

# Reduce the Burden of Unpaid Care Work for Improved Women Economic Empowerment

## SUMMARY

**A**s the world builds back after the COVID-19-inspired lockdowns, the gains made in empowering women before the pandemic must be protected. Reducing the burden of Unpaid Care Work (UCW) is particularly important for the effectiveness of women economic empowerment programs. Thus, investments directed towards enabling households better manage their UCW responsibilities including childcare, cooking, fetching water, and looking after the sick and elderly can yield positive macroeconomic growth (Oxfam, 2018). Globally, while women were already doing most of the world's UCW before the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging research suggests that the crisis exacerbated the UCW burden (Power, 2020) leading to reversals in women's economic empowerment.

A Rapid Assessment of the Socioeconomic Effects of COVID-19 on Businesswomen in the Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area of Uganda by the Ace Policy Research Institute (APRI) showed that the allocation of UCW did not change much even in the face of the pandemic during which many men stayed at home due to movement restrictions. The study covered 250 businesswomen working in 10 markets.<sup>1</sup> The

<sup>1</sup>The rapid assessment focus on the socioeconomic effects of COVID-19 on vulnerable businesswomen in the GKMA and the coping mechanisms used. The assessment was carried out in January-February 2022. The assessment specifically sought to investigate the effect of COVID-19 and government responses on, the performance of businesses, income and the wellbeing of the women, gender roles and distribution of UCW

study, among others, compared the allocation of UCW between men and women and time spent on different types of work before, during and after the lockdowns.

Findings from the study showed that whereas there were some temporary alterations during the lockdowns, the pattern of allocation of UCW between men and women and the time spent on different

work and the coping mechanisms used. The assessment is based on data collected through 250 interviews with businesswomen working in 10 markets in the GKMA. The markets include Wekembé Market, Kireka Farmers Market, Kitooro Market, Seeta Market, Kame Valley Markets, and Nakawa Market, Bwaise market, Usafi market, Ggaba Market, Makindye market, & Kasubi Market

## Highlights

- Women and girls are responsible for 75% of unpaid care and domestic work in homes every day
- Unpaid care responsibilities have a negative impact on women's participation in the paid economy
- Women's unpaid care work is recognized as a driver of inequality
- Girls and adolescent girls have also been impacted by the care work burdens of COVID-19.
- The COVID-19 crisis and response have deepened the already existing inequalities in the gender division of labour, placing a disproportionate burden on women and girls

types of unpaid care work remained the same. The findings also showed that for women living with their spouses, support from them concerning household chores had largely not changed although there was more support from other relatives and children (mainly girls aged 15 years and below). Moreover, most of the women contributed significantly to household income which exacerbated the burden of running businesses and attending UCW. It is, however, important to note that 11% of the women were not involved in UCW.

These findings attest to the profoundness of unequal allocation of UCW between men and women underpinned by deep-seated societal norms, attitudes, and practices. This policy brief argues that there is a need to intensify efforts to change attitudes and practices on the allocation of UCW by deliberately mainstreaming UCW in development discourse and policies.

## What is the Policy Issue?

The strategy of gender mainstreaming, post-Beijing (1995), has propelled women empowerment around the world. This strategy has been underpinned by political commitment and a favourable legal framework that supports equal representation and consideration of gender perspectives within policies. In some societies, gender mainstreaming became so engrained in development discourse that it became policy.

The burden of UCW borne by women, though significant both socially and economically, remains subtle due to the widespread gendered norms that view UCW as a female prerogative across different regions, socio-economic classes, and cultures. Furthermore, despite its importance in well-being, UCW is commonly left out of policy agendas due to the misconception that it is too difficult to measure and therefore less relevant for policies. Yet neglecting UCW leads to incorrect inferences about levels and changes in individuals' wellbeing and the value of time, which in turn limits policy effectiveness across a range of socioeconomic areas, notably gender inequalities in employment and other empowerment areas. It is therefore time that UCW is accentuated in development discourse and mainstreamed into policy. This should start with changing attitudes and practices through appropriate messaging that raises awareness about the burden borne by women due to unequal allocation of UCW and the implications for society (households and the economy at large).

## What is at Stake?

Globally, the economy cannot function to the fullest without the benefits from UCW, which involves the day-to-day domestic tasks of looking after the children, the sick, cooking, and fetching water, among

others. Women and girls are responsible for 75% of unpaid care and domestic work in homes every day (Moreira da Silva, 2019). This is in addition to the paid work which they must undertake. UCW and paid work cause a "double burden" for women. Unpaid care responsibilities hurt women's participation in the paid economy, which leads them to get easily eliminated from the labour market (Addati et al. 2018). Any extra time that a woman or girl spends on UCW means less time potentially that could have been spent on economic activities, education, or vocational skills training.

Women's unpaid care work is recognized as a driver of inequality. It has a direct link to wage inequality, lower income, poorer education outcomes, and poor physical and mental health. This situation has been exacerbated exponentially by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to UNESCO, 1.52 billion students (87%) and more than 60 million teachers stayed home as COVID-19 school closures expanded. As the formal and informal supply of childcare services declined, the demand for unpaid childcare provision fell more heavily on women. As women take on greater care demands at home, their jobs are disproportionately affected by cuts and lay-offs.

Girls and adolescent girls have also been impacted by the care work burdens of COVID-19. Data shows that adolescent girls spent significantly more hours on chores compared to their male counterparts. School closures did not just mean that girls are taking on more chores at home. It also meant millions more girls dropping out of school before they complete their education, especially girls living in poverty, girls with disabilities or living in rural, isolated locations.

The COVID-19 crisis and response have deepened the already existing inequalities in the gender division of labour, placing a disproportionate burden on women and girls (PWC, 2021). If this extra burden lasts, it will cause more women to leave the labour market permanently, reversing progress towards gender equality and reducing productivity in the economy.

Research indicates that strategies that endeavour to support the reduction of UCW may lead to great returns in macroeconomic growth, labour force participation, job creation, increased education attainment and other key government priorities. The reduction of UCW by two hours per day was related to a 10% increase in the rate of women's labour force participation (Nowacka et al. (2014)). Parvez (2016) review confirms that fully closing the gender gap in formal labour force participation could boost Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 5% to 20% for most countries. Evidence shows that addressing girls' unpaid care responsibilities is pivotal to increasing

girls' participation and attainment in secondary education (Brock and N. Cammish, 1997).

As we rebuild economic structures which are more inclusive and resilient, there is an opportunity to be transformative, and to recognize, reduce and redistribute UCW. This should be well articulated in development discourse and mainstreamed into policies. This should start with appropriate messaging that raises awareness about the burden borne by women and girls due to unequal allocation of UCW, and its negative implications for society.

## Conclusion

As the economy tries to build back post-COVID-19, women empowerment strategies have suffered reversals due to the burden of increased UCW. It is, therefore, necessary for the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development to champion the change in norms and attitudes and mainstream UCW in development discourse with the appropriate messaging.

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