

# Its About Time We Care About an Equitable World: Women's Unpaid Care Work and COVID-19

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**Abstract**—Unpaid care work, mostly performed by women, is a central but undervalued contributor to economies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for unpaid care work increased due to restricted movement, social isolation, and economic challenges. This pandemic has highlighted the urgency of recognizing and valuing women's work at the household level which has been systematically overlooked. At the same time, it has increased the demand for technology usage, exposing the gender digital divide. This article aims to shed light on the additional burden women are facing, especially when trying to balance unpaid care work with paid employment from the seclusion of their homes. We do this by reviewing a number of surveys conducted in Indonesia. We combine this with other examples from additional contexts in order to draw attention to a global trend of amplified inequalities and struggles women are experiencing. We advocate for an urgent paradigm shift by providing vital recommendations for policymakers and managers.

**Key words:** COVID-19, gender equality, technology, unpaid care work, women, working from home

## I. INTRODUCTION

**W**OMEN provide an invaluable contribution to society through the various roles they perform. But their efforts remain largely undervalued and underpaid. A principal paradigmatic example of women's invisibility is that although they are the primary caregivers—often putting others before themselves—they continue to suffer from inequality and gender-related biases. Historically, society has devalued the importance of care work for the economy and in strengthening communities. Care responsibilities are more often performed on an unpaid basis. However, there is no reason to perceive it as less valuable than paid work. Unpaid care work and domestic work are necessary for the well-being of individuals and optimum functioning of societies [1]. Nevertheless, caring for children, the elderly or sick people is the kind of

labor that is left out when measuring a country's economy in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

This article highlights the undervalued role of women in the care economy and their struggle to combine paid and unpaid work. We delve into the ongoing pandemic to illustrate how previously unaddressed traditional gender-related inequalities, that for too long have placed women at the center of household duties, have now been exacerbated with wider repercussions to their own lives. We address the issue of adjusting to working from home and the role of technology in facilitating or hindering this. We then take stock of an online survey conducted in Indonesia, a country in which women are traditionally the main unpaid caregivers due to strong cultural and religious norms. Equal to many parts of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic is placing additional burden on these women whose paid and unpaid work is now forcefully

intertwined and both taking place in the domestic sphere. However, the home is not safe for everyone with domestic violence's uptick.

The pandemic has generated immense research interest on unpaid care work globally. We discuss both academic and news articles to support our argument for the need to address gender inequalities in contemporary societies. Finally, we draw policy recommendations to highlight the value of care work in the functioning of societies and economies. At the same time, we encourage women's empowerment and their participation in the labor market in a working environment that acknowledges and respects reproductive work.

## II. WOMEN AND THE VALUE OF UNPAID CARE WORK

Care is an essential human need, vital for the wellbeing of communities and individuals. Paid or unpaid care work takes place across formal and informal economies, where a relationship between a caregiver and a care-receiver is established. Whereas the first form of work implies a relationship with an employer, the second tends to take place at the household level without any financial reward.

Globally, women spend around 4.4 h/day carrying out unpaid work in comparison to men's 1.4 h. This amounts to an estimated 4 years of extra unpaid work over the course of women's lifetime as opposed to men. Men however perform 5.3 h of paid work daily while women are only financially rewarded for 3 h of their time [2]. These numbers highlight the urgency of not only addressing the gender pay gap but also long-standing stereotypes that perpetuate gender inequality.

For women, balancing their job with unpaid care work can be extremely challenging. The way our economies

and social norms are shaped do little to encourage change. For example, it is estimated that if women's unpaid labor in low-income countries was to be assigned monetary value, it would account for 10% to 39% of the GDP [3]. But despite the economic benefit, unpaid care work is yet to be a labor force category. Furthermore, it is absent in GDP calculations and assessments of women's labor force participation rate.

The unpaid care burden on women limits their opportunities to gain an income through formal employment and their participation in social and political activities. It further decreases their opportunities to enjoy periods of rest and leisure, crucial to secure their overall wellbeing. Formally and informally employed women are more likely to return home at the end of their workday to do domestic and/or care work, also known as "the second shift" [4]. This double role women carry, hinders their career progress, resulting in their underrepresentation in senior management positions [5]. The poor representation of women in top positions negatively impacts a company's performance [6]. Employers and managers should not overlook gender inequality as both a social and economic issue, especially now that the world has been hit by a pandemic and women have been forced to engage with and dedicate more time to household and care activities.

## III. CARING FOR OTHERS DURING PANDEMICS

With the COVID-19 crisis and the array of lockdowns worldwide, the significance of unpaid care work has been (re)discovered. Women's role in ensuring a safe environment for others in society is now more invaluable than ever. For example, according to UNESCO, more than 1.5 billion children were out of school during the shutdown [7]. This has increased the need for childcare. The

prepandemic share of child-care among neighbors and grandparents was discouraged due to the need for social distancing and protecting the vulnerable elderly [8].

Thus, as the formal and informal supply of childcare became more difficult, the burden of unpaid childcare fell more heavily on women. Many of them were forced to work from home and, at the same time, be homeschoolers for their children while undertaking other care activities. In addition, some women found themselves unemployed or were forced to leave their jobs and thus, fully dedicate themselves completely to the care work activities [9]. Under these circumstances, the issue of care work is under the spotlight and a concern for many women around the world. For instance, a recent study [10] which analyzed Google searches in Australia, showed how the topic of care emerged; and searches like "childcare" and "elder care" figured among the top ones. Similarly, in some U.S. states searches for "daycare and coronavirus" were more common than those related to "coronavirus and economy."

Preliminary data on the gender dimension of the COVID-19 crisis are welcome, given that the issue of gender has been traditionally overlooked in policy debates and research during outbreaks. For instance, a 2016 study [11] that reviewed articles on the Ebola and Zika outbreaks indicated that less than 1% of published research discussed gender issues. The study used the term "tyranny of the urgent," to refer to policies that prioritize biomedical needs over other social issues. Similarly, another review article pointed out the "gender gaps" in policy analysis on disease outbreaks [12].

Despite the limited available work, it is becoming more evident that the increased burden of care work falls on

women during pandemic outbreaks. A study on the Ebola outbreak found that care work was provided mostly by women, many of whom carried psychological trauma and a stigma of potential disease transmitters [13]. Other studies on Ebola suggest that women suffered more due to their roles as caregivers, which in turn led to higher infection rates [14], [15]. Also, women tend to work in sectors that were hit the hardest by the economic contraction [16]. In Sierra Leone, for example, it was reported that during the lockdown households were provided with food supplies but neither water nor fuel. As women continued to go out of their homes to perform their traditional roles of fetching fuel and water, they became more exposed to Ebola. As UNICEF estimates, 60% of those who died from the pandemic were women [17]. This raises questions of how much of the obstacles faced by women are posed by pre-existent traditional gender roles and cultural norms rather than a consequence of pandemics. In order to address the challenges posed by COVID-19 and the need for social distancing and increased unpaid care work, digital technology is seen as a solution.

#### IV. TECHNOLOGY AND GENDER GAP

Already technology is leveraged by governments and companies to mitigate the potential harm of the pandemic. Women are going online to organize children's education, order food, find answers to health questions, and keep on with their paid work. Digital technology can be used as a channel to provide information, outreach, and support, but only when women can safely access and use them, especially as it has been linked to online misinformation, sexual harassment, and violence.

The pandemic is further exposing the gender gap in access to technology, especially in less affluent economies,

as the World Food Programme [18] reports. Women are less likely to have access to mobile phones or the Internet than men. This alarming fact puts women at the brick of information exclusion. This forces them to remain in silence as they do not have the equal opportunity to voice out their concerns and desires. The WFP further highlights the need to have programs that consult and engage with women, as technical infrastructure tends to be indifferent to the disparities between men and women's accessibility to technology. An OECD report [19] claims that women, on average, have less access, exposure, and experience with digital technologies than men, causing a disadvantage for women when working remotely. Additionally, computers, software, high-speed broadband Internet service at home and other related services such as messaging apps or video conferencing systems are among the essential and often costly equipment needed for work from home.

There is also an ongoing discussion on the use of technology as a tool to help women in their household chores and care activities. In this sense, the pandemic is seen as an opportunity to remove the barriers in the use of these technologies. Some form of technology can allow for communication with loved ones, live monitoring, and care arrangements ("telecare technologies"). However, many of these technologies require special skills and training, which need time and effort to master. They are also quite expensive or not accepted by the cared-for person [20].

The way technology affects the time women spend in household production is still largely controversial. Apart from the potential to reduce "time poverty" [21], the absence of time that can be dedicated to personal interests [22], it can also have the reverse effect and prompt women to redirect their efforts

toward other care or other activities [23]. Nevertheless, the way technology reaches out to women is not specific to a geographical divide, but rather a result of both social and economic development and gender traditional roles that persist in both affluent and less affluent countries. In the following section, we discuss the importance of unpaid care work, its impact on Indonesian women, many of which lack the know-how of digital media or the Internet [24].

#### V. INSIGHTS FROM INDONESIA

In Indonesia, the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in March 2020. With a population of nearly 270 million, by August the country had reported 119 000 positive cases, 75 645 recovered and 5521 deaths—the worst hit nation of Southeast Asia. To further prevent the virus spread, the government adopted strict lockdown measures including business and schools' shutdowns. For Indonesian women, who are still widely positioned in the domestic space and with less formal employment opportunities, this translated into extra work.

According to the International Labour Organization [25], only 51% of the women population contributes to the formal or paid labor force and those women are still expected to carry out most of the unpaid care work. A study [26] argues that it is considered a women's obligation to take care of the family and the chores, regardless of working for long hours. Recent data from the Central Bureau of Statistics Indonesia (2018) [27] reports that 37.68% of the women in the total labor force population carry out unpaid care work, in contrast with 3.65% of men. This is associated with religious norms, social ethics, role models, and stigmatization. Indonesians follow the nuclear/bilateral pattern and not the "extended family" model one can see in other Asian countries [28]. Thus,

most of the care work falls on the hands of women. As Dayaram *et al.* [29] put it “women are viewed as wives, mothers, and servants whose lives are constructed by gender ideology.”

In a country where the gender gap regarding care work is considerable and the technology divide wide, it is essential to foster data on how the unfolding pandemic affects women and in particular those who strive to achieve a balance between the formal employment and the need for teaching and assisting their children’s schoolwork while doing household duties. This highlights the extra burden women carry as caregivers when they are forced to work from home.

An online survey conducted one month after the lockdown, by the Research Center for Population, Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), offers an initial outlook on the challenges women are facing. The survey enquired a total of 300 working women who live in the Greater Jakarta Area participated. All of them were required to work from home during the pandemic. In response to the question ‘*Do you think that the working from home scheme is making you more productive?*’ 45% of women do not agree, 45.6% agree, and 9.4% strongly agree. However, 60% of women agreed that working from home increases their workloads. Moreover, those who are still employed but have to work from home reported that at the same time they have to take care of their spouse who is also working from home, still have to help their children with homeschooling plus carrying out household duties. In this case, the first and second shifts of work are intertwined and often in conflict since they both occur within the domestic space [30]. It is important to recognize that the study has limitations in its methodology, mainly the sample size,

and the data collection process, which excluded certain profiles—women without Internet access, unemployed, young girls, or working in informal sectors. Nevertheless, the results obtained highlight the burdensome of paid and unpaid work born by women.

According to the Ministry of Manpower of Indonesia, 1 757 464 active workers sought government subsidies (e.g., layoffs and unpaid leaves) due to COVID-19, 32.5% of which are women. The high number of layoffs during the pandemic forced many women to find side jobs in order to financially secure their families. The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab Southeast Asia (J-PAL SEA) conducted an online survey on the economic impact of COVID-19 in Indonesia from mid-March to early-May which involved 500 participants. Since the pandemic breakout, 58% of the total women respondents lost their jobs across different sectors. Many of them were forced to look for alternative sources of income in the informal economy, such as opening small food stalls to sell homemade food and masks. Through these informal networks, some women in Indonesia contribute to the relief of some household duties of other women. At the same time, they put their health at significant risk as they work outdoors without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) nor a health or social system that protects them [31].

These results, combined with another study from an online survey carried out by National Women’s Commission of Indonesia which mentioned that there was an increased risk of vulnerability experienced by women related to the changing household dynamics in the time of COVID-19, illustrates the difficult position in which Indonesian women find themselves during the pandemic. Out of 2285 respondents (400 men and 1885 women), 96%

stated that the number of household chores have increased significantly during the pandemic. For 70% of the female respondents, it was especially cooking and washing clothes that placed more burden in their daily life.

As women spend more time at home, domestic violence emerged as a concerning issue. The survey identified that there were more cases of violence against women, especially those from low to middle socioeconomic backgrounds. The most vulnerable women identified in the study had the following characteristics: women with less than 350 USD (5 million Rupiahs), working on informal sectors, aged between 31 to 40 years old, married, with more than three children, and living within the ten provinces with the highest cases of COVID-19 [32]. From 16 March to 19 April 2020, 97 cases of violence against women were reported to the local institution in Jakarta named LBH APIK. Thirty-three of them are domestic violence related, 30 are online gender-based violence (GBV), and 34 refer to other kinds of violence, including rape [33], [47], and [48]. As women have been forced to spend long hours working on household tasks, when they do not meet the expectations of their counterpart, they tend to become more vulnerable to violence [34].

## VI. EMERGING GLOBAL TRENDS OF UNPAID CARE WORK DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The observations regarding the impact of COVID-19 on women provided so far are limited, but the case of Indonesia examined here is not unique. Similar results are emerging from several affluent and less affluent countries highlighting a looming trend. Although some studies indicate that the pandemic and related shutdowns brought positive changes to gender inequality—as



men participate more in household chores [35], homeschooling [36], and grocery shopping [37]—women are still responsible to a higher degree. A survey from the United States [38] examined how couples divide care work during the lockdown. It concluded that there is a more egalitarian division of labor among parents during the lockdown, however mothers are still more involved in homeschooling. In households where mothers did most of the childcare and chores, they were also solely responsible for creating the content for homeschooling. Although in another analysis from the U.S. [39], it was argued that COVID-19 was likely to put a disproportionate burden of care on women. This is mostly because less women have jobs that allow for telecommuting. Additionally, in many cases, women were responsible for the majority of childcare before the pandemic. For this reason, the authors predict that this trend is unlikely to be reversed during the crisis as the factors that initially led to this arrangement like power relations, established social norms, and role models will persist if not amplify.

An extensive research on how working from home affected the employees in various countries showed that women were less satisfied than men when working from home as the bulk of caregiving falls on them. Similar results have been observed in countries like in Germany, where a study showed that more flexible working hours and working from home lead to increased workload [40], [46]. Many more studies have concluded that working from home increases the work–family conflict for women [41], [42]. Additionally, only 27% of mothers felt like their employer understand that burden [43]. Women in the Philippines, Pakistan, and Bangladesh reported higher rates of anxiety and stress due to the increased care work [44], similar to

the data reported in Indonesia. In New Zealand, half of the working mothers that participated in a survey responded that their family needs affect their job and vice versa [45].

The multitude of examples emerging from different parts of the world indicate that traditional gender roles are a long-standing issue that remains unaddressed, despite some women counting on the collaboration of men. Nevertheless, further investigation is necessary to foreground women's concerns in the global policy agenda for transformative change.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The road to a more equitable and just world for all has been long but, throughout history, significant achievements have been made to break with traditional gender-roles and guarantee that women are treated equally and with dignity. The struggle against the undermined role of women in unpaid care work has gained a new momentum with the COVID-19 pandemic. The research synthesis presented here has revealed that combining paid and unpaid care work has put many women under pressure. Not only did their household duties increase, only in a few cases they could count on the active participation of men. As demonstrated, when women had to work from home, they found themselves with increased workload and had a hard time combining both paid and reproductive work. In many parts of the world, particularly in countries where social norms, traditions, religion, and patriarchy harmfully define women, they are still perceived as the household's main pillar with their socially attributed roles taken for granted.

We have questioned whether technology can help mitigate the burden of unpaid care work and find positive and negative effects

especially due to the rapid digital adoption driven by COVID-19. While digital technology can facilitate the performance of women's work loads and household duties and care related tasks, those with less access to technology or limited technological knowledge are in disadvantage. This can even leave many subjected to *techno-marginalization*, in other words excluded from the benefits technology has to offer. The pandemic offers an opportunity to not only expose long-term concerns of gender inequality, it also provides the opportunity to confront and change the status quo.

It is, therefore, the responsibility of the entire society, including governments, organizations, and civil society groups should take action to drive transformative change for equality and address the paid and unpaid care economy, which is an important contributor to the well-functioning of our societies and economies. Recognition of this role via education and awareness creation can lead to a paradigm shift of care work as a responsibility of all, rather than a concern of certain vulnerable groups only. It is also imperative to take pragmatic steps in dealing with some of the important issues that have been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic on care work and gender to build back better and to ensure a more sustainable future.

## VIII. PAVING THE WAY TOWARD A GENDER-RESPONSIVE AND INCLUSIVE POLICY-MAKING AND ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT

COVID-19 resulted in a rapid transformation of the way we work around the world and in all sectors. Working from home has become the new normal and online work a necessity. Given that the pandemic has exacerbated gender inequality,

we offer following recommendations to policymakers and managers to ensure a gender-responsive and inclusive organizational management:

- 1) Ensure that women have a voice and are equally represented within institutions at all levels of decision making, including in emergency situations; eliminate gender pay gaps and collect, analyze, and publish sex-disaggregated data.
- 2) Ensure safe and decent working conditions, protecting workers from harassment and bullying. Enforce legal protection of gender rights and set up a gender desk to effectively address women's concerns and/or complaints.
- 3) Support work-life balanced arrangements for working parents and carers, such as flexible arrangements to working from home and short breaks that will allow the workers to check on the cared person.
- 4) Provide the requisite facilities to enable online work from homes such as computers, headphones, and payment for Internet, etc.; provide capacity building and training to women on the use of technology.
- 5) Ensure access to sexual and reproductive health services and rights for women during pandemics and crises, including gender-based violence supporting services.
- 6) With the possible return to offices, while the pandemic is still ongoing, and there is still high demand for care-work, managers should ensure equal rights apply to those working both in the office and from home, including retention and promotion. It is advisable to adjust the annual reviews and targets, to take into consideration disrupted productivity due to care responsibilities during the lockdown and school closures.
- 7) Expand and reinforce gender-sensitive social safety nets including daycare, parental and sick paid leave, unemployment insurance, and direct cash or food voucher payments.
- 8) Adopt a gender-responsive approach at the workplace that promotes respect and equality among all employees regardless of their sex and other forms of discrimination coupled with sensitivity and gender training.
- 9) Provide a safety network against gender-based violence (e.g., share words that can be used as a signal for GBV and channels to report cases). Moreover, companies should provide assistance for women to heal from violent experiences at workplaces (e.g., medical attention, security, safe shelter, financial support, and legal services).

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