

# **FROGEE POLICY BRIEF 4**

## **Insights from Russia**

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

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Persisting gender inequality in the division of domestic work in Russia

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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.

## Persisting gender inequality in the division of domestic work in Russia

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Modern Russia inherited a high rate of female workforce participation and educational attainment from the Soviet Union. Yet social norms and attitudes toward domestic work remained largely patriarchal. The transition to the market economy widened the gender gap in unpaid work as households adjusted to the changing incentives via deeper specialization. Today, women in Russian cities and in the countryside alike still bear the majority of the unpaid work in their households, though a slow evolution in social norms can be observed.



## 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).

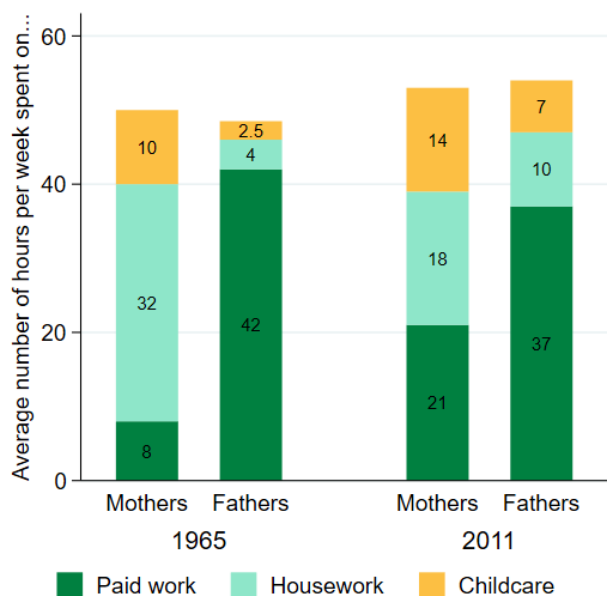
### Is there evidence of convergence in domestic care responsibilities?

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.



## Persisting gender inequality in the division of domestic work in Russia

The allocation of labor within a household, including domestic unpaid work, depends on the opportunities of all the household members and on the bargaining power within a household. We need to consider a complex problem that each person in every household must resolve: which occupation to choose, how many hours to work outside of the home, and how to share the childcare duties and the domestic work. All of these decisions are made jointly, with men and women considering various aspects of their welfare and different opportunity costs and arriving at a solution, which we observe in the data, and which is often considered in economics as the outcome of an implicit bargaining process inside a family. Existing social norms and customs heavily affect the opportunities and trade-offs faced by partners, as well as the status-quo. Yet social norms also evolve. In order to understand the gender bias in the allocation of domestic work in Russia, we need to take into account all these factors.

We start with the background that Russian families come from: with the history of female education, labor force participation and family attitudes in the USSR and in post-Soviet transitional period. Then we consider the evidence for the recent evolution of social norms. The last section concludes.

### Soviet background and the transition

Social norms and traditions of labor division in Russia are deeply rooted in the Soviet era and the challenges of the economic transition of the 1990s. Contrary to the Soviet ideological stance, women

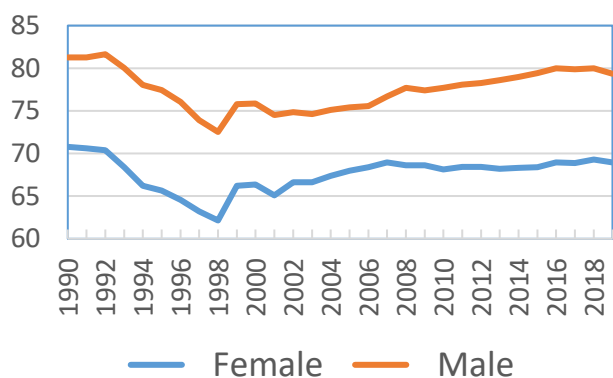
did not achieve economic equality under socialism. The female formal labor force participation rate in the Soviet Union was on par or higher than in the developed Western countries – in 1990 almost 71% for the ages 15-64. However, keeping in mind that the official retirement age was 55 years for women, the female labor force participation rate for the productive age was close to 90%. In the late Soviet years women exceeded their male counterparts in educational attainment. To give an example, according to the Microcensus of population of 1994, 18.9% men and 23.9% women born between 1965-1969 completed higher education. However, this did not translate into equal economic opportunities for both genders. By the end of the 1980s a woman in the USSR earned on average about 2/3 of a man's salary and through all the Soviet history women were underrepresented in positions of power (Firsova, 2021). Commonly held views of gender roles in a family were still predominantly traditional. Equally traditional was the division of unpaid household labor: citing earlier work, Zadornova mentions that in the 1980s women with children did five times more housework than men (Задорнова Ю. , 2013). Thus, most Russian women faced the double burden of paid employment and unpaid work at home.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the commencement of the transition to the market economy, Russian families at the beginning of the 1990s faced radically changing incentives. The transitional shock led to a sharp decline in the labor force participation rate of both men and women (see **Błąd! Nie można odnaleźć źródła odwołania.**). Researchers hypothesized that women, as a less protected group, should have suffered more in the transitional recession and the drop in earning capacity should have led to even greater inequality in the division of unpaid work.



To test this hypothesis, a number of studies traced the evolution of norms, attitudes and the actual gender gap in labor market outcomes and in domestic work during the post-transitional period.

*Figure 1. Labor force participation rate for men and women aged 15-64 in Russia, 1990-2019 (in %)*



Source: World Development Indicators DataBank, retrieved on October 31, 2021.

Katz and Sand analyze two waves of the household survey in the provincial industrial city of Taganrog, Russia (Katz and Sand, 2008). Surveys were conducted in 1989 and in 1998, thus the authors were able to trace the changes in the gender division of labor during the transition from the Soviet system to the market economy. This period includes the sharpest decline in formal labor force participation. The authors hypothesized that women should have experienced a greater decrease in formal employment and a shift toward an even higher share of unpaid household labor. Surprisingly, the authors find that the drop in labor force participation from 1989 to 1998 was comparable for men and women – that is, the burden of transitional unemployment was similar for both genders. The dual-earner household remained a social norm. Yet employed men and women adjusted their working hours differently. Men increased their hours in paid employment, while women worked fewer hours for pay, and did more

unpaid household work in 1998. That is, the households in Taganrog responded to changing market incentives by strengthening within-household specialization. Men, having a higher earning capacity and bargaining power, specialized in employment outside the home, while women specialized in child care and unpaid work, reducing hours of outside employment and choosing occupations with shorter workdays. The allocation of unpaid labor was already unequal at the beginning of the transition, and it became even more unequal by the end of the 1990s.

While families may reallocate a greater share of domestic labor to the partner who works fewer hours outside of home (most often, the wife), the reverse is also true. Women, faced with the expectations and the demands of childcare and household duties, rationally choose (or are forced to choose) the professions that allow flexible hours, but pay less. Thus, occupational segregation and the unequal division of unpaid labor are locked in a circular causality and may reinforce each other. Klimova and Ross studied the changes in occupational segregation from 1994 to 2001 (Klimova and Ross, 2012). They conclude that the shifts in male and female employment in different sectors during the transition did not bring more women into higher-paid professions, and did not foster occupational equality. Rather the opposite, men started to enter lucrative, previously female-dominated professions, while women were pushed out. Overall, the labor market was becoming more, not less, segregated.

### Social norms and the reality

Another body of sociological literature considers social norms and attitudes toward gender roles in relation to the family model in modern Russia. Zadornova proposes a typology of “family models” – attitudes towards gender roles in a family that also determine the “proper” allocation





of domestic unpaid labor (Задворнова Ю. , 2013). A “Soviet family model” is the traditional Russian norm of a “double burden”: a woman works for pay, and she also carries the bulk of the household duties. In a “neopatriarchal” family the husband is the primary breadwinner and decision maker, and the wife has practically no say inside a household. “Dual-career” and “egalitarian” families are supposed to share the domestic duties equally.

Going further, Zadvornova (2013) considers a 2012 survey of 1200 households in the city of Ivanovo, Russia. She contrasts the self-reported “family model” that respondents feel best describes their household with the actual allocation of domestic duties. Zadvornova’s conclusions are somewhat surprising. She finds that 69% of all families claim that their family is egalitarian. Only 4.5% of families in the survey self-classified as “neopatriarchal”. So Russian families predominantly hold liberal views on gender equality at home, yet the actual allocation of household duties in these families is strikingly unequal. Women perform most of the everyday domestic chores, which are typically viewed as the wife’s duty. Husbands’ regular domestic duties mostly include occasional repairs. Men spend much less time on and have fewer responsibilities in the household. The actual “family model” in a Russian provincial city is still predominantly “Soviet” – just like in the Soviet times, women’s dual work and home burden is a widespread norm.

In a follow-up paper, Zadvornova summarizes the evolution of survey responses from different regions of Russia from the beginning of 2000s to the Ivanovo survey in 2012 (Задворнова Ю. С., 2014). She points out that various surveys from 2000, 2003, and 2006 show that the share of “patriarchal” family views gradually declined, and families more and more often identified

themselves as egalitarian. However, the “Soviet” model in the division of household duties persists: women perform most of the labor-intensive and time-consuming everyday domestic tasks, with no visible change toward equality. Thus, the evolution of social norms toward gender equality within families, which is gradually taking place in Russian society, has not yet led to a more equal allocation of unpaid domestic labor in practice.

### More inequality in rural households

An additional dimension of gender inequality in domestic work can be found in rural households. The amount of everyday work required to support a household in the countryside is larger than in a city, and the informal sector plays a bigger role in the rural economy in Russia. Wegren et al. (2017) draw on a number of surveys, interviews and published statistical data to examine the characteristics of gender inequality in the contemporary Russian countryside, and its evolution in the period of 1995 – 2013 (Wegren, Nikulin, Trotsuk and Golovina, 2017).

Rural households in Russia devote a significant part of their time and resources to the production of food: gardening, animal care and selling the extra produce are typical household chores. Authors point out traditional gender inequality in these tasks. Women used to spend more time than men on gardening: three times as much in 1975, twice as much in 1980, about 50% more in 1988. The latest survey from 2008 once again shows a two times bigger burden on women compared to men. Women also bear most of the housekeeping duties and food preparation tasks. Other household duties (animal care and sales of produce) are shared somewhat more equally, but not enough to compensate for the inequality overall. While there was some progress in the last 40 years, the allocation of domestic labor in the countryside remains very unequal today. As



mentioned above, the sheer volume of domestic work is greater in rural households, and, additionally, outside options for women's employment are more limited.

The authors note a peculiar characteristic of the Russian rural households: women are rarely listed as owners of common property, and the land and the house usually formally belong to the husband, not the wife. Privatization of common land after the breakup of the Soviet Union did not distribute land equally between both genders – men were given formal ownership in the majority of cases. Women in the Russian countryside work more, yet own nothing.

## Conclusion

Summing up, gender inequality in the division of domestic labor in Russia still largely follows a "Soviet" tradition. It is considered a norm for women to be double burdened: working full-time outside of home while performing most of the domestic duties and being responsible for child and old age care. Inequality in unpaid labor is even greater in rural areas. While there is some evolution of social norms toward greater equality, it has not yet translated into a more equal allocation of unpaid home labor. On the level of the policy debate in Russia, as of today, gender inequality in unpaid work is not even considered an issue. Overall, it is still a long road toward more equality ahead.

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