SHE WORKS, BUT IT DOES NOT COUNT: THE HIDDEN ECONOMY OF WOMEN'S UNPAID LABOR

By Wanjiku Gachara.

At 5:00 a.m., before the sun rises over her village in Nyeri, Mary Wanjiku is already up. She boils water, cooks sweet potatoes for her four children, sweeps the compound, prepares her husband's sorghum porridge in a bowl, and washes clothes —all before 8:00 a.m. The day continues with errands, tending to a small vegetable garden, fetching firewood, ironing the husband's clothes to prepare for the next work day, and making supper. By 9:00 p.m., when the house settles into silence and the husband and children have retired to bed, Mary is exhausted. Yet when asked if she works, she often answers, "No, I'm just a housewife." Is she just a housewife?

This response is not just a reflection of humility; it is the result of centuries of social conditioning and structural neglect. In Kenya, and around the world, millions of women like Mary are unpaid caregivers, the backbone of society and the economy, yet their labour is invisible, undervalued, and excluded from national accounting. Not only from national accounting but also from the dear husband's recognition and acknowledgement. Most of the men will say "I left her at home, *anapumzika tu, si unajua hana kazi*".

Cooking, cleaning, caregiving, splitting firewood, and providing emotional support are just a few examples of the unpaid care work that Kenyan women do daily. These are the wheels of work that keep on rolling so that Wanjiku's husband in the formal sector can get to work on time, clean and full. According to a 2022 KNBS Gender Sector Statistics Fact Sheet, women in Kenya spend on average 13.2 hours per day on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to just 5.2 hours for men.[1] This work is essential. Without it, families would collapse, children wouldn't be fed or educated, the elderly would go uncared for, and the economy would grind to a halt. But because it happens in the home and is not exchanged for wages, it is not considered "real work" and is often termed as *"kazi ya mwanamke".* Article 27 of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010, recognizes equality and non-discrimination as a fundamental freedom. However, the labour of women like Mary, though foundational, remains economically invisible.[2]

[1] https://www.knbs.or.ke/reports/women-and-men-in-kenya-facts-and-figures-2022/

[2] Article 27, Constitution of Kenya 2010.

At the heart of this injustice is a deeply rooted normalized gender norm that caregiving is a woman's "natural role," and therefore not worthy of economic recognition. Such statements irk me to say the least. Does it mean a man waits to get married to manage housework? This belief is reinforced by tradition, religion, and even formal institutions. Girls are often raised to sweep, cook, and care for younger siblings while their brothers study or play. Women are expected to "sacrifice" for their families, and to find fulfillment not in income or careers, but in service. If a woman chooses to stay at home, she is seen as doing her duty but not contributing economically. I have interacted with a good number of married women who are career women, but their husbands still expect them to fulfill their house duties 100%. Again, I wonder, at what particular point did this career woman leave work so that she could iron the husband's shirts? Don't they both report to the strict formal sector from 8 am to 5 pm?

Globally, the economic value of unpaid care work has been estimated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) at over $10 trillion annually, roughly 13% of global GDP. Feminist economists in Kenya argue that if unpaid care work were counted in national statistics, it could contribute over 25% of Kenya's GDP.[3] Gender inequality is not only a pressing moral and social issue but also a critical economic challenge. If women who account for half the world's working-age population do not achieve their full economic potential, the global economy will suffer. [4] In Kenya, time-use surveys are limited, but growing advocacy from organizations like the Kenya Human Rights Commission and FIDA-Kenya shows that recognition of care work is gaining ground.

Beyond the economic exclusion is the emotional toll. Many housewives report feeling unproductive or ashamed of their status. Yet, paradoxically, they often work longer hours than some formally employed individuals. This emotional burden is compounded by economic vulnerability. Without income or legal recognition, many women have no access to credit, savings, pensions, or financial autonomy. In divorce or inheritance disputes, their unpaid contribution is often disregarded, citing it as an indirect contribution to acquiring matrimonial property. Recognizing unpaid care work is not about charity; it is about justice. Every woman who cooks,

[3] https://conversableeconomist.com/2015/10/12/unpaid-care-work-women-and-gdp/
[4] https://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth

cleans, or cares for a family contributes real value. Every society that ignores this contribution builds inequality into its economic foundations.

Kenya's Vision 2030 and the Social Protection Policy (2011) have made commitments toward gender-sensitive social protection. Article 43 of the Constitution of Kenya 2010 guarantees the right to social security and economic rights, and the Employment Act recognizes maternity benefits, yet the scope of unpaid work is still largely excluded from policy focus.[5]

Mary Wanjiku may never sit behind a desk with a desktop or sign a payslip. But her labour, the meals, the mopped floors, the ironed shirts, the stories told to her children at night have real value. Her story mirrors that of millions of Kenyan women holding society together from behind the curtains. If Kenya is to build a just and inclusive economy, it must begin by recognizing and valuing all forms of work. Unpaid care work is work. And justice begins by counting every woman, every hour, and every effort, whether in the boardroom or the kitchen.

[5] Article 43, Constitution of Kenya 2010.