



The Unpaid Workforce: Why Women's Labour Keeps the World Spinning for Free



Introduction

Unpaid care work is the invisible yet essential backbone of every society, sustaining families, communities, and national economies. From childcare and elder care to domestic labor and emotional support, this work is primarily performed by women. Despite its undeniable contributions, unpaid care work remains largely undervalued and ignored in economic systems and policies. Recognizing and addressing this issue is crucial for achieving gender equality, economic justice, and inclusive development.


Unpaid care work is often overlooked in traditional economic metrics such as GDP, yet studies indicate that if properly accounted for, it would contribute significantly to national economies. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that unpaid care work would account for more than 9% of global GDP if monetized.¹ In some countries, its value surpasses that of key industries like manufacturing or finance. Despite this immense contribution, unpaid caregivers - primarily women, remain economically disadvantaged. They face barriers to formal employment, lower lifetime earnings, and reduced access to social security benefits. This deepens gender inequalities and reinforces cycles of economic dependence and poverty.

According to UN Women, women globally spend about three times more hours on unpaid care work than men.²² This unequal distribution limits their opportunities for education, employment, and political participation. In many African countries, such as Kenya, Ghana, and Uganda, inadequate public services, lack of infrastructure, and weak social protection systems further exacerbate this inequality. When access to water, electricity, healthcare, and childcare services is limited, women and girls must devote even more time to caregiving and domestic labour.

Acknowledging and valuing unpaid care work is not just a moral imperative; it is an economic necessity. Governments and policymakers must take proactive steps to redistribute the burden and ensure economic recognition of care work. Investing in public care services can help reduce the burden of unpaid care work on families. Expanding access to affordable, high-quality childcare, eldercare, and healthcare services is crucial. Countries such as Kenya and Ghana, which have made efforts to expand public childcare and community-based

1 ILO, [Long-term care in the context of population ageing: a rights-based approach to universal coverage](#), (2018)

2 UN Women, [Women spend five times more time on unpaid care work than men, Georgia's first time-use survey finds](#), (2022)



health initiatives, have seen positive outcomes in women's labour force participation³ and overall economic growth.⁴ Implementing family-friendly work policies, such as paid parental leave, flexible working arrangements, and caregiving benefits, can also help balance unpaid care responsibilities between men and women. Encouraging fathers to take parental leave can promote more equitable caregiving roles and contribute to a more gender-equal society.


Governments should also integrate unpaid care work into economic statistics. Including it in national accounts and labor force surveys is crucial for recognizing its value. Countries such as Uganda,⁵ have begun integrating time-use surveys to capture the true economic contribution of unpaid care work. Additionally, progressive taxation policies and direct income support for caregivers such as caregiving allowances, pension credits, or social security benefits can help recognize and compensate unpaid care work. This approach ensures financial security for women later in life and acknowledges their economic contributions.

Challenging gender norms and promoting cultural shifts is essential for addressing the inequities of unpaid care work. Public campaigns, education programs, and media initiatives can challenge traditional gender roles and encourage shared caregiving responsibilities. Engaging men and boys in unpaid care work is essential to creating long-term change. Recognizing that care work is not just a personal responsibility but a societal and economic issue can help drive policy changes and behavioural shifts that lead to a more equitable distribution of care responsibilities.

The recognition and valuation of unpaid care work must be a core component of economic and social policy. A gender-transformative approach to economic planning acknowledges care work as a vital economic activity rather than an invisible or secondary contribution. By restructuring economic systems to include and support unpaid caregivers, societies can move towards greater gender equality, economic empowerment, and social well-being. Governments, businesses, and civil society must work together to create policies that acknowledge, redistribute, and support care work as a key driver of sustainable and inclusive economies. Ensuring that unpaid care work is properly recognized and valued is not just about supporting individuals, it is about building stronger, more resilient societies where economic growth and gender equality go hand in hand.

Written by Edith Macharia

Edith Macharia is an [AWLI fellow](#) and Researcher with 6 plus years' experience in project management and monitoring and evaluation. She has worked with development and humanitarian organisations across Kenya, Ethiopia, Ukraine and South Sudan. At [DadaPower Initiative](#), she champions women's empowerment and climate action, using her expertise to support rural communities. She also writes to amplify marginalized voices and advocate for change.



3 Kenyatta University Women's Economic [Empowerment hub](#), [Enhancing Women's Labour Force Participation and Child Development Through the Creche Programme in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya](#)

4 African Population and Health Research Center, [Empowering women through provision of quality childcare services and strengthening their capacities to engage in paid labor opportunities](#), (2023)

5 Gender, unpaid care work in Uganda: [Evidence from the 2017-18 Time Use Survey](#)

