

Development Matters

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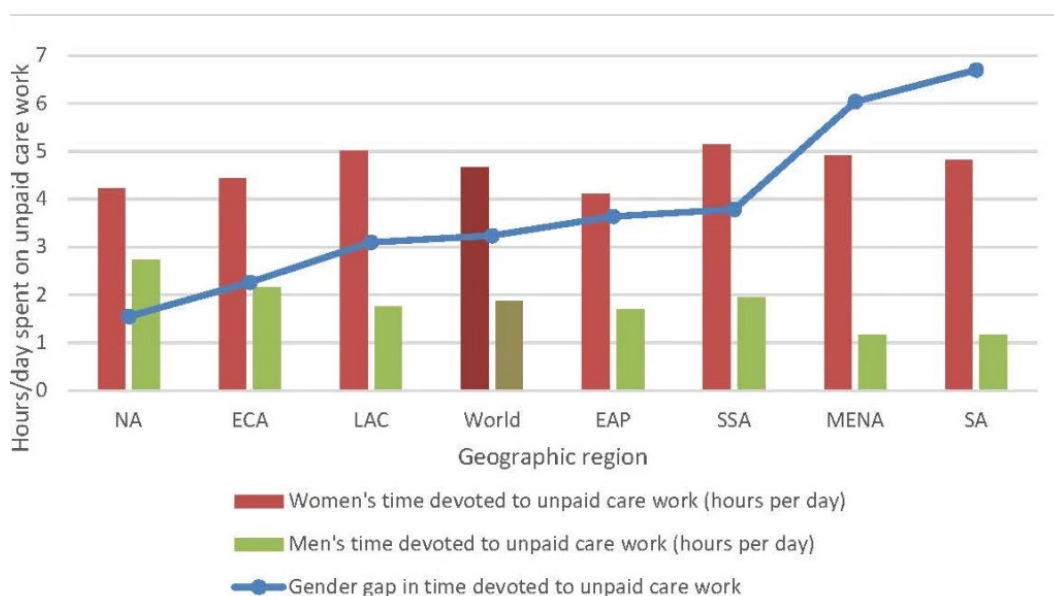
Why you should care about unpaid care work

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The way we currently measure our economies ignores a large portion of work that affects all of us. Most of this work is done by women and girls for free, every day. Around the world, they are responsible for 75% of unpaid care and domestic work in our homes and communities (see Figure 1). So these issues are not just hypothetical, but critical to achieving inclusive economic growth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Figure 1: Gender gaps in unpaid care work by geographic region



Note: NA stands for North America, ECA for Europe and Central Asia, LAC for Latin America and the Caribbean, EAP for East Asia and the Pacific, SSA for Sub-Saharan Africa, MENA for Middle East and North Africa, SA for South Asia.

Source: OECD Gender Institutions and Development Database (GID-DB), 2019, [oecd.stat.org](https://oecd-stat.org).

Unpaid care and domestic work refers to all non-market, unpaid activities carried out in households – including both direct care of persons, such as children or elderly, and indirect care, such as cooking, cleaning or fetching water. These tasks vary in physical effort and time-intensity, depending on location, socio-economic status, as well as age, marital status and number of children. At the country level, unpaid care work is estimated to represent 14% of GDP in South Africa and Canada (Ferrant and Thim, 2019), but the magnitude of all this work is not counted when a country sizes up its economy.

Both paid and unpaid care and domestic work are critical for the well-being of individuals and society as a whole. While certain tasks may be more enjoyable than others, like spending quality time with your children or cooking dinner, they all contribute to a functioning and healthy society. However, women's disproportionate share has a direct negative impact on their ability to participate in the paid economy leading to gender gaps in employment outcomes, wages and pensions: the ILO (2018) estimates that 606 million women, or 41% of those currently inactive, are outside the labour market because of their unpaid care responsibilities.

So how can we address unpaid care work and free that potential? Target 5.4 of the SDGs [1] sets the direction, but how do we get there? We spent two years looking into existing policy and programme solutions (<https://www.oecd.org/development/womens-economic-empowerment.htm>) to provide answers for governments and donors.^[2] The first step is to recognise the value of unpaid care work for society. This requires data on how women and men spend their time. However, to date, only 83 countries have conducted time-use surveys, and only 24% of those were conducted after 2010 (UN Women, 2018). Not surprisingly, time-use data for developing countries is even more limited, due to the significant costs and capacities required. Of the 47 least developed countries, only eight have collected time-use data (Ferrant and Thim, 2019).

The second step is to reduce the physically demanding and hazardous tasks, such as cooking with unsafe fuel sources. According to the IEA (2017), clean cooking for all would save more than 100 billion hours per year of women collecting and hauling fuelwood, freeing women's time to pursue economic opportunities, reducing household air pollution and preventing 1.8 million premature deaths per year. By involving women in the design stage of community infrastructure projects, the Nepal NGO Helvetas identified entry points to reduce time spent on unpaid care work, such as electric grinding mills, water taps and biogas plants. In addition, women's participation in the decision-making process transformed traditionally held gender stereotypes.

The third step is to share the remaining hours more equally between all actors. Given unpaid care work can only be reduced by so much, women, men, the state and the private sector all have a responsibility for meeting communities' care needs. In Nairobi, Kenya, a social enterprise named Kidogo is using a market-based approach to provide sorely needed childcare. They set up a model childcare centre providing training for care providers and operating a "hub and spoke" model, similar to a franchise: it encourages participating centres to improve the quality of childcare provision, including through good nutrition.

Kidogo, a social enterprise, is raising standards of early childcare in Nairobi slums through a market-based approach



Despite these positive examples, we found that policies and programmes rarely address unpaid care work. By ignoring the gender division of unpaid care tasks, some investments may even add to women's unequal load. For example, conditional cash transfers may increase women's time burden if they require mothers to fulfil and report on specific requirements related to their children's health, or encourage those who need care to stay in the household without providing adequate support. These are short-term solutions to longer-term problems: care needs are increasing globally, as populations age and more people live longer with disabilities. Women alone cannot fill the gap left by the public and private sector when it comes to unpaid care work.

Meeting today's needs and preparing for the future therefore requires important investments in a range of policy sectors by all actors, including the donor community. It is difficult to see this happening though, with only 4% of aid going to programmes focussed on gender equality and women's empowerment[3]. This month's UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is an opportunity to identify priority action areas and build global consensus, related to this year's theme of social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure. Governments, donors and development partners have to support women and men in reducing and redistributing unpaid care work to advance inclusive growth and gender equality. Unpaid care work is everyone's business.

Learn more about the OECD Policy Dialogue on Women's Economic Empowerment and how governments and donors can address women's unpaid care work here: <https://www.oecd.org/development/womens-economic-empowerment.htm> (<https://www.oecd.org/development/womens-economic-empowerment.htm>).

[1] Sustainable Development Goal Target 5.4: Recognise 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

[2] OECD (2019), *Breaking Down Barriers to Women's Economic Empowerment: Policy Approaches to Unpaid Care Work*, (<https://doi.org/10.1787/c4ff3ddb-en>). Development Policy Paper, Paris: OECD.

[3] OECD (2019), Aid in Support for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Donor Charts, <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-topics/Aid-to-gender-equality-donor-charts-2019.pdf> (<https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-topics/Aid-to-gender-equality-donor-charts-2019.pdf>).

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