Recognizing the care work provided by children and evidence on its implications (positive and negative) for their wellbeing

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This contributory note was prepared for the ‘Care and children Experts’ Roundtable’, hosted by UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, in Florence, Italy, on 6\(^{th}\) – 7\(^{th}\) December 2016. The opinions expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not reflect the view of UNICEF.

Children and work

It is now well established in the literature that children support their households in performing a range of work activities, both paid and unpaid. Increasingly over the past decades, there has been interest on the issue of child work and its impact on various wellbeing outcomes.

Carrying out work is not necessarily harmful to children: undertaking some kind of work (whether domestic chores or supporting parents in other necessary tasks) is generally seen as a crucial part of growing up. However, to fully grasp the impact of work on children’s lives, one has to consider what kind of work, for how many hours, in what kinds of economic and social relationships, including whether paid or unpaid (see Elson, 1982, for an expansion of this argument).

Care work: what activities are included?

Himmelweit (2007) defines care work as “the provision of personal services to meet those basic physical and mental needs that allow a person to function at a socially determined acceptable level of capability, comfort and safety”. This definition usefully implies not just what sociologists call ‘body work’, such as washing another person, but also human interaction, such as chatting to another person. Therefore, care work differs from other types of work as it involves the emotions to a greater degree than any other kinds of work. This is true of both paid care work, performed for instance by doctors, nurses, and child care providers, as well as unpaid care work performed by family and friends. These emotions may be negative as well as positive - long hours of demanding care work can emotionally draining; and when unpaid care work is provided as an obligation it may be accompanied by feelings of resentment. However, in order for good quality care to be provided, carers need to be able to empathize with those they care for and their conditions of work need to support this.

Care work is usually regarded as excluding self-care: in fact, self-care does not satisfy the third party criterion (whereby we mean that if an activity can be delegated to a paid worker, then such activity should be considered as work), which includes not only services capable of being carried out by others (which, for instance, excludes learning), but also those provided for others (which, for instance, excludes washing and feeding oneself).
According to the ILO, care work involves the direct care of persons, including young children, the elderly and people with illnesses and disabilities, who require intense care, but also of able-bodied adults (ILO, 2016). This definition usefully emphasises that we all need care.

What about activities that are not mental and physical inter-personal care? Razavi (2007) refers to other activities that provide the preconditions for personal caregiving such as preparing meals, shopping and cleaning. In rural areas in developing countries, such preconditions include collecting water (and purifying it) and collecting fuel (or making fuel out of animal dung). Elsewhere, it may be sufficient to turn on a tap or a switch. The activities that constitute the preconditions are often referred to as ‘domestic work’, when they are carried out within and for households or other institutions that provide care, such as care homes.

For such reasons, it is worth maintaining the distinction between inter-personal care and domestic work, because the skills and time and energies required differ. In addition, the possibilities for reducing and redistributing the work also differ. For instance, adequate investments in infrastructure can eliminate the work of collecting water and fuel (Fontana and Elson, 2014).

The SDGs incorporate this distinction. Under SDG Goal 5 Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, there is a sub goal 5 that calls on governments to

“Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work 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.”

Care work: in context of what economic and social relations?

Care and domestic work can be paid or unpaid. If it is paid, it is usually paid at a low level with poor terms and conditions. Paid care and domestic work can be carried out in a variety of organizations: public sector, business, NGO, and household. If it is unpaid, it is generally invisible to economic policy makers. Unpaid care work is excluded in principle from the measurement of GDP and is not considered an economic activity. Some unpaid domestic work, such as gathering fuel and collecting water, is in principle included in the GDP, but generally undercounted or not counted in practice.

Children undertaking unpaid care and domestic work in their own families

In many contexts, participating in such work is a normal part of children’s lives and prepares them for adulthood. However, such work is usually subject to strong gender norms about what girls and boys do. It can be subject to authoritarian, and even coercive¹, control by adults, especially where family relations are strongly patriarchal.

The extent of the participation in care and domestic work varies by social class, with very little in high income families, where much of the work is done by paid domestic workers. As already mentioned, it also varies by gender: there is evidence that unpaid care work is mainly done by girls.

¹ While the issue of coercion is often overlooked in economic models of families, it is an important concept to consider when discussing the issue of children undertaking care and domestic work
while boys participate to some extent in unpaid domestic work such as collecting water and fuel. Data for 25 countries in sub-Saharan Africa shows that collectively women spend at least 15 million hours each day collecting water, while men spend about 6 million hours a day, and children 4 million hours a day (UNICEF and WHO 2012).

High levels of unpaid care and domestic work can lead to children dropping out of school, or under achieving in school, which can be a particular problem for adolescent girls. A study of nine countries in Africa and Asia found that being nearer to a water source had a positive impact on children’s school attendance (Koolwal and van der Walle, 2013).

Where children undertake a high level of care for adults who are ill, frail or disabled, or for siblings (in absence of an adult carer) they are often referred to as ‘young carers’.

**Children undertaking paid care and domestic work**

Many low income children, especially girls, are young ‘domestic workers’. Often their wages are paid to their families, with whom they have little contact.

Let me share some examples from unpublished PhD thesis by one of my students: Maria Jose Moreno Ruiz (2011):

‘... as a 9 year-old child [my mother, in Spain] was sent to a better off family as child-minder of children barely younger than she was. The only hours spared from the “on call” time were those she slept. She barely even knew the money she was earning for the five years she worked there, given that her meagre wage was sent by her employers straight to her father. Years later she would still recall to us, my brother and, a deep, bitter feeling of injustice related to having been deprived of school, care and time to play.’ (p.6)

And an example from field work in Morocco reported by Moreno Ruiz (2011):

“I started to work when I was 13 years old. The woman in the house mistreated me. When I did not clean properly the toilets the employer threw me a bucket of cold water. When I answered she put hot chili pepper in my mouth. She told me I had bad manners... during 6 months I have not been to the hamman I was dirty, my family could not contact me. They paid 200 dirhams (20 euro) to my father monthly.... After I had to rest two years at home to recover.... ...with another one afterwards the neighbors had so much pity for me that they gave me new cloths, they combed my hair, but when I went back to the house, the Madam gave me again the dirty clothes to wear, and she punished me hard” (a Moroccan domestic workers, Sanae aged 23).’ P. 220

See also report for Save the Children UK by Sommerfelt, T. (Ed) 2001.

**In some circumstances, children, mainly girls, undertake unpaid care and domestic work in families that are not their own, under conditions that may be oppressive.**

Moreno Ruiz (2011) gives an example:
Poor, indigenous families in areas surrounding Cuzco [in Peru] live on the verge of food security, and often are faced by a lack of schools in the areas where they have their homes. A lot of these families go to the nearest big city, Cuzco, to look for a family who will feed their young daughter, and hopefully send her to school in exchange for domestic work. Poor families, in order to get their daughter formally inscribed in the schools will hand the host family the birth certificate of the child, which afterwards, in the worse situations can be difficult to recover, threatening the legal existence of the child.

A big number of these stories do not turn out well. Numerous cases have documented the young girls enduring extremely long hours of hard work and mistreatment, of a sexual, physical or psychological nature. These girls are often prevented as well from going to school and therefore are left in a state of vulnerability for life. These girls are often prevented as well from going to school and therefore are left in a state of vulnerability for life.

In some countries children work as unpaid domestic workers under conditions of ‘quasi adoption’. For example, Togrul, 2016:2, describes:

’a particular form of domestic labor—unpaid, live-in labor carried out by non-family members--- that is embodied in the Evlatlik institution in Turkey. Evlatliks, literally child-aliases, are mostly orphan and/or poor peasant girls, who are brought into upper and middle class households under conditions of “quasi—adoption.” While the arrangement emerges under the pretext of a philanthropic act of good will (i.e. of charity toward and protection of the poor), the evlatliks are brought into their new homes to perform the unpaid, domestic labor starting at the age of five or six and continuing until marriage.’

Making children’s unpaid and paid care and domestic work visible

Time use studies are very useful to uncover the realities of many children around the world, especially in low- and middle-income countries, and specifically represent a useful source of data on the quantity and time spent in care and domestic work, especially when unpaid. However, time use data have some caveats. For instance, they do not necessarily include the most vulnerable children, who are working in households not their own and may not be counted as household members. Further, they are less well-equipped to reveal the economic and social relations under which the work is conducted, the extent of coercion and ill-treatment that may take place.

To fully reveal that, and ensure that children have an opportunity to voice their experiences, qualitative studies are also needed.
References


