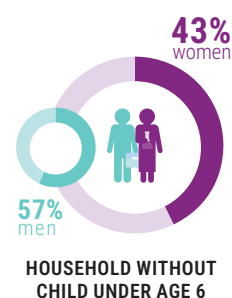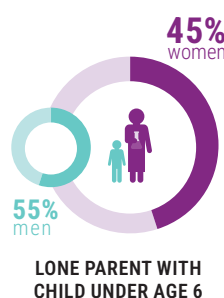**ISSUE BRIEF**

COUNTING WHAT TRULY COUNTS:

VALUING SUPERVISORY CARE AS THE INVISIBLE ENGINE OF INCLUSIVE ECONOMIES

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Most unpaid care work is predominantly carried out by women and girls, which significantly impacts their ability to access, retain, and advance in employment.

Among those workers aged **25-54 Years,** in the labour force there are:

37% women
63% men
COUPLE WITH CHILD UNDER AGE 6

38% women
62% men
EXTENDED FAMILY WITH CHILD UNDER AGE 6

45% women
55% men
LONE PARENT WITH CHILD UNDER AGE 6

43% women
57% men
HOUSEHOLD WITHOUT CHILD UNDER AGE 6

Meeting the physical, social and emotional needs of care-dependent individuals, such as children, the frail, older people and people with disabilities, requires time. It entails hours dedicated to one-on-one activities, such as breastfeeding, helping children with schoolwork, or offering emotional support to someone facing an illness. Globally, women and girls provide a significant portion of this care, whether unpaid within the household or through care jobs that are undervalued and underpaid.

According to research, typical hours of active childcare seldom exceed three hours per day. Meanwhile, time spent on supervisory care (see Box for definition) almost always exceeds six hours per day. As such, supervisory care serves as a constraint on the time caregivers can allocate to other activities, such as to employment. These constraints are particularly pronounced in settings where access to quality paid care services is lacking, and where social norms regarding parental roles influence the unequal distribution of responsibilities for such care.

BOX

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SUPERVISORY CARE?

According to the definition proposed by the Sub-Committee on Supervisory Care, which was endorsed by the United Nations Statistical Commission at its 55th session in March 2024, unpaid supervisory care pertains to the on-call time linked to providing unpaid care services, where a caregiver is not directly interacting with the care recipient but is in close proximity and readily available to offer direct care if needed. Supervisory care can apply to children below a certain age or to adults needing assistance with daily routines. It includes periods when the care-dependent individual is self-engaged or sleeping, and when the caregiver is resting or involved in other activities, possibly remunerated.

WHY IS THE ACCURATE MEASUREMENT OF SUPERVISORY CARE IMPORTANT?

The policy relevance of supervisory care data

The call to recognize the unpaid contributions of women and girls to society and the economy in official statistics is a long-standing feminist demand rooted in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The gendered implications of the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened women's already marginalized position in the workforce, while also increasing the policy focus on the care economy and the need for informed decision-making to accelerate action on gender equality and women's economic empowerment.

As the closure of schools and childcare centres during the pandemic has shown, supervisory care may limit parental ability to perform work at home that requires concentration, the absence of interruptions or tight scheduling. The unequal share of supervisory care may not be fully compatible with full-time employment in the formal economy, often putting women at a disadvantage.

Access to quality and affordable childcare services can enhance women's employment opportunities without necessarily reducing the amount of "quality time" mothers devote to active engagement with their children. Supervisory constraints also shed light on why many women in developing countries are limited to informal employment options that allow them to bring their children along.

Having more and better supervisory care data would serve to inform policy action to achieve gender equality and women's economic empowerment through the recognition and redistribution of this form of unpaid work. Information on supervisory care can also significantly contribute to understanding time poverty, informing work-life balance policies and improving regulatory frameworks. Acknowledging the significance of unpaid supervisory care might also impact policies related to quality employment opportunities for domestic workers and other caregivers.

Conversely, the failure to measure supervisory care constraints may lead to an inaccurate portrayal of the gendered division of labour and hamper the assessment of progress towards gender equality, including for older women. Fathers and other extended family residing outside the household might dedicate a significant amount of time to supervising children rather than directly providing care, yet this often remains unquantified. As such, supervisory care data may well shed light on the intergenerational relations that sustain the present and future workforce.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

Limitations of the statistical treatment of care in time-use surveys

The 2005 Trial International Classification of Activities for Time-Use Statistics initially recognized the time dedicated to minding dependents as a distinct category to prevent its association with other activities. However, the absence of standardized statistical methods has led to an overemphasis on active care as a stand-alone activity in time-use surveys, to the neglect of supervisory care.

Supervisory constraints have thus only been measured through questions about "what else" individuals were doing simultaneously, posing challenges to its accurate measurement and analysis. Minding care-dependent individuals may not be consistently reported, given the pervasive nature of daily background responsibilities, potentially leading to omission, underreporting and recall bias. Supervisory constraints are usually lumped in with "activities", even if the time allocated to a specific set of activities stems from the supervisory constraints themselves.

Responses to survey questions about "passive care" are surprisingly low, possibly due to the ambiguity of the term. Even when surveys explicitly ask about "secondary activities" or tasks performed "simultaneously", supervisory constraints are rarely mentioned. However, surveys that prompt respondents with concrete examples, such as "please include time spent watching or supervising children", provide significantly higher estimates of childcare compared to those that do not.

WHAT IS UN WOMEN DOING?

Towards a better measurement of supervisory care in official statistics

In 2021, UN Women highlighted the need for additional methodological work around supervisory care data and asked the United Nations Expert Group on Innovative and Effective Ways to Collect Time-Use Statistics to address methodological limitations and enhance its harmonization, measurement and international comparability. The Sub-Committee on Supervisory Care was formed, composed of representatives from national statistical offices and United Nations agencies, with UN Women as Chair. It developed a reference concept for the measurement of supervisory care in official statistics that aligns with relevant internationally agreed statistical standards.

Also in 2021, the Global Centre of Excellence on Gender Statistics (CEGS) in collaboration with the Women Count programme commissioned a study on the difficulties of accurately measuring unpaid care for dependents in an effort to support countries to improve the use and

harmonization of time-use surveys to quantify care. In 2023, this research was complemented by cognitive testing by UN Women, the CEGS and El Colegio de Mexico to assess the understanding of the concept of supervisory care and determine the most appropriate wording for surveys.

How do respondents report their time spent on supervisory care?

This cognitive testing study confirmed the anticipated challenges in how time spent on supervisory care is reported in time use surveys. It found that respondents may not understand the conceptual distinction between active and supervisory care. The constant switching and variability in the time caregivers devote to activities each day may affect recall. A "social desirability bias and the moral burden of care" may affect the reliability of data, as caregivers want to show they are fulfilling their roles for fear of social judgment. Moreover, some double-counting of supervisory care time may occur in dual-parent households.

The study identified that respondents used various terms to describe different types of care, with "minding" (in Spanish "estar al pendiente" or "estar pendiente") being the most frequently mentioned phrase associated with supervisory care. As a result of these findings, the study recommended that, prior to designing questionnaires, cognitive testing should be conducted to identify the most effective way to capture supervisory care. This should account for vernacular language differences in rural areas, which are likely to vary even within countries. Cognitive testing on supervisory care conducted in Indonesia by Prospera, Investing in Women, University of Indonesia with the support of the ILO and UN Women also reaffirmed this finding.

An integral aspect of the definition of supervisory care is that the caregiver is in near proximity to provide immediate assistance as necessary, such as when a child calls from another room or the garden. But the study revealed that some respondents considered being reachable by phone as a form of supervision. The researchers cautioned that the explanation should clarify that being "on call" by phone does not constitute supervisory care and that the type of proximity required should be clearly specified to ensure accurate responses.

This exercise highlighted that a prior understanding of the difference between active and supervisory care was essential for accurately capturing on-call care time. Moreover, study participants typically recalled instances of supervisory care only when prompted by an ad-hoc probing question. As such, this prompting should be clear enough to specify that caregivers should be in significant proximity to provide physical assistance when needed. Probing questions could also be supplemented by explanatory tasks or vignettes or visual aids, as deemed appropriate.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE FUTURE?

Rethinking societal and economic models – and measures of wealth

With more countries now undertaking time-use surveys and developing satellite accounts of household production to more accurately measure the value of unpaid household work, supervisory care data are a crucial part of the policy value chain. Better data on supervisory care would greatly increase estimates of the value of "extended income" or 'expanded gross domestic product (GDP)' – combining both paid work and unpaid household work – a far better measure of both economic contributions and living standards than market income alone.

This is evident in a study in the United States, where including the value of supervisory childcare increased estimates of extended GDP by approximately 43% (up from the previous estimate of 26%). Morocco produced a household satellite account report in 2023, which calculates its 'expanded GDP' and finds that if domestic work were to be counted as part of overall wealth creation by the country's national accounting system, this would increase Morocco's GDP by 19.4% (with women responsible for 16.4% of this increase).

Improving gender data on supervisory care is critical for advancing the Beyond GDP agenda, which seeks to measure societal progress through metrics that capture well-being, sustainability, and equity. Supervisory care, predominantly carried out by women, remains largely invisible in SDG 5 as well as GDP calculations despite its significant social and economic value. By integrating robust, disaggregated data on supervisory care into Beyond GDP frameworks and in the measurement of unpaid household services within the System of National Accounts Framework, policymakers can better understand the distribution of unpaid care responsibilities, address gender disparities, and design policies that recognize and compensate this essential contribution.

This shift would not only highlight the true drivers of societal well-being but also ensure that economic systems prioritize care, inclusion, and sustainable development.

Improving the accuracy of gender data can help meet the urgent need to rethink our societal and economic model and gauge progress towards more inclusive economies and caring societies. As envisioned in the recently drafted UN Economic and Social Council resolution on Promoting care and support systems for social development, fostering care policies that ensure the provision of necessary care to all individuals can safeguard their rights and well-being. The resolution calls on Member States to uphold principles of equality and non-discrimination, ensure access to basic social services and promote the active participation of every member of society.

Achieving this requires collective responsibility, involving individuals, families, communities, States and the private sector. It can be accomplished through poverty-eradication measures, labour policies, public services and gender-sensitive social protection programmes – but not without accurate, precise and reliable gender statistics.

READ MORE

Measuring Time Use: An assessment of issues and challenges in conducting time-use surveys with special emphasis on developing countries

https://data.unwomen.org/publications/measuring-time-use-assessment-issues-and-challenges-conducting-time-use-surveys

Quantifying Care: Design and Harmonization Issues in Time-Use Surveys

https://data.unwomen.org/publications/quantifying-care-design-and-harmonization-issues-time-use-surveys
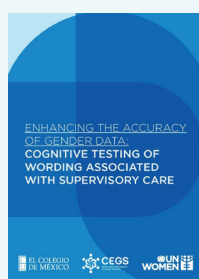
Enhancing the accuracy of gender data: Cognitive testing of wording associated with supervisory care

https://data.unwomen.org/publications/enhancing-accuracy-gender-data-cognitive-testing-wording-associated-supervisory-care

Caring Societies, Inclusive, and Green Economies in Asia and the Pacific

https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/09/caring-societies-inclusive-and-green-economies-in-asia-and-the-pacific