

Economic empowerment

Time spent in unpaid work; total work burden; and work-life balance



Key points

- On an average day, women spend about three times as many hours on unpaid domestic work and care work as men.
- Preliminary data from five developed countries on the activities of working parents during the Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic show that while both women and men spent twice as much time on unpaid domestic work and care work during the pandemic, women still spent about two more hours per day than men on these activities.
- Gender inequality in the amount of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work is lowest in developed regions (where women spend twice as much time on domestic work as men) and the greatest in Northern Africa and Western Asia (where women spend more than seven times as much as men on unpaid domestic and care work).
- Compared to domestic work, there is less variance in the proportion of time spent on unpaid care work between the regions (around 50 minutes per day for women and 20 minutes per day for men, on average).
- In 65% of countries with comparable trend data disaggregated by sex and age category over the period 2001–2018, a small decrease has been observed in the time spent by women on unpaid domestic and care work relative to that spent by men.
- The value of unpaid work represents a substantial portion of gross domestic product (GDP) (20% to 60%) in selected countries producing estimates of the (economic) value of unpaid domestic and care work and volunteer work.
- On average, women spend about 38 more minutes per day on total work or the sum of paid and unpaid work than men, with far less variability across the regions than what is observed in terms of unpaid domestic work and care work.
- The highest proportion of countries that have ratified the ILO conventions on the reconciliation of work and family life are in developed regions, followed by a proportion of countries in the Latin America and the Caribbean region.

Unpaid domestic work and care work

Women continue to bear more responsibilities at home and perform most unpaid work, including taking care of children and other adult household members, cooking, cleaning and other housework.

Based on data from 89 countries for the period 2001–2018, using the latest available data and the broadest age category (people aged 15 and older) for each country, on an average day, women spend about three times as many hours in unpaid domestic work and care work as men — 4.2 hours per day for women compared to 1.7 hours per day for men.

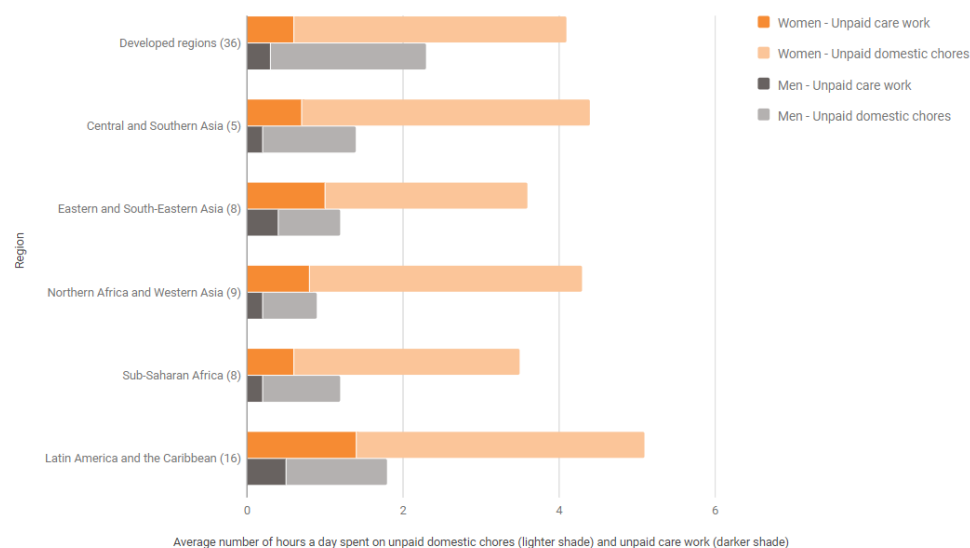
At the regional level (see figure I), countries in developed regions have the most equal distribution of unpaid domestic work and care work: women spend about 4 hours per day versus 2 hours per day for men, or twice as much time, on such activities. Countries in Northern Africa and Western Asia have the greatest level of gender

inequality in unpaid domestic work and care work: women in the region spend about 4 hours per day versus 54 minutes per day for men, or more than seven times as much.

In terms of gender differences between the amount of time spent on unpaid domestic work and care work across countries, the most egalitarian situation for women is in Sweden, where women do almost an hour more work per day than men (four hours per day for women versus three hours per day for men), and the least egalitarian situation is in Pakistan, where women spend 11 times more time on domestic work than men (almost five hours per day for women and less than half an hour per day for men).

In 24 out of the 37 countries (65%) with comparable trend data disaggregated by sex and age category over the period 2001–2018, a small decrease in the amount of time spent by women on unpaid domestic and care work relative to that spent by men has been observed in recent years.

Figure I: Amount of time spent by women and men on unpaid domestic work and unpaid care work in hours per day, averaged by region: 2001–2018 (latest available)



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Statistics Division, Global SDG Indicators Database (accessed in June 2020) (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/>).

Domestic work takes up the majority of time spent on unpaid work

Women in all regions worldwide spend a significantly higher portion of their day on domestic work, such as cleaning or cooking, totaling approximately 3.4 hours per day, while men spend, on average, 1.4 hours per day. In contrast, there is less variability between regions and by sex in unpaid care work devoted to caring for children or parents, although, on average, women still devote a higher percentage of their day to these activities than men (roughly 50 minutes per day for women compared to 20 minutes per day for men). These data suggest that, in general, women and men divide their time more equally in caring activities than they do in domestic ones, although this is not the case in all regions (see figure I). It should also be noted that caring activities are difficult to measure accurately as they often overlap with other activities.

At the regional level (see figure I), Developed Regions has the most equal distribution of unpaid care work (women spend about 38 minutes per day on unpaid care, men about 18), and Northern Africa and Western Asia

has the greatest gender inequality, with women spending more than six times as much time on unpaid care work than men (48 minutes per day for women and 12 minutes per day for men, on average).

At the country level, Honduras, where women spend about 26 minutes per day on unpaid care and men 20 minutes, presents the most egalitarian situation. The least egalitarian situation is in Qatar, where women spend 14 times more time on unpaid care work than men (approximately half an hour per day for women and two minutes per day for men, on average). Stories on the [income of the employed population and unpaid work time, time spent on unpaid work of young people](#) and [income poverty and time poverty](#) provide in-depth analysis of the amount of time spent on unpaid work in Latin America.

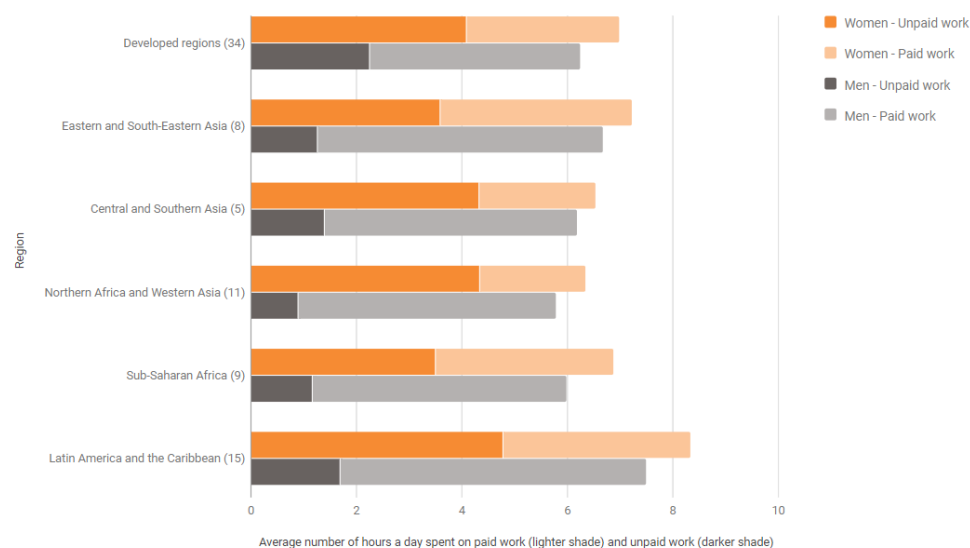
Total work burden on women and men: similar hours, different tasks

The total work burden is the average number of hours spent per day doing both paid and unpaid work. Unpaid work refers to unpaid domestic work, care work as well as community or volunteer work, while [paid work](#) refers to work activities for which a person earns a payment or makes a profit. Based on data from 82 countries for the period 2001–2018, on average, women spend slightly under 7 hours per day and men about 6 hours and 20 minutes per day doing paid and unpaid work, resulting in women working 38 extra minutes each day.

At the regional level (see figure II), gender differences in terms of the total work burden are not large. The smallest gender differences were in Central and Southern Asia (where both men and women work about 6.5 hours, on average, with women working 21 extra minutes per day) and in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (where both men and women work about 7 hours, on average, with women working 33 extra minutes per day). The largest gender differences were observed in Sub-Saharan Africa, where women work almost 7 hours per day and men 6 hours per day, with women working extra 53 minutes per day. The composition of the total work burden differed by gender, however, with women in all regions spending more time on unpaid work and men spending more time on paid work.

Thus, although the gender gap in total work is minor, it is not a real indication of gender equality: as discussed above, despite indications of improvement over time, women still spend, on average, 3 times as many hours per day as men, and sometimes as much as 11 times more (in Pakistan), on unpaid work. These data indicate that men continue to spend more time than women in paid jobs, while women continue to spend more time at home performing unpaid care work and unpaid domestic work (see figure II). While the gender difference in the average amount of time spent on total work is not as dramatic as for unpaid work, it should not be ignored. Consistently working an hour more every day than one's partner can affect women's physical and mental health and well-being. [Colombia's story](#) on unpaid and paid work provides a country-level analysis of the situation.

Figure II: Total work burden in hours per day spent on paid and unpaid work by region and sex: 2001-2018 (latest available)



Source: UNDESA, Statistics Division, United Nations Portal on Minimum Set of Gender Indicators (accessed in June 2020)
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/capacity-development/tools/tool/portal-on-minimum-set-of-gender-indicators/>

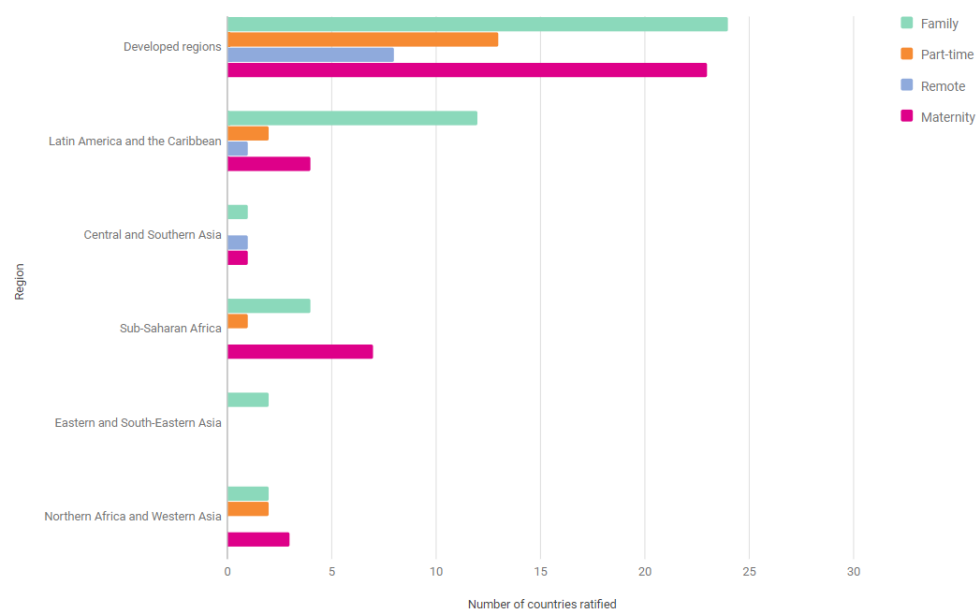
ILO conventions on the reconciliation of work and family life

Giving women and men the opportunity to make a conscious decision about how much time to spend on caring for family members, domestic work and career development is important for gender equality. In the absence of provisions in the workplace that grant employees the flexibility to effectively combine paid work and unavoidable unpaid work, women and men may end up stuck in traditional gender roles. In this regard, there are four conventions adopted by ILO that address the reconciliation of work and family life: ILO Convention No. 156 (adopted in 1981) (Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention), which prohibits discrimination of workers based on their family status and calls upon employers to take the needs of such workers into account, including by providing childcare; ILO Convention No. 175 (adopted in 1994) (Part-Time Work Convention), which calls upon employers to provide the equivalent conditions to their part-time employees that are enjoyed by their full-time employees, such as social security, equal hourly wages and the bargaining rights; ILO Convention No. 177 (adopted in 1996) (Home Work Convention), created to improve the employment situation of homeworkers, or as more commonly called, remote workers, by advocating for their equal treatment with onsite employees, including remuneration and access to social security; and ILO Convention No. 183 (adopted in 2000) (Maternity Protection Convention), which advocates for the provision of maternity leave for pregnant and nursing women. Collectively, the ratification of these four conventions promotes gender equality as it allows people to continue to participate in the workforce to the degree that they desire regardless of their family obligations.

Overall, more countries in Developed Regions have ratified¹ the ILO conventions on the reconciliation of work and family life (see figure III), followed by a number of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Among countries in Central and Southern Asia and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, very few have ratified the ILO conventions, while among countries in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) not one single ILO convention has been ratified. In terms of specific conventions, ILO Convention No. 156 (Workers with Family

Responsibilities Convention) has been ratified by 45 countries and ILO Convention No. 183 (Maternity Protection Convention) has been ratified by 38 countries. In contrast, ILO Convention No. 175 (Part-Time Work Convention) has been ratified by only 18 countries and ILO Convention No. 177 (Home-Work Convention) by only 10 countries. These data indicate that countries are more supportive of maternity leave and the equal treatment of employees, regardless of their family status, than the equality of part-time workers or remote workers with regular full-time onsite employees. These conventions should not be overlooked by countries since working part time or from home enables women to participate in the workforce when conventional full-time employment is incompatible with their family situation.

Figure III: Ratification of ILO conventions on the reconciliation of work and family life by region and convention: April 2020



Source: International Labour Organization (ILO), NORMLEX Information System on International Labour Standards (<https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/?n=NORMI:EXPUR:1:0>) (accessed in April 2020).

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic is radically changing how people, particularly women, spend their time — sometimes with a negative impact on their well-being. The national statistical offices of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Italy have collected data on time use during the COVID-19 lockdown. In the United Kingdom² it was found that, although there is still a gender gap in unpaid work, with women continuing to do more unpaid household work and childcare than men, there was an observed increase in the proportion of men performing these tasks compared to the period before the pandemic. Thus, the gender gap in the average time spent on unpaid domestic and care work has been reduced during the pandemic (pre-COVID-19, just over two hours per day for men and almost four hours per day for women; during COVID-19, almost 2.5 hours per day for men and about 3.5 hours per day for women). Similarly, although men report spending more time on paid work than women, the gender gap has been reduced during COVID-19 (pre-COVID-19, about 3 hours and twenty minutes per day for men and over 2 hours per day for women, with men working an hour and six minutes more per day; during COVID-19, just under 3 hours per day for men and just over two hours per day for women, with men working 47 minutes more per day, on average). Both men and women reported having more free time for

entertainment and socializing during the pandemic, and the gender gap with regard to those activities was also reduced (with men still reporting spending more time on entertainment and socializing than women). The questions in the survey undertaken by Italy's National Institute of Statistics³ were mainly qualitative (asking people if they spent the same/more/less time on certain activities compared to pre-COVID-19). Overall, 67.2% of respondents reported devoting more time to unpaid care work (both mothers and fathers) than prior to COVID-19. The story on the [lockdown and gender in Italy](#) provides more specific details at the country level.

While data from national statistical offices on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the use of time are still scarce, a recent survey done by the Boston Consulting Group in France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States of America found that since the advent of COVID-19 the amount of time spent on unpaid work has doubled for both working women and men who have children. Nevertheless, on average, women spent 15 hours more per week, or just over two hours more per day, on unpaid domestic and care work compared to men, a marked increase over the 10 hours or more per week (about 1.5 hours more per day) prior to the pandemic.⁴ In early May 2020, a poll of 18 countries conducted by Ipsos,⁵ revealed that women have taken on a lot more responsibility for household domestic work and care of children and family during the pandemic. Across the 18 countries, on average, women were 4% more likely than men to say that they strongly agreed that their care load had increased during the pandemic. Mexico had the largest gender gap in responses, with 53% of women strongly agreeing with the statement, compared to only 41% of men.⁶ Additional data collected by the United Nations Entity on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) for six countries in Asia tells a similar story: unpaid domestic and care work has intensified during the pandemic, and women continue to take on the majority of it. In addition, women are also more likely than men to report that they are in charge of unpaid childcare, unpaid adult care and unpaid domestic work, while men tend to focus on tasks like shopping for the household, making repairs and playing with children, which, overall, are less time consuming.⁷

The value of unpaid work represents up to 60% of gross domestic product (GDP) in selected countries

In addition to measuring time spent on unpaid domestic work, there is a strong argument for measuring its monetary value. Conventional statistics grossly understate the total contribution of women to the economy using traditional macroeconomic indicators, such as the gross domestic product (GDP), and do not account for unpaid work or unpaid household service work, about two-thirds of which are performed by women.⁸ At the international level, it has been widely acknowledged⁹ that proper recognition and valuation of unpaid household service work would help to uncover hidden aspects of the economy and raise vital policy issues that have long remained invisible.

While not many countries estimate the economic value of unpaid work, the results from the ones that do demonstrate the significant value of domestic work and care work. For example, the value of unpaid household service work conducted in Australia relative to GDP ranks second highest among all other economic activities in the country, and in 2006, the value of unpaid household service work ranged from \$416 billion to \$586 billion, representing 41.6% to 58.7% of national GDP for that year.¹⁰ In the Republic of Moldova, it was found that, on average, the monthly value of unpaid household service work in 2014 was 4.1 billion Moldovan leu. For the whole year, the estimated value of unpaid household service work was 48.9 billion Moldovan leu or about \$3.5 billion, representing 43.6% of the national GDP in 2014.¹¹ In Switzerland, the monetary value of all unpaid household service work in 2013 was estimated at 401 billion Swiss francs (SwF), or 63% of the country's GDP for that year (estimated at about 635 billion SwF). Unpaid domestic work alone amounted to approximately 267 billion SwF (67% of the total value of unpaid work). Unpaid care work carried out at home were estimated at 93 billion SwF (23% of the total value of unpaid work) and formal and informal voluntary work at 41 billion SwF (10% of the total

value). Work done by women in Switzerland accounted for 60% of the total value of unpaid work overall: this percentage varied depending on the field of activity, amounting to 61% for unpaid domestic work, approximately 62% for unpaid care work and 52% for voluntary work.¹² In Latin America, it is estimated that the value of unpaid work is between 15.2% of GDP in Ecuador and 25.3% of GDP in Costa Rica.¹³ The story about the situation of women and men in [Mexico](#) provides an in-depth analysis of the economic value of unpaid work.

About the data

Definitions

- **Unpaid domestic work:** Refers to unpaid activities related to the maintenance of the household, including food preparation, dishwashing, cleaning, upkeep of the home, laundry, ironing, gardening, caring for pets, shopping, installation servicing and repair of personal and household goods
- **Unpaid care work:** Refers to unpaid activities for the purpose of taking care of others, which includes childcare and care of the sick, older persons or disabled household members.
- **Total work burden of women and men:** Combines both paid and unpaid work
 - **Paid work:** Refers to work-related activities in formal or informal employment for pay or profit
 - **Unpaid work:** Includes both unpaid domestic work and unpaid care work (described above), as well as community or volunteer work related to domestic work or care.
- **ILO Convention No. 156 (adopted in 1981) (Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention):** Aims to promote equality of opportunity and treatment in the labour market for women and men with family responsibilities. The Convention applies to women and men workers with responsibilities for their dependent children or other members of their immediate family who need their care or support.¹⁴
- **ILO Convention No. 175 (adopted in 1994) (Part-Time Work Convention):** Recognizes the importance of productive and freely chosen employment for all workers, as well as the economic importance of part-time work.¹⁵
- **ILO Convention No. 177 (adopted in 1996) (Home Work Convention):** Aims to improve the employment situation of homeworkers (presently called remote workers).¹⁶
- **ILO Convention No. 183 (adopted in 2000) (Maternity Protection Convention):** Aims to improve the employment situation of mothers or expectant mothers.¹⁷

Coverage

- **Unpaid care work:** Data are available for 89 countries¹⁸ for the period 2001–2018 (the latest available year for each country was used): data presented for this indicator are expressed as a percentage of time spent per day on unpaid domestic work and care work (for a portion of the narrative, data were converted into hours spent per day).¹⁹
- **Total work burden:** Data are available for 82 countries for the period 2001–2018 (using the

latest available year for each country).²⁰ Data presented for this indicator are expressed as an average number of hours per day. Countries are organized by **regional groupings** under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicators framework.

- **ILO Conventions:** ILO compiles a list of countries that adopt each convention and updates it regularly, including the dates of adoption and the dates they go into effect. The list is available on the website of the NORMLEX Information System on International Labour Standards.²¹

Footnotes

1. For the purpose of the present review, countries that have ratified the ILO Convention without it yet being in force are also included in the list of ratified countries.
2. Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Office for National Statistics, "Coronavirus and how people spent their time under lockdown: 28 March to 26 April 2020".
3. Government of Italy, National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), "Day-diary and activities during Coronavirus-19" (Italian original).
4. Krentz, M., Kos, E., Green, A. and Garcia-Alonso, J., "Easing the COVID-19 Burden on Working Parents", Boston Consulting Group, 21 May 2020.
5. Ipsos is a multinational market research company based in Paris.
6. Azcona, G., Bhatt, A. and Love, K., "Ipsos survey confirms that COVID-19 is increasing women's workload at home", United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), 9 July 2020.
7. United Nations Entity on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), Surveys show that COVID-19 has gendered effects in Asia and the Pacific, April 2020 (section on unpaid care and domestic work).
8. Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), Guide on Valuing Unpaid Household Service Work, New York and Geneva, 2017.
9. UNDESA, Statistics Division, SDG Indicators, metadata repository.
10. Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), Guide on Valuing Unpaid Household Service Work, New York and Geneva, 2017.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Repository of information on time use in Latin America and the Caribbean, Santiago, 2019.
14. International Labour Organization (ILO) Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention.
15. ILO Part-Time Work Convention.
16. ILO Home-Work Convention.
17. ILO Maternity Protection Convention.
18. Countries collecting time-use statistics around the world use different methods, which may affect the comparability of data across countries. Ongoing methodological developments will improve data harmonization and international comparability: see United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Statistics Division, Demographic and Social Statistics: United Nations Expert Group on Innovative and Expert Ways to Collect Time-Use Statistics.
19. See also UNDESA, Statistics Division, Global SDGs Indicators Database, which presents metadata on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
20. Data for latest available year for each country for the period 2001–2018; some countries had data for earlier periods.
21. ILO, Normalex Information System on International Labour Standards.