



Photo: IDRC/ Brian Sokol

#### KEY FINDINGS:

- Women’s care responsibilities constrain their paid work options.
- The drudgery of women’s work undermines their health and well-being.
- Infrastructure gaps add to the burden on poor women.
- Women’s double burden also harms their children.
- Access to affordable child care boosts women’s economic outlook.

## Who cares?

### EXPLORING SOLUTIONS TO WOMEN’S DOUBLE BURDEN

Research in five countries on paid and unpaid work suggests that empowering women demands much more than a focus on increasing their participation in labour markets. Affordable child care, better infrastructure, decent work, and shifting gender norms are all part of the solution.

Women in low-income countries are less active in labour markets than men, but their working days are endless. Globally, just 49% of women are counted in the labour force compared with 76% of men, according to the International Labour Organization. These figures, however, mask the true extent of women’s economic contribution. According to the Global Gender Gap Index, on average, women spend almost five hours a day caring for their families, compared with only one-and-a-half hours a day for men. This gap is wider in developing regions.

Sustainable Development Goal 5, adopted by the UN in 2015, aims to empower women and girls. It calls for greater recognition and redistribution of unpaid care and domestic work, along with the full and equal participation of women in decision-making.

Many economic empowerment programs focus on increasing women's labour force participation. But without addressing their disproportionate burden of care, the question is whether women truly benefit from more hours of paid employment. We also need to better understand how women in low-income contexts balance the pressures of earning income and caring for their families. In a series of studies undertaken through the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) program, researchers looked at how the burden of care affects women's employment and wellbeing, their children's wellbeing, and the difference that affordable day care can make.

### RESEARCH APPROACH

Through in-depth studies covering five countries — Kenya, India, Nepal, Tanzania, and Rwanda — GrOW-supported research teams gathered new evidence. Between 2015 and 2017, using a range of approaches, these studies explored how women and families in low-income households balance unpaid care work with income-earning activities. In Kenya and India, researchers carried out randomized control trials to test the role that daycare provision might play in unlocking women's full economic potential. In India, Nepal, Tanzania, and Rwanda, researchers used surveys, interviews, and participatory research to explore gender norms and how family members in low-income households share unpaid care work alongside their income-earning activities. They also assessed how programs and policies can help women achieve a better balance between paid and unpaid work.



### KEY FINDINGS

#### Women's care responsibilities constrain their paid work options.

Across the countries under study, unpaid care and household chores — reinforced by social norms — undermine women's earning potential. In 16 study sites across India, Nepal, Rwanda, and Tanzania, research led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) revealed that women did the bulk of unpaid work in their households. Two-thirds of all women were responsible for collecting water, fuel, and wood. In India, 88.2% of interviewed women in extended families were responsible for these tasks. Women saw themselves as better at household tasks and care work, and saw men as breadwinners, better suited to tasks requiring physical strength.

**“I get home tired and [...] start doing the unpaid care and there is a client who wants me to repair his clothes and my baby wants to breastfeed; it becomes too much for me and I end up failing to [...] rest.”**

*- Abayisenga Dancile, a tailor in Mbazi, Rwanda*

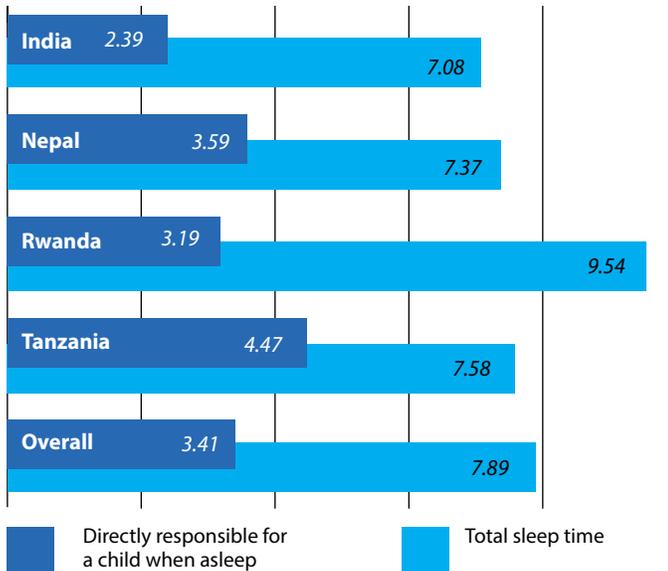
These norms, and the burden of care associated with them, affected both the quality and quantity of paid work that women undertook. When in paid work, women were distracted by their care duties — especially child care and household tasks such as cleaning and cooking. Many spoke about how pregnancies and young children restricted their hours, or caused them to leave work altogether. Women also felt underpaid and unable to bargain for better wages due to their domestic responsibilities. This double burden of care and unpaid work traps low-income women in poorly paid, unproductive, and precarious jobs, while undermining their bargaining power in households.

#### The drudgery of women's work undermines their health and well-being.

The studies highlight that the stress of juggling paid work and unpaid care affected women's physical and emotional well-being. In its four-country research on households' division of labour, IDS found women deeply fatigued by the combination of arduous and poorly paid jobs and the drudgery of unpaid work, with no time for rest. Research in the Udaipur district of Rajasthan in India also found evidence that women's double burden contributes to stress and mental health problems.

Across study sites, child care cut into women's rest time such that even sleep was interrupted. In Tanzania, women reported caring for children for 4.5 hours a night. Similarly, women reported that more than half the precious time they had for their personal care and hygiene involved looking after children.

## How many hours did women have responsibility for a child when asleep?



Source: IDS report No Time to Rest

### Infrastructure gaps add to the burden on poor women.

The drudgery of daily chores is amplified when families lack basic infrastructure such as electricity, transportation, and running water. Women reported having to travel long distances for water and firewood. In Nepal, the lack of electricity meant rural women waited long hours to use the local flour mill in their “off hours”, compounding their struggles with paid labour.

Access to health care was also inadequate. Many in India complained of poor quality care and the discriminatory attitude of medical staff. In Tanzania, poor roads added to the time that women spent reaching health facilities for themselves and their families.

### Women’s double burden also harms their children.

Women’s heavy workloads have consequences for their children, ranging from neglect to a transfer of work duties, undermining their schooling and health. Many older children are expected to shoulder adult responsibilities, looking after younger siblings and taking on a share of their mothers’ drudgery.

Daughters pay the heaviest price for their mothers’ paid work by sacrificing some of their schooling. Children often shadow their working mothers, and some graduate into ‘helping’ their mothers complete paid work, effectively providing unpaid child labour. Many are also exposed to dangerous tools and toxic workplace conditions.

The contrast with families given access to quality child care sheds further light on how mothers’ workloads affect their children. In Kenya, researchers found that in the Korogocho slum on the outskirts of Nairobi, 22% of children not enrolled in day care showed signs of cognitive delay — more than double the levels found among those who were in care (9%).

### Access to affordable child care boosts women’s economic outlook.

The expansion of early childcare centres in low- and middle-income countries has been slow, largely offered privately. But evidence from Kenya and India shows that child care is both in demand and allows women to increase their paid employment — when it is affordable. In Korogocho, research by McGill University and the African Population and Health Research Center showed that over 80% of mothers given vouchers for free day care took advantage of the opportunity, compared with 58% of those who received no voucher. After a year, those given access to free day care were 17% more likely to be in paid employment than those who were not. A similar study in Udaipur in India also showed an increase in employment, though of a lesser magnitude.

In Kenya, mothers who received daycare vouchers worked on average five hours less per week, without affecting their total earnings. This suggests that subsidizing child care for working mothers may allow them to work less without significantly reducing their earnings, thus giving them more time for themselves.



## POLICY INSIGHTS

### Efforts to empower women need to focus on both paid and unpaid work.

Far from being empowering, the combination of low-quality paid work and endless domestic toil simply pushes most women to exhaustion. Well-intentioned public works and other women's empowerment programs may increase their earning power, but inadvertently deplete them if not accompanied by measures to reduce the care burden and drudgery of women's work. Conventional measures of economic empowerment that only focus on paid work need to be re-examined.

**“Work with decent pay and conditions, alongside basic public services, is essential for women in low-income countries to break free from the backbreaking drudgery of their daily lives.”**

- Deepta Chopra, Research Fellow at IDS

### Investments in infrastructure and labour-saving technologies will help reduce women's drudgery.

Improving access to water, transportation, electricity, and other infrastructure would go a long way to reducing women's time poverty and the fatigue associated with their daily chores. Labour-saving technologies, such as fuel-efficient stoves, can also reduce drudgery. Such investments increase the productivity of unpaid work.

### Removing cost barriers to day care can enhance the quality of women's participation in the labour market.

GrOW-supported research echoed findings from earlier research that there is considerable demand for child care among low-income women, and that both women and their children benefit. While improving the quality of registered care facilities through training and regulation is important, the Kenyan study found that cost, more than quality of care, is the main factor preventing mothers from using available child care centres. Subsidizing care is crucial for improving women's economic prospects and reducing gender inequalities.

### Decent work is a first step towards shifting gender norms around care work.

Providing decent work for all is key to empowering both women and men. In several countries under study, such as India and Nepal, male migration rates are high due to a lack of jobs. Without better employment choices, gendered social norms around care and domestic work will be slow to evolve, and women will continue to do the bulk of unpaid work. In addition to pursuing economic pathways likely to generate decent employment, governments can support a long-term shift in norms through measures such as paid leave for new fathers, or employment standards that prevent discrimination against working mothers.

*The policy brief was prepared by Martha Melesse and Mary O'Neill, based on findings from a program synthesis written by Nancy Folbre which looked at three projects supported through the GrOW program: Balancing unpaid care work and paid work; Improving childcare options to create better economic opportunities for women in Nairobi slums; and The influence of affordable day care on women's empowerment in India.*



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