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## **EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH REDUCING UNPAID WORK**

**ROBU Mariana**

ORCID: 0000-0001-8828-7998

PhD student, ASEM <https://ase.md/>, Republic of Moldova, [mariana.robu@mail.ru](mailto:mariana.robu@mail.ru)

**ABSTRACT.** *Unpaid work is recognized as a critical barrier to gender equality and women's economic and social empowerment. Formally categorized as non-market work, unpaid work is not included in gross domestic product (GDP) calculations and remains invisible to decision- and policymakers. Social and cultural gendered norms related to unpaid care work remain stubbornly entrenched. While the 'men as breadwinners' and 'women as caregivers' model may not be universal, it is still the normative construct for gender relations in the Republic of Moldova. Similar to other countries across the world, women in the Republic of Moldova undertake the majority of unpaid work; in the country the unpaid work is not equally shared by women and men. Moreover, while men work longer hours in paid employment, women continue to work longer total hours than men do overall, bearing a 'double burden' or 'second shift'. The actuality of the subject does exist, for example, when women have access to paid work, they may be able to earn their own income, which can give them a greater degree of independence and autonomy. Additionally, they may be able to gain a greater level of social and economic empowerment, which can help them to improve their lives and the lives of their families. The*

*purpose of the research it is focused on rethinking the care economy and empowering women. An in-depth desk review of the available studies in the Republic of Moldova and worldwide was conducted in order to analyze the empowering women through reducing unpaid work.*

**KEYWORDS:** *unpaid work, gender equality, economic development, women's empowerment, social costs, gender stereotypes.*

**JEL CLASSIFICATION:** G38

## INTRODUCTION

This article examines four pathways that influence and shape women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid work and that affect women's empowerment. These pathways are: access to, and opportunities in, the labor market; social and cultural norms; social care infrastructure; and the legal and institutional environment (including social protection and employment rights). These pathways intersect with the social, political and economic context of the country, which shapes — and is shaped by — country-specific characteristics. Such characteristics include the importance of urban-rural differences, the extent of migration, the informal economy, youth unemployment, the heterogeneity of women's experiences, ethnicity and socioeconomic group. Participation in the labor market is a key source of economic empowerment. Male labor force participation rates in the Republic of Moldova are similar to global rates. In contrast, there is considerable variation for women, even though historically their participation in paid employment has been high. Eastern Europe has an average of 84 per cent, with the lowest level in the Republic of Moldova at 54 percent. Industrial and occupational segregation by gender is a typical feature of labor markets, and the national labor markets are no exception. Despite increases in women's workforce participation, women are more likely to be employed in casual, poorly paid/undervalued and insecure work. Part-time employment among women remains low, which leads to many women turning to the informal sector to seek shorter employment hours. All countries have made progress in adopting gender equality mechanisms, including legislation and policies aimed at advancing women's empowerment and achieving greater gender equality in different spheres of social life. Particular attention has been paid to legislation and the elimination of discriminatory practices to address specific problems, such as gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the workplace. Despite this progress, some women continue to face high levels of discrimination in social norms, and there remains a substantial gap between changing attitudes and gender roles in practice. In 2018, survey [1] research from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia found that a majority of participants agreed that it “is a mother's responsibility to change diapers, feed and bathe children.”

The gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is clear both in terms of women's employment as well as in the intensification of unpaid care. Women have been affected more than men by pandemic-related unemployment, reduced working hours and the loss of wages. Similarly, the incomes of women working in the informal sector having declined dramatically. Analysis on COVID-19 [2] and informal workers' lost income estimates that they lost an average of 70 per cent of their income. Further, as the crisis unfolded, millions of people left cities and returned to rural areas. This had two consequences: it intensified rural women's unpaid care and domestic work burden and it exposed the reliance of wealthier countries and families on migrant women workers for social and care services. In relation to the intensification of unpaid care work, much greater numbers of women than men have reported doing more household chores and spending more time on unpaid care work since the start of the pandemic. In the Republic of Moldova, 70 per cent of women spent more time on at least one unpaid domestic work activity, compared to 59 per cent of men.

The article concludes with policy recommendations that prioritize the importance of unpaid work as a barrier to women's economic empowerment. Removing or ameliorating this barrier will require specific interventions in three key areas: the labor market, the social care infrastructure and gender-specific social norms. While significant progress is required across all these fronts, the most effective policy intervention to empower women through reducing unpaid work is the

provision of institutionalized, high-quality, affordable childcare, especially for young children. This reduction in women's unpaid care work responsibilities will facilitate their labor force participation and will help create job opportunities. In the labor market, greater flexibility in work patterns (e.g. part-time/reduced hours, flexible scheduling, shorter work weeks) is necessary to encourage a more equal distribution of unpaid work at the family level and to help women and men find a better work-life balance. This can be supported with paid parental leave for both women and men accompanied by non-transferable paternity leave.

There also needs to be wider investment to address labor-intensive aspects of unpaid work that thwart women's empowerment and impact on their time. For example, investing in sustainable agriculture and rural development will reduce rural-urban inequalities, rural poverty, food insecurity and will reduce the ongoing depopulation of rural areas. Although deep-seated social and cultural norms related to gender roles are slow to change, they are not intractable. Progress towards gender equality through the redistribution of unpaid work would allow men to benefit from new employment and family responsibility arrangements. Essential to this is revaluing and destigmatizing unpaid work, which will disrupt the current gender, racialized and class underpinnings of household and care work. Achieving these long-overdue changes will unlock the potential of women's economic empowerment.

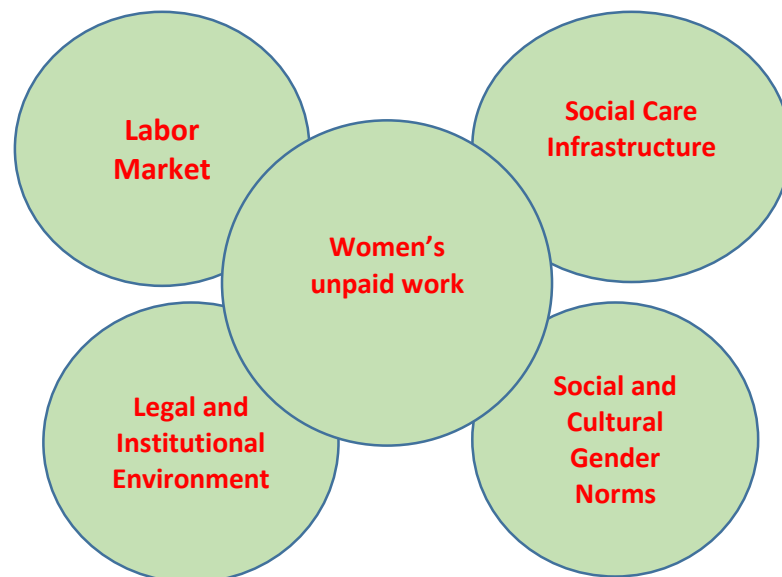
There is evidence to suggest that hiring women to not do unpaid work would reduce unemployment among women [3,5]. Reducing unemployment among women would also have other benefits. For example, it would help to close the gender wage gap and improve women's access to education and health care [2]. Furthermore, it would help to achieve gender equality and empower women [6].

Gender gaps in the labor market remain a pressing global challenge. Female labor force participation has risen in recent decades, but it is still nearly 27 percentage points lower than the rate for men, and no improvements are expected in the short term [7].

The state of gender gaps in the labor market is worrisome per se, but the very slow rate of progress makes things even more shocking. According to the World Economic Forum's last Global Gender Gap Report, the situation of women actually worsened for the second year in a row in 2017. If the current trend continues, economic gender equality will not be achieved for at least another 217 years [8].

## **METHODOLOGY**

An in-depth desk review of the available studies in the Republic of Moldova and worldwide was conducted in order to analyze the empowering women through reducing unpaid work. For the Republic of Moldova, in 2021 it was conducted a Survey [4] on the impact of COVID-19 on SME of Moldova, and the results of the survey were further analyzed to conclude the results of the presented work. Indeed, unpaid care work tends to remain largely taken for granted and overlooked by policy- and decision makers, as has been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic and the response and recovery measures pursued by governments. The figure 1 below shows the four pathway methodology influencing women's responsibility for unpaid work.



**Figure 1. Four Pathways Influencing Women's Responsibility for Unpaid Work**

*Source: Empowering women through reducing unpaid work.pdf [unece.org](http://unece.org)*

Time use surveys are the principal method for collecting data on unpaid work. They have become an important tool for shining a light on gender-based inequalities, for recognizing and estimating the contributions of women's unpaid work to national well-being and for designing policies for women's empowerment. Regularly collected time-use data disaggregated by sex, age group and locations are necessary for reporting on SDG Target 5.4. However, huge gaps remain in the collection and use of sex-disaggregated data.

## **RESULTS**

In the Republic of Moldova mothers of infants (0 to 2 years old) and mothers of three and more children under 15 years of age are more likely to pursue work in the informal sector, which is typically informal own-account or unpaid family work. In Moldova, working mothers of three or more children under 15 years old are also more likely to live in rural areas and thus have limited choices, with informal work in (subsistence) agriculture often the only option to sustain their young children. Each of the SDGs under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, including Goal 5 on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, and gender equality as a cross-cutting prerequisite for sustainable development. In order to continue to make progress towards meeting SDG targets and ensure that no one is left behind in the wake of the pandemic, every COVID-19 response plan, and every recovery package and budgeting of resources, needs to address the gender impacts of this pandemic.

The impact of more women implication in economic activities is positive on the economic development at national level, as more financial resources are injected into the economy [9]. While essential workers may be more likely to keep working during the lockdown and not suffer wage losses, many of them – like health and other frontline workers – face a greater exposure to the disease [10]. The Covid-19 crisis has disproportionately affected women [11] due to the overlapping of several factors specific to the both economy and public life. One such factor is the complete or partial closure of kindergartens and schools, with women taking on the main task of caring for their children. Under these circumstances, many women have had to reduce their working hours or leave the labor market in order to cope with the increased burden of childcare [12]. Another specific factor is the high share of women in the services and health sectors, and this fact exposes them more to infection with Covid-19. Both aspects are applicable in the case of the Republic of Moldova where schools and kindergartens were closed, and where women accounted for as much as 81 per cent of all employees in the 'health and social assistance' activity in 2019. However, provision of high-quality affordable childcare is often cited as one of the most effective

interventions for empowering women through reducing unpaid work. This is because it allows women to more easily participate in the labor force, and it also creates job opportunities for them.

## **CONCLUSION**

Unpaid work impacts on women's empowerment regardless of their level of education, income or the level of country development. Although the country have made advances in line with the 5R framework (recognizing, reducing and redistributing, reward and representation), and although women's paid employment participation has increased, the largest share of unpaid work continues to fall on women — particularly vulnerable women from lower socioeconomic groups, rural areas and women from ethnic minority groups.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the importance of unpaid work to social and economic life into sharp relief. It has also brought greater recognition of who undertakes most of this work. This momentum must now be harnessed to prioritize unpaid work and care on the long-term political agenda (EIGE, 2020) and to push to revalue such work as crucial rather than burdensome work that must be fairly rewarded and equally shared between women and men.

Achieving these ends requires progress in at least five general areas:

1. Recognizing and representing unpaid work in policies and decision-making;
2. Strengthening employment rights and workplace policies;
3. Challenging social and cultural norms;
4. Investing and prioritizing social care infrastructure; and
5. Improving the legal and institutional infrastructure of social protection systems.

### Recognizing and Representing Unpaid Work in Policies and Decision-making

- Recognize unpaid (and paid) care work at the national policy level and in decision-making.
- Improve data collection on unpaid work in order to help inform and shape policy and decision-making.
- Conduct ongoing monitoring and evaluation to better understand the social and economic impacts of women's unpaid care work and to support women's empowerment.
- Ensure evaluations are country- and context-appropriate in order to recognize the multiple circumstances underpinning women's unpaid work and to facilitate comparability across countries.
- Undertake gender analysis and assessments that consider the impacts of infrastructure, social protection and public service investments on women and girls' unpaid work and whether they lead to unpaid work responsibilities being transferred to other women in the household, particularly older women and girls.
- Involve a variety of actors in programme design and implementation in order to understand the local context and to create fit-for-purpose policy and programme solutions.

### Strengthening Employment Rights and Workplace Policies

- Formalize paid parental leave for both women and men.
- Introduce incentives to encourage men's take-up of non-transferable paternity leave.”
- Encourage men to take on a greater share of unpaid care work.
- Advocate for employment policies that support employees sharing care giving responsibilities.
- Incentivize the uptake of paternity leave by ensuring that it covers a high percentage — or 100 per cent — of pre-leave income.
- Improve awareness of the benefits of flexible work schedules and different types of working arrangements (e.g. part-time, reduced hours, flexible schedules, shorter working weeks) that will facilitate more equal distribution of unpaid work and that will help women and men find a better work-life balance.
- Encourage long-term monitoring of these options to ensure that men and women access them equally.
- Ensure that flexible scheduling and work arrangements do not factor into performance reviews or other employment-related decisions.

- Raise and strengthen employers' awareness of their responsibilities to help challenge gendered cultural norms and expectations of ideal workers and ideal careers.

#### Challenging Social and Cultural Norms

- Use outreach campaigns to facilitate changes in socio-cultural gender norms and attitudes.
- Address socio-cultural factors that unduly affect people's choice to avail themselves of flexible scheduling and work arrangements in support of their family responsibilities.
- Promote men's involvement in unpaid work by addressing gender segregation in the home and workplace.
- Normalize cultural expectations of fathers' equal involvement in unpaid work.
- Transform negative masculinities at the societal, community, family and individual levels.
- Create spaces for men and boys to discuss gender stereotypes.
- Initiate media campaigns to destigmatize and disrupt gendered notions of women's and men's work, norms and roles.
- Engage more men in paid childcare positions in order to advance cultural norms of men's roles in care taking.

#### Investing and Prioritizing Social Care Infrastructure

- Revalue domestic and care work's worth to both society and the economy.
- Formally recognize the skills gained through paid and unpaid care work.
- Support unpaid and informal careers' transition to the formal labor market.
- Ensure accessible and affordable child- and elder care public services in order to reduce women's unpaid work responsibilities and to enable their labor force participation.
- Invest in measures to mitigate labor-intensive aspects of unpaid work that thwart women's empowerment and that impacts on their time (e.g. include gender analysis in locating new water sources).

#### Improving the Legal and Institutional Infrastructure of Social Protection Systems

- Design and implement social protection programmes to address legal and institutional constraints on women's access to and utilization of social protection resources.
- Expand unpaid workers' economic and social rights in social protection programmes and schemes.
- Universalize pension entitlements rather than basing them on working life and earned salaries.
- Introduce entitlements to compensate leaving employment in order to undertake unpaid care work.
- Strengthen social assistance and social insurance programmes and schemes to ensure that they enable a decent standard of living.
- Emphasize the need for social protection floors to guarantee services and transfers throughout the life cycle
- Expand social protection programmes to include for children, the economically active with insufficient income, older persons and other vulnerable groups.
- Develop social protection programmes that support unpaid caregivers and that avoid penalizing women as caregivers.
- Design unconditional cash transfer systems that minimize gender stereotypes and that avoid unintentionally creating additional care-related burdens for women.
- Expand contributory credits linked to pensions and other social protection programmes to account and compensate for time spent providing unpaid care (and therefore time spent out of the labor force)

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