

Unpaid Care Work

A Gateway for Gender Equality



By Tala El-Yousef/
Courtesy of the
UNDP Palestinian
Accelerator Lab



Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, countless reports have been published on the increasing burden of unpaid care work that this crisis places on women globally. Governments around the

world have taken different approaches in their response to the pandemic and consequent socioeconomic effects. The common denominator, however, seems to be that progress made towards gender equality pre-pandemic is at serious risk, as evidenced by the rise in cases of gender-based violence. Another worrisome indication that gender equality is in jeopardy is the fact that women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to this crisis than men's, as women make up 39 percent of global employment but accounted for 54 percent of the job losses between May and September 2020.¹ The pandemic has exposed structural weaknesses in reducing the gender equality gap. But this situation presents opportunities for designing interventions to ensure a strong comeback toward achieving gender equality in the coming years.

UNDP/PAPP, through its Accelerator Lab, is exploring a specific angle that is connected to gender equality and, if appropriately addressed, could help end all forms of violence against women: unpaid care work.

Unpaid care work relates to the provision of direct or indirect care without remuneration, carried out within the household. It includes, but is not limited to, caring for children, older people, and sick individuals, washing, cooking, shopping, cleaning, and helping other families with their chores. These

activities are considered work because theoretically, one could pay a third person to perform them.

Globally and in the State of Palestine, the burden of unpaid care work has been exacerbated by the pandemic, as schools have closed and working from home has become a "new normal." Globally, women perform 76 percent of the total hours of unpaid care work, which is more than three times as much as men. In the State of Palestine, it is almost eight times more than men, as indicated by a survey administered by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. According to a survey conducted by the research

firm Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD) in May 2020, 68 percent of women reported a significant increase in household duties, compared to 44 percent of men.ⁱⁱ

Caring for children and managing households is handled mainly by women and girls in the State of Palestine – deepening gender equality gaps and negatively affecting the livelihoods and well-being of women and girls.ⁱⁱⁱ Women are put in the impossible position of choosing between caring for their children, attending to household chores, and working from home or for their own businesses. With the extended disruptions to life as we knew it and no benefits to support women, especially those working in the informal sector, the risks of women losing their jobs and of a reversal of the progress made so far to reach gender equality are imminent. If the burden of unpaid care work continues to fall disproportionately on women, this will influence the economy with lower GDP growth and take a huge toll on women's well-being. Working toward better recognition of unpaid care work might seem subtle but could positively affect the larger goal of attaining gender equality by creating better conditions for those who tend to these tasks.

Tackling unpaid care work requires a broad approach of looking at policies, household dynamics, cultural influences of fixed gender roles, and the specific needs of women, men, boys, and girls. Working toward easing the burden of unpaid care work will require interventions at various levels (policy, community, household, and individual) by an array of actors in sectors that are not confined to working on gender equality. Other areas that ought to be



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What is unpaid care work anyway, and why does it matter?



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tackled include closing the gender gap in digital inclusion, gaining significance with the increase in remote work, and promoting positive attitudinal biases through campaigns.

While strategic work to address entrenched gender norms is under way, especially on the policy level, the magnitude of the problem requires immediate action to reduce the burden of unpaid care work. To this end, UNDP/PAPP's Accelerator Lab is partnering with UN Women to test community-based interventions that could alleviate part of the burden of unpaid care work and to advocate for the uptake and

scale-up of successful solutions by communities, the government, and other development actors.

The first step for us consisted in convening with representatives from various ministries, such as the ministries of labor, education, and national economy, to better understand the magnitude of unpaid care work and what is being done at the national level. We were surprised to hear from the heads of gender units that they themselves are struggling with an incredible amount of unpaid care work while little is being offered by employers or their families. The problem is entrenched in deep-seated cultural beliefs of

gender roles, even among women. The silver lining we noted after this first conversation was that there is a hunger to change things on the ground. Some of the suggestions that emerged from the conversations with ministry representatives focused on how employers can offer flexible working hours, after-school support, and childcare at the office. Another area of interest is how the role of media can be strengthened in promoting positive masculinity.

These preliminary findings led us to design a flash survey that will be administered to women to understand how the pandemic has affected the levels of unpaid

care work and assess whether any changes in intrahousehold dynamics have taken place regarding men's share of unpaid care work. We are interested in learning about the kind of support women have received from their communities and what they would have liked to see as a response from the government, development actors, and civil society organizations. Once we receive the findings, several experimental initiatives will be rolled out among communities.

We have some preconceived ideas of potential interventions based on preliminary reports and anecdotes, but we will validate our thinking by following up with the survey respondents through the holding of a focus group discussion to which we are planning to invite spouses. We know already that there is no one-size-fits-all intervention, as individual household dynamics and societal pressures influence the levels of unpaid care work. In some communities, the answer might be that minor infrastructure support is needed (an additional laptop/iPad to allow for online learning and working from home), whereas in other communities, the solution might be to create a network where members take turns in attending to childcare. Before rolling out any interventions, we want to hear from women and their partners on what they think would be useful to test out. Stay tuned for our next steps!

What can we do to improve the recognition of unpaid care work?



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Tala El-Yousef is the head of experimentation at the Palestinian Accelerator Lab that is embedded within UNDP/PAPP. It is part of the Accelerator Labs Network, whose founding investors are the Federal Republic of Germany; the State of Qatar, represented by the Qatar Fund for Development; and UNDP's core partners.

ⁱ Deepa Mahajan, Olivia White, Anu Madgavkar, et al., "Don't let the pandemic set back gender equality," *Harvard Business Review*, September 16, 2020, available at <https://hbr.org/2020/09/dont-let-the-pandemic-set-back-gender-equality#:~:text=Our%20analysis%20shows%20that%20women%27s,pandemic%2C%20falls%20disproportionately%20on%20women>.

ⁱⁱ "Coping with COVID-19 Pandemic: Impacts and Coping Strategies among Palestinians," Arab World for Research and Development, May 18, 2020, available at <http://www.awrad.org/print.php?id=9b5ed5y10182357Y9b5ed5>.

ⁱⁱⁱ COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Programming, UN Women, April 2020, available at <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20palestine/attachments/publications/2020/4/covid%2019%20-%20un%20women%20rapid%20gender%20analysis.pdf?la=en&vs=4626>.



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