

Task Force 01

**FIGHTING INEQUALITIES, POVERTY, AND HUNGER**

# Rethinking the Care Economy and Promoting Gender Equality for All Ages by Reducing and Redistributing Unpaid Care and Domestic Work

**Adriana Conconi**, SDG Specialist, UNDP Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, USA, and Director of Data and Social Impact, VR Benefícios, Brazil

**Francisco Cos-Montiel**, Senior Research Coordinator, UNRISD, Switzerland

**Anna Eknor Ackzell**, Research Analyst, UNRISD, Switzerland

**Ricardo Nogales**, Full Professor of Economics and Dean of Research in Economics, Universidad Privada Boliviana, Bolivia, and Research Associate, OPHI, University of Oxford, UK

**Ramya Subrahmanian**, Chief of Research on Gender, Rights and Protection, UNICEF, Italy

**Mónica Pinilla-Roncancio**, Assistant Professor, School of Medicine, and Deputy Director, CODS, Universidad de los Andes, Colombia

**Martina Querejeta**, Research Assistant, Universidad de la República, Uruguay

**Mariana Viollaz**, Senior Researcher, CEDLAS, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina, and Research Fellow, IZA, Germany



---

**TF01**

## Abstract

Unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW), involving providing direct and indirect care to family members without remuneration, is crucial for human and productive functioning. Care work is intrinsically gendered: globally, women perform 76.2% of unpaid care work, 3.2 times more than men, affecting their education, employment, wages, and leadership opportunities. Care work is also generational: globally, girls aged 5-14 spend 550 million hours daily on household chores, 41% more than boys. Around the world, gender inequalities in care work start early, widening inequalities between girls and boys in schooling, age at marriage, and less well-explored impacts on self-esteem, empowerment, and confidence.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of care work and the need for reforms to alleviate women's care responsibilities. Providing appropriate care services, including policies aimed at equality in the workplace, investment in quality public social infrastructure, and valuing unpaid work, are instrumental for reducing care burden. However, these efforts may not sufficiently address the unequal distribution of unpaid care within households by gender. Redistributive policies addressing these imbalances are vital, beginning with interventions in early adolescence.

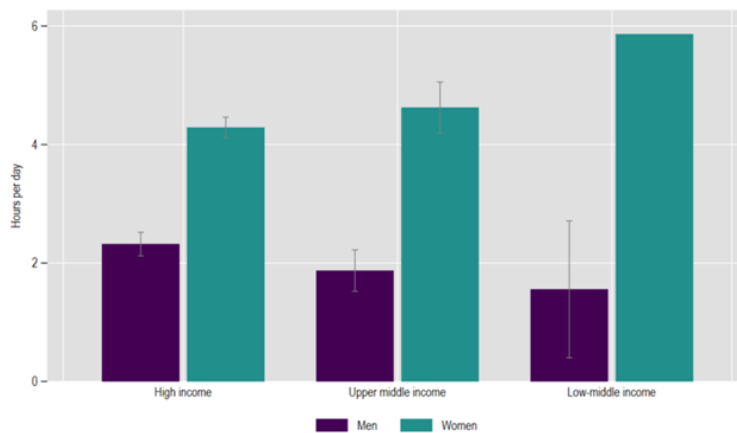
G20 countries need to address fundamental gender inequalities that are constraining their full economic and social potential by considering the importance of both investing in care services and the workforce, as well as addressing unequal gender norms and unequal distribution of UCDW from early adolescence.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, generational perspective, unpaid care work, care economy, social protection

## Diagnosis of the issue

**Global Gender Disparities in UCDW.** Globally, women and girls perform more than 70% of unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW), and the gender gap in the care responsibilities is particularly high in low- and middle-income countries (Figure 1). The female-to-male ratio of UCDW is 2.7 hours a day worldwide, highlighting the persistent gender disparities in caregiving responsibilities around the globe (Hanna et al., 2023). There are also regional variations. The difference in time devoted to UCDW between men and women is around 2.5 hours per day in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and 1.7 hours per day in Europe and North America. The highest gap is found in Central and Southern Asia, Northern Africa and Western Asia (3.7 and 4 hours per day, respectively).

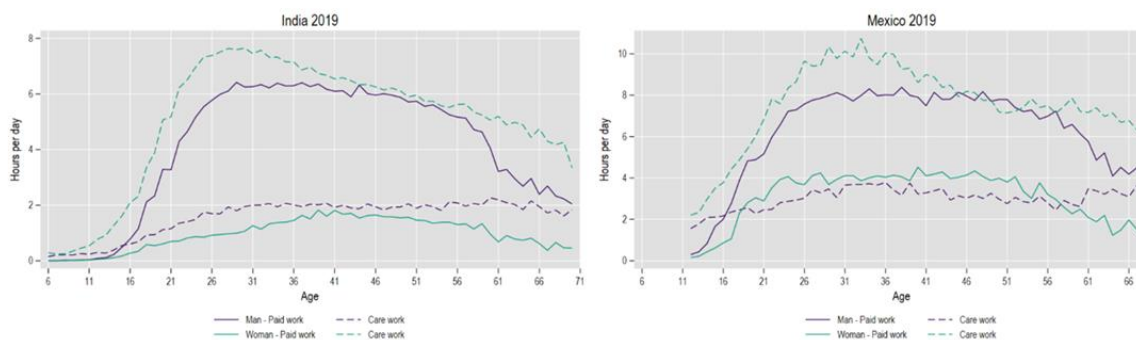
**Figure 1: Hours devoted for unpaid work per day, by sex and economic region**  
(individuals aged 15-64 years)



Source: Author's elaboration based on OECD Time Use Database and Gender Data.  
Note: Income region as per World Bank definition.

**Generational Division of UCDW.** Children actively engage in UCDW, being not only care-recipients but also caregivers. While data on time use over the lifecycle are not easily available (Figure A.1), recent time-use survey data from India and Mexico provide initial findings on gendered and generational patterns (Figure 2). Girls and women devote more time to UCDW than boys and men, which holds throughout their lives. Women’s UCDW follows the same pattern as men’s paid work. However, while critical for the functioning of the economy, UCDW is neither recognized nor remunerated, with significant consequences for girls and women.

**Figure 2: Time devoted to paid work vs unpaid care and domestic work per day over the lifecycle**



Source: Author’s elaboration based on the Indian and Mexican Time Use Surveys, 2019.

The age and gender distribution of care responsibilities varies depending on individual, household, and societal factors. In particular, the presence of a younger child in the household leads to an increase in UCDW for both boys and girls, though girls experience higher increases (Figure A.2). However, socio-economic and demographic differences only account for a small part of the gender divide in UCDW. Household characteristics

also play a role: girls residing in households where females are the primary breadwinners exhibit higher participation rates in UCDW (Figure A.3), suggesting the time spent by mothers and girls on unpaid caregiving duties substitutes for each other.

**Consequences for Education and Economic Participation.** The unequal distribution of care responsibilities by gender affects several dimensions of life, including learning, leisure, paid work, and social and political participation. These consequences vary along the lifecycle: engaging in UCDW results in less time for leisure and learning during childhood, and for paid work during early adulthood (Figure A.2).

Engaging in two or more hours of domestic work at age 12 emerged as the most detrimental factor for girl's education in longitudinal research in India (Singh & Mukherjee, 2017). Time devoted to unpaid household work at early stages impacts employment during young adulthood by lowering job quality and earnings (Carmichael et al., 2023).

Providing informal care results in reduced employment rates, lower hours worked, and foregone income (Bolin et al., 2008), particularly after childbirth. Entering parenthood increases women's workload and reduces employment and earnings. The motherhood penalty is higher in developing countries. A study of 21 low-income countries finds that mothers' wages are 42% lower than childless women's. In these countries, the child's gender also matters, and having a daughter reduces the motherhood gap as they assist their mother in care work (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2015).

**Mental Health and Well-being Impacts.** Given the emotional nature of care, caregivers face increased physical and emotional strains and are more likely to feel alone, depressed and stressed (Hajek & König, 2016).

Available evidence rarely considers young caregivers. Social norms signal to children gender-appropriate behavior, and the costs of not conforming can be high in terms of exposure to stress and even violence. As early as age 10, girls feel that their individual needs and choices are secondary to their family duties (Chauhan et al., 2021), affecting self-esteem and sense of self-worth. The impacts of UCDW on children's and adolescents' mental well-being are under-recognized.

## Recommendations

The G20 has a significant role in signaling the importance of valuing and recognizing UCDW as a core contributor to human development, as considered in SDG 5 (Appendix B). The realm of UCDW and its wide-spanning social and economic effects require a holistic effort, combining investments in infrastructure, social protection policies and cultural change. The following recommendations point toward rethinking the care economy from a gender and generational perspective.

**1. Invest in Comprehensive Care Infrastructure:** Alleviate the responsibilities of UCDW primarily shouldered by girls and women by expanding access to affordable and high-quality childcare facilities, eldercare services, and infrastructure for persons with disabilities. Additionally, enhancing electrification, implementing time-saving technologies, and improving Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities are critical. These investments collectively support women's labor force participation and stimulate economic growth, and promote social development (De Henau et al., 2016).

**2. Develop Gender-Responsive Social Protection Systems:** Develop robust social protection systems to promote gender equality and support families. This includes designing gender-responsive family leave policies, such as extended and well-paid maternity and paternity leaves, to encourage equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities between parents. Additionally, while promoting the formalization of the workforce, it is crucial to implement policies to support workers still in the informal sector, who often lack access to contributory social protection mechanisms. These policies include flexible

and inclusive parental benefits, health insurance, cash transfers, and social safety nets tailored to the needs of informal workers.

**3. Promote Flexible Work Arrangements:** Facilitate work-life balance and a more equitable distribution of unpaid care work between women and men by promoting telecommuting, flexible scheduling, and job-sharing arrangements. This has been successfully piloted in Italy (Angelini & Profeta, 2020). Flexible work arrangements enhance workforce diversity and inclusion, improve productivity and employee satisfaction, and should be available to all employees. Providing access to care services for children, elders, and persons with disabilities is essential to avoid increasing the care burden for those choosing work flexibility.

**4. Engage Men and Boys in Care Work:** Engage men and boys in UCDW by implementing programs addressing gender socialization through schools and parenting initiatives, executing training programs for teachers and health care workers, and engaging with authority figures such as parents, family elders and public figures. Several examples of positive masculinity programs and school-based programs have shown promising results (Achyut et al., 2017; Izugbara et al., 2022). Early adolescence (10-14 years) is associated with the intensification of gender attitudes, though exposure to gender norms starts even earlier (Lane et al., 2017). Initiatives that encourage males to participate more in UCDW may need to use tools that are framed in a way that reinforces prevailing ideas of masculinity to reduce the stigma attached to men who demonstrate caring attitudes and behaviors (Rost, 2021). In tandem with the above, policies and initiatives should be implemented encouraging males to pursue careers in caregiving professions.



This has been successfully done in Belgium, Finland, and Norway. These efforts will contribute to reducing the gender pay gap and challenging stereotypes about caregiving roles, while also leading to more inclusive and responsive care services that better meet the needs of those receiving care.

**5. Establish Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms:** Collect gender and age-disaggregated data on care work through regular national Time Use Surveys (TUS), including data for children aged ten or less, of which there is a current deficit. This involves collecting and analyzing gender-disaggregated data, conducting impact assessments of policies and interventions, and disseminating best practices and lessons learned. By monitoring progress and holding member states accountable for their commitments, the G20 can ensure that efforts to promote gender equality and reshape the care economy are effectively implemented and sustained over time. Additionally, the G20 should facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration among member states to identify innovative approaches and strategies for advancing gender equality and building more inclusive and resilient societies.

**6. Integrate Gender Considerations in Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction:** Develop gender-sensitive policies and investments in resilience-building measures, enhancing the resilience of communities. Climate change disproportionately affects women and girls, who often bear the brunt of its impacts due to their roles as caregivers and providers of food and water. Promoting social inclusion and addressing the specific needs of women and girls in climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction is essential.

While the recommendations outlined provide a comprehensive approach to promoting gender equality and rethinking the care economy, it is important to acknowledge the associated challenges. First, governments must ensure that these investments are both economically sustainable and equitable. This involves developing innovative fiscal tools and exploring diverse financing models, such as public-private partnerships, targeted taxes, and reallocation of existing resources. Additionally, policies must be adaptable to the changing nature of labor markets, where informal work remains prevalent, especially in less developed countries. This necessitates designing flexible and inclusive social protection mechanisms that can effectively support informal workers and gradually integrate them into the formal economy.

Another critical aspect is ensuring the quality, affordability, and convenient location of care services. Investments in care infrastructure must be accompanied by stringent quality standards and monitoring mechanisms to guarantee that services meet the needs of all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. Affordability is equally crucial, as high costs can exacerbate inequalities and curtail access for lower-income families. Implementing subsidies, sliding scale fees, and other financial support measures can help mitigate these barriers.

## Scenario of Outcomes

Adopting the recommendations in this policy brief offers decision-makers within the G20 the opportunity to shape a transformative future for gender equality and the care economy. However, there are also other potential outcomes that can result from implementing these recommendations.

One scenario is that gender-responsive paternity and maternity leave policies lead to greater gender equality in caregiving responsibilities and improved work-life balance for parents. Families may experience reduced financial strain and increased bonding time with children, while flexible work arrangements could enhance workforce diversity and a balanced distribution of care responsibilities.

However, implementing these recommendations may encounter resistance due to entrenched gender norms and cultural expectations. Societal pressure and stereotypes may discourage men from taking advantage of extended and well-paid leaves. Economic incentives also play a role, as low wage compensation during leave periods may deter fathers from using them. Additionally, socio-economic disparities and high informal labor market participation may limit access to parental leave benefits, exacerbating inequalities.

The promotion of flexible work arrangements faces its own challenges. While they can improve work-life balance for caregivers, they might increase stress levels if associated with longer working hours. Additionally, if not suitably implemented, they can increase the disproportionate distribution of care on women using these work arrangements, highlighting the importance of combining work flexibility with care support policies.

Employers might have concerns about productivity disruptions or managing remote teams, while employees unable to take advantage of flexible work arrangements due to job nature or workplace policies may be disadvantaged. Additionally, work flexibility can create penalties in terms of wage and career advancement, increasing gender inequalities in labor markets when women are the ones using these work arrangements. Access to flexible work arrangements for people in countries with high levels of informality and precarious employment might be limited to formal sector workers. They may not be accompanied by productivity-preserving strategies such as upskilling or reskilling training. This leaves workers in informal and low-wage sectors without viable options. Moreover, cultural norms around presenteeism and workplace expectations may hinder the uptake of flexible work arrangements.

Engaging men in the care sector could lead to more inclusive and responsive care services, but the transition may face resistance. Some may question the motivations of men entering caregiving professions traditionally dominated by women, raising concerns about their commitment or suitability for these roles. Others may fear that increased male representation could lead to the marginalization or displacement of female caregivers, further exacerbating gender inequalities within the sector. Overcoming barriers and encouraging men to enter caregiving professions requires addressing stigma, providing support and training, promoting positive role models and cultural change.

In turn, establishing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms is crucial but may face implementation challenges. Collecting gender-disaggregated data and conducting impact assessments require investment in data systems, capacity-building, and

coordination. Limited resources, data gaps, and governance challenges could hinder progress. Sustained commitment and collaboration among G20 member states are necessary to address these challenges.

Navigating these trade-offs requires a nuanced and context-specific approach, considering the diverse needs and experiences of individuals and communities. Additionally, many countries face limited fiscal capacity to implement the proposed policies. Securing sustainable financing is crucial to support a care system that addresses gender inequalities. The challenge lies in coordinating existing policies with new ones to ensure financial sustainability. Diversifying funding sources is essential to find an appropriate combination of mandatory contributions, general revenues, specific taxes, and direct payments from families. In lower income countries in particular, high levels of informality add the challenge of implementing formalization policies to increase tax revenue. Finally, it is vital that financing models are designed from a gender-sensitive perspective and establish the right to care and the care system as part of the social welfare system.

### **Final Remarks**

Addressing gender inequalities requires multifaceted interventions to dismantle discriminatory practices, challenging entrenched stereotypes, and promote girls and women's participation in all spheres of society.

The recommendations provided in this brief highlight practical steps that can be taken to address these challenges. Investing in care infrastructure, designing gender-responsive

social protection systems including paternity and maternity leave policies, promoting flexible work arrangements, fostering the engagement of boys and men in the care sector, and establishing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms including collecting time use data by gender and age are key strategies to promote gender equality and reshape the care economy.

Implementing these recommendations will require concerted efforts among G20 member states. The G20 can lead the way in promoting gender equality, reducing the unequal distribution of care responsibilities, and fostering more inclusive and resilient societies. These efforts will not only benefit women but also contribute to broader social and economic development.

## References

- Achyut, P. N., U. Bhatla, H. Kumar, S. Verma, G. Bhattacharya, G. Singh, and R. Verma. *Implementation and Evaluation of the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) Program in Specific Sites – Vietnam, India, and Bangladesh*. New Delhi and Washington: International Centre for Research on Women, 2017.
- Angelini, V., and P. Profeta. "Smart-Working: Work Flexibility without Constraints." CESifo Working Paper No. 8165, Munich, 2020.
- Bolin, K., B. Lindgren, and P. Lundborg. "Your Next of Kin or Your Own Career? Caring and Working Among the 50+ of Europe." *Journal of Health Economics* 27, no. 3 (2008): 718-738.
- Carmichael, F., C. Darko, S. Kanji, and N. Vasilakos. "The Contribution of Girls' Longer Hours in Unpaid Work to Gender Gaps in Early Adult Employment: Evidence from Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam." *Feminist Economics* 29, no. 1 (2023): 1-37.
- Chauhan, A., A. Prakash, C. Dewan, M. Vaznaik, and S. Sharma. *Addressing Gender Barriers to Entrepreneurship and Leadership Among Girls and Young Women in Southeast Asia*. UNICEF, 2021.
- De Henau, J., S. Himmelweit, Z. Lapniewska, and D. Perrons. *Investing in the Care Economy: A Gender Analysis of Employment Stimulus in Seven OECD Countries*. 1st ed. ITUC, 2016.
- Grimshaw, D., and J. Rubery. *The Motherhood Pay Gap: A Review of the Issues, Theory, and International Evidence*. Conditions of Work and Employment Series No. 57. Geneva: ILO, 2015.

Hajek, A., and H. H. König. "Informal Caregiving and Subjective Well-Being: Evidence of a Population-Based Longitudinal Study of Older Adults in Germany." *Journal of the American Medical Directors Association* 17, no. 4 (2016): 300-305.

Hanna, T., C. Meisel, J. Moye, G. Azcona, A. Bhatt, and S. Duerto Valero. *Forecasting Time Spent in Unpaid Care and Domestic Work*. Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures, UN Women, 2023.

Izugbara, C., J. Emina, C. Ugwu, I. Busgacalia, F. Rutayisire, C. Atama, and I. Onyishi. *Positive Masculinity Programs, Gender Attitudes, and Practices and Health Behaviors Among Men and Boys in Poor Urban Settlements in Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and Rwanda*. International Centre for Research on Women, 2022.

Lane, C., C. L. Brundage, and T. Kreinin. "Why We Must Invest in Early Adolescence: Early Intervention Lasting Impact." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 61 (2017): S10-S11.

Rost, L. A. "'By Sharing Work We Are Moving Forward': Change in Social Norms Around Men's Participation in Unpaid Care Work in Northern Uganda." *Oxford Development Studies* 49, no. 1 (2021): 39-52.

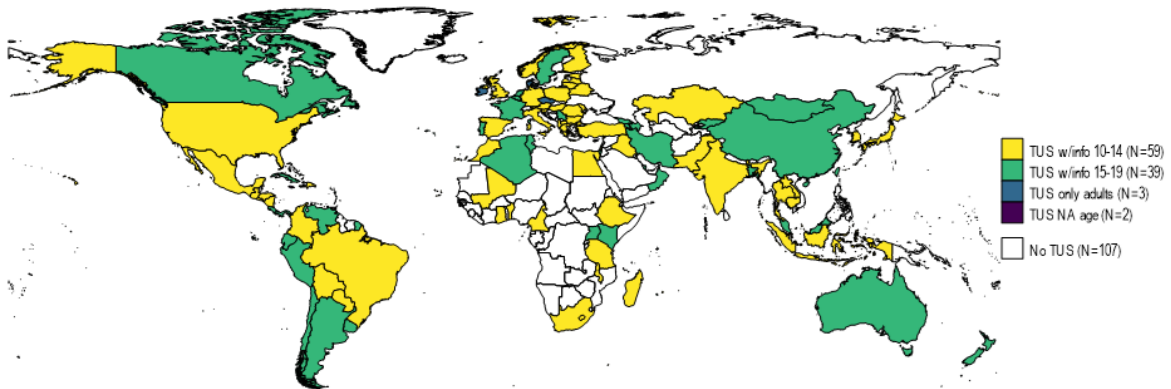
Singh, R., and P. Mukherjee. "'Whatever She May Study She Can't Escape from Washing Dishes': Gender Inequity in Secondary Education – Evidence from a Longitudinal Study in India." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 48, no. 2 (2017): 262-280.



## APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL FIGURES

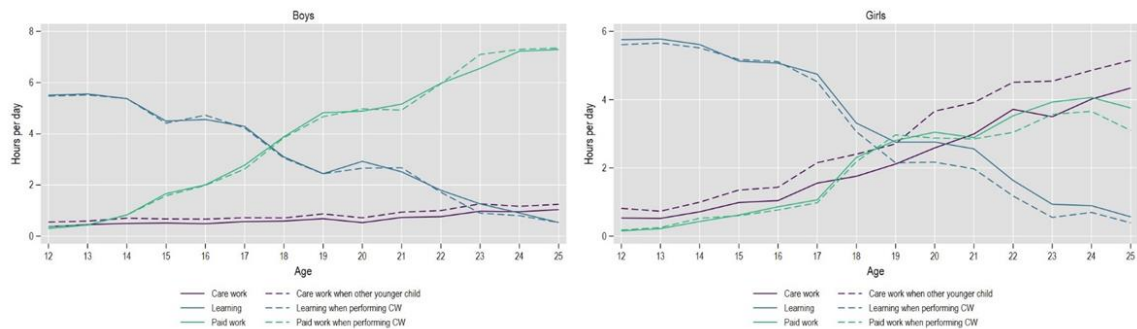
**Figure A.1: Time use surveys completed, by age range**

*Only 18 countries include children under 10 years old*



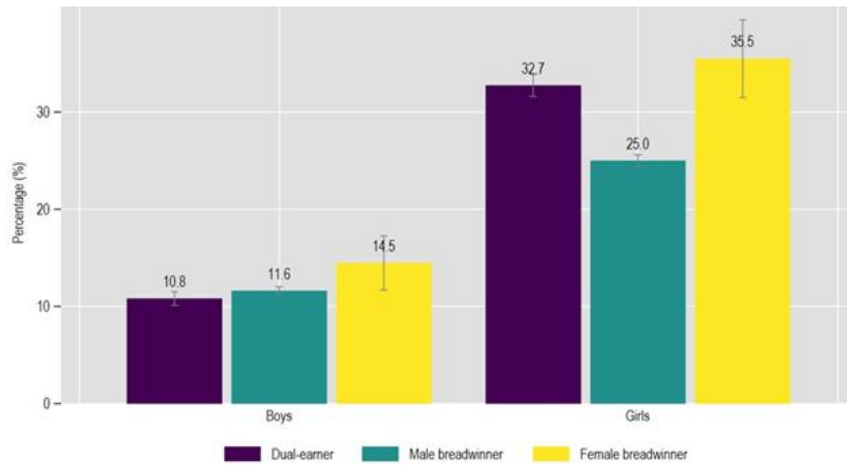
Source: Author's elaboration based on IPUMS-MTUS (2024), Charmes (2019, 2022), ECLAC (2022), and Data2X (2018).

**Figure A.2: Hours per day devoted to diverse activities in Mexico 2019, by household composition and care burden by sex**



Source: Author's elaboration based on the Mexican Time Use Survey, 2019.

**Figure A.3: Participation in UCDW among people aged 6-18 in India 2019, by gender and parent’s working status**



Source: Author’s elaboration based on the Indian Time Use Survey, 2019.

Note: 90% confidence interval represented as vertical lines.

## APPENDIX B: LIST OF EXISTING POLICY AGREEMENTS

Sample of Existing Policy Agreements Relevant to the Care Economy	
<b>Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5</b>	SDG 5 calls for recognition and value of unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW) 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 (target 5.4).
<b>Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)</b>	The four core principles of the CRC are non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child. Every right spelled out in the CRC is inherent to the human dignity and harmonious development of every child. Equitable and quality care is fundamental in ensuring this.
<b>Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)</b>	CEDAW is an international legal instrument that requires countries to eliminate discrimination against women and girls in all areas and promotes women's and girls' equal rights. CEDAW is often described as the international bill of rights for women. Because unpaid care is disproportionately provided by women, reducing and redistributing unpaid care is at the heart of achieving equal rights and opportunities for women and girls.

## APPENDIX C: KEY CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

Key concepts and definitions used in this brief	
<b>Care</b>	An overarching concept that involves both physical care such as bathing and feeding children, and emotional care such as playing with and comforting children. Caregiving includes caring for children or the elderly while domestic work includes cooking, cleaning, and shopping for the household. It can be unpaid, for instance in one's own household or community, or paid, for instance in private homes or childcare centers.
<b>Intersectionality</b>	Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) first coined the concept of intersectionality, in response to the issue of Black women in the US falling between the cracks of the feminist as well as antiracist discourse due to being both women and black, and as a result held an impossible subjectivity marked by ethnicity as well as gender. In order to understand their experiences, Crenshaw therefore called for an intersectional perspective fit to consider multiple structures of oppression simultaneously. In this vein, this brief follows the understanding of the concept as the interaction between gender, age, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power. In focus for intersectionality is thus the contextual interplay between different positionalities such as age and gender and its outcome in terms of power and the lack of the same. Different structures of power in this way connect in a multitude of combinations, and it is therefore not meaningful to consider one position of power solitarily.



<b>Family</b>	Families are a socially constructed institution (at times distinct from households though often overlapping), which are diverse in their structures and membership. While they are often thought of as a place of love and care, they can also be deeply unequal, where power inequalities can lead to violence and abuse, and where resources and responsibilities are unequally distributed.
<b>Gender Socialization</b>	Process whereby individuals develop, refine and learn to ‘do’ gender through internalizing gender norms and roles as they interact with key agents of socialization, such as their family, social networks and other social institutions (Balvin et al.)
<b>Social reproduction</b>	A range of social capacities that include “those available for birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally”.
<b>Time poverty</b>	The concept of time poverty refers to the time-consuming burdens often placed disproportionately on females in relation to males in the shape of domestic duties and caregiving, typically in addition to income generating activities and/or studies. Due to this double burden, women tend to be more time poor than men.
<b>Unpaid Care and Domestic Work (UCDW)</b>	Unpaid care work and domestic work encompasses a wide array of essential activities that sustain and reproduce life, regenerates and promotes people’s physical and emotional well-being. This multifaceted role includes both direct care, involving physical assistance and emotional support to individuals such as children, those facing illness or disability, and the elderly, as well as indirect care through tasks like cooking, cleaning, shopping, laundry, fetching water, and gathering fuel.



# Let's **rethink** the world

