

How society pays when women's work is unpaid ^[1]

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Source: The New York Times

Format: Article

Publication Date: 22 Feb 2016

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

In countries around the world, the ways in which men and women spend their time are unbalanced. Men spend more time working for money. Women do the bulk of the unpaid work — cooking, cleaning and child care.

This unpaid work is essential for households and societies to function. But it is also valued less than paid work, and when it is women's responsibility, it prevents them from doing other things.

"This is one of those root inequalities that exist all over in society and we just don't talk about it very much," Melinda Gates, co-founder of the Gates Foundation, said in an interview. She said she was inspired by her own observations when traveling to other countries as well as by time-use data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. "If we don't bring it forward, we basically won't unlock the potential of women."

Ms. Gates and her husband, Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft, released their annual letter Monday night in which they outlined priorities for the year, and hers was "time poverty" because of unpaid work.

Over all, richer countries like the United States tend to have a smaller time gap for unpaid work than poorer countries like Mexico. Japan, which has one of the largest gaps, has recently started a host of initiatives to try to increase the number of women who work for pay instead of doing full-time child care, because leaders said it was essential to economic growth.

Worldwide, women spend an average of 4.5 hours a day on unpaid work, including grocery shopping, child care and laundry. That is more than double the amount of time men spend, according to O.E.C.D. data. Men spend significantly more time on paid work and also on leisure activities, which include playing sports, watching TV and hanging out with friends.

Relative to women, men spend the most time doing chores in the Scandinavian countries, and the least time in India, Mexico, Turkey and Japan. In Norway, for instance, women spend just over 3.5 hours a day on unpaid work and men spend three hours. In India, women spend six hours and men spend less than an hour. When not making a comparison with women, South Korean men come out last at 0.7 hours.

In the United States, women spend about four hours a day on unpaid work, compared with about 2.5 hours for men. The difference starts early: American girls ages 10 to 17 spend two more hours than boys on chores each week, and boys are 15 percent more likely to be paid for doing chores, according to a University of Michigan study.

When the time women spend on unpaid work shrinks to three hours a day from five hours, their labor force participation increases 10 percent, according to the O.E.C.D. When women are not able to go to school, their children are less healthy and more likely to stay in poverty. Women could do more paid work and get more education if men did more unpaid work, or if both did fewer chores.

"We need to call work what it is — work — whether you do it at home or whether you do it out in the labor force, and then give men and women options to choose what they want to do," Ms. Gates said.

There are several ways to close the time gap. Diane Elson, a sociologist and economist at the University of Essex in Britain and an adviser on women's issues and development to the United Nations, has written that unpaid work must be recognized, reduced and redistributed.

Technology plays a key role in reducing the time chores take: Think about the time American women spent washing clothes and cooking before the invention of modern appliances.

Redistributing more unpaid work to men can happen through policies, like paid family leave. Women are more likely to return to work after having a baby when they have paid leave, and men who take paternity leave spend more time on child care later.

Ms. Gates said the foundation planned to increase its support for ways to reduce the gap in unpaid work, such as providing contraceptives and cellphones for women, which could help women in developing countries. Cellphones allow women to more quickly access information like a clinic's vaccine supply or the price of a crop at the market.

Cultural change is also important, Ms. Gates said.

She recalled being unhappy about the long commute to her oldest daughter's preschool. Mr. Gates, then chief executive of Microsoft, said he would drive their daughter two days a week.

"Moms started going home and saying to their husbands, 'If Bill Gates can drive his daughter, you better darn well drive our daughter or son,'" Ms. Gates said. "If you're going to get behavior change, you have to role-model it publicly."

-reprinted from The New York Times

Region: United States ^[3]

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