



BRIEF

Unpaid Care Work In Kenya: Evidence From The WEE Community of Practice Learning Agenda

Kenya WEE CoP is convened by International Center for Research on Women

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Introduction: Defining Unpaid Care Work And Identifying Unpaid Care Workers

Unpaid care work includes the full range of activities required to care for household members and undertake household chores, such as cooking, cleaning, washing, mending, and making clothes, and collecting water and firewood. Care work is particularly time consuming and physically taxing where infrastructure is poor and publicly provided services are limited or absent. The burden of care work overall is particularly acute in rural settings, in single-parent households headed by women, and in ageing societies.¹ In urban settings, childcare confers a particular burden due to the lack of extended family support in cities.²

The work of caring for the household, community, children, the sick, people with severe disabilities and the elderly helps to maintain healthy, productive households and functioning economies. Care work is a significant component of sustainable economic development, and a productive labour force, contributing to improved livelihoods and well-being. According to the [2012 World Bank Development Report](#), unpaid care work contributes USD \$10 trillion of output per year – roughly equivalent to 13% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Yet despite these vast and critical contributions to society and the economy, unpaid care work is not included in official GDP calculations and remains largely invisible and absent from government policies and protections.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), three-quarters of all unpaid care work globally is undertaken by women and girls.³ Oxfam's 2019 Household Care Survey in Kenya found that women spent about five hours per day on care as a primary activity and over 11 hours per day on any care⁴, compared to men who spent one hour and under three hours, respectively.⁵ The same study also found that women had greater childcare responsibilities than men, and were more than 20% more likely than men to assume childcare responsibilities in the last 24 hours.⁶ These complexities and disparities contribute to gender

inequality and workforce segregation as they limit women's economic potential and opportunity for productive livelihoods.

A number of studies have shown that the burden of unpaid care on women and girls was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, which drove many women further out of the paid workforce.^{7,8,9,10} At a greater rate than men, women left or reduced paid employment in order to care for sick family members and children, following the closure of schools and childcare centers and a shift to remote education and online learning. Many women working in the service industry and other forms of in-person work also lost their jobs or reduced their pay. Many women working in the service industry and other forms of in-person work also lost their jobs or reduced their pay.

A useful framework, developed by the International Labour Organization and known as the 5R Framework for Decent Care Work¹¹ provides a roadmap for supporting care givers by reducing, redistributing, and reducing unpaid care work, and rewarding and representing paid care work. This includes:

- **Reducing** unpaid care by investing in services and infrastructure that reduce the time and burden on care providers.
- **Redistributing** unpaid care tasks to divide responsibilities more equitably between men and women and between the household and the public sector.
- **Recognizing** the burden of unpaid care work in decision making, budgeting, and data collection.
- **Rewarding** care work with decent, attractive, and equal pay and work conditions.
- **Representing** providers of care work in political, economic, and public decision-

making.

The 5R framework provide key levers to unlock women’s economic potential, provide clear pathways for girls’ education and advancement, and advance progress across a majority of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹² Hence, the State Department for Gender and Affirmative Action in Kenya has prioritized the development of the National Care Policy.

This brief summarizes the state of the evidence on unpaid care work in the African context, and Kenya in particular, across three main areas of inquiry:

1. What are the costs and consequences associated with unpaid care work?
2. What is the relationship between gender norms and attitudes and the distribution of household care work?
3. What are the programs and policies to improve the status of care work and caregivers?
4. What are the programs and policies to improve the status of care work and caregivers?

The answers to the above questions are drawn from the primary research work being conducted by members of the [Women’s Economic Empowerment Community of Practice](#) (WEE CoP) in Kenya. The WEE CoP, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, connects 72 partners (as of publication), and coordinates learning, amplifies findings, builds capacity, and enhances collaboration between key stakeholders to share evidence and best practices related to women’s economic empowerment in Kenya and the wider region. The Community’s primary goal is to strengthen the effectiveness and longevity of research and advocacy in Kenya to increase women’s access to opportunity and the means to build sustainable livelihoods.

What Are The Costs And Consequences Associated With Unpaid Care Work?

Household care work is necessary for all societies, and contributes to individual and collective health and wellbeing, social development, and economic growth. Yet policies and practices continuously fail to recognize, adequately reward, and represent these tasks as paid labour nor do they help reduce and redistribute unpaid care work to men. Failing to recognize, redistribute and reward care workers, results in significant consequences felt by both individuals and communities more broadly.

A significant body of evidence^{13,14} suggests that unpaid care as an invisible but critical barrier to women maximizing their economic potential.¹⁵ Women and girls are expected to devote a greater share of their time than men to unpaid work, and as a result enjoy less spare time for education, leisure, self-care, political participation, paid work, and other social and economic activities.¹⁶ Women’s responsibility for care work limits their engagement in market activities, reduces their productivity, increases labour market segmentation, and concentrates them in low-paid, precarious, part-time, informal, and home-based work as a means of balancing unpaid care work and paid employment.¹⁷ Evidence from Kenya generated by Oxfam found that men spent twice as many hours per day on paid work than women, due at least in part to women’s efforts in the unpaid care sector.¹⁸ Girls who are expected to perform care duties have more limited education and training opportunities that can provide the foundation for dignified and well-remunerated employment in adulthood.^{19, 20}

During the 2021 launch of the WEE CoP, Nancy Cheb Sitonik, Principal Gender Officer at the State Department of Gender Affairs & Affirmative Action, Government of Kenya, summarized the consequences of the current distribution of unpaid care work as follows:²¹

- Time poverty and significant opportunity

costs among the poorest and most marginalized women and girls.

- Reduced education and skills development and exclusion from opportunities to engage in social, economic, and political spheres.
- Greater labour force participation gender gaps.
- Increased income inequality.
- Burden of mental and other health difficulties and associated costs.

These and other consequences of failing to better support household caring work have been summarized by Gammage, Sultana, and Kes²² as follows:



What Is The Relationship Between Gender Norms And Attitudes And The Distribution Of Household Care Work?

Gender norms that dictate the appropriate roles for women and men in most societies tend to label unpaid household care work as “women’s work.” In Kenya and elsewhere, women and girls dedicate about twice as much time to these activities as men and boys.²³ Many assume this responsibility on their own and undertake the work to demonstrate their love and care for their families.^{24, 25}

A 2021 study by Action Aid that measured social norms in Kenya in the context of unpaid care found that men were unlikely to have seen another man perform unpaid care work during their upbringing.²⁶ Seventy-one percent of men had never seen another man wash clothes, 45% had never seen a man prepare meals, and 38% had never seen a man take care of his siblings. Maina & Kimani (2019)

report similar findings from Nairobi, and note that men who were taught how to cook or saw their fathers cook when they were children were more likely as adults to be involved in care work themselves.²⁷ At the same time, while most women (83%) agreed that men should also undertake household care work, fewer than 10% report that they ask for help with such tasks. Respondents of both sexes reported having seen men shamed for helping with household chores, and 4% of women and 11% of men thought it was acceptable for a man to beat a woman if she failed to undertake care work in the home.

Achieving greater equity in the distribution of care work will require changing these long-held assumptions, as part of a broader set of programmatic and policy interventions discussed below. In this respect, it is encouraging that the Action Aid study also found that the majority (89%) of both women and men respondents believed that men should not be shamed or mocked for performing unpaid care work.²⁸

What Are Ongoing Programmatic And Policy Directions To Recognize, Redistribute, Reduce, Reward, And Represent Care Work?

As the Government of Kenya gathers time-use data to inform its national policy on unpaid care work (see Box 1), a key step toward recognizing care work, other initiatives are underway that can support this effort within the 5Rs framework. Findings from members of the WEE CoP Kenya and other researchers in the region, will form a solid evidence-base from which to proceed. These include programmatic efforts to shift unequal gender norms related to care and an effort by the Government of Kenya to subsidize childcare.

Box 1: Kenya's Proposed National Policy on Unpaid Care Work

At the WEE CoP launch event, Nancy Cheb Sionik provided an overview of the current effort in Kenya to develop an unpaid care policy. [i] She asserted that the proposed national policy on unpaid care work in Kenya will integrate unpaid care work into the government's development priorities as outlined in [Vision 2030](#) which recognize women as strategic participants in national development. The path to realizing the unpaid care work policy in Kenya began with an initial review of current policies and laws, and the implementation of a time-use survey and national care needs assessment which seek to:

1. Identify gender differences in time-use patterns.
2. Inform policy and resource allocation to programs that accelerate women's economic empowerment, and
3. Make better and more data available to decision-makers

The goal of the policy is to enhance gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

2. Work with communities to facilitate community dialogue, activism, and action.
3. Engage with local-level duty-bearers and service providers for strengthened capacity, coordination, resourcing, and accountability.
4. Reach and influence decision-makers through advocacy and partnerships at national, regional, and international levels.

In a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT), the project aspires to assess the effectiveness and scalability of the model and identify any modifications to reduce the burden of unpaid care work on women and girls effectively and sustainably. The findings from this study will inform policy and community efforts in Uganda and the region more broadly.

Increasing public sector investment in care services and infrastructure to reduce the burden of unpaid care on households.

Public sector investment in care supportive services and infrastructure is a critical part of reducing the burden of unpaid care and unlocking the economic and social potential of women and girls worldwide. Childcare is one of the most important such investments that can be made. The [WeProsper Coalition](#)²⁹ asserts:

“Governments are duty-bearers with an obligation to ensure equitable access to care. Thus, policymakers should prioritize and expand domestic investments in childcare and LTC (long-term care) to fill existing gaps. These investments will help countries to reach UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets and achieve universal coverage, meaning quality care services for all that need them. Such services should be free or low-cost and ensure the needs of the lowest income and most vulnerable groups are met. Context-specific interventions are important, and governments should draw on evaluations of programming that improve women's economic empowerment

Shifting gender norms to redistribute unpaid care work: The POWER model

A partnership between Makerere University's School of Women and Gender Studies, the Economic Policy Research Centre, and CARE International in Uganda is testing a new model to promote the economic, social, and political empowerment of women and girls, called [POWER](#). This program is being implemented as part of the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) [Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women](#) (GrOW) initiative. Working within an ecological framework that places women and girls at the center, the model includes four elements:

1. Organize and engage men and boys to challenge gender inequitable social norms and practices.

outcomes to determine the best policy approach.”³⁰

As part of an overall effort to increase women’s labour force participation in Kenya, the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) and McGill University, with funding from the International Development research Centre (IDRC) Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) East Africa initiative, implemented a randomized intervention of subsidized and quality-enhanced daycare in an informal settlement in Nairobi. This study found that women with subsidized childcare were 17% more likely to be employed, and were less likely to lose earnings due to care responsibilities.³¹ The study also found that, among mothers who were not using daycare at baseline, those who received vouchers for subsidized daycare were 8.5% more likely than those without vouchers to be working for pay (48.9% in the control group versus 57.4% in the intervention). Given that men are currently 10% more likely than women to be in the labour force in Kenya, this finding suggests that subsidizing daycare could almost eliminate the gender gap in labour force participation.

Qualitative findings were similarly encouraging and suggested that as a result of the intervention, mothers had more time to engage in or look for work, older children did not miss school or leisure activities to care for their younger siblings, and fewer children in the community were left unattended and exposed to potential harm.³²

Researchers from [Kenyatta University’s WEE Hub](#) are undertaking a similar study, in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya, assessing the impact of a creche program on women’s labour market participation.³³

Conclusion And Recommendations

Unpaid care work has remained largely invisible in national system of accounts (NSA), rendering women’s significant contributions to their families and national economies unrecognized and unremunerated. This burden negatively affects women’s and girls’ health, constrains their engagement in paid work, education, and civic life,

and forecloses future growth and opportunity. Improved and enhanced support of both paid and unpaid care work would have tremendous implications for unlocking women’s and girls’ economic, political, and social potential, and for expanding national economies. Both cultural, systemic and structural shifts are needed to address the historical perceptions of care work as women’s domain, to more fairly distribute caring responsibilities across household members, and to establish and appropriately finance the policies and programs needed to subsidize and support the care economy outside the home. **To do so, we present the following recommendations:**

1. The government of Kenya to ratify the ILO (C189) Domestic Workers Convention to provide an environment for decent work for domestic care.
2. The proposed unpaid care and domestic work policy (national care policy) should establish a functional employer liability system to cushion workers who have been unpaid or underpaid.
3. The Ministry of Labour to develop a fair (based on minimum wage and benefits policies) reward system for all categories of care workers and specify an implementation plan working with the Ministry of Finance, and State Department for Economic Planning, key government departments and agencies, and private sector associations.
4. The relevant government agency on labour and care to develop regulations for the establishment and investment in affordable, accessible, and culturally sensitive childcare including comprehensive home-based childcare.
5. The State Departments for Labour, Cooperatives and Small and Medium Enterprises, Gender and Affirmative Action, County Governments, and private sector to utilize data from the time use surveys to inform

public expenditure priorities and private investment in domestic care and labor-saving technologies and infrastructure to create more free time for women and girls' economic development and well-being.

6. The Ministries of Finance, Labour, Education, Health, and Gender to develop and scale cash-for-care benefit systems, as a way of recognizing and compensating the activities of unpaid carers.

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