



**Commission on the Status of Women  
Sixty-first Session**

**Women's economic empowerment in the  
changing world of work**

**INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL  
The global care economy in the context of the  
changing world of work**

**Gender and the Care Economy in Southern Africa:  
Policy Implications**

by  
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Friday, 17 March 2017  
3:00 – 6:00 p.m.

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

## **Introduction**

All over the world, women carry the burden of providing care to family members and friends. Women and girls from Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Southern Africa, bear the brunt of care work. This is primarily due to poverty and poor public services which have been exacerbated by the HIV and AIDS pandemic and the recurrent droughts experienced in the region, thus, leading to social, economic and health problems (UNDP, 2016). Southern African governments have made efforts to redress the imbalance in order to promote gender equality, mainly through the adoption of international, regional and national legal instruments, including the most recent 2016 agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The African Union, in an attempt to address the gender inequality, focused on Women's Empowerment and Development in the 2015 Human Development Report (HDR) and Women's Rights in the 2016 HDR. Despite all these efforts, gender equality has been slower than expected and inconsistent for many African countries (UNDP 2016). Care work refers to caring for the sick, children and the elderly including unpaid care for family members and friends, as well as paid care for others (Misra 2007). Meyer (2000) describes care work as physical, mental and emotional work which often is undistributed throughout society. Despite care work being critical for the continuation of every society, it is unrecognized and not valued. The gender gap needs to be tackled in order to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (the SDG 5).

## **Gender inequality in care work**

Historically, there has always been a gender gap where household chores have consistently remained a domain exclusively for women (Mushaka and Maponga 2015). Unfortunately, the aforementioned gender disparity is currently a common characteristic in most of the societies in Southern Africa. Yet their male counterparts continue to dominate the paid and formal labour market (Wekwete 2014). Studies have shown that there are generally more women care givers than men in Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe (GEMSA undated). This gender discrepancy has been attributed to the lack of or low levels of incentives for some home-based care workers. The care work that most women do, although it is socially valued, is not economically valued and hence it is unpaid, unaccounted for and undervalued in economic terms, except for those in formal employment, such as nurses. Care work does not offer monetary remuneration nor social security benefits. Care work is not recognised and valued, yet it is critical to contribution to the overall economy and necessary to the continuation of society in general.

Women carry a heavy burden of care work because of their reproductive roles and household chores. The roles and chores include taking care of children, the elderly, the sick, and the disabled; and domestic work, such as washing, cooking, collecting water and fetching firewood (Misra 2007). In this era of HIV and AIDS, women have taken up the burden of looking after the terminally ill, with grandmothers, who are also frail, carrying the burden of looking after sick children and orphaned grandchildren. Two-thirds of primary caregivers in households surveyed in Southern Africa were female, one quarter of these were over 60 years of age (UNAIDS 2014).

The drought experienced in Southern Africa in 2015-16 and the high levels of deforestation in some of the countries make women even more vulnerable as they bear a greater burden as mothers, caregivers and family providers (UNDP 2016, ENSURE 2014). Rural women spend more time than urban women and men in reproductive and household work, including time spent obtaining water and fuel, caring for children and the sick, and processing food (UN 2011). They are forced

to travel long distances in search of water and firewood, and this is time consuming (ENSURE 2014). In most cases, women use their heads to carry the water, a physically strenuous job.

A gender gap also exists in time use between men and women. Caring and nurturing are considered women's roles, alongside the domestic work. As a result, women spend more time in care and domestic work than men (Charmes 2015, UNDP 2011). Such a scenario consequently affects women's leisure time and well-being. The 2003 Zimbabwe Poverty Assessment Survey Study Report revealed that that women spent 3 times more time than males on household chores, including washing clothes, cooking, sweeping, and fetching water and firewood. Similarly, in Malawi, rural women spent an average of 9 hours per week compared to 1 hour spent by men in fetching water and wood (UNDP 2011). On the other hand, rural girls in Malawi spent 4 times more hours per week than boys in fetching water and wood (ibid). In Madagascar, women spent at least 27 minutes a day, when compared to 9 minutes a day by men in collecting water (Charmes 2015). Women, and those in rural areas of Madagascar in particular, spent at least 21 minutes a day fetching firewood when compared to 7 minutes for their male counterparts. (Charmes 2015).

Working women are not spared the burden of care work. Where women are formally employed, they are still expected to do the care work and household chores. There has also been a shift in the world of work where some women have become breadwinners and have to do the roles traditionally done by men. This has increased the burden of women's work and this has implications for development interventions. However, the greatest challenge lies at home. Formally employed women are still expected to do the household chores. In Gweru (Zimbabwe), married working women spent 3-6 hours per day doing households chores during working days compared to their male counterparts who spent less than 1 hour (Mushaka and Maponga 2015). The same study further notes that during the weekend, women spent even more 10-12 hours compared to 3-6 hours spent by males. The heavy burden of housework is largely due to inadequate access to water supply, sanitation and electricity. Research in Uganda has shown that improvements to access to water and wood in Uganda were found to lead to approximately 900 hours/year work reductions (Arbache et al. 2010). Improvements in access to water and fuel would definitely reduce the number of hours spent on collecting water and fetching wood.

Research suggests that some of the gender inequities in care work are due to the deep-rooted cultural norms and beliefs in the societies (UNDP 2016) as gender stereotyping is prevalent in all the Southern African countries. Men are expected to be the breadwinners while women have to take care of the household chores and care work. The society perceive men who assist with child care duties as being under "petticoat" Government, implying that they are under the control and influence of their wives (ENSURE 2014). In Zimbabwe, people associate such behaviour with concoctions are said "vakadyiswa", meaning that they were given concoctions so the wives have control over them. Men's attitudes are a challenge as they resist to help their wives in household chores, even in cases where the women have taken the bread-winning roles.

Despite the gender inequality in the care economy, most countries do not collect data on time use. Three Southern African countries (Madagascar, Mauritius and South Africa) have conducted time use surveys. However, only South Africa has repeated its survey in a ten-year cycle, in 2000 and 2010. Madagascar and Mauritius had collected survey data on time use once in 2001 and 2003, respectively (Charmes 2015). Such surveys are important as they provide information on the division of both paid and unpaid labour between women and men. Notwithstanding the importance of time use surveys in the gender disparity discourse, it should be noted that data on fuel and water are not included in the calculation of GDP in most countries, neither is child care ever mentioned

or listed as a secondary activity (Statistics SA, 2014). Thus, routine surveys on time use are needed in the region to reduce gender inequality in the care economy and remunerate it.

## **Conclusion**

Gender disparity exists in the care economy where most of the women are engaged in care work and domestic work while their effort is not recognised as productive and hence is not economically valued. Although Southern African countries are signatories to the regional and international legal instruments and have policies to address gender inequality, women continue work more hours in care work than their male counterparts. This gender gap is largely due to the traditional and social norms that are inherent in many societies. The gender stereotype of the division of labour leads to more women being engaged in care work than men. The fact that care work is not valued and remunerated, means that women lack social protection. Men's attitudes are also a challenge and they need to be addressed. The lack of remuneration drives men away from care work as they are expected by society to provide for the family to show their masculinity. The society also perceives men doing household chores as weak. This then calls for proactive awareness and advocacy on gender equality in Southern Africa. However, dealing with cultural and social norms is a challenge as beliefs, attitudes and traditional norms and values cannot be changed overnight. Rather, it is a process that should be achieved over time, as individuals or community leaders do not easily and quickly change their beliefs. Hence, any intervention should start from the communities, by involving the community and identifying programmes that start at grass root level. Male involvement in care work would go a long way in helping change gender stereotype inherent in the societies. Research is critical to show the magnitude of the problem and hence the need for time use surveys.

## **Recommendations**

Traditional culture, attitudes and norms have been cited as the major challenge in reducing gender inequality. There is need for advocacy for changes in the gender division of domestic labour at household level. This initiative should start at individual and community levels. Thus, there is need to work with the traditional, religious and community leaders as entry points for the gender mainstreaming process. The leaders can be empowered through training and awareness programmes and the new values acquired will go down to the communities.

Male involvement in care work is critical to ease the burden on women. Faith-based organisations should also be involved in the advocacy to encourage husbands to help their wives with the household chores.

Gender inequality has also been blamed on the lack of or poor infrastructure for water and electricity. Therefore, there is need for investment in infrastructure and time-saving technologies. These initiatives may include rural electrification and use of alternative sources of energy which are cheaper such as solar.

There is need to introduce paternity leave so that the fathers can get involved in looking after their children and share child care responsibilities.

Collecting data on time use is very important to measure care work and monitor progress in distribution of care and housework. Therefore, there is need for the Southern African countries to routinely collect data on time use by conducting time use surveys.

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