

Unpaid Care Work

Challenges to achieve SDG 5.4

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Only in the 1960s and 1970s, through the work of socialist feminists, housework was stated as “invisible” work that sustains the “visible” (productive) economy.

According to the ILO [2], care work has two dimensions: direct, which consists of activities such as taking care of a person with disabilities or changing diapers, and indirect, such as cleaning a house or preparing food. In the same vein, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) [3] endorses “unpaid domestic work” as activities related to the maintenance of a house, such as cleaning, cooking, doing laundry, among others, and “unpaid care work” as the direct care of others, like feeding a baby or caring for the elderly.

Across the world, women perform these unpaid care and domestic activities 3.2 times more than men³, and the gap is larger for mothers of children between 0-5 years old. Women globally dedicate around 12.5 billion hours daily to unpaid care, adding around US\$ 10.8 trillion to the world economy. [4]

To define “unpaid care work,” it is necessary to investigate the origins of the definition of “work.” Before the capitalist economy, all activities inside or outside the home were considered “work” somehow, and all people (including children) were involved at some level in these activities.

After the advent of capitalism, work outside the home gained monetary value and was associated with productivism (to produce something for the market and earn money from that) [1].

In other words, in modern society, work is considered work if it is productive and if you receive money for that. In this sense, because care is not productive, for many years, it was not considered “work.”

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The essential role of women in the allocation of time and effort for their families and society in unpaid care work has been acknowledged by the global community in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, specifically but not only in SDG 5.4. The target constitutes one of the main gender equality claims set to be achieved by 2030, but the data availability trumps any real hope of even an initial assessment. ILO has put forward some good practices into valuing unpaid care due to the gender equality connotations the unequal division of care constitutes.

For instance, they have proposed the 3Rs as a framework to address this problem: recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work. Recognition involves understanding and quantifying unpaid care work within families and communities across nations and throughout the lifespans of women, integrating these measures into economic development. Reduction entails leveraging new technologies and relevant infrastructures to minimize the time dedicated to caregiving. Finally, redistribution aims to alleviate the burden of care by investing in quality care services, implementing family-friendly workplace policies, and involving men in caregiving responsibilities.

Currently, the common method for measuring unpaid care is through time-use surveys, which track how individuals allocate their time during the day or week.

Time-use surveys allow for an understanding of patterns related to demographics and socioeconomic status within individuals, communities, groups, or societies. [5] While it is feasible to measure time use through interviews, observations, and diaries, the most commonly used and reliable method is the 24-hour self-reported diary. Due to the diversity of cultures globally, there is not a standardized international instrument for time-use measurement. However, the International Classification of Activities for Time-Use Statistics (ICATUS) has been developed as a normative framework to categorize the activities collected in time-use measures.

The United Nations Statistical Commission and the UN Expert Group on Time-Use endorsed the ICATUS in 2022 [6] and provided information on various instruments for collecting time-use data, along with considerations regarding their quality and true assessment of the indicator at play. Their

conclusions suggest a minimum set of requirements for time-use surveys. [7] Many countries use their own time-use measures for reporting, such as time spent on household tasks by gender. However, these instruments are often non-standard and may not adhere to the guidelines set by the United Nations and ICATUS. One challenge is that populations may find filling out a time-use diary burdensome or may not provide accurate information about their daily activities and time use. To address these issues, the modernization of time-use surveys was discussed in 2022, [8] proposing the inclusion of mobile applications (“apps”) and websites for collecting time-use data. Another potential solution, not explored by the UN group, is leveraging Artificial Intelligence (AI) to classify and analyze data, which could streamline processes in this field.

Within SDG 5, there is target 5.4, “recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate”. Without updated and accurate data on time use in households worldwide, it becomes challenging to discuss the problem and find effective solutions. The most recent data reported to the World Bank [9] dates to 2018, before the pandemic, and not all countries participated in reporting. The UN has data from 2022, but only from a limited number of countries.

One of the primary objectives of gathering time-use data is to provide a comprehensive understanding of household production within the national economy, thereby highlighting the domestic and care contributions made by women within their families. Using data from 2011 (over a decade old), if unpaid care work were to be included in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of countries and valued based on an hourly minimum wage, it would amount to approximately US\$ 11 trillion (9% of the global GDP).

The data and analysis concerning unpaid care work may appear superficial and easy to obtain at first glance. However, there are numerous cultural and economic layers underlying this topic, making the task challenging. Firstly, as previously mentioned, there exists an unequal distribution of care and domestic responsibilities among couples. Families with financial means often hire care workers - typically immigrants or from lower-

wage backgrounds - to handle these tasks. In developed countries, many immigrant women leave their own children behind in their home countries to care for others' children, while their own children are cared for by relatives, friends, or neighbors. Particularly in Latin America, relying on community and family care while parents work outside the home is common, with grandparents taking care of their grandchildren, and eldest daughters (in low-income settings) taking on household chores and caring for younger siblings. This aspect is often overlooked in time-use surveys, failing to account for the hours of care tasks performed by children - which can significantly impact their education and mental well-being - or by other relatives inside a family.

The nature of care varies significantly based on factors such as class, education, race, and ethnicity. Cultural differences also influence perceptions of care and who assumes caregiving roles within families. For example, in certain Asian cultures, the daughter-in-law is expected to care for her husband's parents, even if it means neglecting the needs of her own parents. Wealth also influences caregiving, as financially privileged individuals can afford professional caregivers, underscoring the complexities surrounding care and its distribution across diverse societal contexts.

Another persistent issue is the double burden faced by mothers, who not only engage in productive work outside the home but also handle domestic and caregiving tasks disproportionately compared to their partners. This situation is further aggravated for single mothers or individuals responsible for caregiving alone. In fact, most people who are cared for or will need care will be cared for by women. Especially in underdeveloped countries, women suffer primarily due to the lack of infrastructure and resources to redistribute care and reduce the time they spend on it. Therefore, it is necessary to create more public high-quality day-care facilities for children and elderly people, as these are also crucial aspects of redistributing care responsibilities.

Despite the complexity of the problem and the absence of a "one-size-fits-all" approach,

the patterns observed in various cultures, countries, and diverse contexts point to some principles that are crucial to consider when designing family-oriented policies. Firstly, one key principle is recognizing care as an integral part of the human condition, rather than treating it merely as a commodity or invisible work. [10]

Secondly, an aspect supported by many scholars [11] and the ILO, is rethinking the structure and hours of productive work. This entails globally reducing the workweek to less than 40 hours and expanding family care policies within workplaces, without penalizing those who utilize them. If both men and women work fewer hours, they would have more time to spend with their children, potentially reducing the need for extensive daycare and school hours. Consequently, this could lessen the government's burden of investing in education infrastructure, as parents would have more time to dedicate to their children's care and development. Moreover, achieving true work-family balance could lead to a more equitable distribution of responsibilities within households and society, promoting gender equality both at home and in workplaces.

Currently, women often face challenges in demanding jobs or leadership positions due to the long hours typically associated with such roles. Similarly, fathers who reduce their work hours often encounter career penalties. Achieving a genuine work-family balance could create a "parent track" those values both caregiving and professional responsibilities. However, further empirical studies are needed to delve deeper into these concepts, especially considering the limited implementation of such policies in many places.

In addition to reducing working hours, it is crucial to equalize paid paternity and maternity leave globally, while also addressing the harassment that parents, especially mothers, face when taking such leaves. Furthermore, there is a need to change cultural norms through government campaigns within and outside workplaces to encourage greater involvement of men in caregiving responsibilities. Government recognition and incentives for companies that promote male involvement in caregiving can significantly contribute to advancing gender equality.

Conclusion

Unpaid care work often lacks updated data and can present challenges in finding solutions, especially given the cultural, racial, educational, and economic differences between countries. However, despite these differences, certain issues are emerging as critical points of focus. One such issue is the long hours of work, which not only affects the redistribution of care but also impacts gender equality both inside and outside the workplaces.

Considering that unpaid care work forms the foundation of productive work and, consequently, the foundation of society, it should assume a central role in the lives of individuals comparable to wage labor. [12] This shift would contribute to the emergence of a new culture—a culture where unpaid care and productive work share equal importance in society.

Key-points for Policy Makers

- Recognize care work as a need of the human condition and as the foundation of society.
- Find guidelines or develop an instrument to measure unpaid care work.
- Request countries to report data on unpaid care work based on this instrument or guideline.
- Rethink the structure and hours of productive work.
- Shift the mindset away from overworking and equate success with a culture that values care and productive work equally, particularly in some capitalist societies.
- Standardize the length and provide fully paid paternity and maternity leave worldwide.
- Initiate campaigns to encourage men to participate in unpaid care work.
- Establish free, high-quality childcare and elderly care day centers to redistribute and alleviate the burden of care.

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