

Women's Economic Engagement and Childcare

Moving from Survival to a 'Triple Boon'

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POLICY BRIEF

Women's childcare responsibilities are often seen as a barrier to them undertaking paid work. However, this is a two-way interaction, mediated by large quantities of unpaid work. Women thus find themselves in a downward spiral of a 'triple burden' consisting of (a) time-consuming, yet unpaid work with no economic returns to them; (b) informal and back-breaking low-paid work; and (c) supervisory childcare and domestic tasks like cooking, cleaning, and fetching water and fuel. This policy briefing provides recommendations to reverse this spiral to achieve a 'triple boon' such that women are able to engage economically in decent paid work; undertake less drudgerous unpaid work tasks with control over any economic returns; and receive support for redistributing their childcare and domestic chores.

Women's economic empowerment is often conflated with the extent to which they undertake paid work in the market economy. However, there is growing recognition of the importance of women being able to balance their paid work with childcare and domestic tasks. Our research shows that there is a third element that is often overlooked – women's unpaid work – that is critical to them being able to engage economically. This unpaid work includes tasks such as working on own family farms or kitchen gardens

for subsistence agriculture; shops or other family businesses; caring for livestock; community work and household repairs. While they are included in the System of National Accounts (SNA) as unpaid work, the collection of fuel and water deserves special attention in terms of the time and energy that these tasks take, and the central importance of them for women to be able to carry out their other tasks – both domestic chores and care of people.

The 'Balancing Unpaid Care Work and Paid Work' research project, which took place in India, Nepal, Rwanda and Tanzania from 2016 to 2019, looked at how women's economic empowerment policies and programmes take unpaid care work into account in order to optimise women's economic empowerment, shared across families and sustained across generations. Taking a mixed method approach (using both quantitative and qualitative data), the research involved women in low-income settings. Project locations were 14 rural sites together with two urban sites in India. Findings reveal significant similarities in terms of the links between childcare, paid work, and unpaid work across all 16 sites, despite the markedly different geographic settings.

Being responsible for children but not having the time to care for them

In all four countries, women were primarily responsible for childcare. If mothers themselves could not engage in childcare, this responsibility was passed to other females in the family – particularly grandmothers, and, to a lesser extent, older daughters, sisters, and sisters-in-law. Men helped with childcare too but their help was sporadic and circumstantial rather than regular and consistent, and was circumscribed by their own time-poverty and stringent gender norms.



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Source: Image adapted from original animation *Time to Care* developed with Studio Syrup.

Given this, it might be surprising to see that the average amount of time that women reported spending on direct childcare – i.e. directly engaging with their children, for example by playing with them and educating them – was very low. Women reported the time spent on direct childcare as less than two hours a day in India, Tanzania and Rwanda, and three hours a day in Nepal.

This apparent paradox is attributed to the fact that women are also responsible for numerous other daily tasks such as domestic chores and unpaid work as well as trying to earn an income, so the significant amount of time spent on childcare is largely supervisory (i.e. keeping a watchful eye over them). Across all four countries, women were multitasking for over 14 hours a day, with supervisory childcare being provided during more than ten of these hours. This was especially stark in Tanzania, where women were supervising children for more than 17 out of the total 18 hours that they were multitasking across the day.

Women reported their childcare responsibilities affected their ability to undertake both paid and unpaid work: ‘... if my children are sick, I cannot work’ (Beata Yosia, Tanzania). Equally, they reported not being able to look after their children, having a disorganised home, and not being able to cook or clean, if they got home late from work – paid or unpaid.

The effect on my children is that I do not give them much of my time as a mother; they do not get me when they need me since I am always busy with paid and care work which may not necessarily mean that I am with them all the time.

Akimanizanye Dolecera, Rwanda

In Nepal, women shared feelings of guilt, and of children being forced to ‘grow up early’ and take responsibility for themselves. In India, women reported feeling rushed for childcare, and not being able to devote time and energy to their children.

Onerous unpaid tasks need to be juggled alongside childcare, domestic chores, and paid work

Women across all four countries spent between three and seven hours a day on unpaid work such as subsistence agriculture, caring for livestock for subsistence or small dairy-selling, and running small family-owned businesses like shops or trading produce like vegetables.

A lot of these unpaid tasks were expected to be done by women. For example, in Nepal, women were responsible for collecting fodder in baskets; while in India and Rwanda,

women were responsible for digging and weeding, as well as livestock rearing. Such tasks are frequently physically demanding and onerous, and require significant amounts of time and energy, yet women receive few benefits from their efforts as these assets are often owned and controlled by the male household head.

More critically, without the requisite infrastructural support (such as electricity or running water) and the necessary inputs such as good quality implements, seeds and fertilisers, women were struggling to ensure their own and their family’s survival.

The amount of time and energy spent on these unpaid work tasks had two implications for the women, who reported:

- their inability to undertake domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning, and adequately care for their children (the women often took their children along with them to shops, or gardens, which is reflected in the high incidence of multitasking); and
- they were constantly juggling to prioritise either unpaid work or paid work, depending on the extent of returns and immediate needs that they had to meet at any given time.

When you are working for money, you may not get time to work in your garden because you come back when you are too tired... for example, you may have sweet potatoes and beans to weed since this is a weeding season. In short, you forego digging.

Florence Kilia, Tanzania

This then implies that while women strive to balance childcare, domestic chores, and their unpaid work, these tasks are also mediated by demands of paid work.

Women’s childcare responsibilities are impacted by their paid work and other responsibilities

When it came to paid work, this was frequently informal, low-paid, back-breaking and onerous. It included breaking stones, weeding, daily wage labouring, road construction, and home-based work such as incense-stick rolling.

On the one hand, childcare responsibilities, especially when there were young children in the family, both constrained women’s time and energy to undertake paid work and affected the type and location of paid work that they were able to take on. On the other hand, women were taking on multiple types of paid work – primarily resulting from low pay – which put pressure on their time and had an adverse impact on their ability to provide care to their children and families. They were especially concerned about the time and quality of care.

I don't get enough time to be with my children, especially when they return from school and in the evening. They do not get me when they are in need. The reason is I am always busy with paid work.

Esperance, Rwanda

Children were often informally recruited into paid work tasks, which sometimes left them exposed to hazardous work conditions, leading to accidents, etc. They were also pulled out of school to provide care for siblings and carry out domestic and unpaid work tasks. Sometimes, they were left alone. All of these scenarios had adverse effects on their wellbeing and development. However, paid work also gave women much-needed income – which they often used to meet their children's health and education needs – and this contribution was valued by all members of the family.

I feel good about my mother working because she is providing us with all our basic needs and also helps with the care activities at home.

Binti Erica, daughter of Mama Erica, Tanzania

It was alarming to see that programmes implemented to provide jobs and promote women's economic empowerment were too small-scale and disjointed to make any significant difference in terms of the women's economic situation. Further, economic stagnation meant lack of jobs for both men and women. This led to men migrating (in Nepal and India) and men's engagement in casual – often back-breaking – labour and low-paid work (in all four countries). As a result, families were left bereft of energy and time – thereby also making the redistribution of childcare and domestic tasks from women

Policy recommendations

This research highlights how making a simplistic assumption that childcare is the main barrier to women's economic engagement does not hold. Therefore, a single policy solution of ensuring good quality childcare centres will fall short of tackling the complex problem of women facing a 'triple burden' – that of balancing their unpaid care work activities with their paid work as well as their unpaid work responsibilities.

Instead, for women to be able to move towards a 'triple boon' of wellbeing where (a) their economic engagement in paid work is beneficial to them and their families; (b) their unpaid care

to men an impossibility. Instead, women relied on their social networks to make alternative care arrangements for children.

Absence of support structures for childcare means more pressure on women's personal and familial networks

While there was some evidence of community support – especially through neighbours – there was a stark absence of childcare provision from either the state or the market.

Most workplaces had no childcare provision, which constrained the type of economic engagement that women were willing to undertake, as well as the amount of time they could spend doing paid work.

There is no place to keep the kids at the workplace... they [other women workers] have to bring older kids to take care of their younger kid, as they need to travel on foot for nearly two kilometres to work.

Indumati Khair, India

Instead, women relied on their social networks – primarily made up of other women – which then reinforced the feminisation and familialisation of childcare. This in turn limited these other women's potential participation in unpaid and paid work tasks – since they were also grandmothers, sisters, daughters and sisters-in-law whose time was being drawn upon to look after their relatives' children.

This was compounded by the absence of state-provided childcare. In places like India where there were some childcare centres (*anganwadi* centres through the Integrated Child Development Services programme), these were inadequate (provision is only for children above three years), inaccessible and low quality, which meant low uptake amongst women.

work (childcare and domestic tasks) is reduced and redistributed; and (c) their time in unpaid work (including fetching water and fuel) is reduced and any economic returns are under their control, a holistic set of recommendations would include:

1. Recognition that childcare is present continuously and has a supervisory nature, and bearing this in mind when measuring it rather than only recording the time spent on direct childcare.
2. Address the gendered and familial nature of childcare through recognition that childcare is a responsibility not

only of the immediate individual and family, but also of all other institutional actors including community, state, and market (see Razavi 2007).

3. Provision of structural and systemic support – such as quality and accessible childcare centres – so that all women in the family and community are freed up to choose their engagement in the economic and domestic sphere. Different innovative local models of such support exist – such as collective local provision – and these can be evaluated and scaled up with lessons learned towards quality of provision, addressing trust deficit, and financial sustainability.
 4. Increased availability of a range of paid work opportunities for both men and women. This paid work needs to be decent in terms of providing a living wage, be of good quality, and have adequate workplace facilities for childcare and safety.
 5. Address gender norms that restrict men's participation in childcare and unpaid work tasks through sensitisation and awareness raising as a route to redistributing these tasks.
6. Reducing the gender wage gap in markets and providing decent work opportunities to both men and women will also free up men's time and energy to undertake childcare, domestic work, and other unpaid work tasks.
 6. Implement properly any social protection or public works programmes and their pro-gender and care provisions in order to provide adequate and timely benefit to both men and women.
 7. Provision of water, electricity, and fuel to families. This is essential in order to reduce the time and drudgery that women expend on these tasks. Water, electricity, and fuel will also increase returns on unpaid agricultural tasks.
 8. Effectively use community mechanisms such as group-farming methods in order to reduce the time women spend on unpaid work.
 9. Make unpaid work more remunerative through availability of inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, and implements as well as skills-training, market-linkages, etc.

Key readings

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Credit

This policy briefing was written by **Deepta Chopra**, **Sohela Nazneen** and **Meenakshi Krishnan** from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), and edited by **Emilie Wilson**. It was produced as part of the 'Balancing Unpaid Care Work and Paid Work' research project, which was part of the global Growth and Equal Opportunities for Women (GrOW) programme. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IDS or DFID, Hewlett or IDRC.

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