

Connecting Unpaid and Paid Care Work to Progress Gender Equality

Globally, paid care work, such as care for children or the elderly is a fast-growing sector of the market economy. Yet, it remains undervalued by governments and citizens in both monetary and societal terms which has damaging implications for women’s economic empowerment and gender relations more broadly. In order to shape new political responses to the Sustainable Development Goal 5’s targets on unpaid care and domestic work, it is critical to make the connections between paid and unpaid care work and its impact on gender equality and women’s rights. Without reinforcing care work as ‘women’s work’, such responses should promote decent work for women and men in the care sector, invest in care workers, and acknowledge the global dimension of care work.

Importance of recognising, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work

The centrality of unpaid care work as a barrier to gender equality and women’s economic empowerment is increasingly being recognised, as demonstrated by the UN High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment. At the same time, in several countries there has been the adoption of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Domestic Workers Convention,

2011 (No. 189) and Domestic Workers Recommendation, 2011 (No. 201), which recognises the social and economic value of this occupation and work towards ensuring the rights and dignity of workers are protected. Since its adoption in 2013, the Convention has been ratified in 23 countries, including the Philippines, South Africa and Uruguay. In addition, around 70 countries have been working towards decent work for domestic workers, through adopting laws or policy reforms or working towards this end.

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Box 1 Understanding (paid and unpaid) care work

Care work is broadly defined as the activities that go towards meeting the material, developmental, emotional and spiritual needs of other people through direct and indirect personal relationships. It can be paid or unpaid, and involves a wide range of actors.

Unpaid care work includes looking after and educating children, looking after older family members, caring for the sick, preparing food, cleaning, and collecting water and fuel for no explicit monetary reward. Women perform the bulk of unpaid care work in most societies, with the largest amount of unpaid care work taking place within households and families.

Paid care services are a growing part of the economy and include nannies, childminders, nurses and care workers in homes and other institutions for the elderly. Paid carers can be found in both public and private settings and can work across formal and informal economies.

Gender advocates have also lobbied governments to pass legislation that would provide basic labour and social rights for paid care workers, such as minimum wage legislation and coverage in terms of health insurance. However, there is still a failure to recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work in many policy and programmatic spaces, and paid care workers remain unprotected. The experiences of care workers – both paid and unpaid – stem from unequal gender relations within a patriarchal system. What is needed then is a more gender-equitable sharing of care within families, as well as with the state.

The continuity of care work

Around the world, the social significance and demand for paid care work has grown enormously. This has been due to a number of factors: women's increased participation in the labour market since the 1970s, fertility decline, ageing societies, major health crises and the continued gender division of labour. Additionally, in many middle- and low-income countries in the global South, public services – including those that provide good quality care – have been severely weakened, due in part to decades of economic reforms caused by a

rolling back of the state by governments. In these countries, it is at the most informal end of the market that care is widely provided, such as through the employment of domestic workers who perform a wide range of domestic and care tasks (see Box 2). These services, in turn, employ many women, and increasingly men (as domestic workers, nannies, cleaners, child-carers, nurses, health-care supporters and so on) in a variety of settings, including private homes, hospitals, nursing homes and hotels – to meet care needs.

Devaluing paid care work

Paid care work – like unpaid care work – often faces a lack of recognition and not being seen as 'real work' because of its association with, and derivation from, an unequal gender division of labour. This stems from a long tradition in patriarchal societies, in which unpaid care work is considered the responsibility and natural duty of women.

As paid care work is often seen as a paid version of women's unpaid care work, it is often undervalued in monetary terms – as reflected in the often low wages paid care workers receive; as well as in societal terms in that its economic and social value is not adequately recognised by governments, employers and citizens.

Box 2 Paid domestic work

Domestic workers account for a significant share of informal workers. In 2013, the ILO estimated there to be 67 million domestic workers, 54 million of them women. The ILO further estimates that almost one in 25 women in paid work globally are domestic workers, and around 17 per cent of domestic workers are migrants, most of whom work in high-income countries. With ageing populations in many parts of Asia, Europe and North America, domestic work is a sector that will continue to grow.

Workplace experiences of paid carers

Paid care workers frequently experience poor working conditions including very low pay, atypical hours, tenuous employment status (including zero-hour contracts) and isolation. Paid domestic workers are among the least protected groups of workers under most national labour laws. Paid domestic work is frequently devalued for these reasons and this often translates into their limited rights and entitlements, such as little to no days off, risk of abuse or lack of social protection and access to social security, as well as their inclusion in (or exclusion from) economic, political and legal spaces. Domestic work also often takes place informally and frequently includes

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verbal labour ‘contracts’ with few if any social rights attached to it.

Paid domestic workers additionally face isolation and ‘invisibility’ within their workplace – the employer’s home – which places them in a precarious position between the private and public divide, in which the space for public intervention is questionable. This isolation makes it difficult for domestic workers to speak out against injustices and may deter them from mobilising for their rights, for they may not know the similar unfair conditions of other domestic workers and therefore suffer in silence. Live-in domestic workers, those who live in their employer’s home, are especially vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and isolation as the boundary between the home and the workplace, and between independence and servitude, becomes blurred. They are often under a ‘round-the-clock’ work cycle due to the unregulated control an employer may have over them.

Low levels of education and a lack of knowledge about labour rights (if these even exist) can leave domestic workers open to exploitation by their employers or representative agencies as they have little recourse to justice in this unregulated arena.

Inequalities within paid care work

Paid care workers, low paid health assistants, cleaners and child minders in society are predominantly women – although in some contexts, men do provide paid care services (see Box 3). Historically and across a diverse range of countries, they also often belong to disadvantaged social groups such as minority ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, low-caste, low-income rural and urban groups, or are migrants (both internal and international). They are therefore particularly vulnerable to discrimination in respect of conditions of employment and work.

This is evident in ‘global care chains’ – where female migrant workers, often from the global South, fill in the ‘care deficit’ in

Box 3 Gendered hierarchies in paid domestic work

While it is the case that most policy on paid domestic work deals with issues concerning female domestic workers – probably because 83 per cent of domestic workers are female – domestic work has not always been a female occupation, and in some places around the world, such as in India and Nigeria, it still is not. This is important to acknowledge, because if it were just the work itself that was devalued, then it would be devalued equally between women and men. Yet, findings from Nigeria suggest that men who work in the domestic sphere, such as gardeners, drivers, or even in the more classic sense of the term (cleaning, childcare, cooking), are often paid more and treated with more respect in their positions than women in the same occupation. Clearly, the social identities of the domestic worker play an important part in this discrimination. Thus, even within domestic work the division of labour discriminates against women.

wealthier countries as a result of welfare cuts and men’s reluctance to take on domestic and care duties. While these ‘care chains’ often make it so that the need for a more equitable sharing of household work remains unchallenged, they also recreate gender, class, race/ethnic and citizenship inequalities among different groups of women (and increasingly men).

Domestic work, already marked by its place within a gendered division of labour, is further undervalued by its connection with social groups that traditionally and currently have the least entitlements and ability to advocate for their rights.

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Policy recommendations

In order to ensure that care work becomes valued in society and does not contribute to gender inequality, but to women's economic empowerment, it is important to *recognise and value the importance of different forms of care*, without reinforcing care work as 'women's work'. This can be done in the following ways:

- **Invest in care workers and promote decent work in the care sector.** National governments should draw on the important guidelines to promote decent work for domestic workers set out by the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189). Providing decent work to all care workers is integral to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and essential to leaving no one behind. Decent care work includes, among other things, improved working conditions, as well as living conditions (for those who live-in); information on terms and conditions of employment; adequate wages; social security coverage; protection from abuse, harassment and violence; occupational health and safety; and freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining.
- **Acknowledge the global dimension of care work** and the current reliance on migrants – internal or international – for the provision of care. Care work should be revalued to include a recognition of the divisions not only in gender, but class, race, ethnic and migrant status. It is also vital to have an awareness of the diverse range of workers, tasks and skills that comprise this occupation. Seeing the value of care work, and the activities undertaken as real work and not informal tasks could also play a role in improving the pay and working conditions for migrant women (and men) who are employed in this area. This important work could be championed by the UN High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment, national states, civil society organisations and women's rights organisations.
- **Strengthen networks – regional and international – involved in organising around paid and unpaid care work** and increase care workers' voice and representation in relevant policymaking and collective bargaining processes. Led by national governments, this can be done through capacity-building support for members of these networks with a view to strengthen the ability to dialogue, organise and mobilise for decent work. The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is just one example of such networks.
- **Improve data and analysis** on unpaid and paid care work, as well as informal and part-time work. This includes addressing statistical data gaps, developing strong data bases and profiles on care workers, undertaking gender sensitive research on the analysis of the situation of paid care workers, on their contribution, and on immigration and labour policies governing their entry, conditions of work and stay in countries of employment. This can be done through the development of new statistical standards, by national statistical organisations, that take into consideration all forms of work (including care work) and by providing training on data collection and analysis that is care-sensitive.

Further reading

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Credits

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