



Institute of Policy Analysis  
and Research - Rwanda



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# THE INEQUITABLE BURDEN OF UNPAID CARE WORK IN RWANDA



COUNTING  
WOMEN'S  
WORK

**POLICY BRIEF**

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**“Across the world, millions of women still find that poverty is their reward for a lifetime spent caring, and unpaid care work provision by women and girls is still treated as an infinite, cost-free resource that fills the gaps when public services are not available or accessible. Without further delay, public policies should position care as a social and collective responsibility and treat unpaid caregivers and those they care for as rights holders.”**

Magdalena Sepulveda Carmona, Former UN Special Rapporteur on  
Poverty and Human Rights

JULY, 2023

## INTRODUCTION

Despite her progressive policies for gender equality and women empowerment, Rwanda like most other countries is running a challenging race of trying to achieve the 2030 targets for Sustainable Development Goal 5, and particularly, target 5.4. In Rwanda, as is the case in many countries, women and girls are engaged in unpaid care work (UCW). The UCW is not valued, yet it is treated like the air we breathe; a limitless commodity that can be used without cost. It is often dismissed as just women's work, arising from their 'maternal' and caring 'instincts' and carried out as a labour of love.



### **SDG 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls**

*Target 5.4. 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.*

Women find combining UCW and paid work physically demanding and exhausting and have little time for leisure and personal care. Limiting the time women have for productive work makes them dependent on men for their survival. The UCW harms their physical and mental well-being and quality of life, and they are expected to do the bulk of UCW even when they have paid employment. Yet the International Labour Office (ILO) estimates, using an hourly minimum wage, that globally, UCW if included would contribute 9 per cent of GDP ILO (2018).

To achieve gender equality and women's empowerment, there is a need to reduce the time spend on UCW. While the Rwanda National Gender Policy (2020) recognizes the existence of UCW, there is limited policy support and no specific policy or strategy for alleviating women's burden of UCW. It is not included in the calculation of GDP, National Strategy for Transformation one (NST 1) does not explicitly mention UCW, and Rwanda has not ratified several relevant ILO conventions, including C156 - Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No.156)<sup>1</sup>.

The unequal distribution of UCW is an infringement of women's rights, an impediment to their economic empowerment, the economic contribution they could make to the national economy and a barrier to gender equality and women's empowerment. If SDG 5 is to be achieved, it is necessary to recognize, reduce and redistribute UCW to enable the economic empowerment of women and the transformation of gender relations. There needs to be a society-wide shift in gender norms and a move to a more equitable society where women can exercise strategic life choices.

## WHAT IS UNPAID CARE WORK

Unpaid care work refers to unpaid work carried out in the home and the community, mainly by women and girls, that could, at least in theory, be paid for (Box 1).

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11310:0::NO::P11310\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312301](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11310:0::NO::P11310_INSTRUMENT_ID:312301)

## BOX 1: DEFINITION OF UNPAID CARE WORK

Unpaid care work is:

- Unpaid - the person doing the work is unpaid
- Care – the work is necessary for the health, wellbeing, maintenance, and /or protection of members of the household or community
- Work involves mental or physical effort, and someone else could be paid to do it.

It includes:

Domestic work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Shopping for food and household supplies</li> <li>➤ Domestic work – cooking, cleaning, washing clothes</li> <li>➤ Collecting fuel (e.g. firewood)</li> <li>➤ Fetching water</li> </ul>
Care work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Childcare (incl. taking to or fetching from school)</li> <li>➤ Caring for a dependent adult in the household</li> <li>➤ Caring for community members (outside the household)</li> <li>➤ Taking child or dependent adult to health centre/hospital</li> </ul>
Maintenance work/DIY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Maintaining the house (fixing/repairing/improving)</li> <li>➤ Making things for the house (furniture, shelves, a clay cookstove, utensils)</li> <li>➤ Making/mending clothes for the household</li> <li>➤ Making toys for children in the household</li> </ul>
'Political' work; (unpaid)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Attending community meetings</li> <li>➤ Communal work (e.g. Umuganda, other infrastructural work)</li> <li>➤ Volunteer functionary, unpaid (e.g. village leader, secretary or caterer for a meeting, community health worker, dispute mediation worker, unpaid night watchman)</li> </ul>

## WOMEN'S BURDEN OF UNPAID CARE WORK IN RWANDA

Women do the bulk of UCW, with the highest burden being for married women with dependants and especially preschool children. A survey carried out in Rwanda in 2020 found that men and boys did not contribute to UCW in 70 per cent of households. In rural areas, women spent on average, six hours a day on UCW compared to five hours in suburban areas and two hours in urban areas. Men by comparison, did an average of two hours of UCW a day in rural areas and one hour a day in suburban and urban areas. Women in rural areas said they need funded childcare and labour-saving devices such as water tanks and improved cook-stoves.

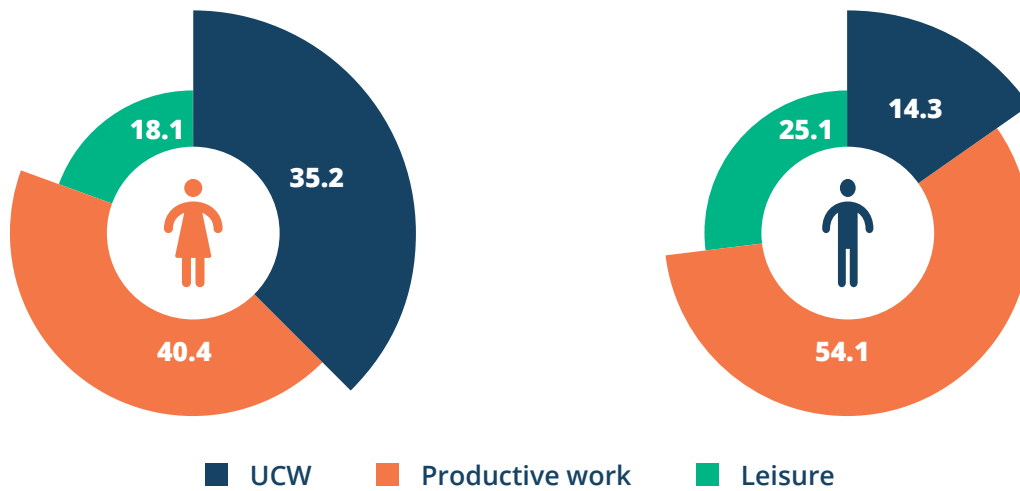
IPAR - Rwanda survey in February 2022<sup>2</sup> focused on families with at least one dependent child under 12 years living in rural areas. These are the families where the burden of UCW and paid work is highest. IPAR - Rwanda collected time-use information for seven days for husbands and wives, asking them to indicate what they had done hour by hour on the previous day, if they had done another activity at the same time and if they had been responsible for a dependent child(ren)/other dependants<sup>3</sup>.

On average, wives and husbands were active (waking hours) for below 95 hours. They spend most of their time working. Wives on average worked longer hours than husbands, 75.6 hours compared to 68.4 hours, and spent correspondingly less time in leisure and personal care activities (Figure 1).

<sup>2</sup> Work is seasonal in Rwanda. February is when the long rainy season starts and farmers are preparing the ground for, and planting seeds. At other times of the year wives and husbands may not be spending the same number of hours in paid employment. However, the hours spent on UCW are less impacted by the seasons.

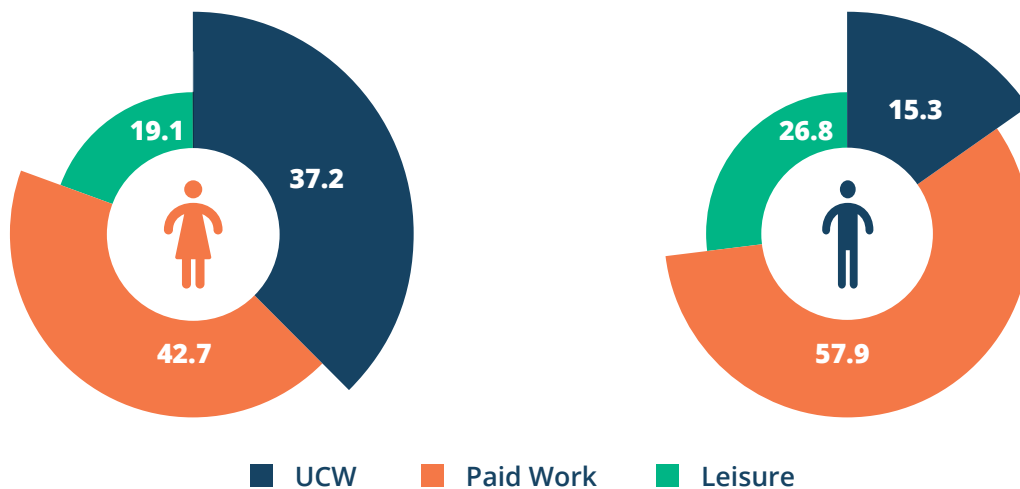
<sup>3</sup> This method is more accurate than the more frequently used 7-day recall method which relies on participants remembering what they did every day for the previous 7-days. It also recognises that women often multi-task, going more than one task at the same time and that they may be responsible for children (they cannot leave them) even if they are not caring for them.

**FIGURE 1: HOW WIVES AND HUSBANDS IN RURAL RWANDA WITH AT LEAST ONE CHILD UNDER 12 SPEND THEIR WAKING HOURS**



However, the proportion of their waking hours spent in productive and UCW is very different (Figure 2). Wives on average, spend 37 per cent of their time doing UCW, while men spend 15 per cent.

**FIGURE 2: HOW WIVES AND HUSBANDS WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN SPEND THEIR WAKING HOURS, %**



Being responsible for children and other dependent relatives also takes up more of wives' time than it does for husbands. On average, wives are responsible for dependent children/adults for 40.3 hours a week, and husbands for 10.5 hours. However, of these hours, wives on average only say that caring for dependent children/ adults is their main activity for 5.6 hours and husbands for 2.8 hours. Even if the burden of the main activity were reduced or redistributed, wives would still be responsible for dependent children/adults for 40.3 hours a week compared with husbands' 10.5 hours.

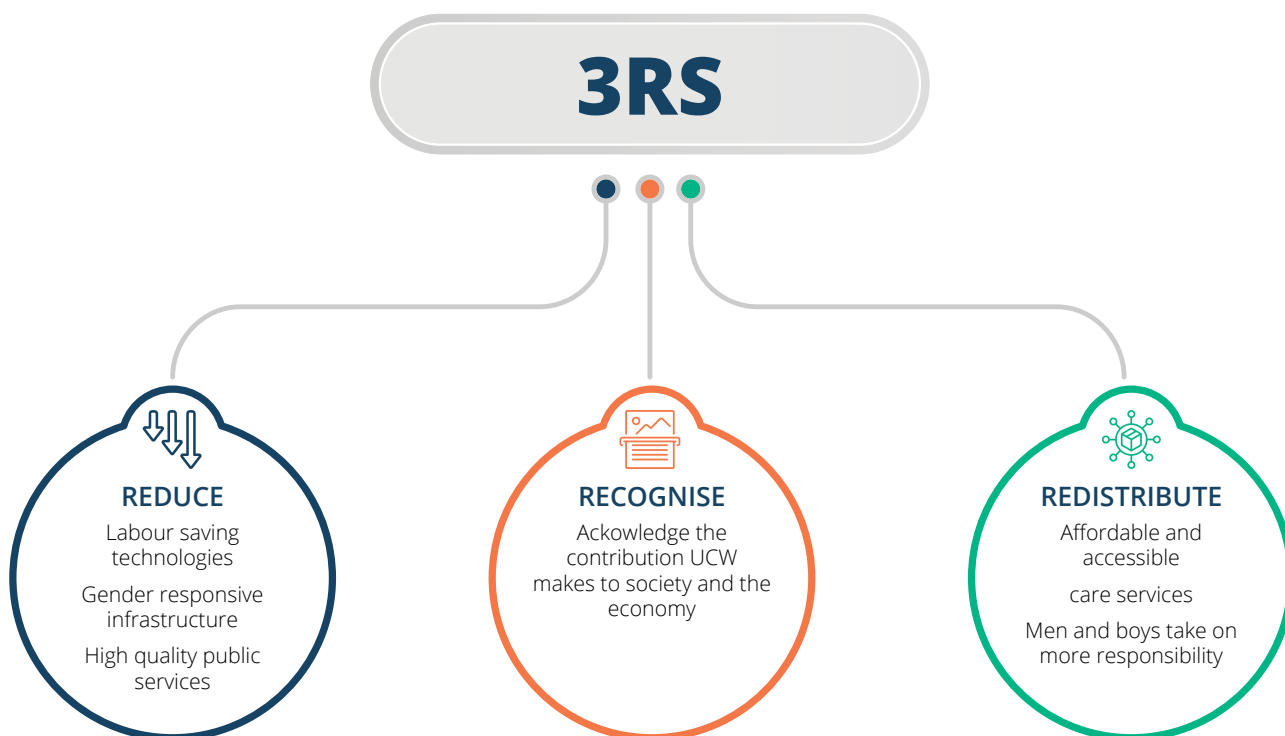
Responsibility for children varies by the age of children and the type of alternative provision available. Being responsible for dependent children limits the paid work that women can do, and time out of the labour market can make it difficult for women to find paid work when they are no longer responsible. If a woman bares four children at two yearly intervals starting when she is 25 years, she will be 36 or 37 before her youngest attends preschool and 44 before her youngest child is 12 years old. Children too young to be left to look after themselves still have to be supervised before and after school and in school holidays.

## ADDRESSING UNPAID CARE WORK IN RWANDA

To address UCW, the '3RS' need to be addressed. First, recognition by making visible the contribution UCW makes to society and the economy and governments

making policy responses. Second, reduction – reducing the time women and girls spend on labour-intensive care work; and third, redistribution – men and boys, the Government, the private sector, and communities taking on more responsibility for UCW. refer to Figure 3 for details.

FIGURE 3: THE 3RS



The Government should consider the following:

1. Implementing gender-responsive budgeting mechanisms to allocate resources specifically for addressing unpaid care work. This ensures adequate funding for services and infrastructure supporting caregiving responsibilities, such as childcare facilities, healthcare services, and social protection programs.
2. The recognition of the contribution of unpaid care work in the national GDP. UCW is not to be seen as natural and effortless. The work that is done in this sector, dominantly by women needs to be appreciated as just as valuable as paid employment. A step to do that is to recognize it in the calculation of the national GDP.
3. Ensuring that all policies, strategies and programmes are subject to a gender audit by trained in gender auditors, that includes auditing for impact on UCW.
4. Enact and enforce labour laws that protect the rights of caregivers, including maternity leave, parental leave, and flexible work arrangements. These laws should cover both the formal and informal sectors to provide support for women engaged in unpaid care work.
5. Establish social protection programs that target and support caregivers, particularly women. This could include cash transfers, pension schemes, and access to affordable healthcare to alleviate the financial burden associated with caregiving and reduce women's economic vulnerability.
6. Promote gender equality through education and awareness campaigns targeting both men and women. Raise awareness about the importance of sharing care responsibilities and challenge gender stereotypes and societal norms perpetuating the unequal distribution of unpaid care work.

7. Invest in infrastructure development to reduce the time and effort required for caregiving tasks. This includes improving access to clean water, electricity, sanitation facilities, and transportation, which can significantly reduce the burden on women and enhance their productivity.
8. Expand and improve childcare facilities' availability and affordability, including formal and informal options that meet the needs of rural women whose opportunities for paid employment are casual and seasonal. This enables women to engage in income-generating activities and participate in the labour market while ensuring that children receive proper care and early childhood development.
9. Conduct comprehensive data collection and research better to understand the dynamics of unpaid care work in Rwanda. This includes measuring and valuing UCW, analyzing its impact on women's economic empowerment, and informing evidence-based policymaking.
10. Foster partnerships among government agencies, civil society organizations, community groups, and the private sector to collectively address the challenges associated with unpaid care work. Collaboration is essential to ensure a coordinated approach, share best practices, and mobilize resources effectively.
11. Ensure meaningful representation of women, including poor rural women, in national and local decision-making fora to ensure that women's unique needs are considered in policy, planning and decision-making.

## CONCLUSIONS

To achieve gender equality and women's empowerment, it is necessary to recognize, reduce, and redistribute women's UCW. This requires developing and implementing policies and strategies to address the inequitable distribution of responsibility for UCW. Reducing women's UCW is one element in the pathway to gender transformative change, transforming gender norms through interventions that shift men's headship roles and patriarchal power, empowering women to challenge conservative gender norms.

## Sources

This policy brief draws on the Baseline Findings of the Institute of Policy Analysis and Research-Rwanda (2023), titled "Assessing the Impact and Scalability of Participatory Homegrown Programs on Reducing and Redistributing Unpaid Care Work among Women in Rwanda: A Case of Réseau des Femmes' Unpaid Care Work Project in Rwanda" by Abbott Pamela, Malunda Dickson, and Byaruhanga Ismael.

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## Ethics

Ethical approval for the research was given through the ethics review procedures of IPAR-Rwanda.

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