

The work that makes work possible ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Whether it's childcare, elder care, or self-care, caregiving plays a central role in keeping America's economy going. As baby boomers continue to age and Millennials continue to become parents, America's care needs are only increasing. In fact, caregiving is projected to be the largest occupation in the U.S. by 2020, with care-sector jobs growing five times faster than other large job sectors. Sixty percent of families do not have a stay-at-home parent, and almost 70 percent of mothers and over 90 percent of fathers are in the workforce.

With those numbers, the labor of caregivers—the majority of whom are women of color, often immigrant women—clearly enables vast percentages of economic productivity in the U.S., without compensation or benefits to acknowledge its value. A survey by the National Domestic Workers Alliance found that 65 percent of domestic workers don't have health insurance and only 4 percent have employer-provided insurance coverage. Less than 2 percent of domestic workers receive retirement or pension funds from their primary employers, and fewer than 9 percent work for employers who pay into Social Security.

With little choice but to exist in a broken system, caregivers consistently trade long-term security for short-term financial gain. And those gains aren't much to speak of. If, as in the current system, the average caregiver makes \$9 an hour (compared to a golf caddy at \$17 and a Whole Foods bag handler at \$19) and 50 percent of low-wage informal childcare and homecare workers rely on public assistance, who will cover the costs when they themselves start to raise families or age into retirement?

Care can in fact be a national priority with an infrastructure to match—it's happened before. Back in the 1940s, when women's labor was key to the U.S. war effort, the U.S. government funded childcare centers under the Lanham Act. These provided universal and affordable care for children under 12 for up to six days a week at centers that offered a low student-teacher ratio, meals, and enrichment activities.

Today, the Pentagon continues to be a leader on this in some ways, subsidizing on-site daycare for military families. And there is a growing global recognition of the need for care infrastructure. As outlined by UN Women in a policy brief on gender equality, child development, and job creation, Ecuador's central government, working with local governments and civil-society organizations, has coordinated community-based childcare services for children of hundreds of thousands of working parents. As part of a broader strategy to universalize access and improve quality, the government plans to create another 1,000 centers by 2017, has recruited a growing number of early childhood professionals to coordinate service provision, and childcare workers—who can now obtain a technical degree after three years of part-time study—receive the minimum wage and full social-security benefits.

Another significant part of the problem of valuing care is the prevalence and invisibility of unpaid care work in the U.S. and abroad, which makes acknowledging and tracking data about this labor as a measurement of both economic growth and gender equality a key solution. The UN Women's "Progress of the World's Women Report" acknowledges, "Domestic work makes all other work possible"—and this is true regardless of whether that work comes from domestic workers or unpaid family caregivers. The labor of domestic workers is critical to the function and growth of national and global economies.

These workers, however, remain socially and economically invisible. For example, roughly one in nine people aged 65 and older are diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and one in three seniors dies from Alzheimer's or suffering from other forms of dementia. In 2014 alone, Americans provided nearly 18 billion hours of unpaid care to family members stricken with the disease; that cost has been estimated at \$218 billion—nearly half the net value of Walmart's 2013 sales. According to a forthcoming UN report, because friends and family provide a significant portion of the care and domestic work "in all societies" without being paid, their labor isn't counted; it's not considered an "economic activity" in labor-force surveys or in calculations of GDP. (If it were, McKinsey's 2015 "The Power of Parity" report estimates the actual value of this unpaid work is about \$10 trillion, around the size of China's GDP.)

In addition to making unpaid care work visible and recognizing its crucial economic value, a third key solution to the problem of valuing care lies in engaging fathers—and all men—as vital participants in creating and sustaining an infrastructure of care. It's clear that American fathers are increasingly serving as "lead parents" and doing so without the social norms or workplace policies necessary to support them. Just as they hinder women's equal participation in the workforce, rigid gender roles keep men stuck in harmful cultural stasis. Subsumed

by a culture of overwork that penalizes them for taking time off for family-care responsibilities, men too face dire consequences from our failure to value care. Failing to involve men in the conversation about care as a core component of gender equality only calcifies harmfully rigid social norms about gender overall. International experts from UN Women and NGOs like Promundo are doing important work to change harmful norms of gender and masculinity through parental leave and fathers' quotas policies and education programs for adolescent boys, respectively.

Making paid and unpaid care work visible and valuable while engaging men in the fight to value care in the U.S. and other countries can foster human well-being, build a stronger social network, and ultimately, promote greater economic growth. Bringing the global social, cultural, and policy implications for care out of the shadows will shine a light on the work that makes work possible.

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Region: United States ^[3]

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