

POLICY BRIEF



CONSULTATION HIGHLIGHTS

- Good quality public childcare services enable women's economic participation.
- Gaps in information, services, and infrastructure deepen the burden of care for impoverished women.
- Gender roles and norms must be challenged if care work is to be valued and shared.
- Care duties need to be accommodated and valued in the workplace.

Unpaid care and women's empowerment: Lessons from research and practice

Unleashing women's economic potential will demand changes in how care work is valued and distributed within households and workplaces, and shared between men and women.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Providing care — for the young, the old, and the infirm — is a vital but grossly undervalued part of the global economy. While both men and women rely on quality care to enable their participation in economic, political, and social life, most unpaid care is provided by women and girls, leaving them with less time for education, employment, civic engagement, and leisure. According to 2015 UNDP estimates, women perform three times more unpaid care duties than men. Low-income families are particularly impacted by this unequal distribution, as they have less resources to pay for care services, and have less access to services and infrastructure that can help lessen the burden of care.

Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) includes a target for recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work. Progress demands a greater understanding of how to relieve the domestic burden on women, promote more equitable participation of men and women in the care economy, and put an economic value on care. To inform explorations in

this area by the United Nations High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment, in May 2016, the Institute of Development Studies, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and Oxfam UK coordinated a call for evidence on what works in transforming dynamics in the care economy.

CONSULTATION APPROACH

Over May and June 2016, 45 responses were received from researchers, NGOs, women's networks, worker's organizations, and national movements, detailing an international range of programs and research initiatives focused on the care economy. Respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire giving details of the programs, including their aims, the strategies used, challenges encountered, and outcomes to date. The responses formed the basis of some 50 cases documenting government and civil society experiences with the care economy, and relevant research initiatives.

The call for evidence was complemented by two global web-based discussions on June 7 and June 8, 2016. Insights from respondent questionnaires and the discussions formed the basis of an evidence paper and a position statement.

While the call for evidence reached a wide range of organizations active on the issue of care and women's empowerment, technology restrictions and the short window available to gather responses for the High Level Panel restricted the time available to thoroughly validate each intervention and may have limited certain groups' participation.



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RECOMMENDATIONS AND INSIGHTS

The insights that emerged from consultation, discussion, and further research highlighted the need for:

- Better provision of essential public services, including care services
- More investment in time- and labour-saving equipment and infrastructure
- More investment in initiatives to shift perceptions, norms, and gender roles about care
- Improved provision of decent work for women and men



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Good quality childcare services enable women's economic participation.

Several cases demonstrated the important difference that affordable and reliable child care can make in freeing up women's time for paid employment. In their 2016 report *Investing in the Care Economy*, the Women's Budget Group compared the return on government investments in social infrastructure — including child care, education, and elder care — with returns on physical infrastructure investment. Using data from seven OECD countries, they estimated that increased resources for care would lead to approximately twice as many jobs as investing the same amount in construction. Investing 2 percent of GDP in the care industry would increase women's employment rates by between 3.3 and 8.2 percent. A number of organizations documented investments in child care, often paired with livelihood initiatives targeting low-income families. In Mexico, for example, the federal government subsidizes up to 90 percent of the cost of day care for children eligible through the *Estancias* program. Among women benefiting from the program, 18 percent more are now employed, working on average six additional hours each week. *Estancias* also provided training and employment in child care for more than 40,000 women. It has been criticized for underpaying this work, however, reinforcing the low value put on women's labour.



Gaps in information, services, and infrastructure deepen the burden of care for impoverished women.

In areas where potable water, electricity, safe transportation, and accessible health and information resources are beyond the reach of families, the burden of care weighs more heavily on women's time. A number of submissions focused on the difference that can be made by time- and labour-saving investments. In Zimbabwe and Uganda, Oxfam's WE-Care (Women's Economic Empowerment and Care) program promoted community dialogue on the value of women's time while providing households with labour-saving devices such as fuel-efficient stoves, bicycles, and domestic solar electric systems. Beneficiaries in both countries have reported having more time for productive and paid work, greater involvement of men in domestic duties, and a decrease in domestic violence. In India, the Self-Employed Women's Association trains women in technical skills related to water infrastructure, such as repairing hand pumps. This provides employment and significantly improves the efficiency of collecting water. Women have thus gained income while saving time and energy.



Gender roles and norms must be challenged if care work is to be valued and shared.

Given prevailing gender norms, women's time is considered elastic and accorded little value. In areas where men largely control household income, these norms provide little incentive to invest in paid child care or in time- and labour-saving equipment or services. Many interventions in the care economy therefore focus on documenting the time use gaps between men and women; shifting perceptions about women's work, care, and gender roles; and encouraging more equitable sharing of care responsibilities. MenEngage, a global alliance with members in 35 countries, advocates for men's involvement in providing care. It has proposed indicators for countries to use to measure their progress

in encouraging men's contribution to caregiving. In Bangladesh, the Equality Through Dignity program uses a range of electronic and print media, community events, popular theatre, and folk music to raise awareness about the implications of women's undervalued care work for domestic violence, poverty, and human rights. Its mass campaign has directly engaged 1.5 million Bangladeshis to date.



Care duties need to be accommodated and valued in the workplace.

If men and women are to more equitably share both paid and unpaid work, they need decent work that reflects the value of care. This includes not only fair wages, but accommodations such as flexible working hours and parental leave benefits, along with other social protections. Child care itself needs to be recognized as a vital professional service. Care providers and other domestic workers need adequate wages, social benefits, and protection from exploitation. Particular attention is needed to protect rights and improve conditions in the informal sector, where most low-income women work. Successful examples in this area include successful campaigning by the International Domestic Workers Federation, which contributed to the enactment of the International Labour Organization's Convention 189 for Decent Work for Domestic and Household Workers. The Federation also spearheads the My Fair Home initiative, through which employers commit to providing safe working environments, fair work agreements, and access to health care for their employees. In India, the Montfort Social Institute's Domestic Workers Forum has organized over 20,000 women in smaller towns to challenge their exploitative working conditions. They have used their collective bargaining power to demand higher wages, benefits such as sick leave, and days off, and are lobbying for greater legal rights and social protections within national policies.

LESSONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Valuing care work begins with measuring it.

Many case studies address the need for governments to recognise and remunerate unpaid care as a fundamental step to addressing inequality and empowering women. Yet national accounts do not adequately capture the value of this work. To give policymakers firmer estimates to work with, the Counting Women's Work initiative, spearheaded by University of California, Berkeley, is finetuning a method to capture the unpaid care and housework typically left out of national accounting. It uses time use data to estimate hours spent producing or consuming unpaid care and housework, and assigns that time a replacement wage. Based on data from 29 countries, it shows the value of unpaid care and housework ranges from 12 to 40 percent of GDP.

Investing in public goods and services pays economic and social dividends.

Investments in public childcare services, in essential infrastructure (water, roads, electricity), and in social protection schemes were all noted as helping to close the gender gap in examples cited in consultation. Research by the Women's Budget Group, for example, demonstrated the economic return on investments in the care economy. But a far greater number of cases documented the enormous social benefits resulting from greater access to child care and to labour-saving services and infrastructure. These payoffs include healthier children, improved school attendance, and reductions in gender and domestic violence. When public services are reduced to "save money", the real costs of care remain, and are shouldered disproportionately by families, especially low-income women and girls. In financing public services and infrastructure, governments should avoid regressive tax measures, such as value-added and other consumption taxes, that place a greater tax burden on the poor.

Private sector companies with a shared interest in women's empowerment can be valuable allies.

Case studies of partnership with private sector actors suggest that, where there is a common interest in economically empowering women, such alliances can be successful. WE-Care, for example, has worked with private companies to increase the budgets for care services and infrastructure by employers. They found negotiations successful when there was compelling evidence linking heavy and unequal care responsibilities to the companies' supply chain operations. In Nicaragua, Body Shop International teamed up with Cooperativa Juan Francisco Paz de Silva to better reflect the value of unpaid care in the

pricing of goods produced. Body Shop — which recognised care as an important input to production — now pays an additional premium to cover the unpaid work of women in supply chains. While the private sector can play a vital role in strengthening the care economy, many companies have a limited understanding of the business case. Through its Tackling Childcare project, the World Bank Group/International Financial Corporation aims to fill the evidence gap to help companies better respond to employees' childcare needs.

This brief highlights insights and recommendations from a consultation organized to inform the UN High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment. These were captured in: "Transforming Care Dynamics: Lessons from Programme and Policy", a summary of evidence; "Addressing Unpaid Care for Economic Empowerment of Women and Girls", a position paper based on the evidence, both written by Deepta Chopra and Sohela Nazneen, Research Fellows at the Institute of Development Studies.

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