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Global Gender Gap in Unpaid Care: Why Domestic Work Still Remains a Woman's Burden

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COVID-19 and the Distribution of Household Work Between Men and Women in Georgia

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Abstract

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In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic numerous reports point to the fact that women are mainly shouldering the burden of increased domestic care duties. But even before the pandemic struck, women performed more than two thirds of the unpaid domestic care work in both developing and developed countries. The lack of gender parity in the distribution of domestic work is associated with significant economic inefficiencies, as well as considerable social and economic consequences for women – affecting their bargaining power within the household and their labor market outcomes in particular. In the brief I review the literature on both the economic and sociological factors which perpetuate the pattern of gender disparity in unpaid domestic care work. I also summarize the "recognize, reduce and redistribute" policies which could be adopted to help address the problem.

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According to recent surveys, Georgia is characterized by both a high level of women's involvement in unpaid care work and considerable gender inequality in this area. This inequality has a substantial negative effect on women's participation in the labour market, their ability to take up full-time work, as well as their wages. Our policy brief details evidence of this impact and discusses how COVID-19 has changed the gender balance in time-use in Georgia. Lastly, we provide a list of country-specific policy recommendations to address the root causes of the unequal distribution in unpaid household work.

Gender Gap in Unpaid Care: Why Domestic Work Still Remains a Woman's Burden?

The realities of *unpaid care and domestic* work have received much attention lately in policy and academic circles, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Houtven et al., 2020; Craig and Churchill, 2020; Duragova, 2020). Recent surveys and reports confirm that while the unpaid household work burden increased for both genders, women around the world ended up shouldering the lions' share of various household chores and care duties during the pandemic (UN Women, 2020). For many countries, prolonged lockdowns have put a sudden spotlight on the "hidden" side of people's economic lives, not typically reflected in the national accounts data. Unsurprisingly, among the main issues connected with unpaid care work is the highly gendered division of labor in the "household sector" and its consequences for the emotional and economic well-being of families. In this policy brief I explore the current state and the evolution of gender inequalities in unpaid domestic care work worldwide, and discuss the academic literature which addresses the reasons and the consequences behind them. I also discuss potential policy interventions which could promote greater work-life balance and help advance both social and family-level welfare.

Gender gaps in unpaid care work

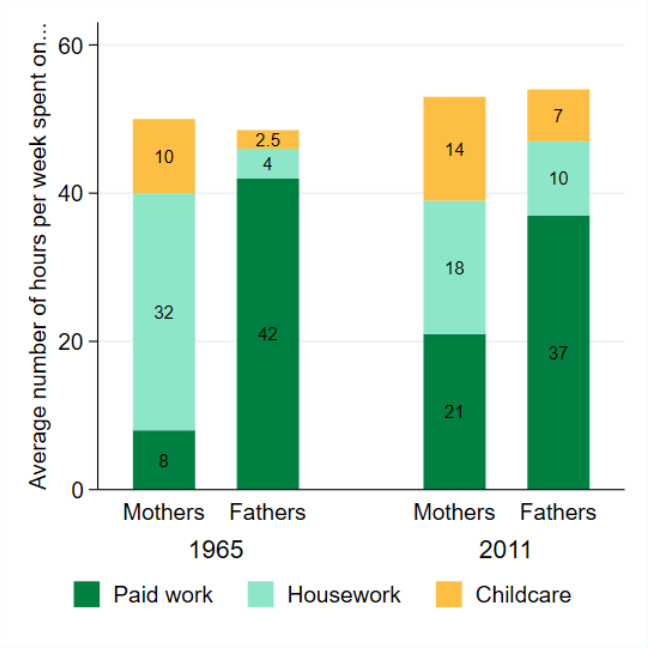
The term *unpaid care and domestic work* appears under many terminological guises, including "unpaid care work" "unpaid household work", "unpaid domestic care work" and others. These terms essentially refer to the same phenomenon – unpaid care activities carried out in the household. They include cooking, cleaning, washing, water and fuel collection, shopping, maintenance, household management, taking care of children and the elderly, and others (Addati et al., 2018). For the purposes of this brief I will use the terms interchangeably, relying mainly on "unpaid care", "domestic work", or "unpaid domestic care" to describe these activities. While the value of unpaid care work is not included in the national income accounts, it can be tracked by time-use surveys carried out by national statistical offices in many countries. According to the most recent surveys, (Charmes, 2019) more than three quarters (76.4%) of unpaid domestic care work worldwide is done by women, while 23.6% is done by men. In developed countries, the women's share is somewhat lower (65%), while in developing and emerging economies, women perform 80.2% of unpaid care. Thus, according to the data, even in developed countries women perform around two thirds of the unpaid domestic care work. Currently, no country in the world seems to have achieved gender parity with regard to the unpaid care distribution in households (U.N. Women., 2019).

Is there evidence of convergence in domestic care responsibilities?

Given that the first time use surveys in many countries have been conducted only relatively recently, it may be premature to make claims about changes in the distribution of domestic work and a potential closing of the gender gap. However, evidence from countries with a longer history of time use data, in particular the United States, suggests that the way mothers and fathers allocate their time between paid and unpaid work has changed dramatically between 1965 and 2011. In particular, as can be seen from the Figure 1 (from Parker and Wang, 2013), in 2011 women spent 2.6 times (13 more hours per week) more on paid work, while men spend 5 hours less than in 1965. The time spent on childcare increased for

both men and women. At the same time, domestic work hours decreased significantly for women, while somewhat increasing for men.

Figure 1. Moms and Dads, the US 1965-2011: Roles Converge, but Gaps Remain



Note: Based on adults aged 18-64 with own child(ren) under the age of 18 living in the household.
Source: Parker and Wang (2013).

Overall, analysis of time use survey data over a 40 year span shows a degree of convergence in unpaid care work between men and women (Kan et al., 2011; Altintas and Sullivan, 2016). However, as the Kan et al. (2011) study shows, gender inequality is quite persistent over time. In particular, men concentrate their contribution in domestic work to non-routine tasks (i.e. tasks that generally require less time, have definable boundaries and allow greater discretion around timing of performance than the more routine tasks) such as shopping and domestic travel, while women devote a bulk of their time to routine work (cooking, cleaning, care). Women's reduction in domestic work time (especially in routine tasks) may be largely due to the advancement of household technologies and higher acceptance/demand for women's participation in the labor market (Gershuny, 1983, 2004). Thus, it appears that the "low-hanging fruit" of gender equality within households has already been picked, and, going forward, further shifting of domestic care responsibilities will be a more difficult task, even in developed countries.

Factors that perpetuate unpaid domestic care as primarily women's responsibility

The factors responsible for perpetuating gender roles in domestic work can be grouped into **economic** (specialization, comparative advantage) and **sociological** (habits, traditions, social perceptions) aspects.

The **economic arguments** that have long been used to explain the unequal division of paid and unpaid care work rely on the **theory of comparative advantage and gains from specialization**. Starting from the seminal work of Becker (Becker, 1985), economic models of the family suggested that a division of labor within the household is driven by different experiences and choices to invest in human capital. Becker argued that efficient households require specialization and the pattern of specialization can be explained at least in part by the differences in the initial investment in human capital (market skills for men and household skills for women) (Becker, 2009). In this model, men's advantage in paid market activities is explained by historical reasons stemming in part from the more physical nature of market work. And yet, contemporary authors point out that the nature of work has been changing over time, with less emphasis put on physical, and more on cognitive skills. Likewise, the nature of household production has been changing (Greenwood et al., 2017). Birth control gave families a better way to control the number of children (Juhn and McCue, 2017). These changes should make men and women's

productivity more equal, and consequently reduce the gender gap between men and women in both types of work. And yet, despite the fact that in developed countries women often achieve higher educational attainment then men (Goldin, Katz and Kuziemko 2006; Murphy and Topel, 2014), it has not been enough to eliminate the gender gap in wages and in the division of unpaid domestic work. Moreover, as the study based on 1992 Canadian data by McFarlane et al. (2000) points out, while the wife's time in housework increases when the husband spends more time in paid work, the opposite is not necessarily true for men (men do not spend significantly more time on household tasks when their wives increase their employment). Alonso et al., 2019, using a sample of 18 advanced and emerging market economies, find that various factors which determine the allocation of time between paid and unpaid work affect men and women asymmetrically. For example, being employed part time vs. full time considerably increases the participation in unpaid work for women, while for men the same increase is statistically insignificant.

Thus, a purely "pragmatic" economic argument for the household division of labor is not sufficient to explain the persistence of the unpaid care gender gap. Other **sociological factors**, such as gender roles determined by **social attitudes and cultural norms,** tend to play an important role in household labor division (Coltrane, 2000; Juhn and McCue, 2017). Moreover, one can argue that educational choices of women, which contribute to their "comparative advantage" in household production, are themselves not independent of cultural norms and attitudes. These choices tend to be shaped in early childhood and reflect how much a family would invest in/encourage a girl's education vs. that of a boy; whether boys are engaged in certain household chores - cooking, cleaning, caring for young children, etc. (UNDP, 2020). For example, the high gender gap in unpaid domestic work in the South Caucasus can be traced to family patterns. According to survey data (CRRC, 2015) in Azerbaijan, around 96% percent of women were taught in childhood how to cook, clean the house or do laundry, while only 35% of men were taught how to cook and clean. In Georgia, close to 90% of women reported being taught how to cook, clean and do laundry, while less than 30% of men on average reported being taught these skills (UNFPA, 2014).

The social cost of gender inequality in the unpaid care work allocation

Gender inequality is not just an issue of fairness. **Inequality results in considerable resource misallocation**, where women's productive potential is not fully realized. The study by Alonso et al., 2019 estimates the GDP gains associated with a potential reduction in gender inequality in domestic work to the level observed currently in Norway. Countries like Pakistan and Japan, where the initial gender gap is quite sizeable, would gain around 3 to 4 percent of GDP. Another source of inefficiency is **occupational downgrading**, a situation where women take jobs below their level of qualification (Connolly and Gregory, 2007; Garnero et al., 2013) in order to better balance their home and work responsibilities. The perception of women as being primarily responsible for childcare and domestic labor drives statistical discrimination in the workplace and affects the "unexplained" portion of the **gender pay gap** (Blau and Kahn, 2017). The pay gap, in turn, perpetuates inequality in the division of domestic labor. Moreover, perception of unequal domestic work allocation is found to be associated with **lower relationship satisfaction, depression, and divorce** (Ruppaner et al, 2017). In addition, earlier sociological studies found that **inequity in the**

distribution, rather than the amount of work, **causes greater psychological distress** (Bird, 1999).

Policies to address the gender gap

Given the sizeable economic and social costs associated with the gender gap in unpaid care work, policy makers are paying greater attention to gender equality and ways to promote work-life balance for men and women. Currently, most solutions center around **"recognize, reduce and redistribute"** types of policies (Elson, 2017).

The **"recognize" policies** acknowledge the value of unpaid care work done by women through cash payments linked to raising young children (i.e. maternity leave policies). Most countries in the world adopt publicly funded paid maternity leave policies, although the adequacy of maternity leave payments and the duration of such leaves is still a stumbling block for many countries (Addati et al., 2014). Data suggests that maternity leave of no longer than 12 months has a positive effect on maternal employment, while long leaves (over two years) increase career costs for women (Kunze, 2016; Ruhm, 1998; Kleven et al., 2019).

The **"reduce" policies,** aim at the provision of public services that would reduce the burden of childcare and other forms of unpaid work on women and free up their time for participation in the labor force. Among such policies are investments in publicly funded childcare services (quality pre-schools and kindergartens) and physical infrastructure to support the provision of clean water, sanitation, energy, and public transport. Empirical studies generally find a positive effect of affordable childcare on female employment rates (Vuri, 2016; Lefebvre et al., 2009; Geyer et al., 2014), but with some caveats – in particular, the subsidies may be less effective for female labor supply if affordable childcare just crowds out other forms of non-parental care (such as informal help from family members) (Vuri, 2016; Havnes and Mogstad, 2011).

Finally, the **"redistribute" policies** aim to promote the redistribution of household chores and childcare among men and women. Among such policies are initiatives aimed at making flexible and reduced-hour work arrangement attractive and equally available for men and women. (e.g. shifting standard weekly hours to a more family friendly 35 hours per week, as for example in France); active labor market programs aimed at retaining women in the labor market can also help reduce hours devoted to unpaid work (Alonso et al. 2019). Moreover, better labor market regulations (e.g. legislation to regulate vacation time, maximum work hours, etc.) would discourage the long working hours and the breadwinner-caretaker gendered specialization patterns within families (Hook, 2006). Other examples include work-life balance policies recently adopted by the EU (EU Directive 2019/1158), and are aimed at providing paid paternity leave and reserving non-transferrable portions of family childcare leave for men. These policies were found to be effective for both increasing father's participation in unpaid care and for reducing the gender wage gap within families in a number of country studies (Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2018; Andersen, 2018).

It is important to recognize that more research is needed to identify exactly how and why specific policies may benefit families, and to adapt them to the specific country context. While many of the policies outlined above will not solve the problem of the gender gap overnight, they can be an important first step towards greater global gender equality in the workplace and inside the household.

COVID-19 and the Distribution of Household Work Between Men and Women in Georgia

Unpaid household work is an essential type of economic activity that is important for maintaining the well-being of families. Cooking, cleaning, shopping, paying bills, making small or large repairs around the house, assisting and caring for children and the elderly – all of these tasks are an essential part of the daily life and make us healthier, happier, more productive. Unfortunately, because these activities are not marketed and do not carry a price tag, their value is not reflected in the country's GDP, although the effect of this work certainly contributes to individual and social welfare. Additionally, there is a common perception of them being "non-work", or a somehow inferior type of work. The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated prolonged lockdowns have changed our lives and perceptions in many important ways. In particular, during this time people became more acutely aware of the importance of this "hidden" side of economic life. According to some estimates, if unpaid household work were compensated at market rates, it would account for 9% of the global GDP (OECD, 2019). In some countries this share is even higher: 23% in France and New Zealand, 33% in China, and 14% in South Africa (Ferrant and Thim, 2019).

From the economic perspective this work is not "free", and the cost of performing these tasks on a daily basis can be measured by the value of forgone options: i.e. hours not spent on paid market work, leisure, or education. Thus, the question of *who inside a family performs* these time-consuming tasks is of high importance and has significant consequences for the distribution of individual welfare.

Inequality in the unpaid care work distribution in Georgia

Georgia is characterized by both a high level of women's involvement in unpaid care work and a high level of gender inequality in this area. In fact, according to ISET Policy Institute's forthcoming Gender Equality Index for FSU countries, in 2019 Georgia ranked last among 14 analysed countries in the "Time" domain of the Index (ISET-PI Gender Equality Index, 2021).

Time-use surveys provide useful insights about the amount of time both men and women devote to household unpaid work. Unfortunately, as of now these surveys are not available in Georgia. However, data collection has already started in September 2020, and the findings are expected to become available by the end of 2021 (UN Women, 2020).

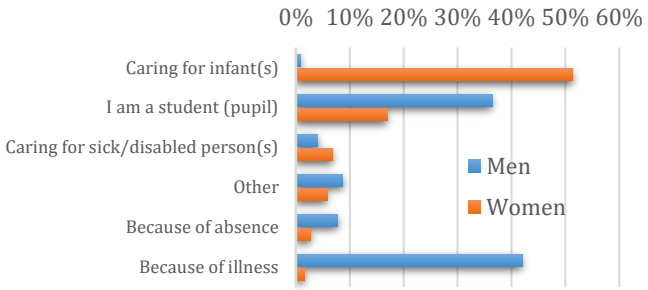
To fill in this gap and estimate gender differences in the amount of time devoted to unpaid work in households, researchers have so far relied on qualitative and quantitative studies (UN Women, 2018, 2020). Such studies typically collect self-reported average weekly time spent on different household-related activities. According to the pre-pandemic survey, women in Georgia reported spending 45 hours a week on unpaid care activities (UN Women, 2018). Moreover, employed women reported spending 42 hours per week on unpaid care, while unemployed women spent 47 hours. This clearly points to the existence of a "double burden": employed women in Georgia spend on average 6 hours per day on household-related work. In contrast, employed men spend

approximately 2.3 hours a day on household tasks, and non-employed men spend even less.

Implications for labour market outcomes among women

Due to the high burden of household responsibilities, women in Georgia are forced to work part time instead of full time much more often than men. For this reason, they are also more likely not to participate in the labour force, especially in their reproductive years. Georgia's 2019 labour force survey provides some insights into this issue. In particular, 22% of part-time working women (who account for about 14% of employed women) list childcare and elderly care responsibilities as the reason for part-time employment (for comparison it is 1.4% of men). Moreover, these factors are given as the reason for not being able to start work by 58% of women, while the corresponding number for men is only 5% (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Why were you not ready to start working? Difference between men and women in Georgia



Source: Geostat Labour Force Survey, 2019 and authors' calculations.

Even if they do engage in full-time and/or high responsibility work, women in Georgia get paid substantially less than men. In the Euro Area the "raw" gender pay gap (unadjusted for education and other characteristics) is around 15% (Eurostat, 2021), while in Georgia the corresponding gap is 17.7% (UN Women, 2018). Adjusting for qualifications, personal characteristics and for selectivity bias (the fact that better educated women are the ones who tend to enter the labour market), there still remains a 12% "unexplained" difference in wages between men and women. This gap is capturing the effect of discrimination or unobserved characteristics on the labour market (UN Women, 2018). For the EU-28, the unexplained part of the gender pay gap is estimated to be roughly similar, at 11.5% (Eurostat, 2018).

How did COVID-19 change the time-use gender balance in Georgia?

According to the 2020 survey (UN Women, 2020) COVID-19 increased the burden of unpaid care work for both sexes, but more so for women. For example, a higher share of women as compared to men reported spending more time on cleaning (35% of women and 24% of men), cooking (31% of women and 25% of men), or caring for children (61% of women vs. 44% of men). Notably, both men and women reported spending more time on at least one of these tasks (57% of women and 61% of men). The domestic workload particularly increased for households with children due to school and kindergarten closures.

Unfortunately, the survey did not assess how the amount of time spent on unpaid care work increased for men vs. women. However, 31% of women reported a decrease in their leisure time, while the same was reported by only 23% of men. At the same time, a higher percentage of men than women increased their leisure time during the lockdown (30% of men vs. 21% of women). On the other hand, there were no significant gender differences when it came to the number of paid hours worked (for salaried employees). These findings may suggest that during the COVID pandemic, the "double burden" has affected women more heavily than men.

Policy recommendations

In order to address the roots of the problem associated with gender differences in unpaid work in the long-term, a policy study by McKinsey Global Institute suggests that policy interventions should ensure the recognition of unpaid work, reduce its amount, and redistribute it between men and women (Madgavkar et al., 2020). In the Georgian context there are some recommendations which could be adopted within this framework.

First, the financing of professional childcare services should be supported publicly. On the one hand, this intervention will enable many women to take up employment and, on the other hand, this will create job opportunities through paid care work. Such policies have been adopted in a high number of EU countries and are particularly common in Scandinavia, with generous subsidies to public childcare and resources made available for families to afford private childcare services.

Moreover, it is crucial to invest in family-friendly policies which promote work-life balance for both men and women. In Georgia this can be achieved through adjustments to maternity and parental leave legislation. The Georgian legislation is well positioned to protect working mothers in the areas of breastfeeding, non-discrimination and health protection in the workplace. However, it falls behind the ILO standards and EU guidelines in some crucial provisions. In particular, maternity benefits for private sector employees are insufficient to support them and the child for the duration of the maternity leave. When calculated in monthly terms, existing compensation barely equals to the subsistence minimum for an average consumer (ISET Policy Institute, UN Women unpublished report, 2021). By increasing maternity benefits, policy makers will not only address the problem of inadequate compensation for employed women, but will increase the likelihood of women's labour force participation.

In addition, a paid paternity leave does not exist at all in Georgia, and fathers do not have any financial incentives to take up parental leave. The introduction of paid parental and paternity leave for fathers will encourage male participation in childcare, and could thus promote a long-term change in attitudes towards the division of childcare between partners. It is also likely to positively affect the division of paid employment and unpaid care and housework within Georgian households (Huerta et al., 2013).

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