

POLICY BRIEF: UNPAID CARE WORK

Recognise, Reduce, and Redistribute Unpaid Care Work in Sri Lanka

Women and Media Collective

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Introduction

Unpaid care work is increasingly becoming a focus of global discourse around gender equality, socio-economic development, and national policy formulation. The Sustainable Development Goals agreed on by leaders across the world in 2015 have gone the furthest to include unpaid care work in Goal 5, the stand-alone goal on gender equality. Yet, Sri Lanka remains slow in the recognition and uptake of these issues and there is still much confusion among policymakers, researchers, and activists in the country as to what unpaid care work is and why it should be an issue that should be addressed at the national level.

“Recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.”

Sustainable Development Goals Target 5.4

“Unpaid care work is unpaid care because it arises out of social or contractual obligations, such as marriage or less formal social relationships. It is care because it is a group of activities that services people in their wellbeing. And it is work because it is an activity that has costs in terms of time and energy.”

Valeria Esquivel (2013), *Care in Households and Communities*.

This policy brief attempts to highlight key policy issues and recommendations in the recognition, reduction, and redistribution of unpaid care work.

The brief is informed by work conducted by Women and Media Collective since 2017 on addressing unpaid care work. Its objective is to compile evidence-based research that recognises the context of unpaid care work in Sri Lanka in order to advocate for effective measures to reduce and redistribute the unpaid care burden on women. This research aims to build on feminist advocacy to bring about the realisation of women’s rights and gender equality through knowledge of the social and economic value of unpaid domestic and care work, a calculation of women’s economic contribution to their households and the national economy, and policies that encourage and support male participation and engagement in sharing unpaid care work.

Key policy issues

Informed by the research and work conducted by Women and Media Collective and national statistics and data, the following selected issues present a brief overview of key considerations around unpaid care work and its intersection with multiple socio-economic issues that have wide-ranging policy implications.

Policy issue 1: Unpaid care work and women outside the labour force

Sri Lanka boasts relatively high social development indicators in health and education, especially for women, owing to the near universal access of citizens to healthcare and access to education from primary to tertiary and vocational education. Yet, Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey Annual Report (2021) notes that labour force participation rates for women have been persistently low and are currently at their lowest in the past decade, at 31.8 (in comparison to 71.0 for men). Of the economically inactive population, the main reason reported for the majority (59.4 percent) among women to be economically inactive is due to their involvement in housework, while this percentage is only 3.4 for men. This shows that housework or unpaid care work poses challenges and inhibits women from seeking, obtaining, and retaining employment. However, policies and programmes that try to get women into the workforce have paid little attention to addressing the gender division of labour in households, the expectation of women’s responsibility for care in the home, assessing the value of this work done in the home, or the redistribution of unpaid care work with men in households which would likely allow women to take up paid work.

Policy issue 2: Gender roles and norms around care work

In Sri Lanka, as in most countries in the region, gendered norms perpetuate the expectation that women should be the primary care providers while men should be the primary breadwinners. On a daily basis, women take care of children, ensuring that they are dropped off at or picked up from school, have a meal ready for when they return home, and have completed their schoolwork; are responsible for elders, the sick, and disabled family members (if any) in the household; attend to housework including cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, fetching water or firewood, and also work in the paddy fields and/

or home gardens and attend community level meetings. These activities are perceived as their responsibilities – because they are women. These social norms have far-reaching consequences – from the individual and the family to the economy and State. At the individual and family levels, social norms create significant hurdles for women in entering the labour force and continuing employment, especially after marriage and childbirth. Women who engage in regular paid work are still expected to fulfil their role as caregivers on their return home, creating time poverty (see below) and overburdening women. These gender norms also overtly make their way into national development policies and political manifestos, as seen in Sri Lanka over the recent past, or wholly exclude the recognition of women's role and burden as unpaid caregivers across policies and frameworks addressing education, health, employment or social welfare sectors.

Policy issue 3: Time use and time poverty with the burden of unpaid care work

Recent time-use data from Sri Lanka confirm such social norms and the global trend that women shoulder a disproportionately high percentage of unpaid housework, care work and voluntary work. The latest estimates in the Sri Lanka Time Use Survey Final Report (2017) indicate that around 91% of females aged 15 and above participate in unpaid activities (in contrast to 63% of males). Employed females aged 15 and above spent on average 5 hours and 42 minutes whereas 'economically inactive' females spent 7 hours and 24 minutes for unpaid activities. By contrast men in all categories spent between 2 to 3 hours per day on unpaid activities. These data show that even those women employed in full-time paid work, are left with the double burden of unpaid care work within their homes. This is a clear threat to women's welfare and well-being and becomes another challenge and disincentive for women to remain in paid employment. Unpaid care work, therefore, leads to time poverty – the concept that women tend to work longer hours than men and therefore have less time for labour force participation, self-care, leisure, or rest. Time poverty also impacts on women's health and reduces opportunities for women to engage in activities to voice their needs and concerns.

"My three children, mother, stepfather, and grandmother all live with me. My husband works at a hotel in the city and his work schedule barely gives him any time to be at home. I spend about 8 hours engaged in tea plucking work and 10 hours of work in the house. This is mainly taking care of the household as I am also responsible for the care of my mother, grandmother, and bedridden stepfather. I use up about 18 hours of my physical and mental energy during a single day and do not have time to do anything else for myself."

32-year old women from Nuwara Eliya

Policy issue 4: Health and well-being considerations around unpaid care work

Being engaged in unpaid care work (and paid work) leaves little time for women to engage in self-care or leisure activities – aspects essential for overall mental and physical well-being. Research shows that when women engaged in leisure activities such as watching television, listening to the radio, and reading these tasks were often performed simultaneously with other activities such as eating, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of young children. Many women rarely do anything outside the home as leisure activities such as going on trips, meeting with friends or watching a movie at the theatre. Many women stated that they did not engage in leisure activities outside the home or for longer periods of time due to the dependency of those in the household on them. Comprehensive policies and programmes that look at the well-being, skills development of carers or those who especially provide care for sick family members, the elderly or the disabled, are also absent in Sri Lanka.

Policy issue 5: Recognition and value of unpaid care work

The nationally representative Time Use Survey carried out by the Department of Census and Statistics in 2017 (mentioned above), is an important step towards highlighting the value of unpaid work and is the first study which confirms the extended hours women engaged in unpaid care work compared to men. However, as the report stops short of a valuation of unpaid work, it thereby prevents calculating and recognising the value of such work, and the unpaid care work carried out by women and girls continues to go unnoticed and unrecognised in the calculations of the country's economy. The concept of valuing care work is not necessarily undertaken from the perspective that the work should be remunerated, or that a monetary value could accurately represent the worth of this work to its recipients, families, and society. Rather, the purpose of valuing care work is to promote an accurate and comprehensive valuation of the work that takes place in economies and to strengthen the argument that those who provide unpaid work to family or household members are entitled to a fair share and control over the income generated by those members. The important economic role played by those who engage in unpaid care is not included in labour force surveys or economic calculations of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and therefore, the realities of the women and girls who engage in this work are also excluded from the data informing policymaking.

Policy issue 6: Services and policies available to ease the unpaid care burden

Sri Lanka's care infrastructure shows the availability of private and public facilities at the district level, such as elders' homes, creches or day care centres, children's homes, and centres for children and elders with disabilities. There is also a lack of family-friendly policies to recognise gendered norms and the care burden on women and these issues also indirectly perpetuate social norms and prevent men from sharing in housework and childcare. The absence of such measures by the state and private

sector alike – to ease the burden of unpaid housework and care work – only increases the overall workload placed on women who are also employed in paid work.

Policy issue 7: Unpaid care work in times of conflict, crisis, and emerging challenges

Sri Lanka's past experiences highlight the volatility of challenges around unpaid care work to external and contextual challenges. Since the end of the war in 2009, thousands of women became heads of their households and often the sole provider for their families, increasing their care burden. The dearth of support services such as child, elder, or disability care which is felt across the country is even more evident in post-conflict areas and especially impacts on women's ability to look for or engage in paid employment. The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the increase of the care burden on women as schools and day care services were shut down, healthcare services were restricted, and households were compelled to be self-sustained as much as possible. The economic crisis the country has been facing since 2022 also adds to the urgency of the need to address unpaid care work as the burden of unpaid care is increasing within families. Irrespective of the sharp rise in the cost of living, the depletion of state funding for public programmes, and shortages of essential items, women are being pushed to maintain the well-being of households. This context is in effect intensifying the financial constraints that households have been facing over the previous two years of the pandemic. While these issues highlight lessons from the past, there are other emerging challenges for Sri Lanka's future and unpaid care work. For example, demographic trends predict an increase in the elderly population that will create a demand for more care work; women will be the majority among the ageing population. Changing definitions and composition of families will also have repercussions for the expectation of unpaid care work.

Conclusion

The policy issues discussed above, and the policy recommendations presented below, draw on the concepts of recognition, reduction, and redistribution of unpaid care work in Sri Lanka. Recognising unpaid care work will bring attention to the important role of care in society and the vital contribution of those who provide care not just for their family but also to the community and country at large. Recognising, documenting, and creating awareness around care work can also provide the basis for monitoring and measuring the effectiveness of planned policies and implemented programmes to address unpaid care work. Once the prevalence and consequences of unpaid work are recognized and understood, it is important to take measures to reduce and redistribute it. The underlying aim of reducing and redistributing unpaid care work is to free time for women and girls to engage in paid employment, self-care, leisure, and social and political activities as they so choose. Establishing means to redistribute responsibilities, time,

and resources around unpaid care work must then, also ensure that the burden of unpaid care work is shared equitably between women and men, girls and boys in the households, the government and the private sector.

- Policy recommendations Make unpaid care work visible by continuing to conduct time-use surveys at regular intervals. Provide support to the Department of Census and Statistics to measure changes over time through time-use data disaggregated by sex, age, and socio-economic characteristics.
- Develop such surveys and data to constitute the starting point for assigning monetary value to unpaid care work and the base to monitor the impact of awareness, policies, and investments in unpaid care. Support efforts to calculate the value of the total unpaid care work relative to conventional GDP as a basis of dialogue on care work.
- Ensure labour force surveys expand on the definition of work to include unpaid care work as well as data on domestic workers where possible.
- Design public and social policy that recognise women's contributions through unpaid care work, reduce the workload associated with this work, and redistribute responsibility for care through state programmes and community involvement.
- Develop effective policies and programmes for support services for primary carers in families. Provide support through infrastructure, affordable care services, respite facilities and respect.
- Reform laws and policies to facilitate the redistribution of unpaid care work by enabling the understanding of work and family obligations, supporting meaningful paternity leave, promoting flexible working hours and work options, and creating programmes that challenge the tradition of women taking primary responsibility for care work and expand women's opportunities and choices.
- Promote gender-responsive budgeting as a method to analyse the unpaid care burden and care needs and ensure that there is adequate budgeting for the implementation of policies and programmes that address unpaid care work across relevant ministries and government institutions.
- Support improved access to healthcare services, improve the quality of care, improve the skills of public care workers and provide households with more opportunities to make use of public care services rather than relying on women and girls to undertake unpaid care work.
- Conduct adequate research across multisectoral and intersecting issues to identify and respond to emerging needs and challenges within the topic of unpaid care work and the burden placed on women.
- Invest in the transformation of gendered norms and expectations around household and economic roles through policy interventions and programmes especially in education, health, employment, media, and social welfare sectors. Invest in campaigning around the redistribution of care work across genders.

About the policy brief

Women and Media Collective has been working on a project titled “Recognising, Reducing, and Redistributing of Unpaid Care Work in Sri Lanka” with financial support from the Ford Foundation since 2018. This policy brief was informed by the research conducted over the course of the project and the valuable experiences gained through the project and its interactions with project partners, community leaders, government and private sector actors and the voices of women themselves from a diverse range of locations and backgrounds, including women involved in agriculture (paddy farmers, home gardeners, internal migrants for seasonal harvesting of natural raw materials), women in industry (in free trade zones and tea plantations), women from urban low-income families, women survivors of the conflict, and returnee migrant workers.

This policy brief was informed by the following research studies as well as relevant national data as credited:

- Kottegoda, Sepali (2022), “Recognise, Reduce, and Redistribute Unpaid Care: An Introductory Note on the examination of households, families and policy in relation to research findings from six districts in Sri Lanka.” Paper presented at the Regional Conference on Unpaid Care Work in South Asia. October 2022. Women and Media Collective, Colombo.
- Kottegoda, Sepali. “Unpaid Care Work: Why Does it Matter Whose Work It Is?”. https://www.i-house.or.jp/eng/programs/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ALFP-e-magazine-5-article-3-Eng.-Sepali-Kottegoda_PDF-version.pdf
- Gunewardena, Dilani and Perera, Ashvin (2022) “Economic Value Assessment of the Women and Media Collective Study on Unpaid Care Work”. Paper Presented at the Regional Conference on Equality and Equity in Recognising Unpaid Care Work and Women’s Labour in South Asia. October 2022.
- Department of Census and Statistics. Sri Lanka Time Use Survey Final Report – 2017. Ministry of Finance, Economy and Policy Development. 2020.
- Lecamwasam, Menaka (2022), “Unpaid Care Work of Women in Relation to The Care of Vulnerable Households Members in Sri Lanka – A Policy Review”. Women and Media Collective, Colombo.

About Women and Media Collective

The Women and Media Collective (WMC) was formed in 1984 by a group of Sri Lankan feminists interested in exploring ideological and practical issues of concern to women in Sri Lanka. Since then, WMC has been actively engaged in bringing about change based on feminist principles in creating a just society that does not discriminate based on gender. WMC has contributed at different moments in time to social and political change,

the inclusion of women and gender concerns in the peace process, increased state recognition of women’s rights, the enactment of new legislation or legislative and policy reform promoting and protecting women’s rights, and recognition for the need to increase women’s representation in politics.



Women and Media Collective


No. 56/1, Sarasavi Lane,
Castle Street,
Colombo 08.
Sri Lanka.

Phone: + 94 - 11 - 2690201 /+ 94 - 11 - 2690192

Email: wmcslanka@gmail.com

Website: www.womenandmedia.org

 <https://web.facebook.com/womenandmediacollective>

 @wmc_srilanka

 @wmcslanka

 @womenandmedia

Compilation: Evangeline de Silva

Technical review: Sepali Kottegoda