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Balancing Paid Work and Unpaid Care Work to Achieve Women's Economic Empowerment

It is widely known that women's economic empowerment can lead to economic growth. However, it is important to understand women's economic empowerment as not simply about labour force participation, but also about the choice to work, the choice of sector, location and working hours. This Policy Briefing looks at the interactions between the market and the household and the consequences of unpaid care work on the type, location and nature of paid work that women and girls can undertake, thereby impacting their economic empowerment. Further, it outlines policy actions that can help prevent women from being forced into making choices that have negative social, economic and political outcomes.

Economic growth will be short-lived if the focus is entirely on women participating in the labour force, and not on a wider understanding of economic empowerment. A broader notion of economic empowerment comprises both the market economy where women participate in the labour market, and the care economy which sustains and nurtures the market economy.

There is a strong yet inverse link between the amount of time that women and girls spend on unpaid care work and their economic empowerment. This relationship becomes stronger because of two reinforcing dynamics – firstly, women face discrimination in the labour market; and secondly, the drudgery that is often involved in carrying out domestic responsibilities impacts on the health and wellbeing of women, further compromising their ability to participate in civil, economic, social and political spheres. This double burden has been termed as 'time poverty'.

Discrimination in the labour market

Over the past 30 years, credible evidence has confirmed a significant increase in women's participation in the informal economy, leading to what has been called the 'feminisation of informal labour'. Women are often concentrated in sectors such as home-based work, domestic work, construction and labour-intensive manufacturing such as garment making, beedi making, shoe making, packaging and handicrafts. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), of the 53 million domestic workers worldwide, 83 per cent are women. This reflects the gender stereotype that perpetuates these jobs as being 'women's work'.

More critically, an undervaluation of women's work in the paid economy adds to the already precarious nature of women's employment. This implies that women are to be found in low paid, irregular, often unsafe and insecure jobs, with very little job security.

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Exploring the reasons behind the feminisation of these sectors reveals a strong link between women's paid work and their unpaid care work responsibilities.

Many formal sector jobs are found in large cities or places that are usually away from residences, thereby creating a barrier to women's participation in the labour market because of high costs and time for transport that is usually inadequate and unreliable. With no help forthcoming either from the men in their families, or from the state in terms of public provision of services, women face the prospect of increasing levels of time poverty, making it difficult for them to consider looking for better paid jobs. This situation is further exacerbated by low wages and high costs of childcare, which can leave women with no other choice than to stay at home rather than work in the paid economy.

Women are therefore more likely to undertake paid work close to home. One reason for this is because it enables them to mind their children, cook meals and care for elderly relatives, without incurring additional time and financial cost. Another reason is that male members of the household decide the location of the family's residence and women usually depend on their informal information networks to find paid employment near their homes.

Correlation between women's stages of life and entry into the labour force

Women's livelihood strategies of entering the paid labour market are deeply correlated to the stage in their lifecycle. Largely, young, unmarried or recently married women are likely to be working in paid jobs. However, an increase in their household responsibilities, either through marriage or childbearing, leads to many women either withdrawing from the labour market; finding more flexible, part-time jobs; or entering into self-employment that offers more flexible time management. Women with young children are less likely to enter into the paid job market, irrespective of their level of education.

Women with young children typically work within or close to their home until their

children are at least in their mid-teens. Then, when their children no longer require childcare, they may not enter into the labour force due to obligations to care for elderly or sick relatives at home.

There are differences by household income as well – better off women are more likely to be in formal sector jobs, and can afford to pay for childcare. However, poorer women often have to care for children, sick and elderly relatives themselves, leading to adverse consequences for both the recipients of care, and themselves.

Retention and promotion in the labour force is also affected by women's lifecycle stage – both in terms of the choices that they themselves make (in terms of choosing to not work, to work fewer or more flexible hours) and the way they are perceived by their employers (in terms of wages, career progression and types of jobs that they are offered).

Lack of decent work for women domestic workers

Increasing poverty in many countries, coupled with structural adjustment programmes, declining agricultural sector and economic crises, has pushed many women and girls into the domestic labour market. With limited access to the formal job market and discrimination on the basis of gender, caste or class, 'race' or ethnicity, options for decent work are few. Furthermore, as most women are from poor households, they generally have little education and few marketable skills. With cleaning, cooking, child and elderly care often regarded as women's work, paid domestic work becomes one of the few employment opportunities open to poor women. Being informal and performed outside the realm of labour regulations and social protections, domestic workers suffer significant disadvantages to those within the formal work environment. Female domestic workers are subjected to gender discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping in relation to their work, which is regarded as low status and accorded little value. As such, domestic workers tend to work longer hours, have lower wages, with fewer benefits, and less legal or social protections compared to most other wage workers. Additionally, they usually have no maternity leave, health care or pension provision (WIEGO 2014; ILO 2010).

Acknowledging the burdens of unpaid care work on education and productivity

Women often end up in home-based work or other seemingly 'non-skilled' work because of lack of education. However, this gap in education or skills has often emerged from them having to drop out of school or further their skills because of the heavy burden of unpaid care work they have had to take on as adolescent girls. Poor living standards with no basic amenities such as lack of piped water adds the drudgery to women's lives and thus limiting their prospects of better jobs or longer hours of paid work and leisure or rest time.

A negative relationship is also at play between the level of unpaid care work and women's engagement in the paid labour market. Research has found that working at home while performing household chores including care work negatively affects productivity. Women working at home (for example, working with livestock or handicrafts production) are able to do less work than women working in formal paid jobs (as export garment workers, teachers, non-governmental organisation staff, nurses and health workers) or informal paid jobs outside of home (domestic work, agricultural and non-agricultural wage labour, petty trade and services). In addition, women working at home are even less likely to get assistance for their unpaid care work from other members of their family, as they are perceived to be at home.

Addressing the double bind of restricted work opportunities and 'care-blindness'

This Policy Briefing illustrates that there is a chain of low paid, irregular, often unsafe, work, which, combined with a blindness to the work that they carry out within the home, binds women (and their children) into poverty and vulnerability – limiting the extent of their economic empowerment – both individually and inter-generationally. This effect is being noticed in programme implementation in a range of sectors. For example, in ActionAid's ongoing Young Urban Women Project in India, Ghana and South Africa, there is a negative impact of the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on marginalised women's access to

livelihoods and decent work opportunities, as well as their access to sexual and reproductive health rights.

Given this strong link, it is necessary to recognise this double bind and put in place policy measures in order for women to be able to participate fully and effectively in both the market and the care economy. Taking unpaid care work into account in policies and programmes has the potential to significantly strengthen the empowering outcomes of women's participation in paid work. This will come about because support for unpaid care work will:

- **Optimise** women's economic participation, by enabling them to work without deepening their time poverty, or worrying about the amount and quality of care their families are receiving. This in turn will help make it possible for them to choose better-paid and more empowering types of work, rather than being forced into low-paid 'flexible' work.
- **Share** the gains of women's economic empowerment across all females in the family, so that younger girls and older women are not left to carry the burden and be disempowered as a result; and that economic benefits are not eroded because of the cost of substitute care.
- **Sustain** the gains of women's economic empowerment across generations, by ensuring that the quality of childcare improves rather than deteriorates, as a result of their mothers' paid work.

It is critical to arrest the push into informal, unsafe and unregulated work, and to eradicate gender wage gaps and gender-based discrimination in the type of work that women and men are engaged in. A balance between paid work and unpaid care work would enable women to have the time, opportunity and choice to participate equally in society and the economy, thereby leading to empowerment.

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Recommendations

It is heartening to see the focus of the Open Working Group's recommendations for the Sustainable Development Goals on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. There is a stand-alone goal pertaining to the recognition of unpaid care work and domestic work. This calls for provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection, which resonate with the following policy recommendations to ensure economic empowerment is optimised, shared across families and sustained across generations:

- **Recognise that time poverty is a critical determinant of women's poverty, and a critical determinant of their economic empowerment.** Time-use surveys are a useful way to capture the contribution that women make to the economy. These can also be used to guide more effective allocation of public resources such that interventions like water and sanitation, education and health, employment creation, and social policies are adequately financed. In addition, time-use survey analysis can highlight time spent on paid work, unpaid care work and leisure time for women and men, and seek to eradicate gender differentials in all of these areas.
- **Redistribute unpaid care work from poor families to the state through provision of public services, infrastructure and care-sensitive social protection.**
 - Investment in public service provision is critical to addressing time poverty. This includes provision of good quality crèches and pre-schools with flexible opening hours, care services for the sick and elderly, and accessible education and health services. All these services need to be conveniently located and have reasonable opening hours. Most critically, they need to be affordable to poor women in order for the benefits of paid work to not be eroded by costs.
 - Investment in infrastructural interventions that bring piped, clean water; electricity and sanitation services to poor communities, and safe and secure travel arrangements are critical to ensure that women and their families are able to maintain a positive balance between paid work and unpaid care work.
 - Social protection interventions are a positive way to enable women to maintain this balance; however, these need to be care-sensitive.
 - The use of enabling technologies such as ICTs fuelled by renewable energy may be a creative solution to providing safe locations and environments for women to work in without creating time poverty or an imbalance between paid work, care work and leisure time. ICTs can also provide access to information and public services such as health and education, which can further women's empowerment.
- **When creating employment opportunities for women, put regulations in place to ensure decent work that takes into account their unpaid care work responsibilities as per their lifecycle and family structure requirements.** This would help guarantee opportunities for flexible working hours, decent and fair wages, maternity benefits, improved working conditions and safe working opportunities at a range of suitable locations.

Further reading

Chopra, D. (2014) 'Towards Gender Equality with Care-Sensitive Social Protection', *IDS Policy Briefing 49*, Brighton: IDS

Fontana, M. (2014) 'Gender-Equitable Public Investment: How Time-Use Surveys Can Help', *IDS Policy Briefing 82*, Brighton: IDS

ILO (2010) 'Decent Work for Domestic Workers', *International Labour Conference, 99th Session Report IV(1)*, Geneva: International Labour Organization

Kabeer, N. (2012) *Women's Economic Empowerment and Inclusive Growth: Labour Markets and Enterprise Development*, SIG Working Paper 2012/1, International Development Research Centre/Department for International Development

WIEGO (2014) *Occupational Groups: Domestic Workers*, <http://wiego.org/informal-economy/occupational-groups/domestic-workers> (accessed 12 January 2015)

Credits

This *IDS Policy Briefing* was written by IDS Research Fellow, **Deeptha Chopra**, in connection with the 'Making Unpaid Care Visible' stream of the UK Aid-funded programme on Influencing Policies to Support the Empowerment of Women and Girls and the Sida-funded programme on Gender Power and Sexuality. It was edited by Carol Smithyes.

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