

Getting Men to Care

Social Norms and Men's Participation in Unpaid Care Work



Findings from an expert convening | Kigali, Rwanda



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In November, 2018, Promundo convened a group of global and regional experts for a two day meeting to discuss the role of social norm change in achieving equality in care work. The convening was funded by Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN), an initiative led by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). Under the heading *Getting Men to Care*, the event included presentations of case studies of social norms change initiatives and large order changes in related to this topic, as well as deep conversations on the key messages to be included in the forthcoming *State of the World's Fathers 2019* report, a product of the global MenCare campaign. This briefing paper presents some of the key messages and takeaways from this convening, and serves as a preview of key messages to be included in the *State of the World's Fathers 2019*.

Inequality in unpaid care work and global implications

Women consistently do more unpaid care and domestic work than men do. Even where men are contributing more than they used to, the gaps between women's and men's contributions persist.¹ Even accounting for the time men spend on paid work as *combined with unpaid care work*, women's contributions still outpace men's. On average, women spend 45 minutes more than men on paid and unpaid care (combined) per day, resulting in almost 6 extra weeks of work per year, and 5.5 extra years of work over 5 decades, according to data from 65 countries.²

Barriers and challenges to achieving equality in unpaid care work are multiple, but new frameworks and analyses are helping identify entry points for programs and policies. Economic and workplace realities maintain and reinforce gender gaps in paid employment and unpaid care work, often encouraging men to prioritize paid work over unpaid caring roles and women to do the opposite. Parents and caregivers of all genders often face discrimination from employers and negative attitudes from colleagues when they want to work fewer hours or more flexibly once a child is born or an elderly parent requires assistance. The distribution of care work is also shaped by the presence (or absence) of laws and policies that promote equal caregiving. In most countries, social and economic policies continue to reflect and reinforce the link between men and paid work, and women and unpaid care.³

What do we mean by “unpaid care work”?

Unpaid care work refers to all unpaid services provided within a household for its members, including care of persons, housework and voluntary community work. These activities are considered work, because theoretically one could pay a third person to perform them.

Unpaid: the individual performing this activity is not remunerated

Care: the activity provides what is necessary for the health, well-being, maintenance, and protection of someone or something

Work: the activity involves mental or physical effort and is costly in terms of time resources.

This definition is adapted from the [2000 Progress of the World's Women](#) report, as presented in the 2014 OECD brief titled, “[Unpaid Care Work: The missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes](#)”

Professor Diane Elson's "3 R's framework"^{4,5} gives structure to efforts toward equality in unpaid care and domestic work. The basic elements of the framework include:

- **Recognition** calls increased attention to the vital importance of role of care in society. Efforts seeking to increase this recognition may gather new data on the patterns and consequences of care work in society, and present this data in compelling ways to decision-makers and government authorities.
- **Reduction** calls on programs, policies, and societies to lessen the toll on women and girls to contribute disproportionate levels and types of unpaid care work.
- **Redistribution** calls not only on women and girls' burden to be reduced, but also for men and boys to take up a greater, more equitable share of the responsibilities, tasks, and work in this domain.^{6,7}
- A publication of the UN High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment has recently proposed adding a fourth "R" to the framework: **Representation**.^{8,9} This category calls for increased visibility of carers within the policy environment, including support to collectives, unions, and groups of organized carers in relevant negotiations and advocacy processes.

So how can we summarize the problem at hand? Crucially, we must recognize that unpaid care work itself is not something we want to reduce to zero. It is precisely by caring for one another that we sustain our bodies, homes, families, and communities, and therefore flourish as a society. However, unpaid care work *does* need to be more evenly distributed, and urgently. Although it is not the only factor, the time and energy women spend on unpaid care work holds them back in their paid jobs and professional trajectories, helping to sustain an unequal and patriarchal social order. Intersectional forces of gender-based inequality, poverty, discriminatory policies, and – crucially, as the next section will explore – social norms all stand in the way of the objective of achieving equality in care work and changing this reality in fundamental ways.

The role of social norm change in achieving equality in unpaid care work

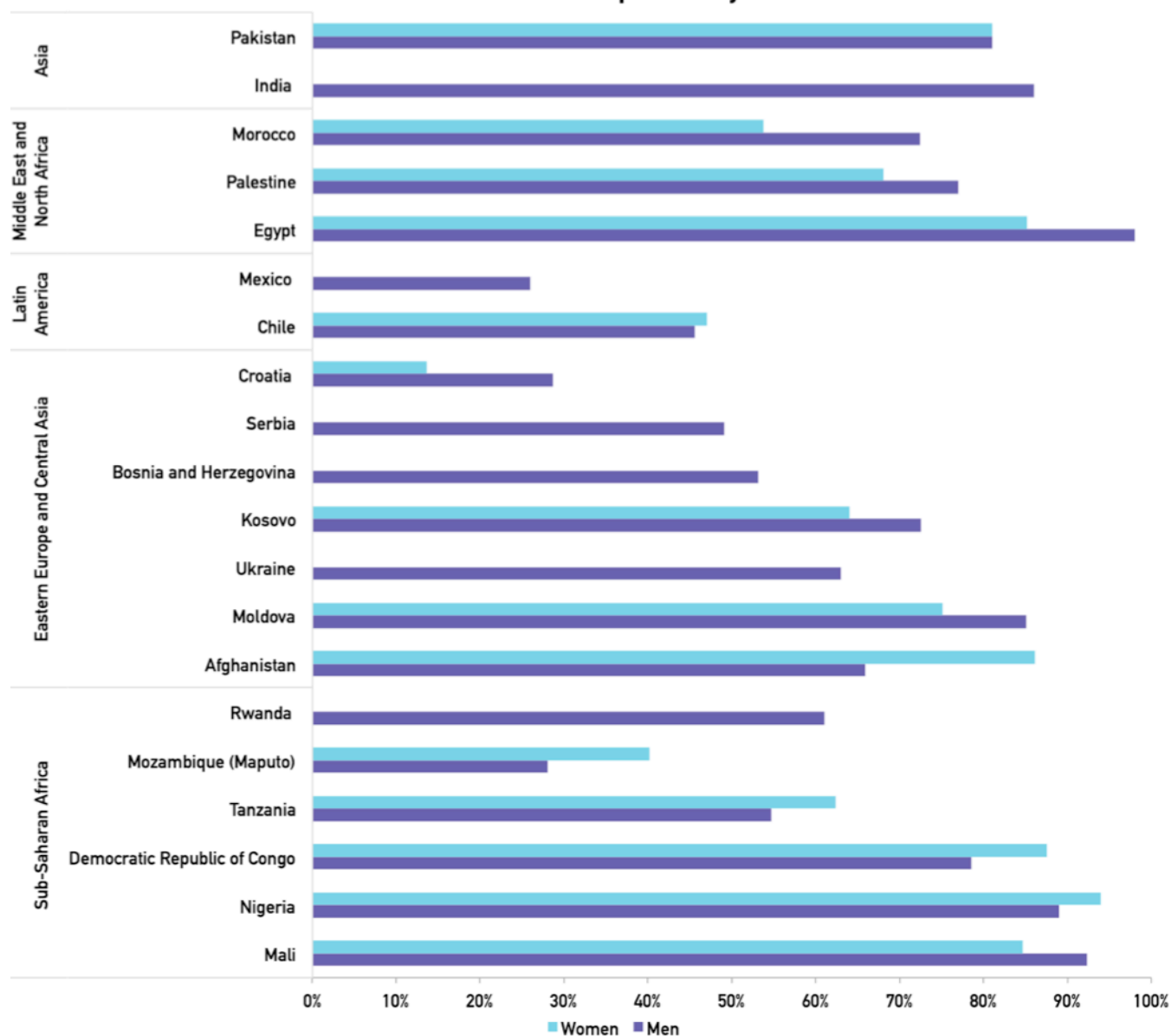
There is no single driver of inequality in unpaid care work, nor single solution. Instead, it will take coordinated efforts at many levels of society to advance these changes at the necessary speed. This multi-level view provides the outline for the upcoming *State of the World's Father's 2019* report, with chapter dedicated to each of at least five "steps" or levels where urgent change is needed:

1. Legal and policy level: *It's the laws that shape people's realities*
2. **Social norms and institutions: *It's their friends, community, and institutions***
3. Economic reality: *It's each family's bottom line*
4. Relationship level: *It's each caregiver's relational context*
5. Individual level: *It's him! It's on men to step up and take on more unpaid care work*

Following the focus of the convening in Kigali, and in accordance with the ALIGN platform's focus, this brief will explore #2 in a bit more detail, in this section, previewing messages and data which will appear in the *State of the World's Fathers 2019*.

Social norms around gender roles continue to affect care patterns in substantial ways. Worldwide, there remains a widespread expectation that men work outside the home and be providers and breadwinners, while women provide care and run the household. Not only are these attitudes alive and well, but they are also a root cause of gender inequality in care work. Just how common are these restrictive ideas about gender roles? A global analysis of data from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES), newly prepared for this paper and presented in the figure below, demonstrates the global persistence of these rigid ideas. Drawing on data from 23 published IMAGES reports, the figure demonstrates that regardless of region, significant proportions of both men and women tend to agree with the idea that “changing diapers, giving baths to children, and feeding children should be the mother’s/woman’s responsibility.”¹⁰

**IMAGES Respondents who agree or strongly agree:
"Changing diapers, giving baths to children, and feeding children are the
mother's responsibility"**



Note: In the case of Pakistan, responses for only the sub-population of married respondents are presented. In Mexico, Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Rwanda, only male respondents were asked this question.

These ideas can and do change, however. IMAGES datasets show that, in nearly every country where data exist, men who reported that their fathers had participated in certain forms of domestic work were more likely, as adults, to carry out this work themselves as adults. Likewise, when children see their mothers in positions of leadership in the workplace, in their communities, or in politics, they come to see it as equally normal for women to occupy leadership roles as it is for men. This “intergenerational transmission of care work” shows the exponential effect that can take place when policies and programs take on the third “R,” redistribution, as a primary objective. These influences work in cyclical ways, however; redistribution of this work both depends on and reinforces changes in social norms and acceptance of new and more equal ways of caring.

Sharing unpaid care work more equally between women and men is not just a question of individual choice. An equitable distribution of unpaid care work must also be supported by state and workplace policies and institutional practices, including tax, benefit, and pension arrangements for those in the formal labor sector.¹¹ Toward this goal, Promundo and MenCare have worked to set international and national goals, strategies, and indicators around men and boys taking on 50 percent of the unpaid care work. And within the recent past, many governments have made such commitments to tackle gender discriminatory norms, as well as ratified international agreements and established legal and policy frameworks providing parental leave and child care services. However, getting men and boys to do an equal share of the unpaid care work – and supporting women in their unpaid care activities – will be constrained as long as families face extreme economic hardship, or lack access to necessary income supports and subsidized childcare.

All of this – the persistence of rigid caregiving norms, the power of intergenerational effects, the intersections of poverty and social protection, and the influence of state policies – points to *social norm change* as a crucial foundation – along with other factors and interventions – for “getting men to care.” It is clear that no policy or program, whether in a high, middle, or low-income country context, will completely achieve this goal without a simultaneous cultural shift. In order to be successful, efforts under the category of redistribution, among others, require us to recognize the social and cultural norms around gender roles – expectations of typical and appropriate ways of being – that continue to affect care patterns.

Which approaches seem promising?

Parent training and couple training. Numerous studies have found that well-designed parent training can improve child development outcomes, reduce violence against children, and – when both parents are involved – reduce couple conflict.¹² It can help prepare new parents for all of the rigors and responsibilities of parenthood, and in particular, boost fathers’ skills and engagement as parents. The authors of a 2016 report at the Institute of Reproductive Health at Georgetown University also conclude that engaging men as parents not only reduces child maltreatment and intimate partner violence, but also increases fathers’ involvement in childcare and expands overall gender equality in participating families.¹³ The best father-inclusive parent training programs are available to young men when they are new fathers, involve hands-on practice in alternative parenting approaches, and take a gender norm-transformative approach.¹⁴

Policy advocacy and organizing. Recent evidence underscores the effectiveness of appropriately ample parental leave policies in leveling the balance of unpaid care work between men and women. Leave for fathers – in conjunction with leave for mothers and additional structural solutions, and when enshrined in national policies – has the power to contribute significantly to the recognition and redistribution of care work and to transform deeply rooted inequalities between men and women. These policies can change the gendered dynamics of caregiving at home and elevate the status of caregiving more broadly. But flexible leave policies should always be part of a broader package of workers’ rights protections.

Health sector approaches. The health sector offers several high-impact, institutional opportunities to shift social norms around care work. Health systems, for example, must establish clear protocols to involve men in prenatal care visits and collect routine data on men’s participation. While the choice must always be the mother’s, the presence of a supportive male partner throughout pregnancy and during birth can improve a mother’s well-being and access to maternal and newborn health services.¹⁵ In addition, when a father is present during the earliest stages of his children’s life, he is more likely to be involved in caring for them as they grow up.¹⁶ Any work in this sector must also be understood as a step toward economic justice for women. A recent 32-country analysis of women’s unpaid contributions to the health sector estimated the annual value of these contributions between 1.9 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP) in high-income countries and 2.9 percent in low-income countries. These unpaid, unrecognized subsidies to the health care system demonstrate the need for urgent norm change – particularly the increased value of women’s care work – worldwide.

Private sector and workplace initiatives. Companies can contribute to social norm change efforts around care work, at a minimum, by providing paid, non-transferable, job-protected parental and caregiving leave for mothers and fathers, in accordance with the best standards of such policies. But such policy changes should also be reflected by other investments toward large order changes in equal care, across all four R’s. Companies can fund research to increase the recognition of care work and can institute company policies and programs to reduce inequality and redistribute this work more equitably. And they should be forthright in their relationships and negotiations with their workers, treating representatives of unions and workers’ collective organizing groups with respect and thriving communities as a shared objective.

Social protection, economic empowerment, and poverty alleviation. Social protection measures include cash transfers, old age social pensions, disability grants, childcare subsidies and public works. Policies and programs within this sector can address the recognition, reduction, and redistribution of unpaid care work, but at the same time, even well-meaning poverty alleviation strategies, such as cash transfers or welfare payments, can inadvertently exacerbate these barriers by offering funds only to mothers. When this takes place, the widespread effect is to perpetuate the idea that caregiving is inherently a female role. Recent studies have affirmed that family-welfare or income-support programs help children better when they engage all caregivers: fathers, mothers, unpaid caregivers of all genders.¹⁷

Strategic litigation. A less commonly applied, but nonetheless promising approach in promoting equal care work among men and women is the pursuit of high profile legal opportunities with the specific objective of shifting public attitudes and policy as a result of the visibility and/or outcome of the case.

Conclusions and discussion

Achieving equality in unpaid care work is an urgent priority for the well-being of children, families, and communities around the world – and there is increasing evidence that this change is not only possible but already underway. While inequality in care work still exists across the globe, there is evidence, primarily from high-income countries, that gaps in unpaid care work are narrowing with men’s increasing participation in childcare. A study of trends in men’s participation over almost 40 years (and across 20 countries) found an average increase of 6 hours per week in employed, married men’s contribution to housework and childcare. Still, men’s contribution did not exceed 37 percent of women’s in any of the included countries.¹

We must also recognize that calling on individual fathers alone to change their behaviors is necessary but vastly insufficient to solve this issue; the barriers are much bigger and more structural. First and foremost, we must use every possible approach, including those presented in this paper, to transform gender norms that paint men primarily as income earners, women primarily as caregivers, and never vice versa. Regressive workplace policies must be replaced by those that protect a full package of workers’ rights, including paid leave for all types of domestic care responsibilities, adequate sick leave, advance scheduling in the case of shift workers, flexible work arrangements, subsidized quality childcare, adequate pensions, shorter working hours when appropriate, and livable wages. Norm change and workplace policies need to be supported by national level policies and laws as well, especially paid, non-transferable, job-protected parental leave for mothers and fathers, in accordance with the best standards of such policies, but also social protection and safety net policies – that don’t themselves reinforce rigid gender roles – for the poorest families.

While the evidence base may yet be incomplete, the pathway to the goal of equal care work is increasingly clear. From the earliest ages, we need to encourage everyone, regardless of gender, to see themselves as both caregivers and financial providers – and we need to better understand and address the structural forces that keep people stuck in rigid gendered patterns. Recognizing that economic justice, social justice, and gender justice are all intertwined, we need to ensure that all caregivers – particularly the most economically disadvantaged and marginalized – have access to income support and affordable or subsidized high-quality child care. We need specific actions at the legislative and workplace levels to allow everyone, regardless of gender, to thrive as both caregivers and financial providers. We need fully reimagined and universally available parent-training initiatives that engage fathers in meaningful ways. And of course, we need equal, paid, non-transferable parental leave for all parents.

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