UNPAID WORK AND CARE
A POLICY BRIEF

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The Sustainable Development Goals recognize the importance of unpaid care and domestic work to be provided through public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies, as well as shared responsibility within the household (Target 5.4). There is an emerging consensus about the importance of the three interconnected dimensions of unpaid care work – Recognize, Reduce, and Redistribute - to narrow the gender gap which exist around the world.

Unpaid Care Work

Unpaid care work includes services provided to household members for their health, wellbeing, and maintenance, at no remuneration. It includes caring for the children, elderly, and ill, and performing routine household chores, such as cooking, cleaning, fetching food, water, and firewood, among others.

1. Size and nature of the gender gap

Globally, women take on three times as much of the unpaid care work as men; based on minimum wage estimates, the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) has determined the value of unpaid care work done by women is $10 trillion or 13 percent of the global GDP.¹ There is significant variation across countries, with men doing between almost 80 percent (in Denmark) and approximately 10 percent (in places like India, Mali, Pakistan and Tunisia) of the unpaid care work that women do (Figure 2). In Costa Rica, women do almost twice as much work as men, increases rapidly as they approach reproductive age.² Changing demographics flag that elderly care will become increasingly important in the future (Figure 3); the majority of older people are already living in developing countries.³ Generally, rural women spend more time than urban women and men on care work.⁴

- Looking at data from the OECD on types of unpaid work, by primary activity, on average, 61 percent is routine housework, while 14 percent devoted to caring for household members.
- Inequality in unpaid work contributes to higher overall workloads for women who participate in paid work as well.
- Data from 65 countries suggest that women on average spend 45 minutes more per day than men on paid and unpaid work combined, and over 2 hours more in the most unequal countries. This results in almost six additional weeks of work per year and 5.5 extra years of work over five decades.⁵

Figure 1

Seven primary drivers of women’s economic empowerment

Tackling adverse norms and promoting positive role models
Ensuring legal protection and reforming discriminatory laws and regulations
Recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid work and care
Changing business culture and practice
Improving public sector practices in employment and procurement
Strengthening visibility, collective voice and representation
Informal work
Formal sector employees
Agriculture
Women-owned enterprises
Building assets – Digital, financial and property
**Figure 2**

Across regions, men do one-half to less than one-fifth of the unpaid care work that women do

*Male-female ratio of unpaid care work, regional averages and high and low country performers by region, 2014*

Note: Unweighted regional average. 69 countries are included. Source: OECD Gender, Institutions and Development Database 2014.

**Figure 3**

A growing share of elderly in the population

*Old-age and child dependency ratio, selected countries and groups, 2015-2065 (%)*

Note: Weighted regional average. Old-age dependency ratio is the ratio of population 65+ per 100 population 15–64 and child dependency ratio is the ratio of population 0–14 per 100 population 15–64.

2. Diagnostics

Various factors contribute to the gender gap in unpaid care work (Figure 4).

**Social norms.** Gender gaps in unpaid care reflect gender stereotypes, according to which women are caregivers and men are breadwinners. This means that in many societies, women are expected to carry the main responsibility for work at home.  

- MGI analysis shows that in countries where people believe that “men should have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce” and that “children suffer when a mother works for pay”, women are more likely to spend more time on unpaid work relative to men.

- In Rwanda, men's participation in the domestic tasks is generally stigmatised and made fun of by other men and by women. Men identified their own culture as barriers to change.

**Limited and poorly remunerated employment opportunities for women reduce the opportunity cost of unpaid care work.** It is difficult to disentangle causality.

- MGI analysis suggests that in countries with higher rates of female labour force participation, women are likely to spend less time on routine housework as a primary activity and men are likely to spend more time caring for household members.

- In countries where women spend twice as much time as men on unpaid care, their average earnings are less than 2/3 of men’s (40 percent if women spend five times as much time).

**Demographic factors, mainly fertility rates and family structure and composition, especially young children, shape the burden of unpaid care.**
• In Colombia, each additional household member reduces the hours a woman sleeps by more than 20 minutes a day.

• An additional child under six increases the time women spend on any care responsibility by 2 hours 35 minutes in Colombia, 1.3 hours in Uganda and 43 minutes in the Philippines.9

Access to basic infrastructure/services. In developing countries, people spend significant time on fetching water and firewood (for example, 2.5 hours every day for women in Ghana).

• In Ethiopia, the proportion of women collecting water and firewood (71 and 54 percent, respectively) is twice that of men (29 and 28 percent, respectively); the average duration of these activities is higher for women than for men.10

• In Uganda, having a water tap on the compound decreases the time women spend on primary care work by 1 hour and primary/secondary care by 2 hours a day.11

Availability of time- and labor-saving equipment/products. In Uganda, having a fuel-efficient stove reduced the gender gap in primary care work by 1 hour, and decrease the time women spend multi-tasking by 1 hour 27 minutes.12

Provision of affordable and reliable care services. According to the World Bank, childcare services are one of the most important emerging challenges to women's economic opportunities in low and middle income countries.13 Women are severely constrained when choosing between paid and care work, especially women from poor households who do not have access to or cannot afford market substitutes for unpaid labor (e.g., childcare centers or paid domestic help).14

• Only about half of governments around the world offer formal early childhood programme before pre-primary education, accepting very young children (younger than three years). Even where such programmes are offered, they have limited coverage. Most families are left to pay for private facilities, if those exist and are affordable.15

• In developed and transition countries, and in Latin America, the public sector provides most formal early childhood care and education.

The private sector is prominent in sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States, the Caribbean and East Asia. In general, children from poorer and rural households have very limited access to ECCE relative to children from richer and urban households.16

• All countries have at least one programme at pre-primary level (from age 3 to the age of primary school enrolment); however access is not universal. Globally, half of children currently do not have access to pre-primary education. In 2011, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa had lowest access levels at 18 and 23 percent, respectively. Globally, pre-primary education accounts for the lowest share of the total public expenditure on education, despite well-recognized long-term benefits of quality ECCE.17

• Among countries recently assessed by ILO, coverage is particularly low in South Africa (21 per cent of 5-year-olds) and India (30 per cent of 3–5-year-olds), while in Brazil, more than half of 5-year-olds are in preschool programmes.18 In Kenya, high childcare costs discourage enrolment in formal childcare, and impact labor market outcomes for women.19 In China, many of the childcare services available to migrant women workers are unregistered because they do not meet the basic requirements for registration.20

• Elderly care is becoming increasingly important as dependency ratios increase (see above).

Family-friendly policies, including paid family leave and flexible working schedules.

At least 800 million women workers lack income security as a result of maternity.21 In OECD countries, women’s labour force participation increased when paid parental/family leave became available or was expanded, with more mothers returning to work after taking paid leave. The same pattern was experienced in the state of California.22

3. Proven and promising actions

A series of actions have been linked to reduction of gender gap in unpaid care work: changes to labour laws and employment legislations; provision and improvements of childcare centers; adequate parental leave benefits; advocacy to challenge gender norms, among others. What is appropriate
Box 1
Investing in care: Proven and promising actions

1. Better technology and infrastructure to reduce unpaid care work:
   - In Eastern Uganda, having a water source within 400 meters of the home saves women and girls more than 900 hours a year.23
   - In South Africa, the time women spent on housework decreased when rural electrification was introduced, boosting labour force participation by 9 percent.24

2. Financial incentives through tax provisions:
   - In Canada, the tax wedge for secondary earners fell from 35 to 31 percent in the decade to 2004, helping to boost the national female labor participation rate.25
   - In Japan, FLFP would increase by almost 13 percent if there were tax incentives (i.e., favorable changes to primary and secondary earner tax) to share market work between spouses.26
   - Following the ILO’s Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202), many countries provide maternity cash benefits to low-income residents or informal workers through non-contributory social assistance programmes financed by public funds.27
   - In the Philippines, under the Expanded Breastfeeding Promotion Act (2009), expenses for establishing lactation stations are tax deductible. ILO provides technical support to governments, and employers’ and workers’ organizations, to set up lactation stations for both formal and informal workers, such as traders at the markets and workers at bus terminals.28
   - Malaysia offers tax benefits to adult children who live with their parents.29

3. Adequate maternity and paternity leave benefits and flexible work arrangements:
   - Paid maternity leave is at the core of social protection policies; income security is imperative to helping women to rest and recover around childbirth and prevent health risks. At the same time, paid paternity leave helps increase fathers’ involvement with young children, foster less gender stereotyping at work, and promote gender empowerment and equality. Such policies can be adopted by firms as well as by governments.
   - Vodafone provides minimum of 16 weeks paid maternity leave and six months in flexible working arrangement upon returning with reduced hours.
   - Paternity leave can also help women to remain employed; women’s employment among private firms is significantly higher in countries that mandate paternity leave versus those that do not.30
• By encouraging father–child interactions, paternity leave also improves “parental capital” for children, which is beneficial to child development and contributes to men’s own right to parenthood and broader gender roles.31

• In Vietnam, labor market policies ensure six months of maternity leave at full pay, paid paternity leave and paid breaks for both antenatal care and breastfeeding.32

• Equal amounts of maternity and paternity leave increase women’s employment by increasing employer incentives to hire women, and equal sharing of care responsibilities (e.g., in Sweden).33

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• In case of non-transferable entitlement, father’s decision to use leave does not depend on the partner.35 Calling this leave paternal as opposed to parental, legitimises and affirms the idea of fathers taking parental leave and assuming a greater responsibility for childcare, which reduces public stigma.36 Providing father-specific leave seems to increase men’s uptake of parental leave. In Iceland and Sweden, the “daddy quota” has led to a doubling in the number of parental leave days taken by men.37

• Flexible parental leave arrangements (e.g., part-time leave or leave in several separate blocks over different years) could help increase the take-up of leave benefits. In Norway, about a quarter of eligible fathers choose to take their father’s quota on a part-time basis.38

• Adequate benefits size is imperative to ensure higher take-up. The four OECD countries with the most gender-equal distributions of parental leave users - Iceland, Norway, Portugal and Sweden - offer leave benefits that replace more than half of previous earnings for an average earner for at least part of the parental leave period. In contrast, countries with the lowest male share of users - Australia, the Czech Republic, France, Italy, and Korea - provide benefits that replace less than 50 percent of previous earnings for an average earner. To mitigate higher costs, countries/companies can shorten leave periods. In 2007, Germany switched from a low-paid, income-tested, two-year flat-rate payment to a higher-paid, earnings-related parental leave benefit payable for 10 months, plus two additional months if both parents use at least two months.39

4. Public financing and/or provision of childcare and pre-primary child services:

Access to affordable childcare is associated with higher earnings, higher labour force participation, and smaller unexplained gender gaps.40 Women’s labor supply is sensitive to the price of childcare: research indicates that halving the cost of childcare would increase the labor supply of young mothers by 6.5 percent to 10 percent.41 Women are more likely to be employed where governments support childcare. According to analysis presented by the World Bank in Women, Business and the Law, in economies with a public provision for pre-primary care, 30 percent of women received wages relative to only 13 percent in the economies without such provision.

• In Kenya, women’s labour force participation increased after the Kenyan government expanded its preschool education to four-to-five-years-old children.42

• In Vietnam, companies with large female workforces are required to provide on-site childcare or to subsidize private provision.43

• In Quebec, Canada, a universal subsidy that lowered the cost of childcare to $5 a day increased maternal labor force participation by about 8 percentage points.44

• Large-scale increase in free pre-primary education in Argentina between 1994 and 2000 increased the likelihood of maternal employment by 11 to 14 percent.45

• In Costa Rica, the Hogares Comunitarios programme promotes creation of childcare microenterprises by mothers who could provide the service to children in their respective homes, thereby also facilitating labour force participation among low-income women.46

• Through its new National Care System 2016-2020, Uruguay aims to expand free existing and create new early childhood programs.47
5. Equitably share responsibility for care of the elderly and infirm:

- Through its new National Care System 2016-2020, Uruguay aims to generate a co-responsible care model to equitably share the responsibility of caring for dependants among families, state, community, and the market. Among the goals of the new care system are: training and improvement of the working conditions of the paid care workers (see below); expand the coverage through money transfers to the elderly to help cover the cost of private Permanent Care Centers; and provide telecare services to allow timely referrals against emergencies and perform automatic reminders.48

- According to WHO, future caregiving for the elderly will require formal long-term care programs that provide informal caregivers with training, respite care, visiting nurse services, and financial assistance to cover care-related expenses.

- Many East Asian and Southeast Asian countries provide adult day care and counseling services to help family caregivers. For example, Singapore provides home help, nursing care at home, and priority in housing assignments to family members who were willing to live next door to their older relatives.49

6. Opening and changing the dialogue on gender roles:50

- In Zimbabwe, the “Africare’s Male Empowerment Project” tries to change gender norms through greater male involvement in home-based care services for rural people with AIDS.51

- PROMUNDO works with men and boys to establish positive images and perceptions about care, with positive results in MenCare+ - a group education program engaging fathers and couples - in Rwanda. Participants reported fathers’ increased participation in care work, improvement in couples’ communication and decision making within household.52

- In India, Procter & Gamble’s #SharetheLoad television campaign draws attention to the belief that laundry is exclusively a woman’s job.

- Oxfam’s WE-Care programme tries to build evidence on care provision in households and communities through the use of Rapid Care Analysis exercises.

- In Malawi, expended evidence on the extent of unpaid care hours was included in mobile services and messages on health and agriculture. This improved awareness on the unequal distribution of care work between women and men leading to changes in practices in local organisations and pronouncements by national officials.53

- In Zimbabwe, WE-Care used “role model” men in communities to act as ambassadors on radio station sessions to encourage others to recognise the significance of care work in households. This resulted in attitude changes regarding tasks that were previously regarded as feminine.54
NOTES


12. Rost, L. et al. (2015). Women’s Economic Empowerment And Care: Evidence For


50. Promundo background paper is forthcoming


