



Care Work and Children: An Expert Roundtable

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Introduction and rationale

Unpaid care and domestic work have often been neglected in both research and policymaking, being viewed as lying within the domestic sphere of decisions and responsibilities, rather than as a public issue. However, over recent decades, researchers across a range of disciplines have strived to fill the evidence, data and research gaps by exploring the unpaid care and domestic work provided particularly by women within the household, and uncovering the entrenched social and gender norms and inequalities.

Evidence has shown the implications of such work on women's foregone earnings and the missed development opportunities which hamper an effective realization of their rights. Researchers and advocates have called for the inclusion of such work in nations' gross domestic product (GDP), for changing norms and behaviours and redistributing care and domestic work to other household members, but also for social, economic and infrastructure policies that reduce and redistribute its provision and financing.

Despite this increasing recognition of the care economy in the global policy arena as a human rights issue and an economic and social necessity, care and domestic work carried out by children and adolescents is still invisible in research and in the policy arena, although it occurs in many households and across many contexts. Such lack of recognition is particularly evident in low- and middle-income countries, where research and data on the quantity and quality of care and domestic work provided by children and adolescents, their economic value and implications for their well-being – are even scarcer.

Why care and domestic work?

Across most contexts, children are expected to perform some level of caregiving and domestic work. Childhood and adolescence are generally seen as life stages when children and adolescents should contribute to their household's welfare, including by providing support with care and domestic responsibilities. These responsibilities are not always perceived as 'work' by children and their families, and thus children may not see themselves, or may not be seen as 'carers' or 'caregivers'. The normalisation of this work, particularly for girls, is also due to entrenched social and gender norms that expect female household members to undertake the bulk of care and domestic work.

What is care work?

Care work is defined 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" (Himmelweit, 2007). UNIFEM (2000) distinguishes unpaid care work from paid care work: the latter is provided by employees in the public sector and NGOs and employees and self-employed persons in the private sector. The term "work" indicates that these activities are costly in time and energy and are undertaken as obligations (UNIFEM, 2000).

Unpaid care work thus involves the direct unremunerated care of persons, including young children, the elderly and people with illnesses and disabilities, who require intense care, but also of able-bodied adults (Razavi, 2007; ILO, 2016). Other activities that provide the preconditions for personal caregiving and constitute necessary services for the social reproduction of the household, include preparing meals, shopping and cleaning: although these are often viewed as separate from direct care activities, the boundaries between the two are blurred, especially because the persons needing intensive care are often also unable to do such 'preconditions' tasks themselves (Razavi, 2007).

Is care work different from domestic work?

Care work and domestic work imply different sets of tasks and activities, and thus of skills, time and energy required, and emotional involvement by individuals. Therefore, the possibilities for reducing and redistributing the work differ: while there are tasks that can be eliminated with the right policies and technology, such as investment in infrastructure, this is not always the case for interpersonal care work. However, the distinction can be blurred for specific activities, and individuals, including children and adolescents, can carry out care work while undertaking domestic work and household chores, and vice versa. Data collection efforts need to appropriately capture these differences and simultaneity.

Children also provide care and domestic work beyond their households. Particularly in many low- and middle-income settings, children work as paid and unpaid caregivers and domestic workers in other households, either in their communities or elsewhere. Often they do not collect the earnings of their work, which are sent directly to their parents. In some contexts, girls are responsible for sharing care responsibilities and the needs of various households in their communities.

Not all caregiving is bad for children. Engaging in the provision of care and domestic work can have positive impacts on children's and adolescents' well-being. Some evidence points towards an increased sense of responsibility, the acquisition and development of life skills and of domestic skills – with the latter particularly important for girls – to ensure a successful marriage and as a 'livelihood' strategy in contexts of poverty and economic vulnerability. Therefore, advocating for the eradication of all children's engagement in care and domestic work is not appropriate nor feasible, but rather a more nuanced understanding of when, how and why caregiving can have a positive impact on the well-being of children and adolescents is needed.

However, there are cases and contexts when the time, the quantity and the burden of care and domestic work are such that they can become detrimental to children's well-being. Such negative effects are not just a human rights concern but can become policy challenges related to schooling, mental and physical health, labour force participation, access to public care, social services and infrastructure (Becker, 2007). As care relationships can involve significant time and energy as well as a degree of emotional attachment, when they impose significant constraints and barriers to children's opportunities, efforts should be put in place to 1) recognise, quantify and value it as work, and 2) reduce and redistribute it across the household and the society. Such constraints and detrimental outcomes can be exacerbated in cases and situations with particularly burdensome and impellent care and domestic responsibilities, such as in the case of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), where the normal social relations, dynamics and reciprocities are disrupted, and the essential services are even more limited.

Why now?

A number of forces have coincided to bring attention to this previously neglected issue. At the global level, international conventions and global normative frameworks call for the protection and realization of the well-being of children and adolescents. Understanding children's engagement in care and domestic work and whether it impedes the realization of children's full potential and capabilities forms an important piece of realising the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) commitments for children.

The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda acknowledges the need to recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work, and thus presents an unprecedented opportunity to increase local, national and global efforts and address the negative implications of children's engagement in care and domestic work for their well-being.

Goal 5 Target 4: *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.*

In addition to Goal 5.4, other goals, targets and indicators cannot be fully met without addressing children's engagement in care and domestic work. In particular, Goal 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, will not be achieved if millions of girls and boys cannot attend school regularly or at all because of their household responsibilities. Goal 6 on ensuring available and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all cannot be achieved if children as well as adults do not have easy and

affordable access to safe drinking water and are thereby forced to spend hours to fetch it, often walking long distances and carrying disproportionate loads (Target 1). Goal 8 on promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, will not be achieved if women are unemployed, underemployed or employed in vulnerable jobs and in the informal economy due to their care and domestic responsibilities (Target 5). Goal 10 on reducing inequality within and among countries will not be achieved if unjust social and gender norms persist, such as those that prescribe female household members as the primary caregivers, with significant implications for their inclusion into the social, economic, cultural and political life of their communities and societies.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) calls on States to ensure children's rights to reach their full potential and well-being. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) calls for the elimination of all discriminations, prejudices and practices against women and suggests measures and policies to achieve this. It calls moreover for a proper understanding of maternity as a social function (Art. 5); for the eradication of discrimination against

women in education (Art. 10) and employment (Art. 11), including through measures such as the provision of services to enable parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities and participation in public life, e.g. childcare facilities. Additionally, ILO Conventions and Recommendations such as the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102) the Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202); the Domestic Workers' Convention, 2011 (No. 189) are also related to the issue of care and domestic work.

Despite the signature and ratification of these international conventions and treaties, there have been major challenges in their implementation, with implications for the rights and well-being of children and adolescents across the world, particularly for the most vulnerable.

Further, the social and economic gains are fragile and too often subjected to the economic environment. While investments in children's first decade have yielded positive results, progress has been slower for adolescents, for instance in education and health outcomes. Adolescence is also the stage where care and domestic responsibilities increase, and thus understanding the impact of care and domestic work during this life stage could contribute to ensure that gains in adolescents' well-being are sustained.

Social, economic and environmental changes such as the increases in female labour market participation, the labour migration (internal and international) of many women, and other factors are having an impact on the care burden and deficit. In contexts where men and other family members are not taking up their fair share of care and domestic responsibilities, it is not clear whether such 'care deficit' is being filled by children or other individuals or agents. Further, in contexts with high fertility rates and a youth bulge, children's care might be the priority, while in others with aging populations and decreasing fertility, care for the elderly can be more urgent. Moreover, economic shocks in the household, like the death of the breadwinner, and at the macro level, such as economic recession and food price increases, can raise the burden of care and domestic work for children. Climate change, water and resource depletion are also increasingly putting pressures on communities. Since fetching water and wood for fuel constitutes a share of the care and domestic work activities, the increasing scarcity of these resources might translate into additional time spent to collect them, if investments in infrastructure are not in place. More cross-country evidence is needed to establish whether children's share of care and domestic work and its impact on children's opportunities have changed due to these socio-economic transitions.

Globalization and the technological revolution have brought potential opportunities for social and economic development. However, there is not enough evidence on whether children and adolescents who provide significant care and domestic work are being deprived of such opportunities. As all these transitions and trends affect the distribution of time and resources within the households, the communities and the wider society, it is important to explore if and how care and domestic work are undertaken by children and adolescents, how their engagement in this work changes as a consequence of such trends, and what impacts these have on their well-being.

More thus needs to be understood on children's engagement in care and domestic work. There is still limited evidence, policy and practice, despite an increasing recognition of the issue in the public arena and in global research. More research and evidence are needed to understand the characteristics, the socio-economic and structural determinants, the dynamics and the impacts of children's engagement in care and domestic work, to eventually inform programmes and policymaking.

Care Work and Children: Structure and Purposes of the Innocenti Expert Roundtable

A first roundtable to explore these issues was hosted in Florence by the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti from 6 to 7 December 2016. Eleven experts from diverse disciplines, such as feminist economics, gender, time use, child labour, social protection, and childhood and adolescence and young carers, came together to discuss issues related to children's engagement in care and domestic work and the implications for their well-being. The meeting was structured in three sessions, each with introductory remarks and presentations, panel presentations and discussions, on the theme of children's engagement in care and domestic work, policies and interventions to reduce and redistribute care work, transform behaviour, social and gender norms, and improve data availability and limitations.

The main purpose of the exercise was to brainstorm around the evidence, the complexities and multiplicities of these issues, and to understand their relevance and the importance of addressing them as a global policy issue. Specifically, the objectives of the Experts Roundtable were to discuss:

- The relevance and importance of conducting research on the issue of children's engagement in care work and domestic work;
- The evidence on children's engagement in care work and domestic work, particularly in low- and middle-income settings;
- The positive implications of children's engagement in paid and unpaid care work and domestic work on their well-being, and the thresholds beyond which it becomes harmful and detrimental, and thus needs to be addressed as a policy issue;
- The implications of different care arrangements ("the care diamond", consisting of household-based, public, private, not-for-profit, community-based care provision and financing) on children's well-being;
- Country examples of public policies and interventions for the recognition, reduction and redistribution of care work within the households and the society at large;
- Available data to address key research questions, and related limitations, and potential additional data to be collected to address other research questions;
- Building a community of practice of researchers around the topic.

Key outcomes

1. The social, economic and structural/institutional determinants of children's engagement in care and domestic work

Children are active co-participants in the care and welfare of their families, and contribute to the social reproduction of the household. They not only receive care from adults, but also often provide it to other members in the household, such as the sick, the elderly and the disabled, and younger siblings. Thus children are not only receivers of care but also care-givers, which positions them along a spectrum or continuum with varying levels of care responsibility, time spent in care and type of care provided. Evidence shows that children with sick parents and children living in households where grandparents are present, are embedded in reciprocal care-giving and receiving relations, which do not fit into a dichotomous model of care. A 'caregiving continuum' approach (Becker, 2007) provides a tool to understand the intergenerational and reciprocal nature of care and the relationships and networks between the children, the persons they care for and from whom they can also receive care.

A life-course dimension is thus essential to understand not just how much time and emotional labour are dedicated by children at specific points in their lives, but also how the allocation of time and emotional experiences change as children go through critical life transitions, such as adolescence, adulthood, marriage and work. As inequalities and vulnerabilities (social, economic and gender) can be reinforced through these transitions, adopting a life-course approach would contribute to understand and therefore sustainably address the inter- and intra-generational cycle of inequalities and vulnerabilities. Mobility also affects and is affected by care responsibilities and trajectories. How does the time spent in care work change as the girl gets married and perhaps moves to the parents-in-law house? Are children and adolescents who provide significant care and domestic work limited in their geographical mobility and the types of activities they go out for because of their caring responsibilities – as they must make themselves available and at reach to the persons they provide care for? While these are some of the key questions, research must account not only for what is expected of children by the household, community and society at large, but also for children's aspirations and the impact of their care and domestic responsibilities on these, and how the children's perceptions, values and experiences change as they face transitions, as their understanding and experiences of the same care and domestic tasks evolve over their life.

Social, economic and structural determinants of children's engagement in care and domestic work must be understood. Material constraints, inequalities, social and economic status and class, ethnicity and race, migration status, location (rural, urban and informal urban settlements), access to services and infrastructure, including the availability of care arrangements, can affect the decision-making processes on the allocation of time and care and domestic responsibilities in a household, and therefore determine the degree of engagement of children in care and domestic work.

Social and gender roles and norms affect the distribution of work within the household and the society. While there is evidence that girls spend more time in unpaid care and domestic work in the households, how and why such work provided by both boys and girls is distributed is not always explained in-depth. As children's division of labour tends to replicate that of adults, and gender-matching principles affect the distribution of care and domestic responsibilities, a more nuanced understanding of how norms affect the allocation of care and domestic work across contexts is needed. Further, in circumstances where children and households do not conform to such norms and expectations, the deviation from and transgression of such norms can cause stigma and discrimination for the children concerned. Moreover, as gender roles start to widen more markedly during adolescence, it is important to understand at this critical point of transitions what role norms play in household decisions around the allocation of such work, such as factors related to the gender of the children, the presence of siblings of different sexes in the household and of other household members, and other factors and dynamics. In better-off settings where choices are less constrained by material needs or lack of social services, gender and social norms and expectations can still play a role in driving children's care and domestic work.

Specifically, patriarchal norms and power relations shape intra-household and intra-community decision-making processes on care and domestic work allocation. There is not enough evidence on how children negotiate the expectations and responsibilities of care within their networks. This can shed light on how care can be redistributed between sexes, how power relations can be transformed, and different forms of masculinities, behaviours and norms encouraged.

2. Intersecting outcomes of children’s engagement in care and domestic work and public policies and interventions to address them

More research is also needed to understand the range of potential positive effects and when, how and why these materialize, in order to inform any policies and interventions to reduce and redistribute care and domestic burden for children.

We must also invest in more research, data and evidence to understand if and how children face mental, physical and social costs and depletion for undertaking care and domestic work and its negative impacts on their lives, which can be detrimental for their cognitive and physical development, such as on physical health and sleep, mental health, stress – both physical and time – their opportunities for play and leisure, and other essential activities for their health and well-being. Care can impact children’s ability to attend school regularly or attend it at all, to complete school tasks and perform well in schools. Due to entrenched social norms, girls can feel the pressure to help their mothers in meeting care and domestic responsibilities and boys to undertake paid work. The inability to complete homework as a consequence of household chores and responsibilities is also often cited as one reason why children and adolescents are punished at school, but children may also be punished by household members because of their inability to complete household chores. Such cycles of violence can be detrimental to children’s well-being and be perpetuated over generations.

The gendered nature of care and domestic work implies different impacts on females compared to males, on their time allocation, on whether they are allowed and/or expected to combine these responsibilities with other activities, such as schooling or income-generating activities. Gender dynamics also play a role in determining the impacts of social (e.g. the retrenchment of the welfare state and public services), economic, agricultural and environmental shocks (such as crop failure and droughts, see for instance Krutikova, 2009, and Galab and Outes-Leon, 2011), and technological innovations and infrastructure issues on girls’ and boys’ engagement in care and domestic work.

There is also need for more research to quantify the economic contribution children make towards their households and communities by engaging in care and domestic work, and the costs they face in the short term and for missed future opportunities. Further, research and evidence are needed to understand which policies are most effective in reducing and redistributing the time spent in care and domestic work and to ameliorate its detrimental effects. As care and domestic responsibilities are more substantial in families from poorer and more disadvantaged backgrounds, poverty reduction strategies continue to be critical. Further, investing in accessible and affordable quality care services and facilities – for children, for the sick and disabled and for the elderly – including the training of care workers, is a first step to pool the work and responsibilities of caring in a society. However, in designing and delivering services a range of issues should be considered, including geographical accessibility, affordability (through, for instance, sustainable investments and public financing and support), opening hours, the quality of the services and the trust in care workers. Public, private and not-for-profit care arrangements can be explored and appropriately balanced to ensure legal and effective coverage and quality for all. Not investing in these services would bring higher costs in the future, including a higher ‘care deficit’ and lost economic and human capital development opportunities for caregivers – both adults and youth. Policymaking and practice should thus recognize care as a human right and an economic and social investment.

It is true that as they engage in care and domestic work, children may (at least partially) free their mothers or other individuals from such obligations, so that they can pursue income-generating activities. However, reducing children’s burden of care and domestic responsibilities on one hand, and investing in care services on the other, should not lead to a feminization of the care sector, pushing women into low-paid and under-valued informal jobs which can also lead to a further perpetuation of the stereotype of caring as a ‘women’s issue’, nor to an increase of women’s burden of care and domestic responsibilities. Rather, a true reduction and redistribution of such work from children and women to other household members – including men, and to public services – could contribute to children’s well-being, and to women’s participation in the formal economy with fair work conditions.¹ To achieve this, bridging the discourse between children’s rights and women’s rights is instrumental.

Care services and facilities should also be integrated and complemented with additional social and economic services and policies. Early childhood development, income support such as social transfers better targeted to families with caregiving children, subsidies to access care services, bursaries to children to attend school, policies and interventions that smooth social, economic and environmental shocks, can contribute to ameliorate and redistribute the care and domestic burden. However, such policies should be designed considering that children and other household members are often time-

¹ As WIEGO’s Childcare initiative shows, care and domestic responsibilities do not only pull women out of employment, but rather can push them into informal, lower paid jobs lacking social protection and other decent work conditions. See more at <http://wiego.org/wiego/child-care-initiative>

stressed – especially in developing countries – in order to avoid exacerbating existing care responsibilities and workloads. In some countries where social policies seeking to ameliorate poverty (such as conditional cash transfers) have imposed conditions (e.g. regular check-ups, vaccinations) that represent an increased onus on women and girls (Camfield, 2014).

Investing in accessible and affordable quality infrastructure (physical and social), technological uptake and time- and labour-saving equipment, such as the mechanization of agriculture and household equipment, can significantly reduce the workload of children and adolescents who spend many hours each day fetching water and fuel.

Reducing and redistributing care and domestic work will depend on a transformation of social norms to promote an awareness that, as an integral part of the social reproduction of the household and society, they should be equitably shared. On the one hand, policies and interventions should be designed to modify gender stereotypes and end discrimination and inequitable practices. On the other, actions should be taken at the individual, household, community and society levels to implement specific interventions that transform behaviours and social and gender norms and promote positive social change.

While public (and private) investments in infrastructure and care and social services are key, each context and setting should adopt the appropriate policy mix depending on the specific needs and priorities. In some contexts, intervening at the level of material constraints might be more constructive, while in others strengthening services and facilities already in place, and intervening to transform social and gender norms could be more appropriate. More research is needed to understand what works best across contexts, to inform programming and policymaking.

3. Data and ethics

Data are crucial to better understand the time spent by children in care and domestic work, the contextual factors and social, economic, political and infrastructure determinants of that work, as well as the socio-emotional share of caregiving and emotional burden. Relationships and networks of different types within the household and beyond must also be considered. Data can also contribute to conceptualizing and measuring the thresholds beyond which caregiving becomes detrimental to children, bearing in mind that these might differ between contexts, or even households and individuals. The time spent in carrying out care and domestic work, and objective factors such as sleep deprivation and time left for play, leisure and schooling, are a first step, but additional data are required for a more nuanced understanding of the multiplicity of issues surrounding care, domestic work and children.

Time use studies offer information on how individuals spend their time, including in work that is unpaid, care or domestic, particularly by women. As they are administered to children too – although the age range varies significantly across countries and studies – these data offer a useful source of information on how much time children spend on care and domestic work, sleep, education and leisure, and other activities. In some more advanced and recent surveys, data are collected on how people feel about the activities they perform, contributing to understanding their subjective well-being, on individual mobility and distances covered, and on whether respondents use communication devices in performing certain activities. Given the increasing digitalization, including of youth, this latter point is particularly important in order to understand whether caregivers are looking for information or asking for help online – for example through social media. However, time-use data also have some limitations and methodological challenges² that can be overcome by combining with other types of studies in an appropriate way. Qualitative studies offer a more in-depth exploration of key issues, such as through individual interviews, focus group discussions, photo-voices participatory approaches, and shadowing children throughout their day. Longitudinal studies are crucial to understand patterns, trajectories and transitions over time, but also behavioral changes due to external/internal shocks or long-term ‘natural’ routine changes.

Any investments in data must include the disaggregation by gender, age, location (rural, urban and possibly peri-urban), ethnicity, religion, and other determinants. Ultimately, children need to be engaged as sources of knowledge and data to understand their experiences, perceptions, values and aspirations. The digital revolution has an immense potential and is changing the way, the ease and speed of data collection that should be further leveraged. Given that youth increasingly use smartphones and other devices on a daily basis, exploring new methods could make it easier to collect data about children and young people. However, appropriate ethical considerations should be in place when conducting research on and with children, also to ensure that research and some specific time-intensive methods do not overburden respondents

² Some of these methodological challenges include: 1) the fact that time-use studies do not always collect data on simultaneous activities; 2) the difficulty in recalling the precise amount of time spent on activities, especially for younger children and/or when activities are broken up throughout the day; 3) the potential inconsistencies between adults’ and children’s reports on children’s time use; 4) the challenge to administer such studies to highly mobile or extremely poor people (as in other types of household surveys); 5) the different stages of cognitive development among children; 6) getting consent for children whose parents or guardians might not be easily identifiable or not contactable; 7) the social desirability effect – when respondents possibly overestimate the time if the activity has a value.

or have negative consequences on their well-being. Ethics and consent should be pursued while ensuring data archiving for analysis over time, to avoid its use for surveillance and unethical purposes by authorities and other entities.

4. Children's voices in the care discourse

More discussion and consideration of the representation of children's voices in the policy arena are needed. Given the context of an absent or extremely limited mobilization by and for young carers/caregivers, and therefore the limited representation of their interests in the public space, it is important to ensure that strategies and efforts are implemented to empower children, support them in delivering their messages and advocate for change in policy and practice. An analysis of the politics of representation is crucial, to understand how to represent interests that are not, or not effectively, represented in the policy discourse.

Conclusion

In specific circumstances, care and domestic work can be a significant policy issue: it can be detrimental to the well-being of children and adolescents, it can be of significant economic value for their households and communities, and it can perpetuate unjust gender and social norms. The recognition and value of care and domestic work, and its reduction and redistribution are crucial, not just to achieve children's well-being, or to increase women's labour force participation rate, but to improve women's participation in formal employment and support children's and women's full participation in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their communities and societies.

Given the substantial research and evidence gaps, generating evidence is the first crucial step. This will include analysing available data and collecting new datasets, reviewing policies, systems and institutions, and understanding policy shifts. Dissemination and communication of findings should then inform policy and practice at both national and global level. At the national level, advocacy efforts and narratives should be tailored to specific priorities and needs, by capitalizing on political momentum and interest, for instance on care of the elderly in contexts with aging populations and decreasing fertility, and childcare in settings with high fertility rates and a youth bulge. Attention should be devoted to considering and identifying key stakeholders and partner advocacy organizations, sharing evidence, and mobilizing and leveraging partnerships and resources effectively, based on national, sub-national and regional priorities. These combined factors will ultimately gather momentum to influence key policymakers and achieve the most impact on policy and practice. At the global level, recent developments, including the SDGs and an increasing interest in the social investment approach, have made the global policy environment more favourable and have opened up a window of opportunity to advocate for policy change in care and domestic work.

Building a community of research and practice on the issues of care and domestic work and children is an important first step. This first roundtable provides a starting point for leveraging UNICEF's comparative advantage to help fill the data gap, build the evidence base on policies and interventions, and advocate for change in policy and practice, as well as behaviours and norms, bringing this hidden issue to the forefront of national and global policy discourse. Ultimately, however, political will is crucial to understand the multiplicities of the issues related to care and domestic work and children, recognize its value and role, and address its detrimental effects.

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