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# Unpaid Care Work in Lebanon: A Barrier to Women's Economic Empowerment

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Biology Major

## Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the impact of unpaid care work on women's economic empowerment (WEE) in Lebanon and to propose a policy solution and a plan of action. The paper begins with a literature review of the causes and effects of unpaid care and highlights previous policies with the aim to produce policy recommendations in Lebanon. Unpaid care has its roots in the discriminatory social norms that judge care as a woman's responsibility. This view has various repercussions on women, most notably, it hinders women's economic empowerment. To address these issues, this paper highlights the need for a multidimensional policy centered around the recognition, reduction, and redistribution of unpaid care work. Some of the proposed recommendations include tackling discriminatory social norms through the educational sector and the media, increasing the government's investment in time-saving infrastructure, and the ratification of non-transferable parental leave policies.

**Keywords:** unpaid care work, women, workplace, WEE, Lebanon

## Introduction

Unpaid care work refers to the activities that help meet the various needs of families or community members, whether material, developmental, emotional, or spiritual (Chopra & Sweetman, 2014, as cited in Rost, 2021). Caring for children, the elderly, and doing household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and even fetching water, are a few examples of

unpaid care work. Unpaid care work is difficult labor that is essential to any household's everyday operations, and it is also necessary for strengthening and renewing social bonds between family members and the community (Chopra et al., 2014). Such activities are categorized as work since a person could be paid to do them (Ferrant et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, such work disproportionately falls on the shoulders of women, particularly the marginalized in developing countries. In fact, part of the slow and uneven progress of gender equality and women's economic empowerment (WEE) programming can be attributed to women's higher share of unpaid care work (Ferrant & Thim, 2019). Around the world, women spend three times as much time doing unpaid care work as men do, ranging from 1.5 times in North America to 6.7 times in South Asia (Ferrant & Thim, 2019). In fact, around 4.1 hours are spent by women every day on domestic work and unpaid care as opposed to 1.7 hours for men, a contribution by women that is estimated to be worth around \$11 trillion (Diallo et al., 2020). To respond to this growing problem, Goal 5.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) specifically targets girls and women's unequal share of unpaid care work (Moussié & Alfery, 2018). Particularly, governments are urged to recognize the importance of unpaid care work through infrastructure, public services, policies for social protection, as well as to encourage shared responsibilities in the household (Moussié & Alfery, 2018). Moreover, this target is also considered a prerequisite for SDGs 1, 5, 8, and 10, which target gender equality, the reduction of poverty, inequality, and sustainable development through decent work, respectively (Hammad et al., 2019).

The significance of the problem of unpaid care work lies in the lack of recognition and attention attributed to this type of labor, resulting in ineffective solutions, the persistence of the problem, and women increasingly suffering the repercussions. Additionally, unpaid care

work often leads to the violation of human rights, especially for women living in poverty, including the rights to education, decent work, social security, health, and the right to enjoy scientific progress, which all ultimately contribute to the hindrance of WEE, as this paper will demonstrate.

Multiple stakeholders are involved in the issue of unpaid care work, first and foremost women and girls, who bear the direct consequences. Other stakeholders include men and boys who can also contribute to unpaid care work. On a national level, the government has a crucial role to play. In Lebanon, this includes the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and even the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private companies, and the educational sector can all play key roles in challenging unpaid care work.

Primary research was not performed in this study. Instead, a cause-and-effect approach was applied during the literature synthesis and review, in which the causes and effects of the problem were gathered, reviewed, and synthesized from several sources. Additionally, this paper reviewed both former and current policies related to the problem of unpaid care work with the intention of making several recommendations to ameliorate the problem going forward.

### **Literature Review**

The aim of this paper is to examine the impact of unpaid care work on WEE in Lebanon and to propose, in addition to previous studies, recommendations and policies to tackle this issue. The proposed hypothesis is as follows: Unpaid care work represents a barrier to WEE in Lebanon. Studies have been conducted to shed light on unpaid care work and demonstrate its impacts on several levels and in multiple countries. This paper adds to

the existing body of literature by specifically analyzing the impact of unpaid care work on WEE in Lebanon.

### Causes

The causes of unpaid care work have been investigated by researchers around the world. Routine housework takes up the majority of women's unpaid care time, followed by caring obligations, but this varies depending on a country's economic growth (Ferrant & Thim, 2019). Unpaid care is prevalent in all countries but especially in poor and developing countries. Women performed more unpaid care in poor households due to lower-quality infrastructure, larger families, and a reduced ability to purchase care services (Razavi, 2016). In low-income countries, up to 14 hours each day are allocated by women in rural areas to unpaid care work (Oxfam International, 2020). However, inequalities in caring obligations remain even in households with greater wealth and education, as women dedicate more than 60% of their time to housework and care, regardless of their work status, pay, or education levels (Ferrant et al., 2014). Social norms influence gender roles by defining which behaviors are socially appropriate and acceptable: In most societies, paid work is perceived as a masculine task, whereas unpaid care work is recognized as a woman's duty (Ferrant et al., 2014). Girls and boys are assigned different household and care responsibilities from an early age (Ferrant & Thim, 2019). Women's domestic and care responsibilities change over time, with unpaid care work increasing significantly when they marry and have children, with more time spent on childcare and household chores during motherhood (Ferrant & Thim, 2019). Furthermore, mothers-in-law often pressure young and newly married women to "show their value" by completing more difficult chores (Marphatia & Moussié, 2013). While marriage and parenthood result in higher amounts of unpaid care work, the opposite is true

for men; although fatherhood results in more time spent on childcare, men's time spent on ordinary housework actually reduces after a child is born, as the mother staying at home with the child performs the majority of household tasks (Ferrant & Thim, 2019).

In Lebanon, gender inequality is severe. In fact, according to the Gender Gap Index, Lebanon is ranked 135 out of 144 nations (Avis, 2017), and is ranked third to last in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, with only Syria and Yemen having worse gender gap scores, ranking at 142 and 144, respectively (Avis, 2017). In a study on the impact of socialization on gender discrimination and violence in Lebanon, results revealed that from an early age, boys are given entitlement over their sisters by society and parents (Avis, 2017). The way that boys are raised gives them superiority and dominance over women. According to one study, when questioned about the characteristics that make up a "perfect" woman, respondents primarily mentioned being "obedient," "devoted to her family," "being a good housewife and mother," and "maintaining the reputation and dignity of her spouse," but qualities linked to education, for example, were rarely mentioned (Hamieh & Usta, 2011, p. 14 as cited in Avis, 2017). These ideas confirm that discriminatory social norms are a major contributing factor to unpaid care work.

### **Effects**

Unpaid care has tremendous consequences that mostly affect women. Due to unpaid care work, women around the world are left with little time on their hands to pursue an education, find a decent job, be active members in their communities, or voice their opinions in society, which works to keep them trapped at the lower end of the economy (Oxfam International, 2020). They have a lower probability of engaging in paid work, and those who do are more likely to be limited to informal or part-time jobs, causing them to earn less than

their male counterparts (Ferrant et al., 2014). This in turn leads to the dependence of women on someone else, mostly their spouses, for their income, hindering WEE. Entrenched gender norms dictate that women are more likely to sacrifice their paid jobs for the sake of unpaid care (Mercado et al., 2020). This is reflected by labor force participation rates in Lebanon, which is 23.5 % for women and 70.3 % for men (UNDP, 2016, p. 6, as cited in Avis, 2017). Women worldwide prefer flexible and less-regular work as it permits them to care for their children (Moussié & Alfery, 2018). However, flexible work is often poorly remunerated (Qi & Dong, 2015).

Eventually, more time spent on unpaid care work leads to reduced time for paying jobs, education, rest, and self-care (Rodriguez, 2021), which compromises women's access to their human rights and their economic empowerment. Regarding the right to education, disproportionate care responsibilities can lead to girls and women dropping out of school or university, limiting the time and energy they can dedicate to education and extracurricular activities, and limiting their progress and opportunities (Public Services International [PSI], 2021). Unequal unpaid care might also prevent women from entering the labor force, or it might push them to accept low-wage, informal, and unstable occupations with little or no social security, thus hindering the rights to decent work and social security (PSI, 2021).

Unpaid care can be demanding, both physically and emotionally, negatively affecting women's health (PSI, 2021). Psychological problems such as depression and anxiety, as well as physical and emotional distress could all result from this immense workload and the lack of respite for women (Seedat & Rondon, 2021). In addition, lack of access to technologies and services, such as suitable energy sources or piped water, can jeopardize their right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress (PSI, 2021). In conclusion, the unequal distribution of

unpaid care work due to discriminatory social norms jeopardizes women's rights to equality and non-discrimination (PSI, 2021). Finally, on a long-term scale, children will see their mothers at home and start internalizing the idea that the household is where women "belong," thus further engraving and strengthening the discriminatory social norms that are at the root of unpaid care work.

### **Policy Synthesis**

Several stakeholders are working to challenge the issue of unpaid care in various ways. At the level of national structure and policy, the Lebanese government has taken important steps outlining its commitment to gender equality. First, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was ratified by the Lebanese government in 1997, but with reservations on Article 9, paragraph 2 on women's nationality, and items (c), (d), (f), (g) of Article 16, as well as Article 29 (Avis, 2017; OHCHR, 2020). Women's equal rights to men's in marriage, divorce, and family problems, were denied by these reservations, as well as their ability to pass on their nationality to their children and their foreign spouses (Avis, 2017). These reservations prevent the full implementation of CEDAW and limit its effectiveness. Second, Lebanon has a national women's machinery, known as The National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), whose mandate includes fighting for gender equality (Avis, 2017). The Lebanese government has also mandated the recruitment of gender focal points (GFP) in all ministries and public institutions to support gender mainstreaming across all sectors (Avis, 2017). The NCLW and the GFPs are Lebanon's official structures for addressing gender issues, and they reflect the Lebanese government's efforts to institutionalize gender equality (Avis, 2017). Yet, it is clear from the lack of effective action taken by the Lebanese government that they do not carry



much authority to implement policies and remain consultative in nature. A lack of commitment to women's empowerment in various sectors and an ongoing lack of effective policies prioritizing gender equality hinder GFPs' abilities to affect long-term change (US Agency for International Development [USAID], 2012, as cited in Avis, 2017). The consultative nature of NCLW also limits its capabilities, as it lacks the capacity to directly propose legislation or reform policies (Avis, 2017).

Moreover, specific laws, regulations, or action plans that acknowledge the burden of unpaid care work inside households are absent from Lebanese labor policies (Sugita, 2010). This could be related to the lack of ratification of the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (1981, No.156), the Employment Act, and similar laws for the rights of workers with family responsibilities (Sugita, 2010). There are no institutional mechanisms in place to help balance work and family responsibilities, such as flexible time, part-time, teleworking, paid and unpaid leave, and workplace care centers (Sugita, 2010). Similarly, Lebanon has not enforced parental leave policies that are up to international standards, according to the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) (Tabbara, 2022). In 1994, Lebanon's Labor Code was amended to include mandatory maternity leave of seven paid weeks, which was later increased, in 2014, to 10 weeks, although the International Labour Organization (ILO) advises a 14-week minimum period (Tabbara, 2022). However, there are no mandated days off for fathers (Tabbara, 2022), as paternity leave is not provided under the law (Takieddine & Abou Ali, 2021). As such, the mother has to bear the burden of childcare alone, or the majority of it at the very least. Yet, the father, who is as much involved in conceiving the child as the mother, does not participate equally in providing this care. In January 2018, a draft law for a paternity leave of three days was proposed and accepted by the Council of Ministers, however it has

not yet come into force due to the Lebanese Parliament's failure to enact it (Takeddine & Abou Ali, 2021).

Such initiatives are helpful and needed. In contrast to the government's lack of action on parental leave, companies such as Diageo and Zomato<sup>1</sup> have provided their employees in Lebanon with maternity and paternity leaves exceeding the legal minimum: A fully paid maternity and paternity leave of 26 weeks as of July 2019 by Diageo, and a paid parental leave of 26 weeks to all Zomato's employees, both men and women (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2019). Companies taking action, especially in the absence of governmental policies, represents an essential step forward in tackling the problem of unpaid care work.

Most recently, the AiW has proposed legislation that would require companies to give mothers 15 weeks of maternity leave and fathers 10 days (Tabbara, 2022). Meanwhile, the Lebanese American University has started to implement these policies as of March 2022. The NCLW has secured the support of seven MPs to support the draft law, but it has not yet been examined in committee (Tabbara, 2022).

### **Policy Recommendations**

Despite measures taken by various stakeholders to tackle unpaid care work, the problem persists, highlighting the need for additional actions and a multidimensional policy. Paying women for unpaid care is not the solution to adopt. This could exacerbate the issue even further as it would encourage women to remain at home since they are getting paid, but their careers, economic empowerment, and status in various fields might be affected by such a policy. Having a child is a choice that both parents make, and neither of them should face the burden of caring for the child or children alone. If the care is equally divided among

parents, then women would not be forced to make significant and detrimental sacrifices to perform all of the care work necessary to raise a child or children. The compromises would be minor and would not hinder their economic development as is the case with women being the only ones performing care work. To reach that, the multidimensional policy should be centered around the “3Rs” framework—Recognizing, Reducing, and Redistributing—developed by the feminist economist Diane Elson (Ferrant & Thim, 2019).

### **Recognition**

Measurement and valuing are essential. To determine this information concerning care work, researchers and governments, as well as other stakeholders, must start by collecting time-use data (Ferrant & Thim, 2019). This information is critical for understanding and acknowledging the amount of time dedicated to unpaid care work and its economic contribution to the entire economy (Ferrant & Thim, 2019). The media should be involved in shedding light on this issue and promoting equal roles and responsibilities among parents, which could be accomplished by creating advertisements, documentaries, or even programs that tackle unpaid care work. In addition, it is necessary to break the stereotypical norms that shape household chores and childcare as the primary responsibility of women, girls, and mothers. This might entail having webinars and awareness programs for women’s rights and gender equality that focus on the importance of shared care work. Such trainings should be accompanied by public awareness campaigns concerning unpaid care work. There should also be joint efforts between various ministries to take action on the issue of unpaid care work, WEE, and human rights. This should include developing school curricula that discuss unpaid care work and its unequal burden on women and girls.

## Reduction

The restraints on women and girls' time can be reduced by countries investing in time-saving infrastructure (Ferrant et al., 2014). This might include state-sponsored childcare facilities, after-school programming for young children, and a strengthened welfare system.

## Redistribution

The Lebanese government can promote the redistribution of unpaid care work by ratifying a national law for parental leave, which is a long-term leave that allows one or both parents to care for their child after the end of maternity or paternity leave (The MenCare Parental Leave Platform, 2016). This leave should be non-transferable among parents, meaning that it is specifically allocated for the father or the mother, with no possibility of transferring it to the other parent, thus preventing the traditional norms from exerting their power against women (The MenCare Parental Leave Platform, 2016). Moreover, the current Lebanese maternity leave of 10 weeks should be extended to 15 weeks to meet both ILO and CEDAW standards. The Lebanese government should also remove all restrictions on the CEDAW convention to ensure its full implementation and ratify its Optional Protocol. Flexible working hours and teleworking, which the government can endorse, would also enable parents to work while caring for children or other dependents. Finally, to improve the work-life balance of employees, especially women, increasing access to child and elderly care, as well as public services is needed (Ferrant et al., 2014). When the individuals needing care are being cared for by third parties, primary caretakers will have more time to pursue their own needs and interests. Such care services should be affordable, especially for the low-income families, and should be free of charge for those who cannot afford them at all.

## Conclusion

Unpaid care work is a significant problem that has been present for a very long time, and one that has gone unnoticed for far too long. This issue stems from the entrenched and stereotypical norms that relegate women to housework and deem men's careers more important than women's careers. It is undoubtedly women who have disproportionately shouldered the burden of unpaid care, which prevents them from enjoying their full human rights and has limited their economic empowerment. Several steps can be taken to solve this problem using the 3R approach: recognition, reduction, and redistribution. This includes using time-use surveys, tackling discriminatory gender norms through education and the media, and investing in time-saving infrastructure. Ideally, Lebanon should focus on lifting reservations to the CEDAW convention and adopting its Optional Protocol, ratifying several laws such as a non-transferable parental leave, extending maternity leave, adopting flexible working hours and teleworking, and increasing access to public services, including child and elderly care, to fight the issue of unpaid care work. Through these steps, Lebanon can work toward eliminating the unequal division of unpaid care work and can achieve gender equality and WEE.

<sup>1</sup> As of 2021, Zomato is no longer active in Lebanon.

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