



Unpaid Care Work Among Utah Women

Setting the Stage

Unpaid work, including childcare, eldercare, housework, and other tasks, is vitally important to the creation of strong families, communities, and nations; in fact, such domestic work has been called “the work that makes all other work possible.”¹ According to the McKinsey Global Institute, the monetary value of women’s unpaid work is estimated to be \$10 trillion each year,² and women worldwide spend a significantly larger portion of their time than men performing this critical work. This happens for many reasons, including personal values and choices, cultural and social norms, unconscious biases, and specific economic and employment considerations. The global average for a women’s daily unpaid work is 4 hours and 47 minutes vs. 1 hour and 30 minutes for men.³ The gap between men’s and women’s unpaid work is largest in many developing nations, yet it remains significant in the United States, and the gap in Utah is higher than the national average.⁴ Researchers and thought leaders worldwide are urging individuals and societies to recognize that unpaid work is indeed work and to value it accordingly; additionally, many assert that this important work must be distributed more equally between men and women in order for families and communities to thrive.

This research snapshot focuses on three areas:

- 1) An overview of unpaid care work and its division between women and men both globally and locally;
- 2) An analysis of some of the factors leading to high rates of unpaid work among Utah women as well as the resulting implications; and
- 3) A discussion of possible ways to redistribute some unpaid work and therefore ensure Utah women can also attend to other vital areas of their lives.

Unpaid Care Work Statistics

On average, women worldwide spend between 3–6 hours per day on unpaid work, whereas men spend between 30 minutes to 2 hours per day. The gap between men’s and women’s hours spent on such work is lowest in North America and Europe and highest in the Middle East/North Africa and South Asia regions. In general, the amount of time women spend on unpaid care work varies from twice as much to ten times more than men, depending on region

and other factors.⁵ According to American Time Use Survey tables, U.S. women who participate in unpaid work average 4.92 hours per day vs. 3.79 hours per day for U.S. men. The gap in Utah is wider: Utah women spend 5.55 hours per day in unpaid work vs. 3.22 hours for Utah men.⁶ Although this snapshot focuses primarily on unpaid care work (generally performed in the home), Utah women also spend significant time doing church and community volunteer work; see our previous snapshot, [Voting and Civic Engagement Among Utah Women](#), for more information.

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Unpaid care work comes in many forms, but one of the most common is childcare, which is significant in Utah especially as the state has the highest fertility rate⁷ and the largest household size in the nation.⁸ Many distinguish between unpaid work that is meaningful and fulfilling (such as caring for a loved one) versus work that is more menial yet necessary. Childcare certainly falls into the “meaningful” category, and many women choose to prioritize childcare over other pursuits. In the United States, about 25.4% of women care for household children on an average day vs. 15.9% of men. The number of hours spent daily by these women is 2.14 vs. 1.6 hours spent by men. In Utah, the gap between women and men’s childcare activities is greater; 36.2% of women care for household children on an average day vs. 23.1% of men. The women who give childcare each day in Utah spend an average of 2.3 hours vs. 1.25 hours spent by men.⁹

Another significant source of unpaid care work involves elderly family members. According to a recent study by the Utah Foundation, 59% of caregivers serving the elderly in the state are women caring for parents. This report states that unpaid caregivers for the elderly provide 90% of such care, and much of this service is long-term: 65% have been giving eldercare for between 3 and 10 years. The AARP describes the average caregiver for the elderly in Utah as a “working married mother with some college in her fifties.”¹⁰ This typical caregiver is often still providing care for her own children; women such as this are called the “sandwich generation,” as they are pulled between two

roles, both important and valuable, which require significant time spent performing unpaid care work.

Another common category of necessary unpaid work is household chores. The American Time Use Survey shows that in the United States, nearly half of all women perform housework on an average day vs. just 1 in 5 men. Of those who do participate in housework each day, women also spend more time: 1.78 hours per day vs. 1.34 for men who do housework. U.S. women spend more time on food preparation and clean-up, whereas U.S. men spend more time than women on yard work and house maintenance, decoration, and repair. In Utah, about half of women also do housework every day, but only 15.7% of men do (below national average). The gap in time spent on housework between Utah men and women is also larger than the national gap: Utah women spend 1.88 hours per day on housework (slightly higher than U.S. women), and Utah men spend .94 hours (lower than U.S. men). The only category of household work where Utah men spend more time than women is household maintenance, decoration, and repair.¹¹

Over the past few years, increasing media attention has been given to additional types of unpaid work generally performed by women, including the emotional and mental work that comes from being involved in relationships, households, and families. Articles in national publications have lamented the fact that women do the vast majority of emotional labor in intimate relationships, and that this is the default, seemingly “natural” role for them to take, despite recognition from mental health professionals that emotional work is indeed work, and it takes a toll on women.¹² Other experts have recognized that even when men participate in the day-to-day work of running a household, it is often the woman who is making many of the decisions and planning—the mental work of the home. Some assert that women do not have as much time to devote to their own personal and professional development when they are taking most of the responsibility for this mental and emotional work.¹³

It should be noted that men do spend more time than women doing paid work activities each day, both locally and globally. Yet, employment data show that more women everywhere are steadily joining the paid workforce, and in nearly every country in the world the daily combined hours of paid and unpaid work are higher for women than for men.¹⁴ This is also true in Utah, and as their labor force participation is rising, women may increasingly find themselves overburdened with the combined load of paid and unpaid work unless efforts are made to redistribute tasks more equally. Both work for pay and unpaid care work are critically important to the well-being of families

and society, but unpaid work, which is sometimes referred to as “invisible,”¹⁵ is often omitted in public economic and policy discussions. Of course, even though this work is unpaid, it still has significant monetary value. For example, salary.com performs an annual survey of the work moms do and calculates a base salary of \$49K and overtime value of \$95K.¹⁶ Although this exercise is largely symbolic, for a family to outsource much of the work performed by women at home would cost tens of thousands per year. Both individuals and society as a whole can do more to recognize and applaud the value of this unpaid work while at the same time ensuring that women are not carrying too much of the responsibility alone.

Factors Surrounding Gender Gaps in Unpaid Work

Many factors contribute to the gender disparity in the amount of time men and women spend doing unpaid care work. Countries where traditional gender norms are still deeply entrenched, including many developing nations, have some of the highest differences in the amount of unpaid care work performed by women and men. The gap can begin early: girls spend 30% more time on unpaid work than boys.¹⁷ In the United States, girls spend an average of two hours more per week on household duties than boys, and when boys do chores they are more likely than girls to be paid.¹⁸ These early gaps can interfere with girls’ education and establish long-standing patterns.

In general, the United States and Europe have smaller gaps between men and women when it comes to time spent performing unpaid work, yet these are not homogenous geographical areas. Research has shown that there are significant distinctions between states in the United States; for example, in the amount of time women spend in unpaid work when compared to men. A recent scholarly article examined three factors among all states and how they affected unpaid care work (specifically housework): female labor force empowerment, family traditionalism, and state government liberalism. The authors’ general hypotheses in this state-by-state analysis were that states in which women received higher overall benefits from paid work, those that showed lower adherence to traditional family gender roles, and those that were more politically liberal would have lower gaps between women’s and men’s share of housework. Utah was singled out in this report, as the authors concluded that women in Utah rank last in the nation in labor force empowerment. The findings of this study showed that women in Utah spend more time doing housework than women who live in states in which the rewards of paid work are greater for women, in terms of pay, prestige, and possibility for advancement.¹⁹ These findings align with the more traditional family

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structure and gender roles that many Utah families embody.

Other factors specific to Utah may also influence the gap between women's and men's contributions to unpaid care work. A Canadian study recently demonstrated that the timing of major life transitions, including the age of marriage and childbearing, can influence how unpaid work is divided up in families; women who marry and have children at younger ages bear a larger portion of unpaid work than women who make life transitions when they are older.²⁰ Utah has the youngest median marriage age for both men and women in the nation,²¹ and although mother's age at first birth has been rising in Utah, we still are below the national average.²²

Utahns have traditionally placed a great emphasis on family, and hence it is unsurprising that women in the state prioritize the work of caring for children and other loved ones. Yet there may be some detrimental effects that come along with the uneven distribution of such work between men and women. When women are disproportionately responsible for unpaid care work, they are less able to complete college and pursue professional interests. This may be relevant in Utah, as the gap between men and women who hold a bachelor's degree is one of the largest in the nation.²³ Utah women rank highest in the nation for part-time work,²⁴ which is likely related to unpaid work as women are 9 times more likely to choose part-time work because of childcare issues than men.²⁵ Women can face professional setbacks because of care duties, including taking time off, refusing promotions, and choosing less demanding jobs, all of which could leave women financially vulnerable.²⁶ Such by-products of caregiving are much more common among women; for example, mothers are twice as likely as fathers to report that being a parent has made it harder for them to advance in their careers.²⁷

In addition to economic risks, women who bear a heavy share of unpaid care work may also struggle with physical, emotional, and mental health issues, especially those who are also working for pay.²⁸ Depression, stress, and feelings of isolation are also extremely common among caregivers for the elderly.²⁹ Even though many Utah women willingly choose to prioritize unpaid care work, they still may suffer ill effects if their burden is unequally shared with other family members.

Efforts to Promote Equal Distribution of Care Work

Numerous individuals, organizations, and advocates have suggested means by which unpaid care work can be more equally distributed between men and women in Utah, particularly when women are working for pay as well. Efforts to promote and legislate more generous leave policies (including paid family leave) would allow parents the free-

dom to prioritize family over work for a time and thus reduce the burden of the "second shift" for many new parents or other caregivers. Increased access to affordable childcare would also create opportunities for women who want or need to pursue their professional lives more fully. To encourage such policy initiatives, forward-thinking companies in the private sector can lead the way in creating innovative and affordable solutions for families trying to navigate the responsibilities of paid and unpaid work. Of course, any of these efforts would help women who are

most heavily burdened: female heads of households, nearly half of whom live in poverty and carry the entire load of both paid and unpaid work in a family.³⁰

Finally, more open discussion of the benefits of rethinking cultural norms could educate men on the value of willingly taking a larger share of unpaid care work. Re-

search shows that fathers who are more heavily involved in the early days of childcare will be greater participants in family care work for years to come.³¹ In discussing her study on household labor, Dr. Renata Forste stated, "Family satisfaction depended on both partners contributing to decision-making and housework. In particular, we found that satisfaction was highest among men that reported greater involvement in childcare and household chores."³² One possibility is for men, who spend more time on leisure activities than women do,³³ to use some of that time in sharing the load of unpaid care work and thereby reduce the strain on women who may be overburdened.

Conclusion

Overall, Utah individuals, organizations, and communities place a high value on families and all the work that goes into making households strong. In some cases, however, the important work of building these families is being disproportionately performed by women, which can carry negative consequences, including economic, physical, and emotional challenges. A variety of efforts to encourage a more equal distribution of unpaid care work between men and women—including legislation and corporate initiatives, public discussions about cultural norms, and individual choices by family members themselves—will benefit Utah families in addition to strengthening the positive impact of women in communities and the state as a whole.

Although unpaid care work is critical to the well-being of Utah families and society, it is often omitted from public economic and policy discussions.

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Acknowledgement: This snapshot is possible through the generous donations of the Utah Women’s Giving Circle, the Peterson Family Foundation, and the Woodbury School of Business at Utah Valley University. Special thanks to Taeja Mauigoa for her research support and to Anne Burkholder, Renata Forste, Peggy Pasin, and Anne Wairepo for their valuable feedback.

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