



OXFAM MEDIA BRIEFING

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All Work and No Pay

The Gender Injustice of Unpaid Care in America

Overview

Women around the world spend more time than men doing unpaid care and domestic work: taking care of children, elders, and the ill. In the United States, women spend 37 percent more time on unpaid care than men. This unequal distribution of unpaid work—work that is essential to families and society—limits women’s career choices, income, and personal development. It also affects their overall health and well-being.

This unpaid work is real and contributes value to the economy and society, but it is not recognized by official statistics. Too often we attribute the inequality in care work to social conventions while ignoring the way public policies and economic choices reinforce this inequality or cause women to shoulder a disproportionate burden of care work without any compensation. Care work provides a huge subsidy to an economy that systematically undervalues women’s work, paying women less for the same job and pushing them into jobs that pay less. A conservative estimate of the value of women and girls’ unpaid work in the United States is \$1.48 trillion annually—more than twice the US defense budget or about double the combined annual revenue of America’s top five technology companies. While women contribute unpaid time and work, the economy grows billionaires at a rate never seen before. It’s no coincidence that 9 out of 10 billionaires are men.

In the United States, women spend an extra 2.1 hours per day more than men doing unpaid care work. That is the equivalent of more than 95 extra eight-hour workdays per year for zero pay. Current policies and social conventions hinder women and families from choosing a better balance of paid and unpaid work. The economy creates obstacles that push women into lower-paid jobs and often out of the paid workforce completely.

A more gender-just economy is possible, but it will take concerted effort and bold policy action to build an economic system that offers opportunity—and care—for all people. Policies like guaranteed paid family and medical leave, paid sick days, and elimination of the gender wage gap will go a long way toward creating a better balance that permits families to decide what makes the most sense without sexist social and economic pressure. Recognizing, honoring, and supporting the value of unpaid and underpaid care and domestic work is important at every level: within families, in communities, in society, and in public policy.

This media brief is based on “Providing Unpaid Household and Care Work in the United States: Uncovering Inequality,” Institute for Women’s Policy Research, January 2020, as well as “Time to Care: Unpaid and Underpaid Care Work and the Global Inequality Crisis,” Oxfam International, January 2020.

Inequality increases, corporations avoid taxes, and women subsidize the economy

Economic inequality is out of control. In 2018, the world's billionaires, only 2,153 people, had more wealth than 4.6 billion people. This great divide is created by a flawed economic system that exalts the wealth of the privileged few, mostly men, but makes the billions of hours of unpaid care work done by women and girls invisible and unappreciated. While companies and the rich avoid paying their fair share of taxes, they also benefit from an economy subsidized by a critical form of support: unpaid care. Women, who disproportionately shoulder unpaid care, also face inequality in wages, compensation, and promotions, often as a consequence of these very care responsibilities.

Income inequality between men and women is substantial—globally women earn 23 percent less than men. The wealth gap between men and women is even bigger—worldwide men own 50 percent more wealth (e.g., savings, land, property) than women. Gender wealth gaps are caused by a range of deeply rooted inequalities—lack of access to credit, prohibitions on owning land, lack of representation in decision-making processes, low wages and insecure work, and heavy responsibility for unpaid care work.

On top of this, billionaires and the corporations they run are not paying their fair share of taxes. Tax avoidance and under taxation of wealth deprives governments of revenues that could be invested in public services and infrastructure to support women, men, and families with care responsibilities. Oxfam estimates that getting the richest 1 percent to pay just 0.5 percent extra tax on their wealth over the next 10 years would generate the funds needed to create 117 million care jobs in education, health, and elder services.

Crucial but undervalued around the world—and in the USA

Care work is crucial to our societies and to the economy. Care work is looking after children, elderly people, and those with physical and mental illnesses or disabilities. It can include domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing, and other household chores. Across the world, this unpaid and underpaid care work is disproportionately done by women and girls, especially those living in poverty and from groups who experience discrimination based on race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and caste.

In no country do men do as much care work as women—a real gender injustice. Women undertake more than three-quarters of all unpaid care work, and they make up two-thirds of the paid-care workforce. Women and girls put in 12.5 billion hours of unpaid care work every day. The monetary value of these billions of hours spent on unpaid care work is estimated conservatively at \$10.8 trillion annually, over three times the size of the world's tech industry. In the United States, women are conservatively estimated to contribute \$1.48 trillion on unpaid care and domestic work—more than twice the value of the annual defense budget, or about double the annual revenues of the country's top five technology companies.

When women do paid work, they do not reduce their unpaid work proportionately. Instead, their working day extends many hours longer. Compared with men, women not only do more unpaid work, but spend more time working overall.

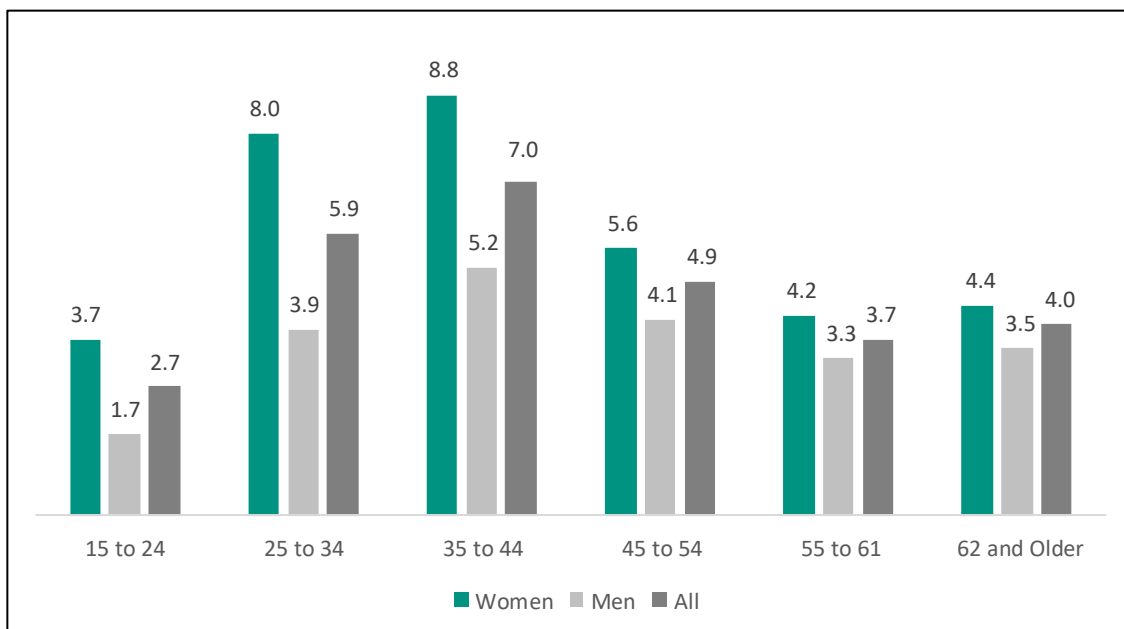
Research conducted by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) in collaboration with Oxfam America found that on an average day, women in the United States spend 37 percent more time on unpaid care than men. That's an average of more than two hours more a day spent on unpaid care and domestic work than men, equivalent to more than 95 extra eight-hour workdays per year, for no compensation. Women's greater responsibility for

unpaid care work both drives and reflects lower pay in jobs and fewer career opportunities. Women pay a long-term income penalty for taking time off from paid work to care for family. And systemically lower pay for women in the workplace reduces the economic justification for women to return to paid work or to increase their hours. For women, an increase in the amount of unpaid work they do is associated with a decrease in their earnings holding other factors equal. Increased unpaid work, however, has no apparent effect on men's earnings.

Gender gap persists despite age, education, employment status, income, and race

Women contribute more unpaid work than men at all ages, but the differences tend to rise through middle age. For those aged 15–24, men and boys spend an average of 1.7 hours on unpaid household and care work per day—two hours less than what women and girls contribute. Both the overall hours of unpaid care and domestic work and the gap between men and women rise until peaking in the 35–44 age range, when many families are raising children and caring for aging parents. Men in this age range spend 5.2 hours per day on this work compared with women's 8.8 hours, for a gender gap of 3.6 hours a day. That's equivalent to 164 eight-hour workdays per year.

Figure 1. Average Hours per Day Spent on Unpaid Household and Care Work by Gender and Age, 2018



Notes: Aged 15 and older. Care work includes secondary child care as well as primary child and elder care. Source: IWPR analysis of American Time Use Survey microdata.

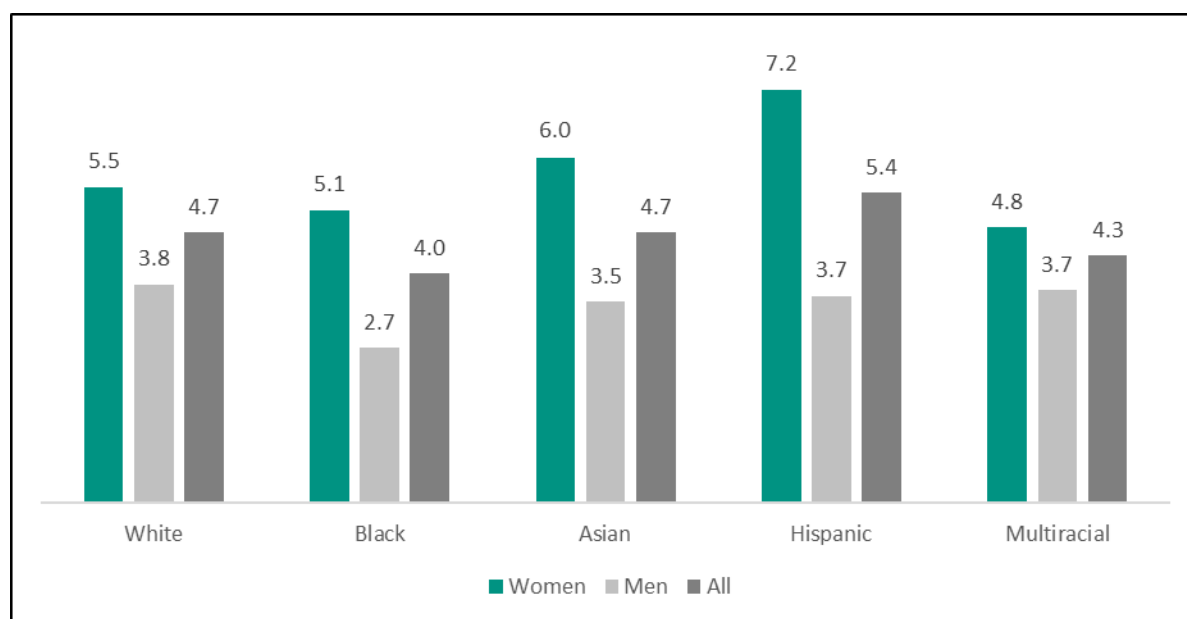
The gender gap also persists across income and education levels. Women and men in the lowest income bracket spend the least time on unpaid household and care work, and women and men with less than a high school diploma spend less time on this work than those with higher levels of education. This smaller amount of time spent on unpaid work may be due, in part, to the fact that many people with low wages work more than one job to make ends meet, allowing less time for household tasks and family care. In addition, low-wage jobs are less likely to offer paid time off, leaving workers without the ability to take time to care family members.

There is a 22 percent gender gap in unpaid household and care work between women and men who work full-time. Women who are employed full-time spend considerably less time on

unpaid work than do women who work part-time (6.6 hours), are unemployed (8.2 hours), or are not in the paid labor force (6.0 hours). The gender gap in unpaid time is largest among women and men who unemployed and looking for work, at 65 percent (8.2 versus 2.9 hours).

There are significant differences in the amount of time spent on unpaid household and care work among women and men across different ethnicities and races. Hispanic women spend 3.5 hours more per day on unpaid household and care work than Hispanic men. Hispanic women also report spending considerably more time on unpaid work than women of all other racial and ethnic groups.

Figure 2. Average Hours per Day Spent on Unpaid Household and Care Work by Gender and Race/Ethnicity, 2018



Notes: Aged 15 and older. White, Black, and Asian are non-Hispanic. Sample size is too small to report for Native Americans. Care work includes secondary child care as well as primary child and elder care. Source: IWPR analysis of American Time Use Survey microdata.

Caregiving takes time, and many caregivers cut back time spent in paid work. This is, in part, because for many families the high cost of paid care makes it unaffordable to hire help. The caregivers who reduce their hours at work or step out of the paid labor force altogether are usually women, since women generally earn less.

Public policies can increase the social value of unpaid care work and promote its equitable distribution

A lack of family-friendly work policies in the United States exacerbates the challenges for workers seeking to meet the care needs of their families. The United States is the only rich country that does not guarantee paid parental leave. Lower-wage jobs rarely offer benefits such as paid parental leave. These factors tend to push women out of the workforce and help explain why the United States has lower female labor force participation than other rich countries.

Although the United States has made great progress toward gender equality in some ways— as seen in women’s increasing advances in education and greater participation in the paid

labor market, for example—the unequal gender distribution of unpaid household and care work continues to hinder women’s economic progress and overall well-being.

And while the gender gap in unpaid household and care work in the United States has narrowed in recent years as more women have entered the labor market and men have taken on more of this work, public policies have not supported families in rebalancing unpaid work.

A more gender-just economy is possible, but it will take concerted efforts and bold policy action to build an economic system that cares for all citizens. Feminist economics and gender equality are fundamental in creating a fairer economy that properly recognizes and increasingly supports unpaid and underpaid care work. Only by fundamentally changing the way that this work is done and how it is valued can we build a more equal world.

Public policies that support the social value of unpaid household and care work can facilitate the more equal distribution of this work between women and men and improve women’s economic and health status. While these policies would benefit all women and men who must balance paid and unpaid work, they are especially critical for low-income working adults, who more acutely feel the impact of any loss in resources due to work-family conflict.

Building on the analysis and recommendations of IWPR and the contributions of women’s movements and feminist economists, Oxfam proposes the following recommendations to help realize the rights of those who shoulder unpaid care work in our economy, while acknowledging the significance of care for the well-being of societies and economies.

Invest in a care infrastructure that allows women (and men) to have a real choice about whether to take time out of the paid workforce to provide child care. Without access to affordable child care, many working parents, particularly mothers, do not have a real choice about participating in the paid labor force. Universal pre-kindergarten and more affordable quality care for younger children would help many women who want to remain in the paid workforce; better alignment of the school day and more family-friendly working hours would also make it easier to balance the demands of work with those of the family. At the same time, a major effort is needed to improve the pay and conditions of paid care work, which are currently among the lowest-quality occupations in America; they offer low wages, high rates of injury and harassment on the job, and little scheduling control or job security.

Improve public investment in the care of older people and those with disabilities.

Investing more in care facilities and in at-home caregiving for adults, as well as increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates, will make it easier for those with family care responsibilities to stay in the paid workforce. It will also improve working conditions for those providing paid adult care, many of whom are older women of color, and increase job retention and the quality of care in this industry.

Support flexibility in working hours and locations. Many mothers and other family caregivers in the workforce may benefit from flexible work schedules, including the ability to work nonstandard hours and to telework. Alternative schedules can help caregivers organize their employment schedules around their care responsibilities and alleviate work-family stress. Scheduling flexibility, however, must be paired with schedule control; workers who face unpredictable schedules and do not have input on their working hours can find it especially hard to balance caregiving and work.

Guarantee paid family and medical leave, and structure leave policies to encourage men’s participation. Lack of access to paid family and medical leave, including paid parental leave, makes it difficult for many workers to balance the demands of their jobs with the needs of their families. As of November 2019, only seven states in the nation had passed paid family

and medical leave legislation (Family Values at Work 2019), but many workers in these areas are not covered under these laws, and the lack of national legislation leaves many more without access.

Provide paid sick days. Access to paid sick days is also essential for workers seeking to balance the demands of their jobs with the needs of their families. As of November 2019, 50 localities in the nation had passed paid sick leave legislation, yet such legislation does not cover all workers in these areas, and many live in jurisdictions that have not passed a paid sick leave law. Enacting paid sick days legislation at the federal and state levels would provide job protection that would allow people to return to work without loss of seniority or health insurance.

Close the gender wage gap. An equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men of unpaid and paid work cannot happen without closing the gender wage gap. As long as women earn less than men, it will continue to make more financial sense for women, rather than men, to take time out of the workforce when families face increased caregiving needs. Closing the gender wage gap includes addressing occupational segregation, or the concentration of women in certain sectors of the labor market that pay less. Ending pay secrecy and the practice of basing salaries on past salary history will help bring more transparency and equity to pay. Finding ways to raise pay in jobs traditionally held by women and improving the quality of those jobs through policies such as providing paid sick leave, supporting collective bargaining, and enforcing equal pay laws will also help.

Recognize the value of unpaid care. By explicitly acknowledging that unpaid care and domestic work are a vital part of the US economy—and by including satellite accounts of household production wherever GDP is reported—researchers and policymakers can more clearly see that paid and unpaid work both complement and compete with one another. Policies meant to affect paid work can undermine workers' ability to fulfill unpaid care work responsibilities. Likewise, policies that support, rebalance, and reduce unpaid care work responsibilities can unleash workers to focus on paid work. Both unpaid and paid care workers in private homes provide important and valuable contributions to the economy and society.

Ensure that caregivers have influence on decision-making processes. Governments must facilitate the participation of unpaid caregivers and care workers in policy-making fora and processes, invest resources in collecting comprehensive data that can better inform policy making, and evaluate the impact of policies on caregivers. These efforts should go alongside consultations with women's rights actors, feminist economists, and civil society experts on care issues, and increased funding for women's organizations and movements working to enable their participation in decision-making processes.

Challenge harmful norms and sexist beliefs. Harmful norms and sexist beliefs that view care work as the responsibility of women and girls lead to an unequal gendered distribution of care work and perpetuate economic and gender inequality. As part of national care systems, governments need to invest resources to challenge these harmful norms and sexist beliefs, including through advertising, public communication, and legislation. Further, men need to be supported in stepping up to share equally in the responsibilities of care work.

Value care in business policies and practices. Businesses must recognize the value of care work and sustain the well-being of their workers. Further, they should support the redistribution of care through the provision of benefits and services such as child care vouchers and living wages for care providers. Companies and businesses should pay their fair share of taxes to support national care systems and implement family-friendly employment practices such as flexible working hours and paid leave.