



WHO CARES?

The gendered distribution of unpaid care work in Jordan

Pervasive global norms position men as breadwinners and women as caregivers; in every country in the world, women do more unpaid care work than men. This paper explores the gendered distribution of unpaid care work in Jordan, where female labour market participation is among the lowest in the world. It presents the key findings of a Rapid Care Analysis, exploring perspectives on the gendered distributions of unpaid care work in the kingdom. Finally, recommendations are offered to facilitate more choice for women in how they use their time and more equitable access to the labour market for women who want paid work.

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This paper was written by Hannah Patchett. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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Cover photo: People shop at a street market in a Palestinian refugee camp in Amman on 19 July 2021. Credit: Pablo Tosca/Oxfam.

INTRODUCTION

Despite sweeping political and economic changes and generational shifts in the roles of women and men in the past century, a remarkable fact remains: in every country of the world, women do more unpaid care work than men.¹ The positioning of men as providers and women as caregivers is a pervasive global norm that perpetuates inequality across cultures, contexts and classes.

Unpaid care work is defined as the services provided within a household for its own members or the community, without remuneration. It includes cooking, cleaning, childcare and care for elderly or sick people.² Neither societies nor economies could function without this work, yet it is often invisible in policy agendas and absent from macro-economic measurements such as GDP.

When unpaid care work falls disproportionately on women and girls, it leaves them with less time for education or paid work, or civic and political participation. Historically, it has meant that women's entry to the labour market has often been in part-time, low-paid and precarious roles or home-based work, contributing to wage inequality.³ While unpaid care work limits women's paid economic activity, it enables men to accumulate assets and economic security, thus exacerbating gender and economic inequality and the feminization of poverty.

Oxfam has developed an assessment tool, Rapid Care Analysis (RCA), to assess unpaid care work and care for people in communities.⁴ In 2021, Oxfam commissioned an RCA to look at the patterns and distributions of unpaid care work in Jordan. Female labour force participation in Jordan is among the lowest in the world, at 14%, and almost a third of women who enter the labour market do not find jobs.⁵ This is despite high educational attainments among women: Jordan has a 98% literacy rate among adult women,⁶ and 53% of university graduates in Jordan are female.⁷ While most young people under the age of 20 are in education, paths diverge after graduation, with most young men joining the labour market and most young women assuming unpaid household responsibilities.⁸ Two-thirds of households in Jordan rely solely on male breadwinners, while both women and men are employed in 13% of households and just 3% of households depend on female breadwinners.⁹

This paper presents the RCA's key findings and looks at the perspectives of women and men in Jordan on the role of unpaid care work in their lives. It then offers recommendations to facilitate greater choice for women about how they spend their time, and to enable more equitable access to the labour market for women who seek paid work.

METHODOLOGY

This RCA relied on focus group discussions across Jordan and a national phone survey to explore the household distribution of unpaid care work. Focus group discussions were conducted in October 2021 in Balqa, Karak, Madaba, Tafileh and Irbid, covering north, central and southern Jordan. Separate focus groups were held with women and men in each governorate. Jordanians made up 77% of the participants, while 23% were Syrians, 52% were women, and 48% were men. Participants estimated how much time they spend on unpaid care work activities by recalling a typical day. They also discussed social norms, perceptions of gender roles and ways to reduce or redistribute care.

The phone survey was conducted in October 2021 with 387 participants selected using stratified random sampling. Ten governorates were represented in the survey: Ajloun, Amman, Balqa, Irbid, Karak, Ma'an, Madaba, Mafraq, Zarqa and Tafileh. Jordanians made up 72% of the participants, while 28% were Syrians, 53% were women, and 47% were men. Participants were asked how much time they spend on different types of care work and about their views on care work and gender roles in the household.

The RCA is not a rigorous quantitative methodology, but provides qualitative insights on perceptions, meanings and experiences of unpaid care, as well as the social and cultural conditions in which unpaid care is distributed and performed. As a participatory tool, the RCA also generates awareness in communities about unpaid care work.¹⁰

Unpaid care work is caring for people within a household or community, including children and elderly people, as well as domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and laundry, without pay. This terminology recognises that this crucial labour is provided for free, even though it adds huge value to the market economy and society.

KEY FINDINGS

Participants in focus group discussions and the phone survey were asked to recall how much time they spend on unpaid care work on a typical day. This generated very high estimates from men that were inconsistent with the tasks men said they performed, and with men's and women's descriptions of men's household roles. This may be due to the unfamiliarity of the concept of unpaid care work in Jordan, highlighting the need to ensure facilitators and enumerators have adequate technical training and understanding of the topic. Ultimately, the quantitative data collected were not robust enough to estimate average time usage among women and men. However, clear trends emerged regarding the gendered patterns and distribution of unpaid care work, as well as perceptions of gender roles and the impact of household responsibilities on labour market access.

TRENDS

UNPAID CARE WORK FALLS DISPROPORTIONATELY ON WOMEN

The focus group discussions and phone survey found that women spend more time on unpaid care work than men. Married men and women took care of their spouses and children daily, with most married men also caring for their parents on a weekly basis. Unmarried men and women took care of parents and siblings, with unmarried women also caring for nieces, nephews and grandparents. The most common activities reported by women were cooking and cleaning, while childcare was the most time-consuming task among women with children. The most common activities reported by men were grocery shopping and taking care of parents, although if parents were sick, women were responsible for their care.

SYRIAN WOMEN SPEND LONGEST ON UNPAID CARE WORK

Syrian women consistently reported spending the longest time on unpaid care of all participants, which they attributed to Syrian society being more traditional than Jordanian society. They said household dynamics had changed since they arrived in Jordan, and that they spent less time on unpaid care than they had in Syria. In Syria, they lived with extended family, which generated more unpaid care work, demonstrating how conflicts disrupt dominant narratives of gender roles and intra-household gender division of labour.

Syrian women also said they spent more time educating their children in Jordan than they had in Syria, reporting that early marriage was more common in Syria than in Jordan, where girls were more likely to stay in school. Syrian women were less likely to engage in paid work than Jordanian women, reflecting national trends. Notably, Syrians face restrictions on their labour market participation in Jordan and are only permitted to work in limited sectors.

EXPECTATIONS FALL ON DAUGHTERS

When women are unable to perform unpaid care, for example due to illness or absence, it is usually passed to other women or girls in the household, often daughters, confirming that this work is viewed as 'women's work'. In some households, men would only perform household chores until daughters were old enough to take over. 'My husband used to help me in the household when my daughters were young, but he doesn't help any more, and it has been the case for 10 years now because he relies on my daughters', a female participant in Tafileh said.

While in most of Jordan the wife/mother was primarily responsible for unpaid care, an exception was observed in Balqa governorate, in northwest Jordan, where daughters bore primary responsibility for cleaning, childcare

and care of the elderly. Women in Balqa said some girls dropped out of school to take on these responsibilities. 'Most responsibilities fall on girls over 15. The daughters have more responsibilities than the mothers at this age', a female participant said. This was linked to women's participation in agricultural work in Balqa, which requires long shifts and limits the time available for unpaid care work. This finding highlights the need to address unpaid care work alongside efforts to increase female labour force participation: the redistribution of unpaid care work to girls risks entrenching inequalities for the next generation, perpetuating a cycle of poverty.

PERCEPTIONS OF UNPAID CARE WORK

The phone survey found that 83% of women said unpaid care work was enjoyable, and nearly all men and women considered it skilled work. However, in focus group discussions women said unpaid care work was exhausting and emotionally draining. Cleaning was singled out as challenging because it required time management and considerable energy. Women in paid work found domestic responsibilities especially challenging and said they did not receive enough support at home.

Women said they lacked an outlet or group to provide emotional support, and that family members did not value their work and took it for granted: 'From the perspective of my family, this is my duty. They don't need to say thank you because this is society's expectation. Expectations say cooking is her duty, cleaning is her duty', a young woman in Balqa governorate said.

PERSPECTIVES ON GENDERED DIVISION OF LABOUR

The phone survey revealed the stark gendered division of unpaid care tasks: 83% of men said they did no cleaning and 82% did not cook. Among women, just 8% said they did no cleaning and 9% did not cook. Some women said their husbands sometimes helped with cooking and cleaning, but this was irregular, for example cooking a favourite meal once a month.

Women said that while childcare was difficult and time-consuming, they felt it was their duty and a societal expectation. Some women said they were brought up to take care of children. Men's role as fathers was perceived by women and men as providing discipline. Broadly, men's role in the household was seen as providing material support and protection. Men said their physical strength meant they were suited to physical labour rather than domestic work, suggesting a lack of recognition that domestic labour is often physically demanding.

Men and women attributed the gendered division of labour to traditional social norms and expectations, while some men also said it was determined by religious scriptures. Some men and women said innate feminine and masculine traits influenced household roles. A female participant from

Karak said women were better at multitasking: 'God created women so that she can have the patience to do multiple things. Men, on the other hand, do not have the ability to do anything'. A male participant said: 'Women are more in tune with others' needs. She can pick up on small signs that something is wrong and has a sixth sense'.

Socialization and upbringing were highlighted. A female focus group participant said: 'I have three brothers. They ask me to bring them water and food, and if I were to say no my father would intervene and tell me to do it'. Another woman noted that sons could be raised to perform unpaid care: 'I raised both of my children, my son and daughter, to help with household chores, so I receive support from both, although more help from my daughter'.

Neither men nor women expressed a desire to change the division of labour. Men generally said that women should adhere to socially assigned roles. One man said: 'Women in politics often talk about our patriarchal society ... I am not against women, but I am against women not sticking to their roles'. Women did not indicate that they wanted male household members to participate more in care work, although some said they would like more emotional support from their husbands. 'Most of the time [the husband] gives emotional support if he is expecting something in return. In our community it's a small percentage of men who give emotional support. We are exhausted', a female participant in Tafileh said. Most women said providing emotional support and disciplining children were the most important qualities in a husband, rather than participating in household responsibilities such as cleaning or cooking.

UNPAID CARE WORK AND THE LABOUR MARKET

Previous studies have found that, while 86% of women in Jordan are considered economically inactive, 60% of these women want paid work.¹¹ In focus group discussions, women identified care work as among the barriers they face in accessing paid work, alongside conservative social norms, long working hours and low pay. Childcare was identified as a particular hindrance to paid work. Among employed women, household responsibilities made it difficult to keep their jobs, as a female participant in Madaba explained: 'Some women who want to work end up leaving their job because someone in the household gets sick, and they are the ones expected to provide care'.

This reflects the findings of other research: in a 2021 survey in Jordan by the International Labour Organization, 44% of women identified family responsibilities such as housework and childcare as the reason they were out of the labour force, compared with 11% of men.¹² A 2018 ILO survey found a starker gap: 77.4% of women outside the workforce cited unpaid care work as the reason they were not working, compared with 3.7% of men.¹³

Discussing how the gender division of roles might change if a woman had paid employment, men and women felt that women would still be responsible for cleaning, but that men might support with meals, although this would likely be limited to serving rather than preparing food. The phone survey revealed a clear shift in time use on unpaid care work when women are in paid work, with employed women allocating less time to unpaid care. A similar shift was seen among men, with employed men participating less in unpaid care, although the difference was smaller.

In focus group discussions, men said deteriorating economic conditions meant they had to spend longer hours at work and had less time to contribute to household work. However, this research also found that even when men were unemployed, women still did most of the care work and the gendered division of labour did not significantly change. One woman explained: 'I have a husband who does nothing around the household even though he is retired'.

Worsening economic conditions may be increasing men's openness to women's employment. Women said their communities were increasingly receptive to women working, a change they attributed to shifting attitudes as well as growing financial pressure on households in a struggling economy. Syrian men in Tafleeh called for more employment opportunities for women, to help with rising household costs, but said this should focus on home-based work due to government regulations that restrict the sectors Syrians can work in.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are offered to national and international actors and stakeholders to facilitate more choice for women in how they use their time and to enable more equitable access to the labour market for women who want paid work.

CONDUCT A NATIONAL SURVEY USING TIME DIARY METHODOLOGY

Gender-responsive planning and policy making in Jordan is hindered by a lack of available data, including quantitative time-use data on unpaid care work, as observed in Jordan's National Strategy for Women.¹⁴ The Department of Statistics should conduct a national survey using time-use diaries to quantify the time spent by women, men, boys and girls on unpaid care work. Time-use diaries produce the most robust quantitative data;¹⁵ recording activities in real time can capture multitasking and minimize over- and under-reporting of time spent on unpaid care.¹⁶ The survey could present differences in time use across different income levels, within different household structures and urban and rural areas, and among

people with disabilities. Such data could help shape gender-responsive policy making around labour and care and facilitate nuanced and targeted interventions. Tracking time use over time could capture the impact of interventions or policy changes, as well as the influence of external factors such as economic or labour market changes on unpaid care work.

The Department of Statistics may require financial support to undertake this survey. Technical support should also be provided, as the framing of household responsibilities as unpaid care work is a relatively new concept in Jordan.

REDISTRIBUTE UNPAID CARE WORK THROUGH THE PROVISION OF PUBLIC NURSERIES

This research found that for women with children, childcare was the most time-consuming care activity. Reflecting on infrastructure that would lessen the time used on unpaid care work, women and men expressed a need for quality, affordable childcare facilities. Women said the lack of affordable childcare options kept them out of the labour force: in Jordan, mothers of children under 5 years old have the lowest employment rate.¹⁷

The average cost of childcare in Jordan is 88% of the median wage for women, and more than 100% of the median wage of women with a secondary degree or less.¹⁸ Jordan's labour law stipulates that employers should provide childcare facilities if their employees collectively have more than 15 children under the age of 5. This is not enforced and is rarely implemented. Further, it puts the responsibility for childcare provision on employers rather than the state and does not benefit women who are not employed, or those working in small enterprises.

Jordan has made recent progress in expanding early childhood care and education (ECCE). This should be built on with the provision of public childcare services for children under 5. Public investment in universal ECCE can be offset by returns from higher employment levels.¹⁹ Public nurseries could absorb some of women's unpaid care work, freeing mothers to access paid work. In addition, the care sector is the main employer of women in Jordan, so expanding ECCE could create new jobs for women. Professionalization of ECCE and enforcement of decent work standards could help ensure such paid care work is valued.

Quality ECCE improves the social and health outcomes of young children; state-funded ECCE could therefore help reduce socio-economic inequalities. The most advantaged children in Jordan are nine times more likely to attend ECCE than the least advantaged, creating divergence in opportunities from infancy.²⁰

INCREASE RECOGNITION OF UNPAID CARE THROUGH MEDIA ADVOCACY

Jordan's National Strategy for Women recommends the use of national advocacy campaigns to address negative social norms, roles and stereotypes of women and men related to unpaid care work.²¹ Media and social media campaigns could raise awareness and recognition of unpaid care work and help shift perceptions of women's and men's roles.

Global advocacy often describes unpaid care work as a burden, but this research found that domestic work is considered enjoyable, valuable and skilled by women and men in Jordan. Likewise, previous research has found that more than 80% of women and men in Jordan agree that being a housewife is just as fulfilling as paid employment.²² Advocacy must ensure that the framing of care work resonates with the Jordanian public, and campaigns should avoid using negative terms to describe such work.

Social media campaigns could generate online conversations on unpaid care work among women and men in Jordan. Previous research has found a discrepancy between perceptions and realities of social attitudes towards women's work, with men and women overestimating conservatism in their communities.²³ Generating public conversations on unpaid care work may help correct misconceptions about public opinions on issues such as women working.

Greater recognition of unpaid care work is a necessary precursor to efforts to redistribute this work. Meanwhile, further research to identify who enforces gender norms at the household level, especially among children, would allow effective targeting of advocacy to redistribute unpaid care.

EXPAND WOMEN'S ACCESS TO ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH SUPPORT TO HOME-BASED BUSINESSES

The barriers to women's labour market access are well documented²⁴ and demand a range of interventions beyond the scope of this paper. However, a strong demand among women for support to establish home-based businesses emerged from this research.

Women engaged in agriculture in Balqa requested financial support and training to help them start home-based businesses, which they said would be preferable to working long shifts on farms. Home-based businesses were viewed by women and men as mitigating several barriers to accessing paid work, such the lack of public transport and social norms which restrict women from returning home late. Home-based businesses can offer flexibility to accommodate unpaid care, although they do not circumvent the need for childcare, especially for mothers of young children.

There have been multiple initiatives and programmes to support women-led home-based businesses in recent years, led by government, INGOs, local civil society and international agencies. Further research is needed to assess the long-term impact of these initiatives on economic productivity and business sustainability; such research should inform the design of future interventions.

Feasibility studies should be undertaken to ensure home-based businesses have sufficient markets and growth potential. Most women-led home-based businesses in Jordan are engaged in food production, sometimes for produce with limited demand and oversaturated markets. Home-based nurseries should be explored as a sector with potential to grow that could both create jobs and help address the childcare needs discussed above.

For organizations providing finance to women entrepreneurs, grants are preferable to microfinance. Debt has been identified as a critical barrier to women's economic empowerment in Jordan; microfinance loans have exacerbated high levels of debt in the kingdom, while defaulting debtors face imprisonment.²⁵

INCREASE WOMEN'S MOBILITY BY EXPANDING PUBLIC TRANSPORT PROVISION

Improving public transport provision is essential to facilitate women's access to economic opportunities beyond the home, especially for women in remote areas. Public transport in Jordan is inefficient, unreliable, unsafe and suffers from poor coverage; 47% of women in Jordan have turned down job opportunities because of the lack of public transport options while 62% have suffered harassment on public transport.²⁶

The government of Jordan is engaged in multiple projects and initiatives to expand public transport provision, with the support of international donors; it is critical that this expansion is gender responsive at all stages. In a positive step, the Ministry of Transport introduced a Code of Conduct in 2019 to improve the experience of public transport users, especially women and girls.

For women engaged in paid work and unpaid care work, long commute times are a significant additional constraint on their time. Meanwhile, the gendered distribution of unpaid care work creates different mobility needs among women and men; further research is needed to map how unpaid care work affects patterns of transport use among women and men in Jordan. Such research should inform public transport planning.

NOTES

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