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

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Latvian strengths and weaknesses in moving towards closing the gender gap in unpaid housework and care

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Abstract

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Page 3-7

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.

Latvian strengths and weaknesses in moving towards closing the gender gap in unpaid housework and care

Page 7-11

According to the Gender Equality Index Latvia is the second most equal country in the European Union in terms of gender gaps in the involvement of women and men in caring obligations, as well as their contribution to cooking and housework. In this brief I review Latvian strengths and weaknesses in moving towards closing the gender gap in unpaid housework and care. In particular, I show that despite widespread views in favor of gender equality in family life, the great burden of care and housework responsibilities is still shouldered by women in Latvian households.



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).

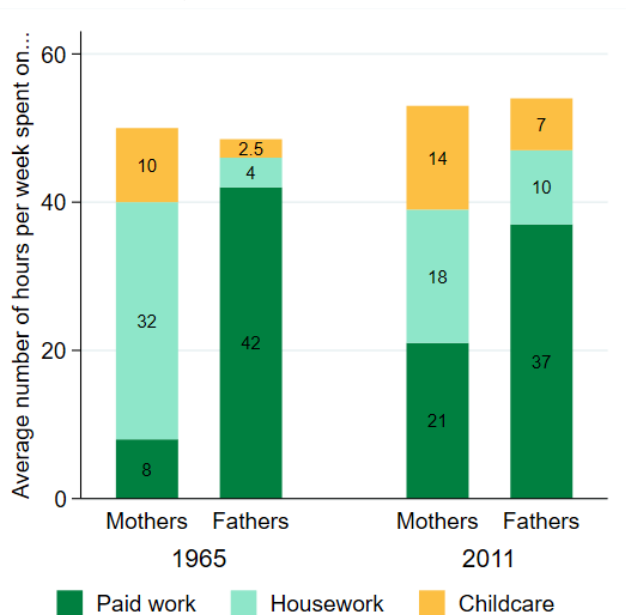
Is there evidence of convergence in domestic care responsibilities?

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; Garnero 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.

Latvian strengths and weaknesses in moving towards closing the gender gap in unpaid housework and care

According to the Gender Equality Index developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Latvia is the second most equal country in the European Union in terms of the gender gap in time use. Time use is reflected in one of subdomains of the Gender Equality Index, "Care activities", which measures the involvement of women and men in caring for and educating

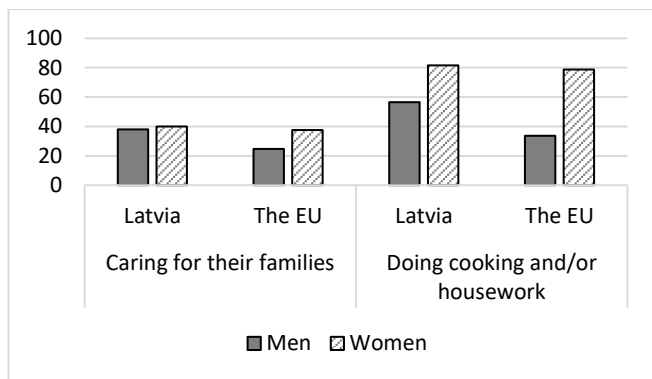
their children or grandchildren, caring for older and disabled people, as well as their contribution to cooking and housework. In Latvia the index score for the subdomain "Care activities" is only slightly lower than in Sweden, which has the highest score in the EU, significantly higher than the EU-average (the score in Latvia – 89.8, Sweden – 90.0, the EU – 70.0; scores of 1 for total inequality to 100 for perfect equality).

In Latvia women and men take almost equal responsibility for caring duties in their families. 38.0% of men and 39.9% of women are involved daily in at least one of the caring activities outside of paid work, such as caring for children, grandchildren, elderly and people with disabilities (Figure 1). Slightly less men than women are involved in housework on a daily basis (81.7% of women vs. 56.6% of men). Nevertheless, Figure 1 shows that Latvian men are much more likely to be involved in both caring and housework activities on a daily basis than men in EU countries on average. In the case of women, the percentages for Latvia only slightly exceed the EU-average.

Moreover, since 2005 Latvia showed significant progress in achieving gender equality in the subdomain of "Care activities". Latvia's score has increased by 12.3 points, while the EU average score has increased only by 0.1 points.

Figure 1. Percentage of men and women involved daily in caring activities and cooking and/or housework





Note: "Caring for their families" includes caring for and educating children or grandchildren, elderly or people with disabilities. The data for 18+ population for 2016. The scores for the domain of time and its subdomain "Care activities" have not been updated since 2017. The next data update for this domain is expected in 2021.

Source: European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020.

Attitudes towards gender roles

These positive developments have roots in steadily changing social norms in Latvia. The Latvian population has shown a fairly clear trend towards equality in terms of individuals' views regarding gender roles (Trapeznikova et al., 2019). While the older generation tends to hold more traditional gender role attitudes, there is a significantly higher proportion of the younger generation who believe that housework and family care responsibilities should be shared equally between men and women. Education also matters: individuals with a higher level of education are more likely on average to hold egalitarian views regarding the roles of men and women.

Stereotypical attitudes towards the division of roles in the family are shared only by a small portion of the population. For example, only 19% of respondents of the survey conducted in August 2020 agreed with the statement that raising a child is primarily a mother's responsibility. Similarly, only 30% of respondents agreed with the statement that in a good family the father earns

money, but the mother takes care of the children (OMG Latvia Snapshot, 2020).

Division of housework and childcare responsibilities?

The widespread views supporting gender equality in family life are reflected in the actual division of housework responsibilities: 93% of women and 75% of men report doing cooking and performing housework at least several days a week. But women spend on average 17 hours per week on these activities, which is 30% more than men (Eurofound, 2016). The division of responsibilities for cleaning the house between men and women is even more equal (OMG Snapshot, 2019): in 2019, 98% of women and 86% of men performed home cleaning chores on a regular basis.

While men are increasingly more engaged in childcare, they still devote less time to these duties than women. In the majority of households, mothers are always or usually the only ones who help their children get dressed (in 63% of households), put them to sleep (57%), or help them with homework (50%). In about 40% of households fathers share these tasks equally with mothers. A more equal division of childcare is reported by households where both parents work (Trapeznikova et al., 2019). In about 80% of households mothers are always or usually the ones who care for children when they get sick (Trapeznikova et al., 2019). Although the majority of recipients of the sickness benefit for caring for a sick child are women, the share of men is gradually increasing over time: from 21.6% in 2012 to 30.1% in 2020 (SSIA statistics published by Central Statistical Bureau, 2020).



With regard to childcare, lone parenthood is an important part of the Latvian context as single-parent families with at least one minor child make up more than half of Latvian families with children (54.7% in 2021, author's calculations based on Central Statistical Bureau data). Fathers are involved in childcare in only 52% of single-parent families (OMG Latvia Snapshot, 2020), which is partly related to the fact that after separation or divorce children live primarily with one parent, usually the mother. A study based on the analysis of Latvian courts over the course of three years before 2020 (Saulītis, 2020) shows that on average the court assigns 15% of a child's total time endowment to be spent with a non-resident father. Though increasingly more fathers demand equal childcare rights after divorce and want to be more than just "weekend fathers", according to court rulings only one third received the right to have their child stay overnight. In more than half of the cases, the court ruled that regular meetings were not more frequent than once in every two weeks.

Parental leave policies in Latvia

In Latvia, municipal pre-primary education institutions admit children from the age of 1.5 years. Until the child reaches this age, Latvian legislation provides equal rights to insured parents to paid parental leave, as well as adding the duration of leave to parents' work experience and the right to return to their prior position at work.

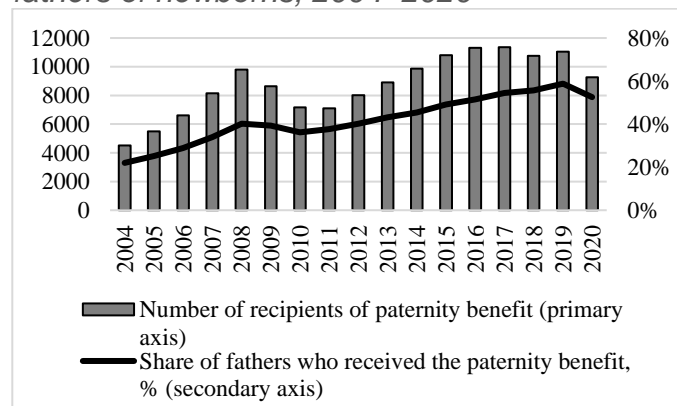
In Latvia, there are two benefits which are paid to one of a newborn's parents: the parental benefit and the childcare benefit. The childcare benefit is paid to all parents, regardless of their employment

status, during the first two years following childbirth. A more generous parental benefit is paid to insured parent in the first year (or 1.5 years) after birth. The rules allow for a change of the recipient of the parental benefit, thus both parents can take paid parental leave in turns.

An increasing number of fathers use their right to the parental benefit (Central Statistical Bureau, 2020). In 2019, 18.6% of unique recipients of the parental benefit were fathers, and the majority of them (77.7%) continued to work and thus received the parental benefit of reduced amount (LV portals, 2020). Since this is allowed by regulations, the possible motivation for the fathers to take up the parental benefit is a financial advantage (e.g. if the mother did not have a paid job before childbirth).

Insured fathers are also entitled to 10 days of paid paternity leave and the paternity benefit, granted no later than two months after the child's birth. More than half of the fathers of newborns use the right to paternity leave and this proportion increased significantly since 2004 when the benefit was introduced (from 22.0% to 52.6% in 2020; see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Take-up of paternity benefit among fathers of newborns, 2004–2020



Note: Share of fathers of newborn children who received the paternity benefit is calculated as the number of recipients of paternity benefit to the number of live births.



Source: SSIA and Central Statistical Bureau.

Access to formal childcare and care services for older persons

While Latvian parental leave policies seem to have a positive impact on the amount of time that fathers spend with their newborn children, the limited availability of public childcare institutions may have an opposite effect and increase gender inequality in childcare. Long waiting lists for kindergartens remain a problem in a number of municipalities in Latvia, including Riga. In 2019, 27.2% of children below the age of three and 75.3% of children from the age of three to the minimum compulsory school age were enrolled in formal childcare for at least 30 hours per week (Eurostat). Unmet needs for formal childcare push women to fill the gap. For example, in 2020 every third (31.7%) economically inactive woman aged 25-49 reported not seeking employment due to the need to provide care to children or adults with disabilities (Eurostat).

In Latvia 21.7% of adult women and 19.3% of adult men are engaged in caring for older persons and/or persons with disabilities at least several times a week (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020). Although the gender gap is slightly lower than in the EU, the proportion of women and men with informal care responsibilities is significantly higher than on average in the EU – by 7.1 p.p. for women and by 9.5 p.p. for men, reflecting significant unmet needs for professional home care services faced by Latvian households.

Conclusion

With a much higher share of men involved in caring and housework activities on a daily bases

than on average in the EU countries, Latvia is the second most equal country in the EU in terms of care activities. The widespread views of the Latvian population in support of gender equality in family life are reflected in particular in the actual division of housework responsibilities. Though the division of childcare responsibilities in the household is still not perfectly equal, the involvement of fathers and their willingness to participate in childcare activities increased over time. Latvian parental leave policies proved to be an effective way of increasing fathers' engagement in newborns' childcare. However, better access to formal childcare services and formal care services for older persons could help address the needs of Latvian families and contribute to reducing the burden of care responsibilities, still to a greater extent shouldered by Latvian women.

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