

The Economic Injustice of Unpaid Work: What's to be done?

Unpaid work, as defined by the ILO, is the “non-remunerated work carried out to sustain the well-being and maintenance of other individuals in a household or the community, and it includes both direct and indirect care (i.e. routine housework)”. This work has consistently fallen disproportionately on women and is one of the most striking manifestations of gender inequality. Estimates place women doing 75% of unpaid care work, constituting working on average 4.5 hours every day for the 1.5 hours worked by men. If American women were to earn minimum wage for this work, it would constitute a \$1.5 trillion contribution to the economy in 2020 [1].

Doing the brunt of unpaid work, which is both time-consuming and physically demanding, results in what has been described as ‘time poverty, whereby little time is left to invest in education and paid work. Research shows that in developing nations female labour force participation has decreased and time poverty has increased, creating a vicious trap where lack of income affects economic status and independence. This further reinforces the distribution of resources in the household towards men. Issues in the macroeconomy also exist, whereby unpaid work means women are not specialising in their most productive job, instead of exerting effort and energy into care and domestic work, meaning there is lower overall productivity in the economy.

Factoring in the imbalance of unpaid work has long been part of the UN Sustainable Development goals. One principal method to achieve this end is to make sure unpaid work is incorporated into national accounting methods. This began with a strand of feminist economics, generally considered to have been borne by Marilyn Waring’s 1988 book “If Women Counted”, where Waring noted that the primary method of national accounting, the System of National Accounts, (SNA) ignored unpaid work. Since then, attempts have been made to incorporate Time-Use surveys into national accounts. Here individuals are interviewed on how they allocate their time. However, these methods remain rudimentary and not completely accurate. If unpaid work was more rigorously measured, fluctuations in the macroeconomy would reflect reality more realistically. We would be able to see the true effects of the business cycle downturns on households. Policymakers, when examining the effects of policies on individual demographics, would get a truer picture of the effects on women.

Although there has been a decrease in women’s share of unpaid work since the 1970s, inequality in unpaid work persists, and it appears to have gotten worse during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of more people working from home, widespread school closure has increased unpaid work, with women doing the predominant share of home-schooling. As COVID-19 affects the elderly at the highest rates, there has been an increase in caring responsibilities. Worst hit are employed women, who have seen their professional and domestic lives blurred into one. For example, one woman in India reported [1]:

“With schools being shut and education being done through online mode, I have to constantly look after my children, get involved in their virtual classes and also do my office work. In the pre-COVID world, we all used to spend time together in the evening and go out on weekends. Now, I have to devote a lot more time to child care. It has started affecting my professional life as I am missing

deadlines and am constantly tired. My husband is a big support, but his working hours are more rigid than mine."

But what is to be done to address these imbalances?. In developed nations, family-friendly policies might be part of the reason for the success of the Nordic countries. This can include investing heavily in early childhood education and care, which allows for high enrolment and fosters women's ability to return to work after giving birth. In developing nations, policy proposals are clearer. One of the most beneficial appears to be to lessen the hours spent by women in unpaid, unproductive work such as investing in water infrastructure, so time is not wasted collecting sanitary water.

By not engaging in policies to distribute the strain of unpaid work equally among the genders, it is not just unfair but inefficient. With the advent of COVID-19, the value of unpaid work should be recognised. Whilst there is a long road ahead to equalise this, policymakers must fight for two ultimate goals: for the greater recognition of the value of unpaid work, and for this to be shared equally amongst genders.

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[1] Ghodsee, K. and Wezerek, G., 2020. Opinion | Women's Unpaid Labor Is Worth \$10,900,000,000,000. [online] Nytimes.com. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/04/opinion/women-unpaid-labor.html>>

[2] Chauhan, P., 2020. Gendering COVID-19: Impact of the Pandemic on Women's Burden of Unpaid Work in India. [online] Gend. Issues. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-020-09269-w>