



Ulita Mutambo and Muchineripi Sibanda hang up laundry together outside their home in Ture Village, Zvishevane region, Zimbabwe. Photo: Aurelie Marrier d'Unienville/Oxfam

# UNPAID CARE: WHY AND HOW TO INVEST

## Policy briefing for national governments

**Evidence shows that investments which support households to better meet their unpaid care responsibilities – responsibilities such as childcare, food preparation and laundry – can yield substantial returns in terms of macro-economic growth, job creation and other key government priorities.<sup>1</sup> To achieve this, governments should a) include commitments to support households' unpaid care work in relevant policies and programmes, and collect data on unpaid care to support policy making; b) increase households' access to care-supporting infrastructure and services; c) encourage men and boys to share care work; and d) step up efforts to give women a real voice in policy making and a real opportunity to speak out about unpaid care.**

# UNPAID CARE: WHY SHOULD GOVERNMENTS BE CONCERNED?

*'We commit ourselves to place at the centre of public policy the shared responsibility for caregiving.'*

Luis Guillermo Solís Rivera, President, Costa Rica<sup>2</sup>

Unpaid care work done by households – which includes general household tasks such as fetching water and fuel wood, laundry, and food preparation, as well as direct care of household members including children, the elderly and the sick – tends not to be seen as something relevant or important for policy makers. In fact, there is growing evidence that governments and economies could benefit substantially from recognizing unpaid care as a key policy concern, and from increasing investments to support households meet their unpaid care responsibilities.

**This opportunity lies in the fact that currently, the efficiency and distribution of unpaid care work is sub-optimal.** There are two main reasons for this. First, households – in particular, poor households – spend a lot of time doing basic household chores because they do not have ready access to basic labour-saving infrastructure and equipment, such as nearby water sources and fuel-efficient stoves. Second, women and girls do the majority of unpaid care work: typically five times more than men in rural areas.<sup>3</sup> The result? Half of the working age population spend so much time meeting the basic care needs of household members – typically at least five or six hours per day in poor rural households<sup>4</sup> – that they are unable to contribute effectively to both current and future household income, while also struggling to provide quality care to household members. This is clearly a concern for men, households and the economy, as well as for women themselves. It is also an impediment to achieving poverty reduction goals, since poor households are disproportionately affected by heavy unpaid care work and this contributes to keeping them in poverty.<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, evidence shows that effective measures to reduce the amount of time required by women and girls to meet household care needs can strengthen economic growth, including through job creation and increasing educational attainment (thus strengthening future economic growth potential). A study comparing trends across numerous countries has shown that a reduction of women's unpaid care work by two hours per day is related to a 10% increase in the rate of women's labour force participation;<sup>6</sup> and several studies confirm that fully closing the gender gap in formal labour force participation could boost GDP by anywhere from 5% to 20% for most countries.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, recent research in seven countries showed that investing 2% of GDP in strengthening care services could generate between 2% and 6% growth in overall employment: double the number of jobs that would be created by investing a similar amount in the construction industry.<sup>8</sup> It is widely recognized that addressing girls' unpaid care responsibilities is central to increasing girls' participation and attainment in secondary education.<sup>9</sup> Governments can work towards achieving these gains by addressing Oxfam's four calls to action below.

# ASK 1: INCLUDE UNPAID CARE COMMITMENTS IN POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES AND COLLECT DATA ON UNPAID CARE

## What are we asking?

We urge governments to incorporate into relevant government policies concrete commitments to support all households, including poor households, in meeting their unpaid care responsibilities, strategies and assistance programmes. Relevant policies and strategies include those relating to national economic growth, poverty reduction, education and agricultural development; and relevant assistance programmes include social protection schemes. We also urge governments to collect policy-relevant data on unpaid care work and to use this data to inform policy making and budgeting decisions.

## What are the benefits?

Embedding recognition and commitments on unpaid care into formal government policies, plans and programmes is essential to ensure *sustained* investment in – and hence sustained *returns* from – care-supporting interventions. It can also support more effective implementation of assistance programmes. Collecting and using policy-relevant *data* on unpaid care can lead to better informed policies and more effective policy implementation. For example, a recent 32-country analysis estimated that the annual value of women’s unpaid contributions to the health sector alone was on average approximately 3% of GDP in low-income countries – effectively a hidden subsidy to the government health budget.<sup>10</sup> Health sector policies that take steps to protect and support, rather than undermine, these unpaid care contributions are therefore more likely to avoid healthcare crises and unexpected public healthcare costs further down the line.

**What can be done? How governments are incorporating unpaid care in policies, programmes and data collection**

- **Kenya’s** Constitution (2010) explicitly provides that it is the shared responsibility of both parents to care for their children, stating that every child has the right to *‘parental care and protection, which includes equal responsibility of the mother and father to provide for the child, whether they are married to each other or not’* [Art. 53(1)(e)].<sup>11</sup>
- In **Ethiopia**, the government’s public works programme pays male and female workers equal daily wages but allows women to work 50% less hours than men work in recognition of women’s greater unpaid care responsibilities. Some eight million people have benefited from the programme.<sup>12</sup>
- The **Uganda** Bureau of Statistics has incorporated questions on unpaid care into relevant national surveys including the Demographic Health Survey and National Health Survey, following engagement with Oxfam and local women’s rights organization UWONET.<sup>13</sup>

# ASK 2: INCREASE ACCESS TO CARE-SUPPORTING INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES

## What are we asking?

We urge governments to make relevant, concrete and time-bound commitments to increase the number of households, in particular poor households, that have access to affordable and reliable basic infrastructure and care services which reduce the amount of unpaid care work that households need to do themselves. Important infrastructure includes domestic water and electricity supply, community-based health services, and relevant care services including childcare centres and support services for those with long-term illnesses. Specifically, government commitments should include sustained, guaranteed investment in the types of care-supporting infrastructure and services prioritized by primary carers (typically women and girls), and ensuring that both existing and planned infrastructure and services are designed and managed in such a way that unpaid carers have easy access and confidence in these services.

## What are the benefits?

As well as delivering multiple benefits to individual households, investments in such infrastructure and services can also contribute to meeting national policy priorities. Investing in childcare services has strong potential to increase economic growth through boosting labour force participation rates: the percentage of women in waged employment in countries where the government provides childcare support (either through direct provision or subsidies) is more than double the percentage in countries without such support (30% as opposed to 12%).<sup>14</sup> Investing in basic infrastructure can also contribute to reducing aid dependency: substantive investment in infrastructure such as roads and education played an important part in the success of countries which have managed to end their aid dependency.<sup>15</sup>

**What can be done? How governments are investing in care-supporting infrastructure and services, including for poor families**

- In **Mexico**, the Federal Day Care Programme for Working Mothers, launched in 2007, gives grants to individuals and civil society organizations to provide subsidized, full-day childcare to children aged 1–4 years from lower income households. While the scheme has received some criticism for the quality of services provided, after 2 years of operation it had become the most important childcare provider for 1–4 year olds, and several surveys showed high levels of satisfaction from scheme beneficiaries including improved ability to find better jobs.<sup>16</sup>
- In **Turkey**, under a long-standing scheme, the government pays a ‘home care allowance’ equivalent to the net minimum wage to those caring for disabled family members at home. In 2015, the allowance was paid to more than 500,000 people.<sup>17</sup>
- In **Uganda**, since 2003 a new Water Liaison Division has been created and the Ministry responsible for water has put special effort into recruiting staff with gender mainstreaming competencies for it. This has led to an increase in women’s representation in management teams, and a higher propensity to undertake gender impact assessment studies to monitor differential effects on women and men of water supply projects.<sup>18</sup>

## ASK 3: ENCOURAGE MEN AND BOYS TO SHARE CARE WORK

### What are we asking?

We urge governments to use public sector communications channels and education systems to encourage men and boys to take on a more equal share of unpaid care work within their households. For example, this could include incorporating messages promoting gender-equal care responsibilities into primary and secondary school curricula, adult literacy classes and public health campaigns.

### What are the benefits?

Evidence shows that men taking a more active role in unpaid care work, in particular childcare, can contribute to key government health and education targets. For example, in Niger, following the introduction of *École des Maris* ('School for Husbands'), a UNFPA-supported programme to engage men as partners in maternal health, the percentage of women in the Zinder region whose births are attended by a medical person increased from 8% to 43%.<sup>19</sup> A study from China shows that children whose fathers provide positive emotional support perform better academically; and several studies demonstrate a strong correlation between fathers spending time talking to their children and young children's development of language skills.<sup>20</sup>

#### What can be done? How governments are encouraging men and boys to share care work

- In **India**, the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) programme promotes gender equality, including through challenging social norms, with school children aged 12–14. Children who participated in the programme showed increased support for gender-equal practices including greater male involvement in household work.<sup>21</sup> The first phase of the programme, implemented in Mumbai public schools between 2008 and 2010, reached more than 8,000 girls and boys.<sup>22</sup>
- In the **Philippines**, the national government's 4Ps programme, which provides cash assistance to poor families, includes a Family Development Session (FDS) that discusses relationships between husbands and wives, women's rights and home management – among other topics. The programme now requires fathers as well as mothers to attend these sessions, and has established a target to achieve a minimum 40% involvement of fathers.<sup>23</sup>
- The government of **Mexico City**, through *La Nueva Cultura Laboral*, promotes the role of fathers in raising and caring for their children, in recognition that women's care responsibilities impede their participation in the workforce and that fathers' involvement in childcare delivers multiple benefits for children's development.<sup>24</sup>

## ASK 4: GIVE WOMEN AN EFFECTIVE VOICE IN POLICY MAKING AND A REAL OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK OUT ABOUT UNPAID CARE

### What are we asking?

To ensure that unpaid care secures a firm place on current and future policy agendas, we urge governments to do three things. First, to step up efforts to ensure that women, including organizations representing the interests of poor women, are able to effectively influence the development of new government policies, budgets and development plans. Second, we urge governments to ensure that women with significant unpaid care responsibilities can access leadership positions at all levels, for example by holding policy meetings at times and locations that are convenient for those with unpaid care responsibilities. Third, we urge governments to create an enabling environment where both women and men leaders feel comfortable to raise unpaid care issues in policy meetings, for example by supporting senior government officials or politicians to propose agenda items on unpaid care at strategic policy meetings.

### What are the benefits?

Increased involvement of women in policy making and planning has been shown to not only increase women's empowerment and rights, but also to increase effectiveness and uptake of broader government policies and services. For example, an analysis of a dataset of 181 peace agreements signed between 1989 and 2011 found that peace processes that included women in key decision making positions showed a 20% increase in the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least two years.<sup>25</sup> In Peru, supporting women to be involved in a citizen monitoring scheme for health services led to improvements in the quality, relevance and uptake of relevant health services.<sup>26</sup> Women's unpaid care responsibilities are also widely recognized as a key constraint to women's participation in leadership positions,<sup>27</sup> so making participation easier for those with unpaid care responsibilities is likely to contribute to increasing women's leadership overall.

### What can be done? How governments are strengthening women's role in policy making

- In **Rwanda**, the 2003 Constitution provides for a minimum 30% quota for women in all decision making organs including the Parliament, political parties, and other government bodies. Through the National Women's Council, support and mobilization of women's political participation takes place at local as well as national levels. These among other measures have contributed to women holding a majority of parliamentary seats (64% in 2013 elections).<sup>28</sup>
- In **India**, the national Planning Commission constituted the Committee of Feminist Economists (CFE) which was officially designated to engage in the preparation of the country's Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007–2012). As a result of CFE's engagement, the Plan was far stronger than the previous one in terms of recognizing gender equality as a mainstream economic concern and setting gender priorities in all relevant sections of the Plan.<sup>29</sup>
- In **Papua, Indonesia**, following engagement with Oxfam and partner organizations, village development planning meetings are now held publicly with women making up nearly 50% of participants. Previously, women were not permitted to participate in the meetings at all.<sup>30</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 The strengthening of women's human rights and the eradication of poverty are at the heart of Oxfam's mission, and therefore first and foremost, Oxfam's work to promote the recognition, reduction, redistribution and representation of unpaid care work is directed at achieving these core aims. However, Oxfam firmly believes that adequately recognizing and investing in unpaid care also contributes to achieving wider economic, social and commercial goals.
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