

**Addressing Unpaid Care for Economic Empowerment of Women and Girls**  
**Institute of Development Studies, International Development Research Centre and Oxfam**  
**Position Statement, June 2016**

**Key Recommendations**

- Better provision of accessible essential public services, including care services
- More investment in time-labour-saving equipment and infrastructure services
- More investment in initiatives to shift perceptions, norms and gender roles about care
- Improved provision of decent work for women and men

**Heading Towards a Care Crisis**

Care provision is an essential, but an under-recognised and under-valued sector of the economy. Women and girls across the world do most of the unpaid care work – this takes up a significant amount of their time and effort. These care tasks are time intensive and often onerous. This leaves women and girls with less time for engagement in social, political and economic activities, and for rest and leisure. In low-income households, economic necessity compels women to engage in the market economy, thereby putting an additional strain on their time and energy. In addition, low-income families are unable to pay for care services, and also usually have more limited access to public services, infrastructure and time- and labour-saving equipment that can facilitate care work. This heavy and unequal responsibility for unpaid care work means that women's mobility and time is constrained, which impedes their access to critical components for economic empowerment, such as access to information, technology and financial services. Furthermore, these women are unable to balance their paid work and unpaid care work responsibilities without negative consequences – to their bodies (adverse effects on health), their emotional wellbeing, their families (reduced amounts and quality of care) and therefore to their communities (increased friction and social costs of reduced care provided to dependents – children, adolescents, elderly, sick, disabled).

With more and more women engaged in the labour force, and men not participating sufficiently in care work, adolescents (mostly girls) and elder women are often required to carry out the majority of care work tasks, which impedes their time and infringes their human rights. It also restricts the generational sustainability of economic empowerment initiatives which have to provide the same inputs like training and education to the next generation of women - girls who had dropped out of health and education initiatives.

It is imperative to recognise that women and girls' time is not an inexhaustible resource. Many communities see increasing demands of work to care for families, because of changing demographics, pressures to care for ill and disabled people, climate change, processes such as urbanisation and increasing constraints on resources especially land and water. Combined with economic pressures, women's increasing engagement in the market economy (especially as more women find themselves with no choice but to enter the labour market, even at sub-optimal conditions), we are heading towards a care crisis. This will imply less amounts of care for vulnerable populations, at the same time as a decline in the quality of the care that these segments of the population receive. This will naturally lead to infringement and curtailment of their development – thereby compromising the growth of the economy as a whole.

**Why Public Services Matter**

Public service provision, and access to it, is a critical issue for achieving equitable care provision, and in turn, to increase the potential for women to become empowered economically, thereby benefitting families and communities more broadly. The lack of essential public services has arisen from a multiplicity of factors including fiscal pressures translating into a roll back of the state, increased privatisation, and failure to recognise the importance of the care economy and women and girls' contribution to unpaid care work. Although policy-makers may argue that cutting public budgets is 'saving' money, without essential public services, the costs of care do not vanish, they are simply transferred. More and more care work falls on the shoulders of families, especially low-income women and girls. This is in essence a transfer of the responsibility and work of providing care, at multiple

levels – firstly as noted above, from women in the labour market, to women and girls outside of it. Secondly, the costs of care are transferred from rich families to poor and minority-ethnic families (typically underserved by public services) and thirdly, from the global North to the global South – specifically through paid care services provided by poorer women migrants (local and international). Therefore, this transfer of care into the personal sphere perpetuates inequity around class as well as across nations.

### Limitations of ‘Care-less’ Economic Empowerment Initiatives

The focus on women’s economic empowerment is welcome, however where this is understood as merely increasing women’s labour force participation, this is a short-sighted approach. This is because of two factors: first, the quality of employment is critical in evaluating whether jobs are delivering economic empowerment: gender discrimination in the labour market means that the jobs that women do, are too often low paid, informal, insecure and often unsafe. The returns from these jobs are therefore barely sufficient for poor families to be able to sustain themselves, let alone lead to ‘empowerment’. Perceptions and norms about care work – cooking, cleaning, childcare – being ‘natural’ activities for women have also contributed to paid care work being perceived as less skilled, and not garnering equal wages compared to other types of paid work. Second, women still undertake the majority of unpaid care work which leads to a depletion of their and their family’s wellbeing. The unequal distribution of care responsibility also restricts women’s choice of sector and type of job, as they seek out flexible jobs close to their homes, usually only informal, unregulated employment – jobs that are precarious, unsafe and low paid.

### Recommendations for Improving Women’s Economic Empowerment

It is important to understand and recognise the vital role that the care economy plays in sustaining and reproducing the market economy. Care is critical for economic initiatives to be both socially and commercially sustainable. Therefore, the provision of care needs to be considered as a contribution to development, and care work as a valuable and skilled activity that governments need to invest resources in. Investments by governments and private companies in care services, infrastructure, labour-saving equipment and subsidies for carers are critical in order to support the contribution of care work to the economy. Initiatives on women’s economic empowerment need to focus not on getting women to ‘work’ more on top of long hours of care work, but on increasing real *choice* in paid work opportunities and making care work less arduous, safer and more productive, without compromising on the quality of care provision.

This can be done by actors including governments, private sector actors, the voluntary sector and families/communities, in a range of complementary ways:

- a) **Provision of accessible essential public services, including care services:** These include provision of *safe water* that is easily accessible especially in terms of time taken to access it; affordable and good quality *health and education services*; *electricity* that enables time- and labour-saving equipment, and lighting for domestic work; *roads* that increase connectivity and reduce travel time (especially for paid work and marketing own produce); affordable and good quality *crèches and pre-schools* with flexible opening hours; and *care services* for the elderly and disabled. Increasing *public sector budgets* for investment in such public service provision that is affordable to poor women, and accessible, is critical to address their time poverty and to enable them to increase their engagement in paid work. Monitoring and measuring unpaid and care work, as well as paid work, in national surveys and censuses, is critical for accurate and equitable public policy design. Specifically, *time use surveys* can guide more effective allocation of public resources into areas that need the most investment. It is essential to build *a strong tax base* in order to increase government spending on infrastructure and public services.
- b) **Investing in time-saving and labour-saving equipment and infrastructure services:** Investments in *time-saving and labour-saving equipment* and infrastructure services such as clean cooking stoves, clean piped water, electricity (especially through micro-renewable energy), *sanitation services*, and safe and secure *travel arrangements*, are critical to arrest time poverty, and counter the ill-effects of drudgery-filled tasks.

*Information provision* (especially through effective use of ICTs) can be another element for saving valuable time for poor families, for example eliminating the need to walk long distances to clinics to report or consult with medical staff about chronically ill or disabled family members.

- c) **Investing in initiatives to shift perceptions, norms and gender roles about care:** Research findings indicate that reducing the time for individual care tasks may not lead to women having more time. If cooking or washing take less time, social expectations of other tasks, such as childcare, may rise. Thus, investing in labour-saving equipment and care services, must be combined with *shifting perceptions about women's work, care, and gender roles*. Given prevailing gender norms, women's time is considered elastic and therefore the opportunity cost of *women's time* is close to zero. Combined with men's control over income, these norms may imply that purchasing time- and labour-saving equipment is not a priority even with income available to do so. In cases where such equipment is purchased, women may end up being tasked with even greater care work (or paid work) responsibilities as their time is freed up from other care tasks. It is important therefore to have initiatives that seek to *change social norms*, especially those around *sharing care* within the household and communities. *Encouraging men* to take on more care responsibilities may be an important first step in this direction. *Community- and employer-led initiatives* to recognise that men could/should have care responsibilities, or incentives (such as flexible working hours/long and mandatory parental leave etc.) for men to take on more responsibility, are good ways of increasing their participation. Beyond that, it is important to highlight the *gender differentials in the time* that women and men spend on paid work, unpaid care work and leisure time, and to raise the importance of care work in sustaining the market economy. This can be done through *building an evidence base* and *counting women's work*. Efforts in these areas may lead to an increase in the valuation of care work and help transform social norms.
- d) **Provision of decent work for women and men:** *Decent work for both women and men* needs to take into account their unpaid care work responsibilities. It is especially critical to take into account *different lifecycle and family structure responsibilities* when creating employment opportunities for women. Opportunities for *flexible working hours, decent and fair wages, maternity benefits, pensions, improved working conditions and safe working opportunities at a range of suitable locations* are essential for ensuring women are not forced into low-paid, often unsafe work. It is equally important to recognise that the informal economy employs the large majority of poor, working women – and that while policies that regulate working conditions of formal employment are important, those that seek to *ensure decent work in the informal economy*, are critical. Signing up to *international conventions, changing legislation around informal work, and proper monitoring* of the implementation of existing legislation would be crucial aspects to this. Another vital intervention would be to promote *collective organisation and unionisation of informal economy workers*. Initiatives to *recognise domestic worker/nanny/cleaner rights, ensure decent work conditions* (such as minimum wages and maximum hours, health and safety regulations and protection from violence and harassment), *investment, training and skills* for low paid and undervalued paid care workers are other important measures. Finally, *social protection initiatives* such as health insurance, crop insurance, cash transfers and public works programmes would help ease the risks and vulnerabilities associated with informal sector work.

The 'Transforming Care Dynamics: Lessons from Programme and Policy' paper and its accompanying appendix presents evidence supporting this position paper from 50 case studies submitted as part of a call for 'what works on transforming the care economy' coordinated by IDS, IDRC and Oxfam in May/June 2016. The evidence is supplemented by collaborative discussions engendered by two webinars hosted by IDRC in early June.