



# Lightening the Load: New Evidence on the Impacts of Unpaid Care Work on Women and Girls

## Overview

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that more than 16 billion hours of unpaid care work are undertaken daily – equivalent to approximately 9 per cent of global GDP, or around US\$11 trillion per year, if paid at minimum wage.<sup>1</sup> Most of this work is done by women and girls. Across the world, women and girls do an average of three times more unpaid care work than men and boys; in some countries, this may be up to seven times more (ILO 2018).

**Target 5.4 of UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality calls for the recognition and valuing of unpaid care work**, ‘through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family’ (United Nations n.d.). But despite increasing international efforts, significant gaps remain in policy, data, programme delivery, coordination and resourcing.

This policy brief summarises research on unpaid care work from over two decades of the Young Lives study, including new findings from Round 7 of the quantitative survey, collected in 2023–24, and sets out key recommendations for meaningful policy action.<sup>2</sup>

While gender inequalities in unpaid care work are well documented, Young Lives unique longitudinal evidence provides nuanced insights into the long-term impacts on women and girls, particularly those from poorer households and in rural areas. It shows how the unequal distribution of unpaid care work affects many areas of women and girls’ lives, restricting opportunities in education and paid work, as well as limiting their leisure time. It also reveals how global crises such as COVID-19, climate change and conflict can increase unpaid care work, with women and girls disproportionately affected. Persistent discriminatory gender norms sustain these disparities. Men and boys contribute significantly less to childcare or housework, even when paid work is scarce or when women are also undertaking paid work.

<sup>1</sup> Unpaid care work refers to ‘all unpaid services provided by individuals within a household or community for the benefit of its members, including care of persons and domestic work’ (UN Women 2022). This includes care of children, elderly people, ill people and people with disabilities.

<sup>2</sup> Preliminary findings from the 2023–24 Young Lives survey (Round 7) are available in factsheets on work and family lives in Ethiopia, India and Peru (Tanima 2025a; Tanima 2025b; Campos and Lopez 2025). On this occasion, no data collection took place in Vietnam due to a change in government procedures on the international transfer of personal data.

**This evidence is key to shaping policy action** that will contribute to the recognition, redistribution, and reduction of unpaid care work – critical steps toward achieving gender equality.

### Key Findings

1. The latest evidence from Young Lives shows that by age 29, women are doing over three times more unpaid care work than men. Women spend 5.3 hours more on unpaid care work per day than men in Ethiopia and India, and 4.5 hours more in Peru. In all three countries, women also do more work overall, when combining both unpaid care work and paid work.
2. Adolescence is a critical period when gender inequalities in unpaid care work emerge, with significant gender gaps continuing into adulthood.
3. Poor and rural women and girls do more unpaid care work than wealthier and urban women and girls. Marriage and motherhood, especially at a young age, also reinforce the gendered division of unpaid care work.
4. Increased time spent on unpaid care work has a significant effect on women and girls' experiences and long-term outcomes, restricting opportunities in education and paid work.
5. Unequal distribution of unpaid care work contributes to women and girls having less leisure time than men and boys.
6. Shocks and crises such as illness, the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme weather events and conflict typically increase unpaid care work, with women and girls disproportionately affected.
7. There is some good news: new Young Lives data shows that young men are doing more unpaid care work than in the past, even if it is still significantly less than young women, giving hope for change.
8. In addition, Young Lives data shows that social protection programmes and public services can help reduce and redistribute unpaid care work, but they need to take account of gendered social norms and the specific needs of women and girls to avoid unintended consequences.

### The Young Lives study

Young Lives has been following the lives of 12,000 young people in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam, from infancy into early adulthood, since 2002. In each country, the study is divided into two age groups: 2,000 young people born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort) and 1,000 born in 1994 (the Older Cohort).

Young Lives longitudinal mixed-methods data enables an exceptional level of detailed and nuanced analysis on when gender inequalities between girls and boys start to become significant, how poverty, location and age-based gender norms influence time spent on unpaid care work, and the resulting impacts on women and girls' empowerment and opportunities over time.

## Young Lives findings

### *Women and girls continue to do more unpaid care work than men and boys*

The latest evidence from Young Lives shows that by the age of 29, women are doing over three times more unpaid care work than men. Women spend 5.3 hours more on unpaid care work per day than men in Ethiopia and India and 4.5 hours more in Peru.

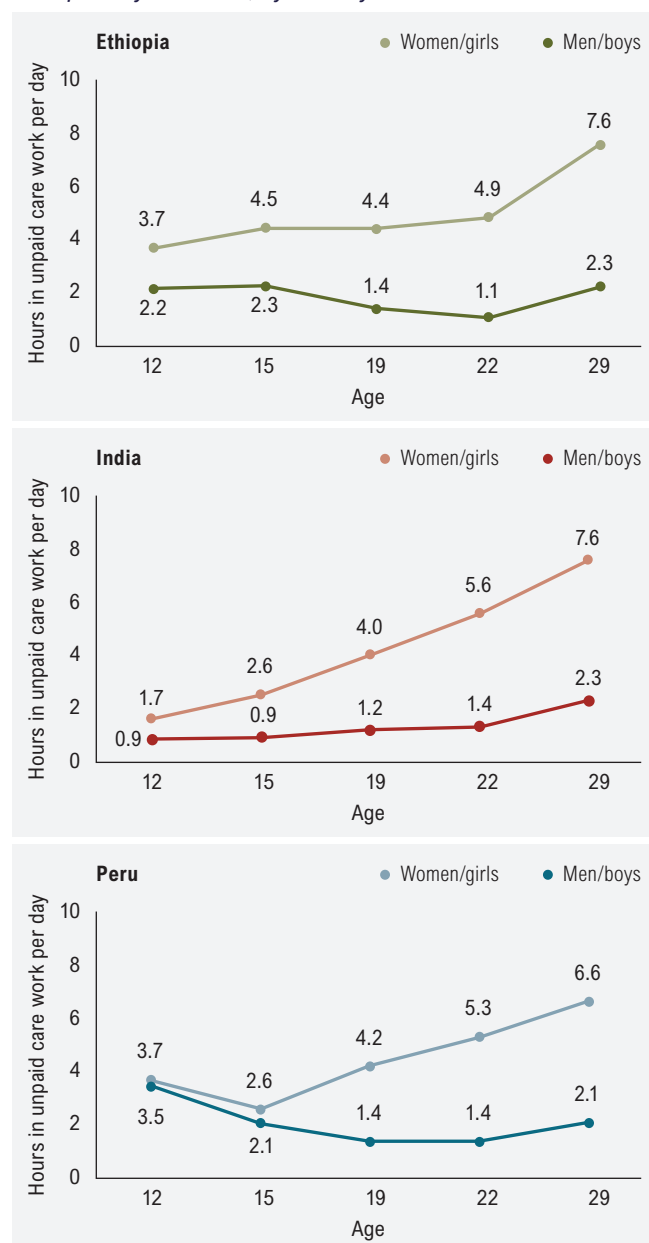
Although women spend less time on paid work than men in each of the three study countries, women do more work overall per day.<sup>3</sup> Combining the hours spent on both unpaid care work and paid work at age 29, women work 1.2 hours more per day than men in Ethiopia, 0.5 hours more in India and 0.7 hours more in Peru.

Young Lives longitudinal evidence shows that children's household roles and responsibilities become increasingly gender-differentiated from adolescence onwards. While adolescent boys and girls spend a similar amount of time on education in all four study countries, and do similar amounts of work overall (combining both paid and unpaid care work) in all study countries except India, adolescent girls spend significantly more time on unpaid care work, while adolescent boys typically undertake more paid work (Espinoza Revollo and Porter 2018; Winter 2016; Vikram, Ganguly and Goli 2024).

The latest data on Young Lives Older Cohort shows that gender gaps in time spent on unpaid care work start as early as age 12 in Ethiopia and India and grow over time (Figure 1). In Peru, this gap is visible from age 19.

3 In line with Charmes 2019, paid work is defined as employment and related activities, including tasks on family farms and other family businesses.

**Figure 1.** Hours spent by women and men on unpaid care work per day over time, by country



Source: Authors' calculations, using data from Round 2 to Round 7, covering Older Cohort participants who were interviewed in Round 7.

The gender gap in time spent on unpaid care work is also significant, albeit smaller, between *employed* women and men. By age 29, employed women spend 3.3 hours per day more than employed men on unpaid care work in Ethiopia, 3.5 hours more in India and 3.2 hours more in Peru.

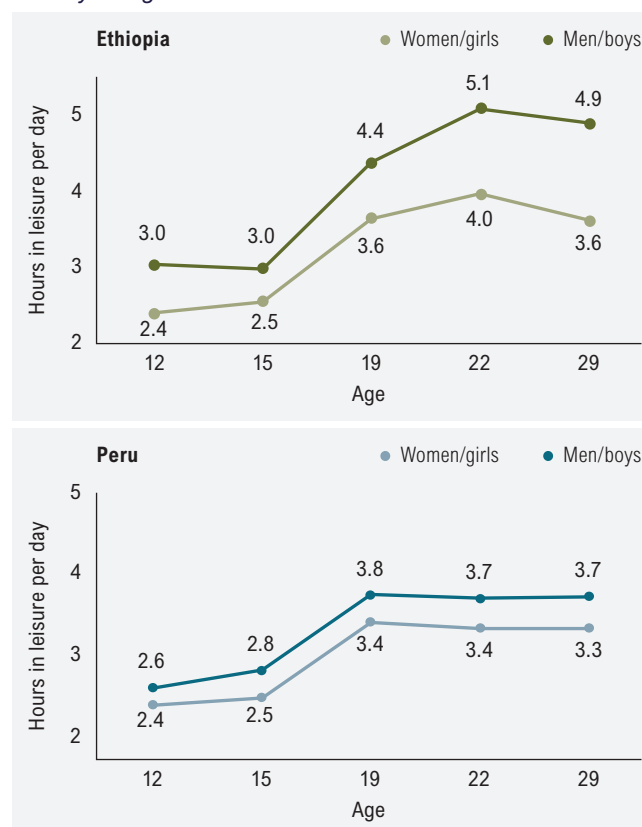
Cross-cohort comparison also shows that, in Ethiopia and India, the total time spent on unpaid care work has not significantly changed for young women aged 22 between 2016 and 2023. However, in Peru, it has decreased by just under an hour (56 minutes) – a welcome piece of good news.

## Women and girls have less leisure time than men and boys

A unique finding from the Young Lives study is that women and girls typically have less leisure time than men and boys, and that this is related to unpaid care work. Girls spend less time on leisure activities than boys, especially within the same household (Khanna and Thomas 2023; Vikram, Ganguly and Goli 2024). Although the gap is relatively small in all countries, it emerges early in children's lives and persists throughout childhood. In India, the gender gap in leisure time is linked to more domestic work responsibilities for girls.

The latest Young Lives research in Ethiopia and Peru reveals that gender differences in time spent on leisure activities continue into adulthood, with men having more time for leisure than women (Figure 3). In Ethiopia, 29-year-old men spend 1.3 hours more per day on leisure activities compared to 29-year-old women, while in Peru men spend 0.4 hours more than women. In India, women and men spend about the same amount of time on leisure after age 15.

**Figure 2.** Hours spent on leisure time per day over time, by country and gender



Source: Authors' calculations, using data from Round 2 to Round 7, covering Older Cohort participants who were interviewed in Round 7.



### ***The poorest women and girls do the most unpaid care work***

Across all four Young Lives study countries, children from the poorest households spend more time on work and less time studying than those from the least-poor households (Winter 2016).

The latest Young Lives findings show that at age 29, young women in Ethiopia and Peru who were born in the poorest households spend significantly more time on unpaid care work than those born in wealthier households. In India, there is no significant difference in time spent on unpaid care work by wealth.

In Ethiopia, women from the poorest households spend 3.6 hours more per day on unpaid care work, while in Peru the difference is 1.8 hours. However, this is not the case for young men; there is no significant difference in the amount of unpaid care work undertaken by young men from the poorest and least-poor households.

### ***Children in rural areas spend more time on unpaid care work than those in urban areas, but these gaps do not necessarily persist into adulthood***

Young Lives longitudinal evidence also shows striking differences in time use between rural and urban locations, with urban children spending significantly more time on schooling and studying and less time working (all types of work) than children living in rural areas, in all four countries (Espinoza Revollo and Porter 2018).

Interestingly, the latest Young Lives data shows that by age 29, there are no differences in time spent on unpaid care work between rural and urban women, or between rural and urban men, in India and Peru. However, in Ethiopia, 29-year-old rural women spend 2.2 hours more per day on unpaid care work than urban women, while there is no significant difference between rural and urban men.

### ***Birth order can affect the amount of unpaid care work***

Where in the family a child is born can also be important in determining how much time is spent on care work. In Ethiopia, older sisters spend about one more hour per day on unpaid care work than their younger sisters, but this is not true for older brothers compared to younger brothers (Heissler and Porter 2013).

### ***Increased time spent on unpaid care work can limit women's access to education and paid work***

Young Lives longitudinal evidence shows that by age 22, significantly more women than men were not in education, employment or training ('NEET') across all four study countries, principally due to unpaid caring roles, including motherhood (Favara, Chang and Sánchez 2018).

The latest Young Lives data shows that 37 per cent of 22-year-old women in India are NEET, compared to only 7 per cent of men of the same age. In Ethiopia, 24 per cent of 22-year-old women and 9 per cent of 22-year-old men are NEET, while in Peru the gender difference is even starker: 11 per cent of 22-year-old women in Peru are NEET compared to just 1 per cent of men at the same age. In all three countries, the most common reason given for not working is domestic and childcare responsibilities.



Medi, a young married woman living in urban Ethiopia with two children under the age of four, struggles to balance her desire to earn money with her domestic responsibilities:

“I have to prepare food for the family, take care of the children and there are situations in which I wish my husband could help me in the house ... [I] just accept it ... [B]ut it is always better if we both can have some income instead of one of us.”

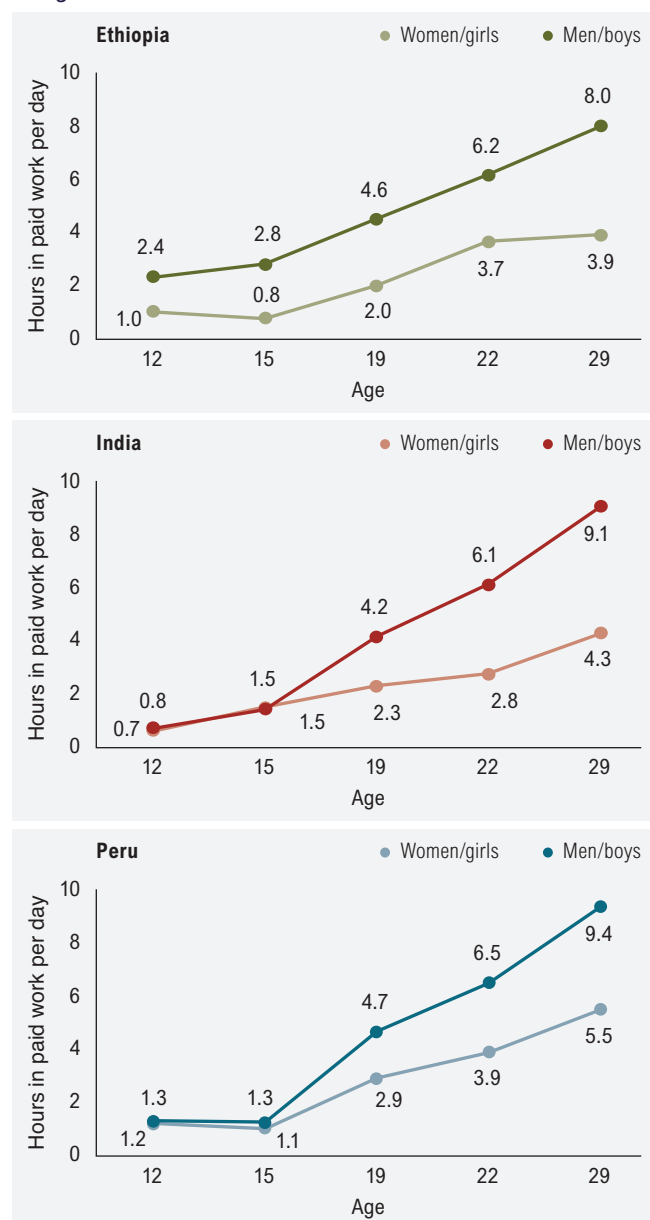
(Tafere et al. 2020)

In India, engaging in more than two hours of domestic work per day at age 12 is more likely to affect the educational attainment of girls than boys (Singh and Mukherjee 2017). Longer hours spent on unpaid care work by girls also predicts the gender pay gap that is already evident by age 22 (Carmichael et al. 2022).

The latest Young Lives data shows that gender employment gaps are evident from age 12 in Ethiopia and age 19 in India and Peru, and grow in magnitude over time (Figure 3). By age 29, there is a time-use gap in paid work per day between men and women of 4.1 hours in Ethiopia, 4.8 hours in India and 3.9 hours in Peru. A key factor driving persistent gender employment gaps is women not engaging in the labour market due to their unpaid care work.

Young Lives evidence also reveals that the gender employment gap increased significantly during the pandemic, with additional unpaid care work being the single most important factor in the slower economic recovery for women than men, especially in Peru and Vietnam (Scott et al. 2021).

**Figure 3. Hours spent on paid work over time, by country and gender**



Source: Authors' calculations, using data from Round 2 to Round 7, covering Older Cohort participants who were interviewed in Round 7.

### Marriage and motherhood reinforce the gendered division of household tasks

Qualitative evidence from Young Lives suggests that marriage, especially early marriage, reinforces the gendered division of household labour, with women expected to take on more domestic and caregiving work. This further restricts married women's access to education and paid work (Crivello and Mann 2020a) and can have intergenerational impacts. Girls' increased unpaid care work may free mothers to do more paid work outside the home; however, this then means that girls sometimes leave school early to look after their siblings (Winter 2016).

In Ethiopia, the latest Young Lives data shows that marriage and parenthood are associated with wider gender gaps in time use. At age 29, women who are married or have children spend an additional 4.2 hours on unpaid care work and 3.2 fewer hours on paid work per day compared to unmarried

women or women without children. In contrast, men who are married or have children experience no change in the time they spend on unpaid care work but spend one fewer hour per day on paid work compared to unmarried men or men without children. Similarly, in India and Peru, gender gaps in time spent on unpaid care work are larger among women and men who are married and/or have a child, compared to their unmarried peers or those without children.



“It was only after I got married that I learnt being married comes with a lot of responsibilities, especially for the wife. I had never seen a wooden stove before getting married, but I need to cook on that stove now. I never cooked or washed clothes before, but now I have to do all that and more.”

Rekha, a girl in rural India who married at age 16  
(Crivello and Mann 2020b).

### Shocks and crises typically increase unpaid care work for women and girls

Young Lives evidence shows that families typically revert to or reinforce traditional gender roles in times of stress, further increasing unpaid care work for women and girls.

### The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on unpaid care

- In Ethiopia, 70 per cent of young women spent more time on household duties during lockdown, compared to only 26 per cent of young men; while 46 per cent of young women undertook increased childcare, compared to only 19 per cent of young men (Favara et al. 2022).
- In India, 67 per cent of young women spent increased time on childcare and household duties during lockdown, compared to only 37 per cent of young men. By contrast, young men spent more time on family businesses compared to young women (Favara et al. 2022).
- In Peru and Vietnam, the unequal distribution of care work was important in explaining why the employment rate of young women recovered more slowly than that of young men after lockdowns ended (Scott et al. 2021).

The latest Young Lives data found that the armed conflict in Ethiopia from late 2020, which closely followed the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly increased women and girls' unpaid care work, with a knock-on effect on their education and labour opportunities. Almost one-third of 22-year-old women said they would have been in education in the absence of COVID-19 and the conflict as they would have had fewer household responsibilities. Young people surveyed in the sixth Young Lives qualitative survey in the Tigray region said that fetching water during the armed conflict became solely the responsibility of women and girls, because men and boys were involved in the fighting, and that this potentially exposed girls to an increased risk of violence.<sup>4</sup>

When households are faced with adversities, the time-use patterns of girls and boys change in different ways. In Ethiopia, family shocks such as illness among household members increases the amount of unpaid care work by a greater amount for adolescent girls than for adolescent boys (Ogando and Pells 2014). In India, household shocks increase both boys' and girls' time spent on paid and unpaid work. However, unlike for boys, this usually comes at the cost of girls' leisure time (Vikram, Ganguly and Goli 2024).

Climate shocks often lead to increased household work, such as having to walk further for water and firewood, or additional childcare responsibilities when schools or childcare are closed. These responsibilities often fall on adolescent girls and young women, reducing their time to study and increasing the likelihood that they will drop out of school (Favara et al. 2022).

“I feel very bad because I am not going to school and my mother is sick ... I will be happy if I continue going to school and my mother gets better.”

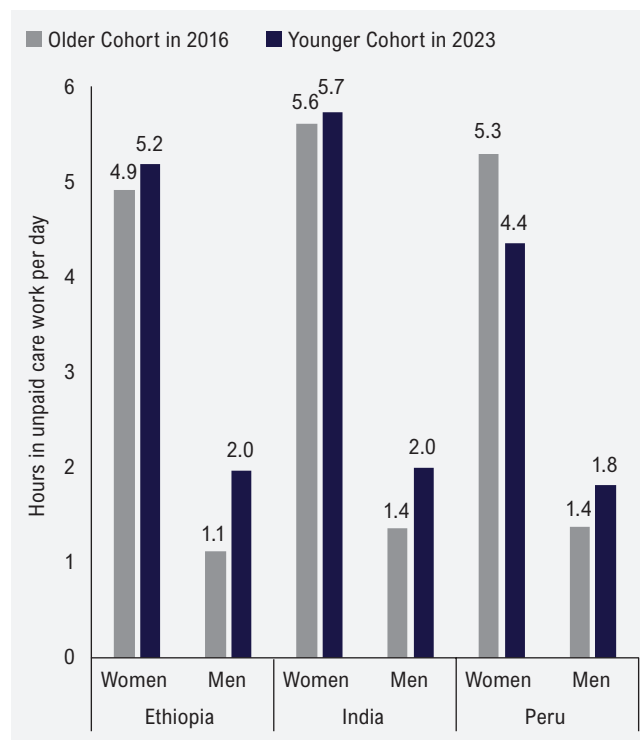
Haymanot, a girl in rural Ethiopia, forced to leave school at age 14 due to a combination of famine, drought and family sickness (Dornan, Ogando and Pells 2014).

### ***Young men are doing (a bit) more unpaid care work than in the past***

While young men still do significantly less unpaid work than women, the latest survey data from Young Lives shows that young men aged 22 spent more time on unpaid care work in 2023, compared to 22-year-olds in 2016, in all three study countries.

In Ethiopia, between 2016 and 2023 – a period marked by both the COVID-19 pandemic and conflict – the amount of unpaid care work done by young men rose by 52 minutes (0.9 hours) per day. In India, 22-year-old men spent 38 minutes (0.6 hours) more doing unpaid care work per day in 2023 than in 2016, while in Peru they spent 27 minutes (0.4 hours) more. Young men still do much less unpaid care work than young women in all three countries (Figure 4), but their increased participation could be a positive step towards gender equality.

**Figure 4.** Hours spent by 22-year-olds in 2016 and 2023 on unpaid care per day, by country and gender



Source: Authors' calculations, using Round 5 data for the Older Cohort and Round 7 data for the Younger Cohort, covering participants who were interviewed in Round 7.

### ***Social protection programmes and public services can reduce and redistribute unpaid care work – but may have unintended consequences if gender considerations are overlooked***

Social protection programmes and public services can support a reduction in the amount of unpaid care work done by women and girls, but only if they take account of existing gender norms. For example, the Young Lives Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS) in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Zambia found that few young mothers used a crèche or daycare services in Ethiopia and Zambia. This was due to a lack of affordable care close to home, as well as persistent social norms that ascribed childcare responsibilities to women. The study also found that mothers, notably in Peru, were often distrustful of those providing childcare and found that they did not meet their needs and schedules (Crivello and Mann 2020a).

Young Lives research also found that JUNTOS, a conditional cash transfer programme in Peru, reinforced traditional gender roles among children in beneficiary households (Luong 2024). The programme inadvertently led to an increase in unpaid care work for girls and their mothers in households receiving the cash benefit, mainly because mothers who received the cash undertook less paid work. This increase in time spent on unpaid care work was also associated with lower test scores in maths and reading for girls living in the beneficiary household.

<sup>4</sup> The sixth wave of Young Lives qualitative data collection in Ethiopia is almost completed, with research analysis and initial reporting scheduled for publication in late 2025.



## Policy implications

The good news is that there is increasing international acknowledgement of the importance of unpaid care work and the need for it to be recognised, reduced and redistributed (Elson 2017). In 2021, the multi-stakeholder Global Alliance for Care was established to push this agenda forward, and in June 2024 the International Labour Conference adopted Resolution 4 on decent work and the care economy (ILO 2024).<sup>5</sup>

An evidence-based approach – that includes advocacy – is essential to ensure that unpaid care work receives the recognition it deserves as a social investment, a public good and a major factor in promoting gender equality.

- The unequal sharing of unpaid care work between women and girls and men and boys is based on deep-rooted patriarchal norms, which see women as caregivers and men as providers. Programmes and campaigns promoting a fairer division of unpaid care work need to challenge discriminatory gender roles and actively engage whole communities, including men and boys, and community leaders, to help transform unequal power relations. Schools, youth clubs and religious leaders can be influential in advocating for change.
- Adolescence is a critical period when gender inequalities in unpaid care work emerge. Preventing early marriage and teenage pregnancy is vital as they disadvantage girls and young women in education, training and employment. Measures that support girls to stay in school and protect their time to study, as well as the promotion of vocational training and employment, should be prioritised. Particular attention needs to be paid to young mothers, who often have very little control over their domestic arrangements.
- Investment in public services and infrastructure is essential to help young women and men balance unpaid care work with paid employment. This includes measures to support mothers returning to paid work through access to quality, affordable childcare and creches, as well as elderly care and support for people with disabilities.
- Employers should be encouraged to adopt care-friendly employment policies, including flexible working arrangements, maternity and parental leave and anti-discriminatory practices.
- Providing affordable and accessible time-saving technologies and infrastructure, such as access to clean water, efficient cooking stoves and rural electrification, can reduce the overall burden of domestic work and help enhance women and girls' well-being and available leisure time; promoting social activities and sports for women and girls could also help.
- Governments should consider undertaking regular time-use surveys to measure the time spent on unpaid care work, disaggregated by gender, age, disability and location. This helps in recognising the value of unpaid care work and assessing the effectiveness of policies and programmes.
- Social protection programmes designed to help the poorest households can also help reduce and redistribute unpaid care work, but they need to take account of gendered social norms and the specific needs of women and girls to avoid unintended consequences. Further research is needed to better design programmes that take an intersectional approach and support the recognition, redistribution and reduction of unpaid care.
- Responses to adverse shocks, such as extreme weather events, conflict and public health emergencies, should also take account of the impacts on unpaid care work.

## Continuing to follow Young Lives

Young Lives completed Round 7 of its in-person quantitative survey in 2024. The survey collected comprehensive new data on many aspects of young people's lives as they transition into adulthood and navigate multiple global crises (COVID-19, climate change and conflict), including in relation to their physical and mental health, education and skills, time use, work and family formation. This is generating important new insights into the impact of unpaid care work on young women's empowerment and opportunities.

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The Young Lives images are of young people living in circumstances and communities similar to the young people within our study sample



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