

## **Care Work: Invisible, Undervalued, and Largely Assigned to Women**

The charts in this section of the Gender Analysis website focus on care work. Care work includes direct personal and relational care, such as feeding a baby or nursing an ill person, and indirect care activities such as cooking and cleaning.

It is crucial work. According to the [International Labour Organization](#) (ILO), by 2030, the number of people around the world who need care will be 2.3 billion. This includes children under the age of 15, older persons at or above a healthy life expectancy, and persons with disabilities.

### **Much Care work is Unpaid**

One sign that care work is undervalued is that so much of it is performed, often by family members, for no pay at all. Women do most unpaid care work. The ILO calculates that women perform 76% of unpaid care work around the world – meaning that women do 3.2 times the amount of unpaid care work that men do. According to the ILO, across world regions and income groups, when both paid work and unpaid care work are counted together, the average working day is longer for women (7 hours and 28 minutes) than for men (6 hours and 44 minutes).

### **Women’s Responsibility for Unpaid Care Work Interferes with their Participation in the Paid Labor Force**

In 2018, the ILO reported that the main reason women of working age gave for being outside the labor force was their responsibility for unpaid care work. Men, on the other hand, most often listed education, illness or disability as the main reasons for not engaging in paid work. The ILO reported in 2018 that, globally, “606 million women of working age declared themselves to be unavailable for employment or not seeking a job due to unpaid care work, while only 41 million men are inactive for the same reason.” (p. xxxii).

This disparity has widened during the pandemic. In the United States, the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the [Center for American Progress](#) reports that 4 times as many women as men dropped out of the labor force in Sept. 2020. One in four of these women said they dropped out because of a lack of child care. [The Hamilton Project](#) reports that more than one in every ten mothers of young children left their jobs at some point during 2020 because of childcare responsibilities.

[Researchers](#) have also found that more women than men have reduced their work hours to care for children – and that mothers’ reductions in work hours are four to five times greater than those arranged by fathers.

Such trade-offs between unpaid care work and participation in the paid labor force are stressful, and they have significant economic consequences for women. Researchers in [one study](#) discovered that women who took just one year away from the labor force ended up with annual earnings 39% lower than women who took no time away from the workforce.

### **Women Also Do Most Paid Care Work**

As is the case with unpaid care work, women predominate in the paid caring occupations in general. For example, the US Census Bureau noted in a [2019 report](#) that women hold 76% of all health care jobs and that in some health care occupations such as nurses, nursing aides, psychiatric and home health aides,

women make up more than 85% of workers. According to the [Paraprofessional Health Institute](#), 87% of direct care workers are women.

As seen in some of the charts on our site, the people who are paid to care for others in their homes (housecleaners, childcare workers, personal care aides, nannies) are mostly women and the share of women holding these jobs is much greater than the share of women holding other kinds of jobs. These women are also disproportionately likely to be women of color. The [Economic Policy Institute](#) reports that these workers often have no benefits and little job security.

As the charts on our site reveal, such jobs are poorly compensated. Domestic workers, earn, on average, about \$12 per hour. Furthermore, within each job category for which data are available, male workers earn more than female workers.

### **Why is this Feminized Form of Work Paid so Little?**

Decades of research have shown that people tend to devalue work that is associated with women. For example, when told that the percentage of women in a profession is going to increase, respondents rate that profession as less prestigious (Touhey, 1974). The perception that a job requires stereotypically masculine traits is a strong predictor of its perceived prestige and salary (Glick, 1991). Children view “masculine” jobs as more difficult (Verweken & Hannover, 2015). Adults assign lower pay to jobs situated in a feminine domain than to identical jobs situated in a masculine domain (Alksnis, Desmarais, & Curtis, 2008). Census data show that, as jobs become more strongly associated with women they also become lower in both status and pay (Levanon, England, & Allison, 2009; Magnusson, 2013). This may be, in part, because women, particularly women in traditional roles, are often stereotyped as less competent than men (Fiske, 2010). According to that stereotype, if women can perform a job, it must not be so difficult.

Of particular relevance to care work is that women tend to be stereotyped as being naturally warm, caring and nurturing (Ebert, Steffens, & Kroth, 2014). Thus, care work is seen as “easy” for women and is taken for granted. Also, remember that women of color are overrepresented in care-work jobs. Occupations associated with Black and Hispanic people are also stereotyped as requiring less competence (and Black and Hispanic persons are stereotyped as low on competence) (He, Kang, & Toh, 2019). Thus, the intersection of race and gender in care-work jobs makes it especially difficult for these workers to be seen as valuable, as worthy of decent pay.

As Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2010) notes, caregiving is viewed by much of society as both “priceless and worthless”. This work is supposed to come naturally to women, to be done out of generosity and love. It is so valuable that one cannot put a price on it – which undermines its economic worth.

### **Can this Problem be Solved?**

To solve the problem of the undervaluing of care work, it would be necessary to remove the impact of sexism and racism from judgements about the value of work. Some efforts in this direction have involved an emphasis on pay equity: evaluating the value of jobs normally filled by women and those normally filled by men, and paying people in those jobs equally for work of equal value. It is a complicated process, but jobs can be evaluated along such dimensions as effort, competencies required, stressful conditions, emotional demands, and physical danger. In an important case in New Zealand, the jobs of workers in senior care homes (mostly women) were compared to those of prison guards and

other male-dominated occupations. The finding was that the female-dominated senior care work was underpaid relative to its value, and 55,000 care home workers received salary increases (McGregor & Davies, 2019).

The key takeaway is that, for women's work to be paid fairly, we have to reexamine our assumptions and biases about the nature of jobs that are dominated by women or men and about women's "natural" caring skills. Such assumptions are still rooted in our stereotypes about women: that women are naturally caring and nurturing, that the emotional (and physical) work of caring for others comes easily to women. We are unlikely to be able to re-value the caring occupations if we do not also rethink and revalue the vast amount of unpaid care work that women do.

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