



# ENHANCING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN UGANDA BY ADDRESSING UNPAID CARE WORK

Dr. Susan Kavuma and Richard Ayesigwa

## Abstract

Unpaid care work (UCW) is a critical issue in Uganda, predominantly carried out by women and girls, and deeply entrenched in societal norms. Despite its economic and social significance, UCW remains largely invisible in national policies and economic planning, limiting women's participation in education, employment, and political life. This policy brief explores the implications of UCW on Uganda's development, emphasizing the need to integrate care work into economic planning and social policies. It advocates for recognizing, reducing, and redistributing UCW, highlighting successful local and international interventions that promote gender

equality, economic empowerment, and sustainable growth.

## Introduction

Unpaid care work (UCW) encompasses essential activities carried out by a people such as cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and elderly care; all of which are tasks traditionally associated with household and domestic duties. This work sustains families, supports communities, and underpins Uganda's economy. However, unpaid care work remains largely invisible in economic terms and quantification. This greatly contributes to undervaluation of 'unpaid care work' in policy and planning. In Uganda, this burden falls

disproportionately on women and girls, with studies showing that these perform three times as much unpaid care work as men (UBOS, 2019). This unpaid care work incidentally tilts a heavier burden in terms of distribution of responsibilities onto women and limits their opportunities to participate in formal employment, pursue education, and engage in public and political life. As a result, this latent unpaid care work insidiously engenders and deepens inequalities, perpetuating poverty cycles that affect not only individual women but also families and the broader society.

The challenges associated with unpaid care work extend beyond gender equality to impact national development goals. When a significant portion of the population is constrained by latent unpaid labor, workforce productivity declines, and economic growth potential remains unfulfilled. In many cases, energetic young and youthful girls get forced to drop out of school to assist with household chores, leading to intergenerational cycles of poverty and limited access to opportunities. This not only constrains the girls' future economic potential but also hinders Uganda's ability to gain from a skilled and inclusive workforce.

Inspire its importance, unpaid care work remains largely unrecognized in Uganda's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), limiting its visibility in economic and social policy. Recognizing and addressing unpaid care work could be transformative for Uganda, offering pathways to gender equality, empowerment and economic growth. By reducing and redistributing unpaid care responsibilities, Uganda could empower women and girls, enabling them to participate more actively in economic, educational, and civic

activities. This would support progress in attainment of national and international commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, as well as Goal 8 of promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth.

## Background and Context

Unpaid care work remains a significant barrier to women's economic empowerment in Uganda, as it restricts their time, limits their mobility, and affects their access to education, training, and paid employment. Women spend far more time on unpaid care tasks than men do, which perpetuates a cycle of economic dependency and limits their participation in productive sectors.

According to the Uganda Time Use Survey Report of 2017–2018 by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), women in Uganda spend an average of 4.5 hours daily on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to just 1.5 hours for men. This unequal division of labor reflects societal norms and expectations that frame caregiving as a feminine and women's responsibility, in spite of the fact that it takes an economic toll on women's productivity and financial independence (UBOS, 2019).

The gendered nature of unpaid care work (UCW) limits women's access to formal employment, entrepreneurial opportunities, and financial resources. A study by the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC), Makerere University, and Oxfam Uganda highlighted that, UCW impedes women's ability to pursue

paid employment and education in rural and low-income areas. In the districts of Kaabong, Kabale, and Kampala; women's time-intensive care responsibilities prevent them from developing marketable skills, leading to lower earnings, reduced savings, and economic insecurity (Oxfam, UWONET, 2018).

The impact of unpaid care work extends beyond individual households to the broader economy. Inadequate support for care-related infrastructure such as water supply, sanitation, and childcare services compounds the issue, as women spend valuable hours traveling to fetch water or managing household needs. According to the OECD (2019), addressing UCW is essential to achieving inclusive economic growth, because it promotes women's labor force participation and their contribution to national economic development.

## **Women Economic Empowerment and Unpaid Care Work Interventions**

Efforts to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work in Uganda are increasingly gaining momentum among key stakeholders at a government and non-government level. At a national level, the Government of Uganda through its development planning and budgeting is committed to addressing unpaid care work. For instance, the Public Finance Management Act (2015) mandates that all sectors of government integrate gender and equity considerations into their budgets. This includes addressing unpaid care work by prioritizing investments that reduce the care burden on women, such as funding for

healthcare, mainstreaming accessibility to good quality water supply systems, and access to electricity. All government ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) are required to demonstrate gender and equity responsiveness in their budgets to receive approval from the Ministry of Finance. This ensures that care-related infrastructure and services are taken into account.

Another component of the WE-Care initiative targets Uganda's water and sanitation infrastructure, - implemented through NDP III. By improving access to clean water, and reducing the distance to 1 km in rural areas and 200 meters in urban centers, this initiative although not fully realized in some regions has helped reduce the time women and girls spend on water collection—a task that typically takes hours in rural and urban informal settings. This intervention supports the Ugandan government's efforts under NDP III to invest in infrastructure that alleviates unpaid care work and enhances women's access to economic opportunities (Government of Uganda, 2023).

Non-government organizations have implemented interventions aimed at recognizing, reducing, and redistributing UCW. One such program is Oxfam Uganda's WE-Care (Women's Economic Empowerment and Care) initiative, which was implemented in Kampala to promote labor-saving technologies and community education. Through this initiative, Oxfam trained trainers to promote as the use of fuel-efficient stoves, water harvesting tanks, and water carts, aimed at reducing the time women spend on domestic tasks. The program also fostered dialogues within communities to encourage men and youth to share in household responsibilities, and promoting a fairer division of labor in the household

(Oxfam-Uganda, 2022). By improving access to water and energy-efficient tools, WE-Care has positively impacted the lives of many Ugandans, fostering economic empowerment for women and strengthening advocacy for gender equity in caregiving responsibilities.

The Strengthening Capacity for Effective Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) and Care Solutions in Uganda project, implemented by ACODE and Oxfam in Uganda, has made a profound contribution to the national conversation on Unpaid Care Work (UCW) by addressing critical policy gaps and fostering evidence-based decision-making. Aligned with the GROW East Africa Initiative, the project focuses on reducing the burden of unpaid care, while empowering women and enhancing their collective agency. Its policy-oriented approach has transformed the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of policymakers, ensuring the integration of care work into national economic planning. Through technical assistance, customized gender training, and coalition-building, the initiative has strengthened the capacity of WEE policy actors to advocate for increased investment in care-responsive policies. By establishing a Community of Practice, the project has created a lasting platform for knowledge-sharing, advocacy, and continued dialogue, driving systemic change in how unpaid care responsibilities are recognized and redistributed in Uganda.

The Women's Economic Empowerment and Care (WE-Care) program, implemented by UWONET, has been instrumental in challenging social norms around UCW since 2014. Phase V (2023–2026) focuses on advocacy to elevate UCW as an issue in public policy. UWONET's research in Kampala and Gulu City highlights how cultural perceptions

reinforce the burden of UCW on women, hindering their social and economic advancement. Through capacity-building efforts, UWONET engages stakeholders, including traditional leaders, women's rights groups, and policymakers, to address these norms. UWONET's "Theatre for Development" approach employs storytelling and community dialogues, educating communities on the 4Rs of UCW, i.e. Recognition, Reduction, Redistribution, and Representation. These initiatives not only raise awareness but also empower communities to question and change harmful social norms, thus contributing to gender equality and economic growth (UWONET, 2023).

In addition, Oxfam-Uganda has birthed, tendered and caused to grow internal policies to support the caregiving needs of its staff, partners, and program participants. This includes offering flexible working arrangements, care leave, and financial support for child and nanny costs when staff travel on official duties. These policies allow women, in particular, to engage meaningfully in Oxfam's work while at the same time performing their caregiving responsibilities. This approach also extends to program participants and partners, promoting institutional recognition of care work as a critical factor in workforce participation and productivity (Oxfam-Uganda, 2023). These internal policies underscore the importance of creating care-responsive workplaces, and setting a precedent for other organizations in Uganda to recognize the demands of UCW on their staff and partners.

To address the lack of childcare services in local markets where many marginalized women work, the Ace Policy Research Institute (APRI) piloted a childcare services initiative in Uganda's

informal markets. With support amounting to CA \$687,200, APRI has implemented onsite childcare facilities for women traders, and allowing them to work without worrying about their children's safety. Through a mixed-methods approach, APRI conducted research to identify scalable childcare models suitable for these settings. The initiative also emphasized public-private partnerships for sustainability and engaged government officials to address childcare gaps in public markets. This project has brought direct benefits to poor mothers working in Kampala's local markets and has opened discussions on formalizing childcare services in informal workspaces (APRI, 2023).

## Regional and International Unpaid Care Interventions

Several countries have implemented targeted interventions to reduce the UCW burden and enhance caregivers' well-being and economic opportunities. For example, Kenya's Inua Jamii program supports caregivers of vulnerable groups—such as children, the elderly, and people with disabilities—through regular cash transfers. Over 27,000 caregivers have benefited from this initiative, easing the financial strain of unpaid care work and enhancing the welfare of both caregivers and care recipients (Kenyan Ministry of Labour, 2022). This program not only reduces the economic pressures associated with caregiving but also underscores the need for government support in fostering social protection for those engaged in unpaid caregiving roles.

In Rwanda, water and sanitation

infrastructure projects have been a transformative intervention targeting one of the primary components of unpaid care work in rural areas. These projects, implemented by the Rwandan government, aim to minimize the time women and girls spend collecting water. By providing easier access to water, the intervention has indirectly enabled thousands of women and girls to pursue education, engage in income-generating activities, and participate more actively in community life (Rwandan Government, 2020). The initiative illustrates how improved infrastructure can reduce UCW and support women's socioeconomic engagement, emphasizing that the impact of unpaid care work interventions can extend beyond caregiving itself.

Other countries have introduced care systems that directly address caregiving needs, thereby lessening the UCW burden on families. For instance, Chile's "Chile Crece Contigo" program provides affordable childcare services, which benefits over 60,000 children and families, helping many women participate in the workforce while improving early childhood outcomes (Chile Ministry of Social Development, 2020). Similarly, Uruguay's Sistema Nacional Integrado de Cuidados offers care services for children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities, reaching over 22,000 childcare and 8,625 home care beneficiaries by 2020 (Government of Uruguay, 2020). These programs demonstrate the effectiveness of national care systems in reducing UCW and promoting gender equality, as more women are able to engage in paid work. Together, these interventions underscore the importance of integrating UCW considerations into national policies to support caregivers, advance gender equality, and contribute to broader economic development.

These diverse interventions across nationals demonstrate the vital role of targeted policies in alleviating unpaid care work and its socio-economic impact. These programs have not only reduced the time and financial burden associated with caregiving but have also empowered women to participate more in the workforce and community life. By investing in social protection, infrastructure, and accessible care services, these countries showcase how comprehensive approaches can promote gender equality, improve family welfare, and drive broader economic growth.

Uganda can draw lessons from global examples of models to address its unpaid care work challenges, by investing in related strategies, Uganda could significantly reduce the caregiving burden on families, advance gender equality, and drive inclusive economic growth.

## Recommendations for Scaling Up Interventions in Uganda

To address unpaid care work comprehensively, Uganda should consider the following:

1. Strengthen Gender and Equity Budgeting: The Gender and Equity budgeting presents a promising tool for tackling care work as part of a broader gender equality agenda. By increasing investments in care-related infrastructure and services, redistributing care responsibilities, and recognizing the economic value of unpaid care work, GEB can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society. The efforts must be complemented by adequate strategies to monitor and evaluate investments that target at reducing the care work burden.
2. Recognize Unpaid Care Work in National Policy Frameworks: Uganda should build upon the efforts under the National Development Plan III by integrating unpaid care work (UCW) as a priority in economic and social policies. This could include developing specific UCW indicators in the NDP IV to monitor and evaluate progress in achieving set targets of reducing and redistributing UCW. A dedicated national action plan for recognizing, reducing, and redistributing UCW would guide government ministries, departments and agencies in addressing UCW. Lessons can be drawn from national programs such as Chile's "Chile Crece Contigo" program and Uruguay's National Care System (Chile, Ministry of Social Development, 2020; Government of Uruguay, 2020)
3. Expand Affordable and Accessible Childcare Services: Uganda needs to prioritize creating affordable and accessible childcare solutions to support working mothers. Public-private partnerships, like those explored in APRI's childcare initiative in informal markets, can be scaled to include urban and rural settings. Drawing inspiration from Quebec's subsidized childcare system, which has created over 217,000 childcare spaces, Uganda could focus on establishing community-based childcare centers and subsidizing childcare costs for low-income families. This would help women pursue economic opportunities while ensuring that their children's safety and development.



4. **Challenge Harmful Social and Gender Norms:** Transforming cultural perceptions of caregiving as solely a woman's responsibility requires targeted advocacy and community engagement. Initiatives like UWONET's Theatre for Development, which uses storytelling to promote the 4Rs of UCW—Recognition, Reduction, Redistribution, and Representation be implemented across the country. These efforts can involve traditional leaders, women's groups, and policymakers to sensitize the public in order to foster equitable household labor division. Community dialogues and campaigns could be supported to challenge entrenched norms and promote men's active participation in caregiving.
5. **Promote Institutional Policies for Work-Life Balance:** Workplaces in Uganda could adopt care-responsive policies similar to Oxfam's internal measures, including flexible working arrangements such as remote working, care leave, and financial support for caregiving expenses. These policies not only alleviate the caregiving burden on women but also enhance employee productivity, motivation and retention. The government can incentivize organizations to adopt such measures by offering tax benefits or recognizing care-friendly employers through national awards.
6. **Enhance Public Awareness and Advocacy:** Public campaigns highlighting the economic value of UCW and its impact on development could be implemented. Drawing lessons from global best practices, Uganda could partner with media outlets and civil society organizations to amplify the discourse on UCW. The Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) should be supported to conduct regular time-use surveys to quantify UCW and its impact on the economy, providing data to inform policy advocacy and planning.
7. **Leverage Regional and Global Partnerships:** Uganda could collaborate with regional and international partners to share knowledge and resources for addressing UCW. Programs like Uruguay's National Care System and Chile's Chile Crece Contigo offer valuable models for comprehensive care systems. By learning from these examples, Uganda can implement tailored interventions that address local needs while aligning with global standards for gender equality and social protection.

## Conclusion

Reducing unpaid care work in Uganda requires coordinated action at multiple levels, including government policy, community initiatives, and workplace reforms. By recognizing the critical role of UCW in economic planning, investing in infrastructure and childcare, challenging gender norms, and adopting care-responsive workplace policies, Uganda can foster gender equality and unlock women's economic potential. Drawing from global and regional best practices, Uganda has the opportunity to create a more inclusive and equitable society where care responsibilities are shared and valued.

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**Advocates Coalition on Development and Environment (ACODE)**

Plot 96 Kanjokya Street, Kamwokya

P O. Box 29386, Kampala

Tel: +256 312 812 150, Email: [acode@acode-u.org](mailto:acode@acode-u.org)

Website: <https://www.acode-u.org>

FaceBook: [ACODEUganda](#) X: [ACODE\\_Uganda](#) YouTube: [ACODEUganda](#)