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Global gender gap in unpaid care: why domestic work still remains a woman's burden

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Gender gap in unpaid domestic work and care in Belarus

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Abstract

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In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic numerous reports point to the fact that women are mainly shouldering the burden of increased domestic care duties. But even before the pandemic struck, women performed more than two thirds of the unpaid domestic care work in both developing and developed countries. The lack of gender parity in the distribution of domestic work is associated with significant economic inefficiencies, as well as considerable social and economic consequences for women – affecting their bargaining power within the household and their labor market outcomes in particular. In the brief I review the literature on both the economic and sociological factors which perpetuate the pattern of gender disparity in unpaid domestic care work. I also summarize the “recognize, reduce and redistribute” policies which could be adopted to help address the problem.

Gender gap in unpaid domestic work and care in Belarus

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Despite high female labor force participation rates and relatively high levels of female educational attainment and professional qualification, in Belarus unpaid household work is still viewed as a female responsibility. Belarusian women spend on average around twice as much time on domestic work and childcare as men. Traditional conservative views on gender roles in families, together with a growing gender wage gap, are the main explanatory factors of inequality in the amount of time devoted to unpaid work.



Global gender gap in unpaid care: why domestic work still remains a woman's burden

The realities of *unpaid care and domestic work* have received much attention lately in policy and academic circles, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Houtven et al., 2020; Craig and Churchill, 2020; Duragova, 2020). Recent surveys and reports confirm that while the unpaid household work burden increased for both genders, women around the world ended up shouldering the lions' share of various household chores and care duties during the pandemic (UN Women, 2020). For many countries, prolonged lockdowns have put a sudden spotlight on the "hidden" side of people's economic lives, not typically reflected in the national accounts data. Unsurprisingly, among the main issues connected with unpaid care work is the highly gendered division of labor in the "household sector" and its consequences for the emotional and economic well-being of families. In this policy brief I explore the current state and the evolution of gender inequalities in unpaid domestic care work worldwide, and discuss the academic literature which addresses the reasons and the consequences behind them. I also discuss potential policy interventions which could promote greater work-life balance and help advance both social and family-level welfare.

Gender gaps in unpaid care work

The term *unpaid care and domestic work* appears under many terminological guises, including "unpaid care work" "unpaid household work", "unpaid domestic care work" and others. These terms essentially refer to the same phenomenon – unpaid care activities carried out in the household. They include cooking, cleaning, washing, water and fuel collection, shopping, maintenance,

household management, taking care of children and the elderly, and others (Addati et al., 2018). For the purposes of this brief I will use the terms interchangeably, relying mainly on "unpaid care", "domestic work", or "unpaid domestic care" to describe these activities. While the value of unpaid care work is not included in the national income accounts, it can be tracked by time-use surveys carried out by national statistical offices in many countries. According to the most recent surveys, (Charmes, 2019) more than three quarters (76.4%) of unpaid domestic care work worldwide is done by women, while 23.6% is done by men. In developed countries, the women's share is somewhat lower (65%), while in developing and emerging economies, women perform 80.2% of unpaid care. Thus, according to the data, even in developed countries women perform around two thirds of the unpaid domestic care work. Currently, no country in the world seems to have achieved gender parity with regard to the unpaid care distribution in households (U.N. Women., 2019).

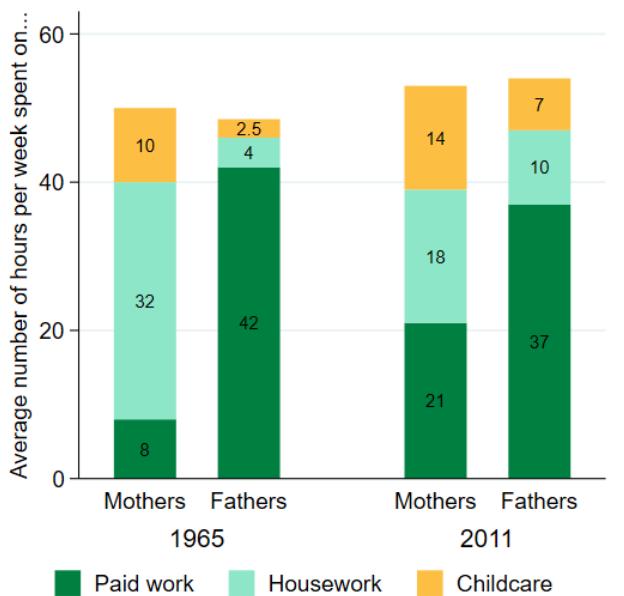
Is there evidence of convergence in domestic care responsibilities?

Given that the first time use surveys in many countries have been conducted only relatively recently, it may be premature to make claims about changes in the distribution of domestic work and a potential closing of the gender gap. However, evidence from countries with a longer history of time use data, in particular the United States, suggests that the way mothers and fathers allocate their time between paid and unpaid work has changed dramatically between 1965 and 2011. In particular, as can be seen from the Figure 1 (from Parker and Wang, 2013), in 2011 women spent 2.6 times (13 more hours per week) more on paid work, while men spend 5 hours less than in 1965. The time spent on childcare increased for



both men and women. At the same time, domestic work hours decreased significantly for women, while somewhat increasing for men.

Figure 1. *Moms and Dads, the US 1965-2011: Roles Converge, but Gaps Remain*



Note: Based on adults aged 18-64 with own child(ren) under the age of 18 living in the household.

Source: Parker and Wang (2013).

Overall, analysis of time use survey data over a 40 year span shows a degree of convergence in unpaid care work between men and women (Kan et al., 2011; Altintas and Sullivan, 2016). However, as the Kan et al. (2011) study shows, gender inequality is quite persistent over time. In particular, men concentrate their contribution in domestic work to non-routine tasks (i.e. tasks that generally require less time, have definable boundaries and allow greater discretion around timing of performance than the more routine tasks) such as shopping and domestic travel, while women devote a bulk of their time to routine work (cooking, cleaning, care). Women’s reduction in domestic work time (especially in routine tasks) may be largely due to the advancement of household technologies and higher acceptance/demand for women’s participation in

the labor market (Gershuny, 1983, 2004). Thus, it appears that the “low-hanging fruit” of gender equality within households has already been picked, and, going forward, further shifting of domestic care responsibilities will be a more difficult task, even in developed countries.

Factors that perpetuate unpaid domestic care as primarily women’s responsibility

The factors responsible for perpetuating gender roles in domestic work can be grouped into **economic** (specialization, comparative advantage) and **sociological** (habits, traditions, social perceptions) aspects.

The **economic arguments** that have long been used to explain the unequal division of paid and unpaid care work rely on the **theory of comparative advantage and gains from specialization**. Starting from the seminal work of Becker (Becker, 1985), economic models of the family suggested that a division of labor within the household is driven by different experiences and choices to invest in human capital. Becker argued that efficient households require specialization and the pattern of specialization can be explained at least in part by the differences in the initial investment in human capital (market skills for men and household skills for women) (Becker, 2009). In this model, men’s advantage in paid market activities is explained by historical reasons stemming in part from the more physical nature of market work. And yet, contemporary authors point out that the nature of work has been changing over time, with less emphasis put on physical, and more on cognitive skills. Likewise, the nature of household production has been changing (Greenwood et al., 2017). Birth control gave families a better way to control the number of children (Juhn and McCue, 2017). These changes should make men and women’s



productivity more equal, and consequently reduce the gender gap between men and women in both types of work. And yet, despite the fact that in developed countries women often achieve higher educational attainment than men (Goldin, Katz and Kuziemko 2006; Murphy and Topel, 2014), it has not been enough to eliminate the gender gap in wages and in the division of unpaid domestic work. Moreover, as the study based on 1992 Canadian data by McFarlane et al. (2000) points out, while the wife's time in housework increases when the husband spends more time in paid work, the opposite is not necessarily true for men (men do not spend significantly more time on household tasks when their wives increase their employment). Alonso et al., 2019, using a sample of 18 advanced and emerging market economies, find that various factors which determine the allocation of time between paid and unpaid work affect men and women asymmetrically. For example, being employed part time vs. full time considerably increases the participation in unpaid work for women, while for men the same increase is statistically insignificant.

Thus, a purely "pragmatic" economic argument for the household division of labor is not sufficient to explain the persistence of the unpaid care gender gap. Other **sociological factors**, such as gender roles determined by **social attitudes and cultural norms**, tend to play an important role in household labor division (Coltrane, 2000; Juhn and McCue, 2017). Moreover, one can argue that educational choices of women, which contribute to their "comparative advantage" in household production, are themselves not independent of cultural norms and attitudes. These choices tend to be shaped in early childhood and reflect how much a family would invest in/encourage a girl's education vs. that of a boy; whether boys are engaged in certain household chores - cooking,

cleaning, caring for young children, etc. (UNDP, 2020). For example, the high gender gap in unpaid domestic work in the South Caucasus can be traced to family patterns. According to survey data (CRRC, 2015) in Azerbaijan, around 96% percent of women were taught in childhood how to cook, clean the house or do laundry, while only 35% of men were taught how to cook and clean. In Georgia, close to 90% of women reported being taught how to cook, clean and do laundry, while less than 30% of men on average reported being taught these skills (UNFPA, 2014).

The social cost of gender inequality in the unpaid care work allocation

Gender inequality is not just an issue of fairness. **Inequality results in considerable resource misallocation**, where women's productive potential is not fully realized. The study by Alonso et al., 2019 estimates the GDP gains associated with a potential reduction in gender inequality in domestic work to the level observed currently in Norway. Countries like Pakistan and Japan, where the initial gender gap is quite sizeable, would gain around 3 to 4 percent of GDP. Another source of inefficiency is **occupational downgrading**, a situation where women take jobs below their level of qualification (Connolly and Gregory, 2007; Garner et al., 2013) in order to better balance their home and work responsibilities. The perception of women as being primarily responsible for childcare and domestic labor drives statistical discrimination in the workplace and affects the "unexplained" portion of the **gender pay gap** (Blau and Kahn, 2017). The pay gap, in turn, perpetuates inequality in the division of domestic labor. Moreover, perception of unequal domestic work allocation is found to be associated with **lower relationship satisfaction, depression, and divorce** (Ruppaner et al, 2017). In addition, earlier sociological studies found that **inequity in the**



distribution, rather than the amount of work, **causes greater psychological distress** (Bird, 1999).

Policies to address the gender gap

Given the sizeable economic and social costs associated with the gender gap in unpaid care work, policy makers are paying greater attention to gender equality and ways to promote work-life balance for men and women. Currently, most solutions center around “**recognize, reduce and redistribute**” types of policies (Elson, 2017).

The “**recognize**” policies acknowledge the value of unpaid care work done by women through cash payments linked to raising young children (i.e. maternity leave policies). Most countries in the world adopt publicly funded paid maternity leave policies, although the adequacy of maternity leave payments and the duration of such leaves is still a stumbling block for many countries (Addati et al., 2014). Data suggests that maternity leave of no longer than 12 months has a positive effect on maternal employment, while long leaves (over two years) increase career costs for women (Kunze, 2016; Ruhm, 1998; Kleven et al., 2019).

The “**reduce**” policies, aim at the provision of public services that would reduce the burden of childcare and other forms of unpaid work on women and free up their time for participation in the labor force. Among such policies are investments in publicly funded childcare services (quality pre-schools and kindergartens) and physical infrastructure to support the provision of clean water, sanitation, energy, and public transport. Empirical studies generally find a positive effect of affordable childcare on female employment rates (Vuri, 2016; Lefebvre et al., 2009; Geyer et al., 2014), but with some caveats – in particular, the subsidies may be less effective for female labor supply if affordable childcare just crowds out other forms of non-parental care (such

as informal help from family members) (Vuri, 2016; Havnes and Mogstad, 2011).

Finally, the “**redistribute**” policies aim to promote the redistribution of household chores and childcare among men and women. Among such policies are initiatives aimed at making flexible and reduced-hour work arrangement attractive and equally available for men and women. (e.g. shifting standard weekly hours to a more family friendly 35 hours per week, as for example in France); active labor market programs aimed at retaining women in the labor market can also help reduce hours devoted to unpaid work (Alonso et al. 2019). Moreover, better labor market regulations (e.g. legislation to regulate vacation time, maximum work hours, etc.) would discourage the long working hours and the breadwinner-caretaker gendered specialization patterns within families (Hook, 2006). Other examples include work-life balance policies recently adopted by the EU (EU Directive 2019/1158), and are aimed at providing paid paternity leave and reserving non-transferrable portions of family childcare leave for men. These policies were found to be effective for both increasing father’s participation in unpaid care and for reducing the gender wage gap within families in a number of country studies (Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2018; Andersen, 2018).

It is important to recognize that more research is needed to identify exactly how and why specific policies may benefit families, and to adapt them to the specific country context. While many of the policies outlined above will not solve the problem of the gender gap overnight, they can be an important first step towards greater global gender equality in the workplace and inside the household.



Gender gap in unpaid domestic work and care in Belarus

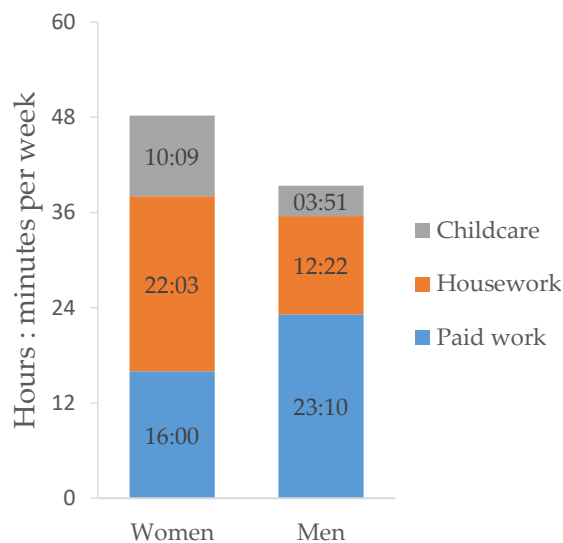
Similar to other FSU countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia), women in Belarus demonstrate high levels of economic activity. In 2018 the labor force participation rate for women and men (aged 15-64) equaled 74.7% and 80.4%, respectively (ILOSTAT). At the same time, women aim high with respect to educational qualifications and professional development. 36.7% of female workers in Belarus have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 26.1% among working men (Belstat, 2018a). Yet Belarus' women are still considered the main childcare and household duty providers in the family, bearing the "double-burden" of work and family responsibilities (Bergmann, 1981).

Division of household duties and childcare between men and women

Time use data confirm the double burden of duties that falls on women in Belarus. When paid and unpaid working hours are combined, women tend to work more than men: on average 38 hours per week as compared to 36 hours for men (Figure 1). Women are much more involved in domestic work and childcare, spending around twice as much time on these activities as men. On average, women spend around 3 hours 35 minutes per day on household duties, while men spend just 1 hour 46 minutes per day on these duties (Belstat, 2016). Childcare responsibilities are also mostly performed by women. The average female and male daily time budget on childcare equals 61 vs. 33 minutes.

The gender gap in childcare is much wider in households with children aged below 10 where women and men spend around 126 vs. 38 minutes on childcare duties per day.

Figure 1. Average weekly time budgets among women and men in Belarus



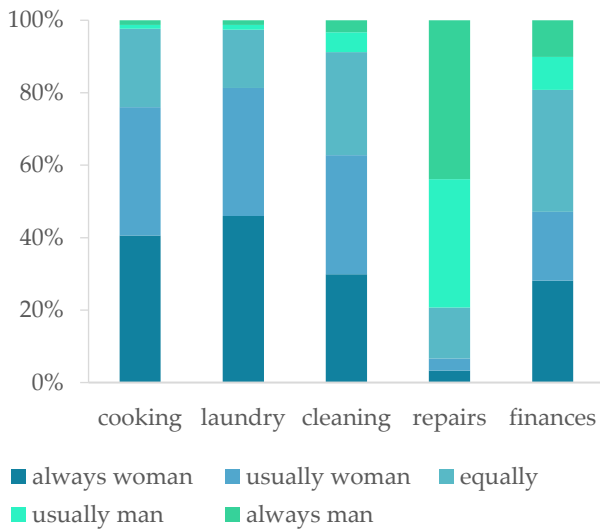
Note: Based on the population aged 10 or higher. Lack of time budget data for women (16-54) and men (16-59) does not allow comparison of workload distribution for working-age population.

Source: Belstat, 2020.

Belarus' women reported that they are in charge of most household duties (Figure 2). Women are always or usually responsible for cooking (76.0%), doing laundry (81.3%), cleaning (62.8%), and paying bills (47.1%), while men are in charge of the repairs (79.3%), which are not part of a typical daily routine. Just 8.8% of men are responsible for the regular household cleaning duties, while the numbers for cooking or laundry are even lower (2.3% and 2.6% respectively). It should be noted that a majority of the population is satisfied with such an unequal distribution of household responsibilities between partners, but men feel more comfortable with the state of things: 68.8% of men vs. 50.9% of women declared to be completely satisfied, and just 9.4% of women and 3% of men admitted dissatisfaction with the way housework was shared in their families.



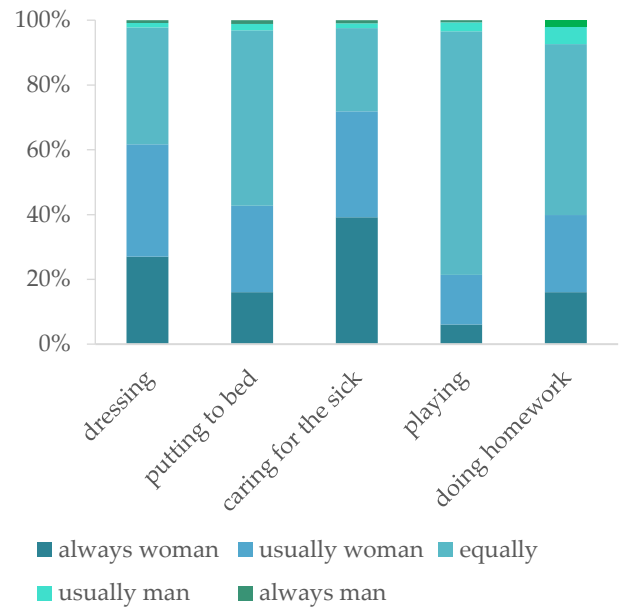
Figure 2. Division of household duties between partners (%)



Source: GGS Belarus, 2017.

Women also claim that childcare activities are always or usually their responsibility. The data shows that mothers are three times more likely than fathers to be engaged in educational and prep-school activities with their children aged 4 or above (UNICEF, 2019). Women always or usually stay at home with sick children (71.9%), put them to bed (42.7%), dress them (61.7%), or help them with homework (42.9%, Figure 3). The incidence of equal division of childcare responsibilities in the household strongly depends on the type of childcare activity. While in 54.2% of households putting children to bed is shared equally between parents, only in 25.7% of households parents equally often take care of a sick child. At the same time rarely is childcare only or mostly a man's obligation. In 7.4% of households it is the father who always or usually helps with homework. For other types of childcare activities, this percentage is even smaller. Notably, 57.8% of women and 74.2% of men expressed complete satisfaction related to the distribution of childcare responsibilities in their households, and 7% of women and 1.7% of men felt uncomfortable with that distribution.

Figure 3. Division of childcare between partners (%)



Source: GGS Belarus, 2017.

It should be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had an unequal effect on the amount of childcare provided by men and women in the household (UNFPA, 2020). The time devoted to childcare (dressing, playing, feeding) as well as children's education has grown at a substantially higher rate among women than men.

The determinants of inequalities in unpaid work

There are certain economic and social reasons behind the observed inequality in unpaid work in Belarus. First, a significant part of Belarus' society still supports traditional gender role models. 28.4% of the society supports the traditionally patriarchal role model, in which men are the breadwinners and women are the homemakers (UNFPA, 2018). Around 29.4% support the egalitarian relationship with an equal division of work and family responsibilities between partners. A partly-egalitarian model, where men and women are both breadwinners, but women are responsible for domestic work is supported by 28.8% of the society. These traditional attitudes



are also clearly visible in the existing stereotypes and social norms. According to the European Values Survey data, most Belarusians consider women to be better with kids (77% agreed or strongly agreed with such a statement) and believe that women should be responsible for child and home care (43% agreed or strongly agreed). At the same time men are viewed as better political leaders (55%). Many Belarusians also share views that it is more important for men to have a job (38%) and earn money (60%) than for women.

Secondly, the gender wage gap in Belarus had increased from 19.0% in 2000 to 27.4% in 2018 (Belstat, 2018b). The growing gender wage gap lowers women's opportunity costs for full-time employment resulting in a higher incentive to work fewer hours for pay and be more involved in unpaid household activities or to shift towards lower paid jobs accompanied by more flexibility in working hours. The gender gap in time use is feeding back into labor market outcomes as it becomes a factor further contributing to the increase of the gender pay gap and preventing equal access to economic opportunities and development (Fälth and Blackden, 2009). This feedback mechanism creates a vicious cycle – as women earn less due to the gender wage gap, they are more likely to shift towards household work, which in turn results in a higher wage gap..

Conclusion

Certain policies and reforms aimed at the reduction of the existing gender gap and transformation of the perception of gender roles lead to a more equal distribution of household responsibilities between partners (ILO, 2004). Moreover, these efforts have a positive impact on women, raising their productivity, professional development and labour market participation rate (Hegewisch and Williams-Baron, 2017), at the same time providing effective incentives for the

reduction of their involvement in unpaid domestic activities (Estévez-Abe and Hobson, 2015).

Among such policies one can name various awareness-raising and educational measures rupturing gender stereotypes and promoting equality in terms of sharing family responsibilities. In order to reduce the amount of domestic workload and raise the overall effectiveness it is vital to implement various labor-saving technologies. At the same time investments in the development of the affordable childcare infrastructure and daycare services are important. These investments are often accompanied by the provision of various tax subsidies, deductions or vouchers on daycare services. In Belarus the costs of childcare and food in kindergartens are partially subsidized by the government. However, the childcare infrastructure remains underdeveloped. According to the official statistics, while the present capacity of kindergartens for children 3 years and older is satisfactory, it covers only 40% of younger children (Belstat, 2019).

Promoting non-transferable paid parental leave can help increase fathers' involvement in childcare activities and has a positive impact on the development of women's careers and long-term equality (Nivorozhkin and Romeu-Gordo, 2019; Welteke and Wrolich, 2019). While paid maternity leaves in general have a positive impact for female labour force participation, the length of the leave is crucial – overextended periods of the leave may prevent women from going back to work. In Belarus, the current paid parental leave is as long as 3 years and is mostly taken by women (in 99% of families). There are ongoing public discussions on reducing the leave period, however, no clear actions have been implemented so far. Starting from 2020 another form of support appeared on the map: Belarus' men are allowed to take 14 days



of unpaid leave to look after a newborn child during the first 6 months after birth (Kodeksy-by). However, a lack of financial incentives may impede the success of this new instrument.

Flexible working arrangements, i.e. flexible working schedule, vacation time, teleworking, reduced daily hours, increase the possibility of entering the labor market for women as well as retaining work-life balance (Gender Equality Index, 2019). Finally, eliminating the gender wage gap and consequently raising women's opportunity costs of unpaid domestic work is beneficial for the reduction of women's involvement in domestic work. Decrease of the bulk of the domestic workload performed by women will in turn allow them to focus more on career development and will help decrease wage inequality (Matteazzi and Scherer, 2020).

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