

Care Work and its Effects on Women's Economic Empowerment

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Abstract

Care Work plays a critical role in human well-being and economic development, particularly emphasising the disproportionate burden shouldered by women globally. Care work, which includes unpaid or underpaid activities related to caregiving, has profound implications for women's participation in the workforce and their ability to achieve economic independence. This study articulates the problem of gender disparities in labour force participation, wages, and job quality stemming from women's extensive involvement in unpaid care work. The research objective is to synthesise findings from various projects to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities within the care economy and recommend interventions to alleviate the unequal burden of care work on women, thereby advancing gender equality and economic empowerment. The study was scoped to encompass various aspects of care work, including paid and unpaid caregiving-related activities. The methodology employed for data collection involved a literature review of existing research on care work. Data analysis was performed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The study found that unequal distribution of caring responsibilities between men and women, rooted in social norms, is a barrier to women's full engagement in the paid economy. Addressing these inequalities in unpaid care work is crucial for advancing gender equality and enhancing women's economic empowerment. Neglecting the recognition, reduction, and redistribution of unpaid care work perpetuates gender disparities and limits women's opportunities for economic advancement and leadership roles. The study recommends efforts to alleviate the unequal burden of care work on women to transform their economic empowerment and contribute to broader gender equality goals.

Keywords: Care work, Women economic empowerment, Unpaid, Workforce, Caring responsibilities.

1.0 Introduction

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) report, there were 2.1 billion people in need of care globally in 2015, including 1.9 billion children under 15 and 200 million older persons. By 2030 this number is expected to reach 2.3 billion, driven by an aging population and other demographic shifts (Laura A., Umberto C., Valeria E., & Isabel V., 2018). This rising demand for care services is a key driver of economic growth and human development. The ILO estimates that doubling investment in education, health, and social work by 2030 could create around 269 million new jobs (ILO, 2023).

The burden of care work falls overwhelmingly on women. Globally, women perform 76.2% of total hours of unpaid care work, more than three times as much as men. In Asia and the Pacific, this rises to 80%. The gender gap in unpaid care work has declined by just seven (7) minutes per

day over the last two decades, meaning it would take 210 years to close this gap. This disproportionate burden of unpaid care work is a major barrier preventing women from participating in the paid labour force. In 2018, 606 million working-age women were not able to work because of unpaid care responsibilities, compared to only 41 million men. This has significant economic consequences, with the ILO estimating that the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) gains from reducing gender inequality in domestic work could be 3-4% for countries like Pakistan and Japan ([Frogee, 2021](#)).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequalities, with women shouldering an even greater share of increased domestic and care duties during lockdowns and school closures. This has put an enormous strain on women's well-being and economic opportunities. Care work significantly affects women's economic empowerment by creating a disproportionate burden of unpaid work, which limits women's opportunities for education, labour force participation, and career advancement.

Women spend two to ten times more time on unpaid care work than men, impacting their ability to earn, save, and invest. This unequal distribution of caring responsibilities is linked to discriminatory social institutions and stereotypes on gender roles (OECD, 2014). This inequality in unpaid care work influences gender gaps in labour outcomes, such as labour force participation, wages, and job quality. Addressing entrenched gender norms and stereotypes is a crucial step in redistributing responsibilities for care and housework between women and men. Recognising and investing in the care economy is essential for promoting women's economic empowerment, reducing poverty, and achieving gender equality (CARE, 2020). This involves equal access to and control over economic resources, assets, and opportunities, as well as long-term changes in social norms and economic structures that benefit women and men equally.

A (2019) Oxfam household care survey in Kenya found that traditional gender roles and divisions of labour result in greater opportunity and economic benefits occurring to men and male-dominated professions. It further established that women spend 11.1 hours per day compared to men's 2.9 hours in providing care work at home. This unequal distribution of time by women and men has stretched the barrier to women participating in other economic and political development. The inaccessible and unreliable social amenities in the targeted informal settlement areas have created a power imbalance in these areas as women are left with a choice to make between active participation in development activities or providing care for their families. Intentional care-free hours should be adopted that will ensure women are available post-care work to participate in shaping the development to be responsive to their needs.

A baseline study (2023) conducted by Oxfam in Kenya ahead of a Time To Care project (TTC) established that only 15.8% of domestic workers and their employers are aware of the existing laws, policies, and relevant government resources while 84.2% indicated not to be aware of and relevant government resources that address unpaid and domestic work. Limited knowledge and awareness limit the ability of women and girls involved in paid care work to call on laws or policies to protect their rights and demand government action to address their challenges and needs. Therefore, the sector has been left to be managed on assumption, perceptions, and humanity-driven without legal obligations that should somehow inform engagement and address concerns that

require legal interventions. Further, the plight of domestic workers who provide care is not a priority, and they are left to defend themselves on any eventuality at their workplaces.

In 2023, the Kenya Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) released the Time-use survey established that Kenyan women spend 4 – 5 hours per day on unpaid care work compared to about 1 hour for men, which is about 4 times more time for women than men. However, when all forms of work (paid and unpaid) are tallied, women work 7 -8 hours, whereas men work 6 -7 hours, resulting in a gender gap of 1.16 - this implies that women work 1.16 times more than men. The disproportionate responsibility for care work results in time poverty and significant opportunity costs, particularly among the poorest and most marginalised women and girls in Kenya.

1.1 Objective

This study aimed to assess the extent to which unpaid care work affects women's economic empowerment.

2.0 Theoretical Orientation

Theoretical orientation in the context of care work provides a framework for understanding the complexities of caregiving roles and the social dynamics that influence them. This orientation is essential for identifying the underlying factors affecting care work, particularly the gender disparities that arise from societal norms and expectations. By establishing a theoretical framework, researchers and practitioners can better analyse issues related to care work, develop effective interventions, and advocate for policy changes that promote gender equality and economic empowerment.

2.1 Capability Approach

The capability approach, developed by Sen & Nussbaum, provides a framework for evaluating well-being and development in terms of people's capabilities to live the kind of lives they have reason to value. This approach highlights how the unequal burden of care work on women can limit their capabilities and freedoms to pursue education, paid work, and other valued activities. The capability approach emphasises the importance of addressing the structural barriers and social norms constraining women's choices and opportunities, including the gendered division of care work. Policies that support women's economic empowerment should aim to expand their real freedoms and capabilities to live the lives they have reason to value. By drawing on these theoretical perspectives, we can better understand how the unequal distribution of care work is a key driver of gender inequality and a constraint on women's economic empowerment. This theory emphasises that addressing the care economy is essential for achieving substantive gender equality and enabling women to participate in fully and benefit from economic opportunities.

3.0 Methodology

A detailed methodology is essential to research the critical role of care work and economic development, particularly focusing on the disproportionate burden shouldered by women. This methodology outlines a systematic approach to data collection and analysis, ensuring

comprehensive insights into the challenges and opportunities within the care economy. Quantitative Data: Collect statistical data on labour force participation rates, wage differences, and demographic information from national databases and international organisations. Qualitative Data: used conducted interviews and focus group discussions with women engaged in both paid and unpaid care work to gather personal experiences and insights.

3.1 Data sources

A questionnaire was used to gather and utilise secondary data from various sources, such as Academic Journals: Peer-reviewed articles from journals, Gender & Society and World Development that have examined the linkages between care work, gender inequality, and women's economic outcomes. International Organizations: Reports and datasets from organisations like the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and UN Women that provide cross-country data on time use, labour force participation, and gender gaps. Policy Documents, Government reports, policy briefs, and program evaluations that discuss initiatives aimed at addressing the care economy and promoting women's economic empowerment

The analysis involved the following steps:

Literature Review: a comprehensive review of the existing literature to synthesise the theoretical and empirical evidence on the effects of care work on women's economic empowerment. Policy Analysis: Examine the effectiveness of existing policies and programs to address the care economy and promote women's economic empowerment, drawing insights from the literature and the empirical analysis.

3.2 Ethical considerations

These ethical issues were carefully addressed throughout the research process, in line with best practices in social science research. The use of secondary data in this study raises several ethical considerations, ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of individuals in the datasets and acknowledging the limitations and potential biases inherent in the secondary data. Considering the potential implications of the research findings for policymaking and program design.

4.0 Key Findings, Discussions

4.1 Finding on Challenges

Table 1 indicates that in 2021, CEDEFOP found out that male employment accounted for only 12% of care worker employment, compared to 54% across all occupations. Care work is a female-dominated field. 37% of care workers were aged between 50 to 64 years in 2021, compared to 28% across all occupations. The aging care workforce will intensify skills shortages. Care work is sometimes of a temporary nature. In 2021, 14% of care workers were employed on temporary contracts.

OXFARM found that in low-income countries, women in rural areas spend up to 14 hours daily doing unpaid care work. Across the globe, 42% of women cannot get jobs because they are responsible for all the caregiving, compared to just 6% of men. Across the world, care work is disproportionately falling on women and girls, especially those living in poverty and from marginalised groups. Women undertake more than three-quarters of unpaid care work globally.

In low-income countries, women in rural areas spend up to 14 hours daily doing unpaid care work (UN Women). Care workers are often trapped in low-quality jobs, raising concerns about the availability of decent care jobs to cover future care needs (ILO, 2023). The gendered nature of care work leads to its economic undervaluation, impacting women's labour force participation and access to quality employment (ILO,2023). There is a significant shortage of care workers, particularly in health services, which poses challenges in meeting future demand for care workers (CEDEFOD, 2024). Insufficient childcare options in communities where informal economy workers live and work can hinder women's ability to engage in paid work, affecting economic opportunities (UNDP, 2023). Care workers face several challenges that impact their economic development and the overall care economy, according to (ILO, 2018).

Table 1: Challenges of unpaid care work

Finding	Statistic	Source
Male employment in care work compared to all occupations	12% of care workers; 54% across all jobs	CEDEFOP, 2021
Percentage of care workers aged 50 to 64 years compared to all occupations	37% of care workers; 28% across all jobs	CEDEFOP, 2021
Care workers employed on temporary contracts	14%	CEDEFOP, 2021
Women in rural areas in low-income countries spending on unpaid care work	Up to 14 hours per day	OXFAM
Women unable to get jobs due to caregiving responsibilities	42% of women; 6% of men	OXFAM
Proportion of unpaid care work performed by women globally	More than 75%	ILO, 2023
Average time spent on unpaid care work by women compared to men	Women: 4 hours 25 minutes; Men: 1 hour 23 minutes per day	Aidspan
Percentage of women outside the labor force due to family responsibilities	606 million women (2018); men: 41 million	PRB

Source: Authors Combination 2024

The lack of robust data systems to measure the economic effects of care work makes it difficult to understand the full scope of the care economy and its impact on economic development. Also, particularly those in informal settings often receive low salaries and lack recognition for their work, which can lead to a shortage of quality care workers and a decline in the overall quality of care. CEDEFOP (2024) indicated that the care economy faces a significant shortage of care workers, particularly in health services, which can lead to a strain on healthcare systems and impact economic development. The overreliance on unpaid care work, often performed by women, can hinder economic development by limiting their participation in the paid labour force and reducing their economic opportunities. Women are also expected to cope with pandemics and global health crises, which can be overwhelming and put them at risk of infection, impacting their ability to provide care and contribute to economic development. Managing end-of-life care is a challenging task for healthcare workers, requiring emotional support and comfort for patients and their families, which can be emotionally draining and impact their ability to contribute to economic development. These challenges highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to address the economic development of care workers, including improving data systems, increasing recognition and compensation, and addressing health disparities and inequities. Addressing the challenges faced by care workers in the care economy requires a multi-faceted approach that includes

investing in quality care services, promoting gender equality, implementing supportive policies, and ensuring access to affordable childcare. The unavailability of care-responsive budget analysis reports is the grey area that limits the tracking of financial resources toward reducing unpaid care work through accessible and reliable infrastructures. Thus, sectors are not further analysed in terms of gender impact analysis and how the different populations will benefit from the projected priorities. The absence of a national legal framework that seeks to recognise and put a value on care and its regulation has led to different definitions that suit individual needs. In the context of devolution (for countries with devolved governance systems like Kenya), counties cannot develop a care policy without a national anchoring point.

4.2 Findings on Opportunities

CARE found that globally, women spend 2.6 times more time on unpaid care and domestic work than men. In India, the Self-Employed Women's Association's training of women in water infrastructure repair has significantly improved the efficiency of collecting water, saving women time and energy. Investing in affordable and accessible childcare can increase women's labour force participation by 10% or more. In countries with universal childcare, the employment rate for mothers with children under 3 is 11% higher than in countries without such policies. When women earn an income and control their earnings, their children are more likely to attend school, their families are healthier, and household incomes grow. According to Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW), closing the gender gap in employment could give the global economy a USD 7 trillion boost.

Investing in the care economy can create millions of jobs globally, including opportunities for youth, enhancing early childhood development, and advancing economic growth. Strengthening the care economy can promote human capital development, benefiting children, women, men, and families and creating economic opportunities for all. Investing in quality care services can boost consumption demand, increase worker productivity, and facilitate inclusive growth, contributing to economic development. Recognising the value of unpaid care work and promoting decent care jobs with formal labour protections can challenge gender norms, making paid care work more attractive for both men and women and opening new business opportunities.

Formalising the work of domestic and care workers through the adoption of the draft care policy will facilitate the regulated sector with the provision of minimum wages. Adopting this policy will facilitate domestication at the county level, facilitating care-responsive development plans. The time-use survey by KNBS is a good start-up point for advocacy on care investment that will reduce the time taken by women in providing care work. Also, the quantified economic value of care will trigger the government's injection to increase its revenue collection.

4.3 Potential Interventions:

Studies indicate that encouraging employers to adopt family-friendly policies and supportive work environments can enhance the well-being of caregivers and improve care outcomes, challenging gender norms around caregiving (UNDP, 2023). Greater investment in quality care services can create job opportunities, promote human capital development, and contribute to the economy. A conducive policy environment is crucial for addressing challenges in the care economy and

promoting sustainable investment growth (ILO, 2018). Increasing the availability of affordable, safe, and quality childcare can prevent children from being left unsupervised, allowing women more opportunities to engage in paid work.

Increased awareness of the nexus between unpaid care work and economic development will create interest in the government, which will invest more in the care sector. Scholars need to be sensitised that care work is also an area of research that will translate to studies that will inform discussions and policy interventions. It is also important to champion establishing a domestic workers' employers' community of practice to act as change agents in influencing their communities on care labour rights.

4.4 Impacts of unpaid care work on economic empowerment

The findings in Table 2 show that women's extensive involvement in unpaid care work significantly impacts their economic empowerment, leading to gender disparities in labour force participation, wages, and job quality. As highlighted in the sources, the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women is rooted in societal norms and cultural expectations that assign women the primary caregiving responsibilities within households. This division of tasks often results in women spending more time engaged in unpaid and domestic work than men, impacting their ability to participate fully in the labour force and affecting their economic opportunities. The gendered nature of unpaid care work, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has become more apparent, with women shouldering a greater share of domestic chores and childcare responsibilities. Real-time surveys have shown that women have been disproportionately affected by job losses, interruptions in paid work, and increased caregiving duties during the pandemic. This unequal distribution of unpaid care work not only affects women's well-being but also has significant implications for their economic empowerment, mental health, and overall quality of life. Addressing the gender disparities in unpaid care work is crucial for reducing gender inequalities in labour force participation, wages, and job quality.

Implementing interventions such as promoting family-friendly policies, investing in quality care services, and challenging traditional gender norms around caregiving can help alleviate the burden on women and create a more equitable and inclusive labour market. Urgent action is needed to protect women's mental health, enhance their economic empowerment, and ensure a more balanced distribution of unpaid care responsibilities to achieve gender equality in the workforce.

Table 2: Impact of unpaid care work on women

Finding	Statistic	Source
Gender gap in labor force participation (aged 25-54)	Female: 61.4%; Male: 90.6% (29.2 pp gap)	ILO, 2022
Women with children under six experience a wider labor force participation gap	Female: 53.1%; Male: 95.7% (42.6 pp gap)	ILO, 2022
Average time spent on unpaid care work by women compared to men	Women: 3 to 6 hours; Men: 0.5 to 2 hours	OECD, 2014
Proportion of unpaid care work performed by women globally	Over 75%	ILO, 2023
Women unable to get jobs due to caregiving responsibilities	42% of women; 6% of men	OXFAM
Average daily unpaid care work hours for women in low-income countries	Up to 14 hours	UN Women
Employment in informal and vulnerable jobs for women globally	Nearly 60%	UN Women
Gender wage gap globally	Women earn approximately 51 cents for every dollar earned by men	ILO, 2022
Percentage of men preferring their wives to stay at home	One in three men	OECD, 2018
Projected job openings for care workers by 2035	Estimated at 4.3 million	CEDEFOP, 2024

Source: Authors' Combination 2024

4.5 The unequal distribution of caring responsibilities between men and women

Globally, women spend two to ten times more time on unpaid care work than men due to discriminatory social institutions and stereotypes about gender roles. This "double burden" of paid work and unpaid care limits women's economic opportunities (OECD, 2014). The higher the inequality in the distribution of care responsibilities between women and men, the higher the gender gaps in labour force participation. In countries where women spend almost eight times more time on unpaid care activities than men, the female share of the labour force is 15 percentage points lower. Across the European Union (EU), employed women spend 90 minutes more daily than employed men on unpaid care. This unequal sharing of care limits women's job prospects and is a major reason behind the gender pay gap (EIGE, 2020)

Gender stereotypes endorse expectations that women are "natural" caregivers while men are seen as the "ideal" breadwinners. These views construct firm dividing lines between responsibilities seen as "women's domain" and those appropriate for men (UNECE, 2008). Entrenched social norms confine men to breadwinning and view unpaid care work as a female prerogative.

Globally, one in three men would prefer that their wives stay home and care for the family rather than be in paid work (OECD, 2018). Women spend, on average, between three and six hours on

unpaid care activities, while men dedicate between half an hour and two hours (OECD, 2014). This makes women bear the disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work, meaning over 75% of the world’s total unpaid care work is done by women. The disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women, rooted in discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes, is a key barrier preventing women from participating fully in the paid labour force. Tackling these entrenched attitudes is crucial for redistributing care responsibilities more equally between women and men and unlocking women's economic potential.

By 2035, over 6.5 million people will be working as care workers. This underestimates the true level of employment demand. An estimated 3.9 million people will be needed to replace those who are expected to leave the occupation mainly due to retirement – in addition to the projected growth of an additional 373 thousand people. In other words, between 2022 and 2035, an estimated 4.3 million job openings will need to be filled, as shown in Table 3. To interpret the importance of care work in relation to the projected working population, we can analyse the projected number of care workers alongside the overall labour force.

Table 3: Projected Number of Care Workers by 2035

Category	Number	Proportion of Total Working Population (%)
Projected Care Workers by 2035	6.5 million	$\frac{6.5 \text{ million}}{180 \text{ million}} \times 100 \approx 3.61\%$
Total Job Openings Needed	4.3 million	$\frac{4.3 \text{ million}}{180 \text{ million}} \times 100 \approx 2.39\%$

Source: Authors’ Combination 2024for individual well-being and

5.0 Conclusion

This data underscores the significant role that care work plays within the labour market. With care workers accounting for a notable percentage of the workforce, their contributions are essential for individual well-being and societal and economic stability. The demand for care work is expected to grow, highlighting the need for policies supporting this sector, improving working conditions, and promoting gender equality in caregiving responsibilities. Addressing these needs is crucial for ensuring that both paid and unpaid care work are recognised and valued within the broader economy.

Care work is essential for human development and economic growth, but the burden of this work falls disproportionately on women globally. Urgent policy action is needed to "recognise, reduce and redistribute" unpaid care responsibilities in order to achieve gender equality and unlock the full economic potential of women's labour. Care work significantly impacts women's economic empowerment by limiting their opportunities for education, labour force participation, and career advancement. Addressing gender inequality in unpaid care work is crucial for promoting women's economic empowerment, reducing poverty, and achieving gender equality.

6.0 Recommendation

Policymakers need to address unpaid care work in policy agendas and design suitable fiscal policies to avoid discouraging female labour force participation. Additionally, tackling discriminatory social institutions and adopting a care lens across all areas of public policy are essential for achieving gender equality.

There is a need to bring on board interventions that target the religious spaces that have been left out in care development discussions, yet they hold power in influencing their followers.

The private sector should equally be included in care development discussions as the main employers where women spend most of their productive hours.

Increased dissemination of county-based Time-use survey report ahead of draft National care policy. In this policy development, some stakeholders who will take action based on this research regarding care work and its effects on women's economic empowerment include a diverse array of actors from various sectors. These stakeholders can be categorised as follows:

Government entities: National Governments will play a crucial role in formulating policies that recognise and redistribute unpaid care work, ensuring that women have equitable access to economic opportunities. The Local Governments and their local authorities can implement community-specific programs that address women's unique challenges, particularly regarding unpaid care responsibilities.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): Organisations such as WEL and CARE International will focus on women's economic justice and empowerment, advocating for policies that support women's roles as economic actors and address their exclusion from economic processes. Another organisation is Oxfam; through initiatives like the Women's Economic Empowerment and Care (WE-Care) program, Oxfam recognises, reduces, and redistributes unpaid care work to enhance gender equality and women's participation in economic activities.

Private Sector: The private sector, such as Businesses and Corporations companies, can adopt practices that support women's economic empowerment by creating flexible work environments, offering childcare services, such as breastfeeding space and promoting gender equality in the workplace. Engagement with women-led enterprises is also crucial for fostering economic growth.

Financial Institutions such as banks and microfinance organisations can develop products tailored to women's needs, such as savings accounts and loans with minimum interest that consider the financial constraints posed by unpaid care work.

Community Organizations: Women's Cooperatives and Groups, such as Local women's groups, famously known as 'chamas', can mobilise resources and advocate for policy changes at the community level, providing support networks for women balancing paid work with unpaid care responsibilities.

Grassroots Movements, in their capacity, can raise awareness about the importance of recognising unpaid care work and advocate for systemic changes that promote gender equity.

International Bodies

Agencies like the United Nations (UN) bodies such as UN Women focus on global advocacy for women's rights and economic empowerment, promoting policies that address the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women

Regional Organizations: Entities such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) can facilitate regional strategies to tackle issues related to women's economic empowerment and care work

Research organisations and academic institutions: Research Organizations and academic institutions can conduct studies that provide data-driven insights into the impacts of unpaid care work on women's economic empowerment, informing policy recommendations at various levels. This could strengthen the capacities of labour unions working with domestic workers on progressive care legal frameworks for integration. Further studies could be conducted to build the capacities of care economy stakeholders on care-responsive development

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