

GENDER INEQUALITY
CARE WORK

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What is it?

Unpaid care work refers to any behaviors associated to caring for individuals in a family or community and is a component of social reproduction. This is an unpaid job that requires time and energy and is done out of a sense of social obligation and/or love and compassion. Unpaid care work is recognized as a female responsibility and is referred to as “women’s work”. Although it is well understood that it is a crucial component of the economy, it is frequently overlooked and undervalued [1].

Paid care work by women is critical to families and communities, and our economy could not function without it. Children, the elderly, and the sick continue to demand care, and there are fewer people at home to offer it. Despite this, those who care for children and the elderly are paid little, have inadequate benefits, and have limited opportunities for training and growth [2].

Women perform at least two and a half times more unpaid home and care work than males, from cooking and cleaning to fetching water and firewood and caring for children and the elderly. As a result, women either have less time to engage in paid labor or work longer hours mixing paid and unpaid labor [3].

Why does it matter?

According to research, women's disproportionate care load is a fundamental barrier to their development in the paid work sector. For example, it prevents them from taking on leadership responsibilities or working in high-paying industries, such as technology. Furthermore, in Lebanon and many other countries care work is done by mostly racialized, and migrant women and frequently for poor salaries [3].

There is an unequal distribution of home tasks between spouses. Women, as opposed to men, perform most of the unpaid domestic care work for the family and pick kinds of employment that allow them to maintain a work-life balance, resulting in high satisfaction but economic losses for the state. However, globally, the majority of women, including those who are not in the labor sector, would prefer to work in paid occupations [4].

Domestic labor in the household is an important part of a person's life and society. However, its significance to the overall evolution of society's social structure, institutions, and norms has yet to be fully understood. The increasing number of women in paid work does not change the unequal

distribution of domestic labor between men and women, which fundamentally characterizes the systemic problem of gender inequality.

My thoughts

Below are three examples of people I knew and wanted to talk about in regards of this matter, without mentioning the names or relationship with:

First example is about a woman who works for a software development firm in Beirut. She had a baby and wanted to leave her job or look for a part-time job that would suit her better in her present circumstances so she could care for her child. When her boss found out, and since he knows her work and abilities, and most importantly, because she is in charge of a large project, her boss suggested that she work in the office until 2:00 pm and bring her baby with her, and then work remotely from home in the afternoon (remote work was more valued by employers after the COVID-19 pandemic), anyone would say that this is a very positive and promising step from her boss. However, on the other hand, the same firm pays male employees more just because they are men! Furthermore, her boss denied giving her the opportunity to advance in her career and become a team leader or project manager just because she is a woman. Although he knows well, she deserves to advance in her job, he prefers to recruit men for such roles since ladies would marry and have children, which will cost him money. From here we can say, he did what he did above because this was of a benefit to him, and not because he appreciates his employees or care for them.

Important to mention here that she encountered several challenges before being recruited for this position since she is wearing a hijab, which is not accepted by a majority of employers and firms, and this also limits her and forces her to accept less than what she deserves.

Every minute a woman spends on unpaid care work is a minute less she could spend on market-related activities or investing in her educational and occupational abilities. The effort for women to integrate care work with paid employment might result in "occupational downgrading," in which women pick jobs below their skill level and accept lower pay.

Generally, in our countries, employees (mainly women employees) can't go up and advance in their jobs because there is always an excuse by employers to exclude and push backward. They

say, “this will cost me money”. Unfortunately, employers and CEOs which most of them are men, think of profit over people, transforming human beings into capitals.

I believe that for equality to be applied in the job market, employers must give time, subsidies and services to employees to support care and assist women in finding a better work/life balance such as: flexible work hours, paid maternity and paternity leave, funeral leave, space and time for nursing newborns at work, health or childcare facilities, and paid vacations. This will have better success when institutions advocate with the government. Governments should establish laws and regulations to aid this cause, and they are responsible for preventing rights violations by firms, and ensuring that human rights are recognized, and preserved. On the other hand, I believe that if the government invests more in care services such as childcare and long-term care, the economy will improve. Governments have a critical influence in developing or changing cultural norms around unpaid care work. They can also establish, regulate, and fund domestic and care services to alleviate the load on communities, families, and women, and raise the compensation and benefits for individuals who work in paid care work positions to properly value them.

Second example is about a woman who performs all of the housework with no assistance from anyone. Her children grew up watching her perform all kinds of jobs, including the ones that her husband should do. One of her children used to tell her, “This isn't your work; isn't it enough what you're doing at home from cleaning and cooking etc...., this will have a negative effect on your health in the future.” but she never listens. The serious problem is that all she receives in return is terrible words and insults if something is not as what her husband wants. From the very beginning she listens to and cares about what others say and what society says, which is what has landed her in this situation. She is also terrified of her father's emotions and reactions. The issue we have here is that society standards push women to conform and males to behave as if they are dominating, and always right. It is very harmful silencing any significant proportion of human beings. I believe domestic workers and women who care for their own families must take collective actions and speak up about their own experiences, interests, and suggestions for change.

Third example is about a married couple, both are university instructors, and they have three little children. The husband supports his wife with the majority of the housework, and they split the workload between them, from teaching the children to preparing food, taking the children to

outdoor activities, washing the dishes and clothes, and so on... I was so delighted seeing them and how they live together, because around me there are no similar families or let me say such loving, understanding, open, respectful, supportive and genuine husbands. Seeing this family makes me believe that dividing the care work between women and men starts first by “men” themselves. It is more tied to men's thinking, mindset, education, and openness, as well as how they were raised and the environment in which they grew up. All of this has an impact on his personality, either positively or badly, and a male's behaviors and emotions are influenced by all what he experienced as a child. I'm not attempting to be a psychologist here, but I believe this has a lot to do with how a man treats his wife and children later.

I also believe that either religion or interpretation of it plays a role too. In all monotheistic religions, men are portrayed as rational, natural leaders, violent when needed, and heads of families. While wise women are sent to the background as supporters of those men, they are expected to listen and abide, portrayed as emotional and subordinate to men. As a result, some men may not modify their behavior because they are afraid of being criticized, questioned, or having their authority challenged.

We keep saying “it is the culture” just to convince ourselves that what we are doing is right, but we should remember that the culture is changeable and changing. Women are not born and know how to cook, take care of elderly people, children, and family... Women and men are born similar; however, women spend disproportionately more time than men on care duties because of social standards and gender roles and cultural stereotypes. Reproductive labor thus, should be centered because it is very much expected from men.

Not to forget, care work is what kept people alive in the COVID-19 pandemic. As schools stay closed, and as the global economic crisis looms, it is the domestic workers who did it all: from taking care of children and family to feeding, teaching, nursing, etc...

Whole communities wouldn't survive without this kind of work. We need to admit that it is not the bankers, nor the politicians who did that, it is WOMEN. Unpaid care and domestic work are valued to be 10 and 39 percent of the Gross Domestic Product and can contribute more to the economy than the manufacturing, commerce, or transportation sectors [5] which makes it an integral part of an individual's life and society, yet it is rarely recognized as “work”. Nonetheless, even in the paid labor market, paid care employment often pays less than other forms of paid job.

Conclusion

Gender norms are complicated and altering them might take a long time and risk backlash. However, big changes come in little steps. The needle is moving, even if it is moving slowly but moving. I believe, ensuring that males engage on a regular basis, and breaking down change into simple activities, can be more beneficial than setting high short-term goals. Media and programs can help by engaging men and boys in ways leading to possible change.

Labor done out of love, or “care work”, does not mean that it is not work and that it should not be acknowledged; on the contrary, it should be valued and counted. As a result, care should not be considered simply as a burden, and this key activity for well-being should be shared among men and women, as well as between the family and the state. It is abuse to not see it as actual work and not to make it visible. While some unpaid care labor is done freely and contributes to personal and family well-being, some of it may be decreased by improved infrastructure, divided more fairly by male and female household members, or converted to paid occupations. As a result of these measures, more women may become financially independent, and there may be intergenerational advantages for the children of working moms.

Finally, Gender is an identity and not about the body we are born in, it is not about biological function or reproductive setup, it is a social construct and to whom it gives power and privilege which tends to be organized by people with certain characteristics, geographics, ethics, etc....

Gender is what we believe we are, and how a fulfilled happy person is. It is fluid. It is a relation with others, not only at the level of household rather in the public, and where we interact with our peers at work, etc....

All of us are different. Gender equality is not about sameness, we are different human beings, and we think differently. When we talk about rights and inequality: we should recognize diversity and make sure that this diversity doesn't act as a block to accessing rights. We need equal access to resources, same chances, equal employment prospects, and equal involvement in politics, the economy, and decision-making.

Gender equality is essential for fulfilling human rights and is a goal that helps everyone in society, particularly girls and women. I'm hoping that in our contemporary era, we can see this happen.

Notes

[1] “Redistributing care work for gender equality and justice – a training curriculum”, Report by OXFAM, ActionAid, and Institute of Development Studies, June 2015.

[2] N. Folbre, “Gender and Care Work”, PERI, 2021.

[3] G. Ferrant, L.M. Pesando and K. Nowacka, “Unpaid Care Work: The missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes”, Report of the OECD Development Centre, Dec. 2014.

[4] Y. OLGA, R. M. POTLURI, N. GULFIYA, and S. AIZHAN, “Women’s Unpaid Work as a Factor of Gender Inequality: A Case of Kazakhstan,” *The Journal of Business Economics and Environmental Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 17–21, Apr. 2020.

[5] Women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work, Report of the Secretary-General, Dec. 2016.