

**Thematic Session
Gender Inequality in Housework**

**Unpaid Care and Housework:
Case of Viet Nam**

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The Sustainable Development Goal 5, “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”, includes a target 5.4 that calls for the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work¹ through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family. In Viet Nam, the issue of women’s unpaid care work has been discussed in many gender research and analysis as a major obstacle to gender equality and women’s development throughout their life. The reduction of women’s time spent on unpaid care work has been set as the national targets in the most recent National Strategies on Gender Equality for the two period 2011-2020 and 2021-2030. Specifically, the national target in the National Strategy on Gender Equality 2021-2030 is to shorten the time women spend on these tasks by 1.4 time compared to men, by 2030.²

This paper includes three sections. The first section provides the evidences on the disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work of women in the country through the recent surveys and its impacts on gender inequality. The second section presents the Viet Nam’s legal framework and policies on unpaid care work that have impact on the participation of women and men in unpaid care work. The third session discusses the limitations of the policies and challenges related to unpaid care work, and policy implications.

1. Women’s burden on unpaid care work: No change or recession?

As many countries in the world, the perception that women and girls should be responsible for unpaid care work is deeply embedded in Viet Nam’s society. While women’s disproportionate share of unpaid care work has been recognised, making gender differences in time use and counting the value of unpaid care work visible is critical for evidence-based policies and programs.

Time-use survey is a tool for understanding the patterns of individuals’ time use. In Viet Nam, the first time-use survey was conducted in 2016 by an international NGO - Action Aid Viet Nam. It revealed that on average, women spent 314 minutes and men spent 190 minutes per day on unpaid care and housework.³ It means that *women’s time spent on unpaid care work is 1.7 times more than men’s time*. There was little difference in the time spent on unpaid care work among women’s groups with different education levels and marital status. Valuing the cost of unpaid care and housework, this time-use survey estimated that unpaid care work contributed more than 20 per cent of the total GDP of Viet Nam in 2015.⁴

To record the changes on the time spent of women and men in unpaid care work, the government of Viet Nam took efforts to collect the data through National Labour Force Survey since 2019. Thus,

¹ In this paper, “unpaid care work” includes unpaid care and housework, so the terms “unpaid care work” and “unpaid care and housework” are used interchangeably.

² Prime Minister Resolution No. 28/NQ-CP the National Strategy on Gender Equality in 2021 – 2030. Objective 3, Target 1

³ Action Aid. 2016. Make the house become home. Policy brief. Ha Noi, Viet Nam

⁴ Action Aid. 2016. Make the house become home. Policy Brief, Hanoi, Viet Nam

the National Labour Force Survey (2019)⁵ included, also for the first time, a question on time spent on unpaid care and housework. The data showed that women and men spent 18.84 hours and 8.93 hours, respectively per week on unpaid care and housework, which means the *time spent by women on this work is more than double that of men*. However, the weakness of this survey is that definition of “unpaid care and housework” with seven specific tasks including three types of unpaid work⁶, while some activities are not included such as community work, social activities, and leisure time. Thus, this way of definition has affected counting of the exact time on unpaid care and housework.

The second Viet Nam’s national time-use survey was supported by World Bank in 2022 and 2023 with sample of 6,001 Vietnamese residents, from 15 to 64 years old and its results was just launched recently in June 2023. This time-use survey focusses on eight categories of activities: paid work, household work, care (unpaid caring services to family members), community work and help other household, education, social participation, leisure and media consumption, personal care, sleep and eating. According to this survey, *women’s time devoted to unpaid care and housework is 2.87 times more than men’s time* (261 minutes of unpaid care work for women and 91 minutes of unpaid care work for men).

Time spent on activities per day by Sex (in hours:mins)								
	Paid Work	Household Work	Care	Community work and help other households	Education	Social participation	Leisure and media consumption	Personal care, sleep and eating
Female	5:07	2:47	1:29	0:04	0:26	0:21	1:32	12:10
Male	6:04	0:56	0:28	0:06	0:38	0:28	2:18	12:59
Total	5:36	1:52	0:58	0:05	0:32	0:24	1:55	12:34

Source: Time-use Survey, ABP Gender, World Bank, 2023

Time spent on paid, unpaid work and participation & leisure per day (in hours:mins)

⁵ Viet Nam Household Living Survey which was conducted every two years from 2002 to 2008 that includes a question on housework had a problem of methodology with exclusion of care (of children, elderly and sick).

⁶These unpaid work are: (i) Making products for household consumption (furniture, pottery, clothes, weaving carpets, etc.); (ii) Self-repairing or maintaining household items (repairing broken objects or equipment, repainting walls, etc.) and (iii) Self-construction, expansion or upgrading of a house, or other construction. These three jobs, though are primarily performed by men, they are exceptionally rarely done as the services are available for these products

	Paid work	Unpaid cwork	Total work	Participation & Leisure
Female	5:07	4:21	9:29	1:53
Male	6:04	1:31	7:35	2:46
Total	5:36	2:56	8:32	2:20

Source: Time-use Survey, ABP Gender, World Bank, 2023

The above tables show that the total of women’s work (9 hours and 29 minutes) is considerably more than men’s work (7 hours and 35 minutes). It indicates that the time use of women and men differs most in terms of the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work and leisure time. Although, labor market participation of women is remarkably high in Viet Nam, about 70.9 per cent compared to the global average of 47.2 per cent, the participation gap between women and men in Viet Nam has averaged at 9.5 percentage points over the last decade.⁷

Some researches and analysis⁸ illustrate that the gender impacts of unequal distribution of unpaid care work on Vietnamese women’s development are pronounced throughout the fields: education and training, labor force participation, decent work and earning, health and political participation. For example, more than 20 per cent of the women who did not engage in paid work were because of unpaid care work, compared to 2 per cent of men. The same percentage of women reported that unpaid care work is one of the top reasons for discontinuing education and training.⁹

Given the different methodologies used for these surveys to measure the time spent on unpaid care work, the above results show that social norm on women’s responsibility for unpaid care work almost has not changed over the last ten years in Viet Nam, even the stereotype has been reinforced stronger in the context of COVID-19.

2. Viet Nam’s legal and policy framework supporting to unpaid care work

Viet Nam has a strong legal framework to advance gender equality. The unpaid care work has been clearly mentioned in some specific laws and national strategies. They are Labour Code, the Social Insurance Law, Law on Marriage and Family and National Strategies on Gender Equality.

[Labor Code \(2019\)](#) includes a chapter on Female Employees and Gender Equality. It stipulates a number of articles on supporting women’s unpaid care and housework, in direct or indirect way, such as: (i) State to support to construction of kindergartens and day care centres in worker-populated areas¹⁰ and employers support part of child care expenses for employees (Article 135); (ii) Encourage employers to widely apply the working regime according to flexible timetables, part-time

⁷ Australian Aid, ADB, ILO and UN Women. 2021. Country Gender Equality Profile 2021.

⁸ UN Women. 2016. Unpaid care and domestic work: Issues and suggestions for Viet Nam; Institute for Social Development Studies (ISDS). 2015. Social Determinants of Gender Inequality in Vietnam. Hong Duc Publisher.

⁹ ISDS. 2015. Social Determinants of Gender Inequality in Vietnam. Hong Duc Publisher.

¹⁰ Decree No 145 passed in December 2020 includes direction to Provincial Peoples’ Committees to facilitate the land, loans/investment and administrative procedures to construct kindergarten and day care centres in worker-populated areas, including industrial zones.

work, and work-from-home assignments (Article 136); (iii) Employers should not dismiss or unilaterally terminate labor contracts with employees for reasons of marriage, pregnancy and maternity leave; and female employees having children under 12 month old are entitled to 60 minutes rest every day during working time with full salary according to the labor contract (Article 137); (iv) Female employees are entitled to maternity leave for 6 months with the maternity regime in accordance with the Law on social insurance (Article 139) and guaranteed with the jobs when they return to work after taking maternity leave (Article 140); (v) In some cases, employees are allowed to unilaterally terminate the contract without prior notice, such as being pregnant or being sexually harassed at work (Article 35).

[The Social Insurance Law \(2014\)](#) states that principle of gender equality be applied to compulsory social insurance, maternity and retirement benefits and unemployment insurance. It includes comprehensive maternity protection for formal workers and surrogate and adopting mothers with 6-month maternity leave. Short-term leave is also granted to women in formal employment in the case of miscarriage, abortion and stillbirth. Women have 5 to 10 days off work for pregnancy check-up.

Maternity Allowance:

Maternity leave is to be paid and *monthly allowance* equal to 100% of the average salary of the preceding 06 months before taking leave, provided that the employee must pay social insurance during those 06 months.

One-time allowance for childbirth or adoption: a lump-sum allowance for each child is 2 times base salary (3,600,000 VND/156 USD). For the case of childbirth but only the father participates in social insurance, the family is entitled to this lump sum allowance.

The Social Insurance Law (2014), Article 38, 39

Paternity leave, the first time, is enshrined in Social Insurance Law in 2014, i.e. the male employees who pay social insurance premiums are entitled to paternity leave, when their wives give birth to children, from 05 to 14 working days depending on specific situation (Law on Social Insurance 2014, Article 34) with full salary for the leave.

[Law on Marriage and Family \(2014\)](#)

Husband or wife's labor in the family (i.e. unpaid care and housework) is considered as income labor (Clause 2, Article 59). It means a wife or husband who stays at home to take care of children and family but does not work is counted as an employee with income equivalent to that of a working husband or wife. Accordingly, unpaid care work is considered when dividing assets upon divorce.

3. Discussion on challenges related to unpaid care work and policy implications in Vietnamese context

Social norms and understanding on unpaid care work

The nature of unpaid care work is not well understood, and to date, the topic has not featured in economic development discourse in Viet Nam. It has been a common understanding and perception for a long time that the unpaid care work is a cultural issue, i.e. women and men's roles in family. This perception has not supported the rationale for economic growth and sustainable development. Shifting perception on unpaid care work from cultural to economic and human right perspective is extremely important, and can open opportunities for strengthening the policy discussion on this issue. A proper understanding of the nature and the impact of unpaid care work on the development of the country is essential to advance the policy design and implementation that underline the unpaid care work as a cross cutting issue of the socio-economic development and sustainable development policies. Men's engagement, promotion of shared responsibilities between women/girls and men/boys at home, raising society's awareness of the value of unpaid care work, provision of the public services to support unpaid care work, its significance, and linkages to development through communication campaigns and engagement with media - all these are crucial to transform social norms, which is further driven by policy advocacy and implementation for reducing and redistributing unpaid care work in both the public and private sector.

Data and evidence generation and resource development

In Viet Nam, the time-use survey and research on this topic have been mainly conducted and financed by international organizations. Lack of data and evidence on unpaid care work in different sectors is a barrier for making it visible in the design of economic and social policies. It is time for Viet Nam to conduct further assessment on the gender impacts of socio-economic policies such as labour and employment, tax policy, and social protection policies in relation to unpaid care work. As Viet Nam wants to collect the regular data on unpaid care work in the National Labour Force Survey, the development of tools and analytical framework for monitoring the impacts of national investment specifically to reduce unpaid care work and periodical costing of unpaid care work is critical. To ensure the unpaid care work data from the National Labour Force Survey to conform to the international standards and to reflect precise measurement of time spent by women and men on unpaid care work, the revision of the categories of unpaid care work in the survey is very important.

Social insurance coverage and maternity protection system

Currently in Viet Nam, the maternity leave and benefit is only applied to the workers in the compulsory social insurance system¹¹, meaning that a large portion of women working in the informal sector and women participating in voluntary social insurance cannot enjoy and benefit this

¹¹ Viet Nam's social Insurance includes two types: Compulsory social insurance with six kinds of benefits: sickness, maternity, occupational accident, occupational disease, retirement and death; and (ii) voluntary social insurance offers only two regimes: retirement and survivorship benefits

policy. In 2019, just 30 per cent of women in the labour force had access to maternity protection.¹² The effective level of protection is even lower with the fact that not all women in the labour force. Lack of maternity protection affects women's earning and children's and family's wellbeing. *Extending coverage of social insurance*, thus, to informal workers and regimes of voluntary social insurance including maternity protection is to achieve not only gender equality in unpaid care work, social inclusion in social protection system, but also attractiveness of social insurance as an investment. The roadmap and steps forward are needed to ensure and put universal maternity protection in place that will benefit all women, both in the formal and informal sector in Viet Nam.

At present time of this paper development, the Social Insurance Law (2014) is being revised and presented to the National Assembly for amendment. The revised draft of the Social Insurance Law has included a new article that employees participating in voluntary social insurance when giving birth have the opportunity to enjoy maternity benefits, the funding source will be guaranteed by the state budget.¹³

Regarding the maternity leave duration, while mothers are offered with 6 months of paid leave equal to 100 per cent of the average salary over the previous half year, men only have 5 to 14 days of paternity leave, supporting their already very limited role in childcare. The same limitation is expressed in the sickness leave system. While the Social Insurance Law establishes that insured women and men have an equal right to sick leave days if their child is ill, the Labor Code restricts this leave to female workers only.¹⁴ Focusing on women exclusively for maternity leave is not advancing gender equality and does not encourage equal sharing on unpaid care and housework between women and men, but rather deepens gender norms on unpaid care work and puts more burden on women. The *transformation to the parental leave system* is one of the critical solutions for promoting shared responsibility for unpaid care work.

Early childhood development

Having an educated population has been an enduring and high priority of the Government of Viet Nam. The annual budget expenditure on education, which in 2020 was about 15 per cent of total budget expenditure, or around 4.11 per cent of GDP.¹⁵ This policy commitment to education has yielded significant achievements in Viet Nam, without notable gender disparities.

On the early childhood education, the current policy and investment concentrates on older children, especially at 5-years of age. In all 63 provinces and cities nationwide have achieved universal education for 5-year-old children. In the 2019-2020 school year, Ministry of Education and Training reported that 90.9 per cent of 3 to 5-year-old children (pre-primary school age) attended pre-school. However, the challenge remains with respect to children under three years of age, with an enrolment

¹² Australian Aid, ADB, ILO and UN Women. 2021. Country Gender Equality Profile 2021.

¹³ Draft of Social Insurance Law (revised) on the Government's web portal (dated 26th July 2023), available at <https://xaydungchinh sach.chinhphu.vn/toan-van-du-thao-luat-bao-hiem-xa-hoi-sua-doi-119230317095523224.htm>

¹⁴ Labor Code 2019, Article 141

¹⁵ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS?locations=VN>;
<https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/VNM/vietnam/education-spending>

rate of 29.2 per cent¹⁶. In Viet Nam, care arrangements for children under three years of age is, therefore, primarily a parental responsibility, and the primary caregiving role is usually performed by mothers. The World Bank report indicates that care responsibilities are a key reason for women not participating in the labour market and 40 per cent of women who are not engaged in any paid work, cited this as the main factor.¹⁷ The reliable access to childcare affects the participation and the quality of participation of women's labour force in Viet Nam. The investment in the development and expansion of the pre-school network and improvement in the quality of early childhood education for children under three years is critical for a family's access to care facilities, particularly in the context of a growing demand for care needs, an ageing population and migration of the country. In general, policy for the development of children aged 0-3 is nascent in Viet Nam and needs to be strengthened, from both a child development and a gender perspective.

Policy design

Policies for addressing the gender issues related to unpaid care work requires renovation of both maternity protection system, including parental leave, universal maternity protection, child care public policy as mentioned earlier, and design of socio-economic development policy toward gender responsive to unpaid care work. Currently, the Government of Viet Nam is implementing a large number of policies and programs for the period of 2021-2025. It attaches a great importance to investment in the national target programs including a Socio-economic Development in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas, a New Rural Program, and Program on Sustainable Poverty Reduction.¹⁸ Through the implementation of these national target programs, a huge State fund resource has been invested on the construction and maintenance of infrastructure works, providing loans to support production and social security policies. These are great opportunities for integration of gender issues and unpaid care work, e.g investment in gender responsive infrastructure, investment in technology to save time and reduce amount of housework, and health and education services. Balancing paid work and unpaid care work should be considered in the policy design. It means that a two-pronged strategy needs to pursue with the aim of promoting the provision of public care services, including childcare and elder care services, and mainstreaming key interventions to enable the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work into public sector policies and programs.

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¹⁷ World Bank. 2018. Vietnam's Future Jobs – the Gender Dimension. Cited in International Finance Organisation (IFC); IFC. 2020. Tackling Childcare: The Business Case for Employer-Supported Childcare in Vietnam. August 2020. Washington DC

¹⁸ Vietnam's National Assembly Standing Committee has decided to allocate over VND92 trillion (US\$3.9 billion) from the central budget for the 2021-2025 period to localities implementing three national target programs.

Draft of Social Insurance Law (revised) on the Government's web portal (dated 26th July 2023), available at <https://xaydungchinh sach.chinhphu.vn/toan-van-du-thao-luat-bao-hiem-xa-hoi-sua-doi-119230317095523224.htm>

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