



A question of gender justice: Exploring the linkages between women's unpaid care work, education, and gender equality



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ABSTRACT

ActionAid International implemented an action-research programme on women's unpaid care work in rural Nepal from March 2011 to December 2012. This social empowerment methodology, *Reflect*, enabled 106 women to gain recognition for their unpaid care work through their own collection of time-use data. The literacy skills women acquired facilitated greater representation in community meetings calling for a reduction in their unpaid care work rather than shifting this work to girls. The article draws on Fraser's model of gender justice to explore how women's literacy, girls' education and a more equitable balance of care work are needed to improve women's status.

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1. Introduction

Family members make different contributions to ensure smooth functioning of households. These include monetary contributions and 'unpaid' work involving the care of other family members such as cooking, childcare and cleaning. Depending on the context, different reasons underpin the division of tasks, with either women or men fulfilling more of one type of activity. These include expected roles and behaviours of women and men, access to paid employment, availability of resources such as childcare and educational opportunities (Moore, 1994).

The concern for this article and for many feminist scholars is the bulk of care work, entailing long and often unrecognised hours on arduous tasks that fall primarily onto women. This gendered division of labour also impacts other family members, especially girls, who, to assist on care tasks, drop out of school. They, like their mothers, forgo the capabilities (skills, knowledge) and autonomy (facilitated through greater confidence and voice) which may enable them to better negotiate a fairer balance between care work and other opportunities. In this way, the existing inequality in life choices between women and men persists across generations. This disparity becomes a concern for 'gender justice' not only because the tasks and the women who perform them are undervalued but also because of how a disproportionately higher level of care work restricts personal growth and professional development.

Whilst evidence of the inequitable allocation of tasks and potential consequences is growing, more needs to be known on how to change these practices and improve women's status in society. In the authors' perspective, both practice and theory are required to support transformative change in women's share of care work, education and life opportunities. Whereas 'practice' is grounded in the reality of women's everyday lives, theoretical frameworks offer the opportunity to 'step back' from the complexities of these daily experiences to consider the underlying social norms creating and reproducing gender disparities (Fraser, 1995a). The challenge before us is to find the meeting point between 'top down' and 'bottom up' approaches from which to deepen thinking and action (Elmore, 1979). Our goal is to both understand and change the situation in favour of greater equality.

Since pragmatically one has to start somewhere, the entry point for this article is in practice. We draw on findings from an 'action-research' programme in rural Nepal aiming to increase recognition and achieve a more equitable redistribution of women's unpaid care work (ActionAid International Nepal, 2013a). The programme was implemented as a pilot effort by a rights-based Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), ActionAid International, in partnership with community based organisations from March 2011 to December 2012. The Unpaid Care Work (UCW) Programme was designed to incorporate two of ActionAid's strategic priorities – women's rights and education (ActionAid International, 2012). A participatory adult literacy and social empowerment methodology was used to nurture the capacity of 106 women to find solutions appropriate for their lives (Berkes, 2002), thus valuing and legitimising their perspectives and indigenous forms of knowledge (Alcoff and Potter, 1993; Harding, 1988a) whilst also discussing options for safeguarding their daughter's right to education.

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The goal of this article is to use action-research as a platform from which to explore the relevance of theoretical concepts for change-oriented objectives (Edge et al., 2010). We begin by reviewing linkages in existing literature on women's disproportionate share of unpaid care work, their lack of education and gender justice. Next, we explore how these factors manifest in the lives of women participating in the unpaid care work programme in rural Nepal. To deepen our thinking of these connections, we draw on Nancy Fraser's theory of gender justice and together with the findings from the Nepal study explore the best means for transforming the norms restricting women's life choices. It is here that we consider the practical tensions of reducing women's unpaid care work and supporting girls' educational opportunities.

1.1. Women's disproportionate share of unpaid care work and low education

The importance of nurturing and caring for personal and family well-being cannot be understated. Referred to as 'social reproduction' (Bakker, 2007), care work includes the essential tasks (e.g. childcare, cooking, and cleaning) required to support the development of cognitive, emotional and physical capabilities (Bakker, 2007; England, 2005). Seen as a whole, these 'care' tasks provide the critical inputs required for personal growth and healthy development of families (Oakley, 1974 cited in Sullivan, 2004). They contribute to '...the re-creation/re-production of the population from one day to the next and from one generation to the next...the intergenerational transmitting of historically derived values, norms, skills and knowledge as well as the construction of identities and subjectivities, individual and collective (Steans and Tepe, 2010, p. 809).'

Research documenting care work in families explores varying aspects of direct and indirect care and social reproductive labour, finding a disproportionate share continues to be performed by women and is usually 'unpaid' (UNDP, 1995).² For example, Budlender's review of India's national time use survey shows that women spend on average 5.1 h on housework in comparison to the 24 min spent by men (Budlender, 2007). In South Africa, Floro and Komatsu also find that on average women spend 5 h per day on housework, collecting fuel and water, and taking care of others, as compared to men who spend 3.1 h in these activities, therein suggesting the higher unemployment rates amongst women are in part due to their unequal responsibility for unpaid care work (2011). Overall, their data showed men in South Africa had more time than women to engage in paid and subsistence work and to search for employment when unemployed.

It is not just that women do more unpaid care work than men, but how the volume of this work leaves them little time, energy and access to resources such as education, food and healthcare (Robeyns, 2003). At a more fundamental level, the gendered division of labour creates a separation of life purposes for women and men (Bakker, 2007), with women restricted to the private sphere, whereas men, through participation in public spaces, have greater access to socio-economic and educational resources from which to participate in broader society (Mayhew, 1999; Unterhalter, 2013).

According due respect to the women performing unpaid care work and thus greater value to the work itself have thus become issues of gender justice. Here, research finds that recognition of women's roles in sustaining families and societies is often denied

because they, and thus the work they perform, are devalued (England, 2005; Palriwala and Neetha, 2011). Mead suggests these care tasks are symbolic of the low status attributed to women in society (1950 cited in Spender, 1981) because the division of tasks in a home reflect local ideas about the appropriate and expected behaviour of women and men, further reflecting their power and status in households (Moore, 1994). In this sense, unless the ideals of fatherhood and masculinity place more value on caring roles with men's 'nurturing' and 'involvement' in family life being prized, a change in practice is less likely to occur (Sullivan, 2004). Achieving a more egalitarian balance of care work is thus likely to require a deeper understanding of the gendered ideologies, norms, power, and personal relationships within familial structures (Alcoff and Potter, 1993).

Changing the balance of this work is a particularly complex undertaking because in many societies these hierarchies are not only produced by men but also reproduced by women (DeVault, 1994). For example, in many South Asian societies age, marriage status, and socio-economic position of the family determine responsibility and decision-making on different tasks (Sen and Sen, 1985). Research from India and Nepal finds women aged 15–29 doing the most amount of care work, followed by those aged 60 and higher (Choe et al., 2005; Sen and Sen, 1985). Similar findings from Mexico show that half of girls over 17 years of age perform more than 20 h of care work compared to 10 per cent of boys of any age doing similar work (Levison et al., 2001). Care work is thus reflective of status, with young (especially newly married) women often pressured by mother-in-laws and themselves to 'prove their worth' by performing more arduous tasks (Chorghade et al., 2006).

Unless these gendered norms are changed in a way which accords all women higher status, redistributive efforts are likely to fall on other female members therein perpetuating the cycle of illiteracy, and low participation in economic and political spheres (Marphatia, 2003). Prevailing ideologies, norms and practices may paradoxically increase perceptions of a woman's own feminine worth but not necessarily that of their daughter (Bourne and Walker, 1991), who may be expected to take on more care work. For example, when women are over-burdened, especially in times of financial crises, illness, or drought, these tasks are often shifted onto girls, who like their mothers, experience similar challenges in attaining their rights (e.g. to education) whilst balancing personal development with family-well-being (Dorman, 2008; Levison and Moe, 1998; World Bank, 2011). Fulfilling this 'mother substitute' role (Amin et al., 2006; Ilahi, 2001; Jones et al., 2010; Lloyd and Blanc, 1996) is also likely to influence family and self-perception about purpose and capability (Admassie, 2003; Vlassoff, 1994). As a result, families, and also girls themselves may not see the value of education if the expectation remains that they will continue in their roles as caregivers and secondary breadwinners (Dodson and Dickert, 2004).

In practice, research shows that girls who undertake a high proportion of care work have lower rates of schooling. In Nepal, an overall 32 per cent of students drop out of school due to poor academic performance (often linked to irregular attendance), 27 per cent because they were needed at home, and 12 per cent due to the high cost of schooling (Government of Nepal, 2007). A report by the International Labour Organisation on 23 member states found that girls who perform 28 h or more a week of domestic chores attend school 25 per cent less than girls who do fewer than 14 h per week (ILO, 2009).

Therefore efforts targeting only one but not both of these constraints are likely to be short-lived, especially if the broader androcentric cultural, political and economic structures maintaining these inequalities are left unaddressed (Fraser, 2007). Rather, the end goal, as Sullivan explains, is to transform the wider set of gender relations and ideologies subordinating women, 'By focusing on daily interaction as a potentially transformative process, it is

² The term 'unpaid' differentiates from paid care and the word 'care' indicates that the services provided nurture other people. The word 'work' indicates obligation and costs in terms of time and energy (contractual or social) (UNIFEM, 2000). Direct care work includes personal care such as feeding a child or tending to the ill and indirect care refers to all the activities that make care possible including collecting water or fuel for cooking and cleaning (Razavi, 2007).

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