

COMPILED POLICY BRIEF ON UNPAID
CARE & DOMESTIC WORK FROM
ECONOMIC & POLICY PERSPECTIVES

POSITIONING UNPAID CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK AT THE CENTER OF ETHIOPIA'S POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM AGENDA

S E P T E M B E R

2025

A D D I S A B A B A



NETWORK OF
ETHIOPIAN WOMEN'S
ASSOCIATIONS

POSITIONING UNPAID CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK AT THE CENTER OF ETHIOPIA'S POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM AGENDA

KEY MESSAGES

- 1** Unpaid care and Domestic Work (UCDW) is a major but invisible economic sector, contributing between 16.8% and 22.6% of Ethiopia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), yet excluded from national accounts, statistics, and planning systems.
- 2** Women perform most of the unpaid care and domestic Work (UCDW), spending 41 hours per week compared to men's 21 hours. This limits women's economic participation, productivity, leisure, and career advancement by creating time poverty.
- 3** Deeply entrenched gender norms perpetuate the unequal distribution of UCDW. Women are overwhelmingly responsible for routine, time-consuming caregiving and domestic tasks. Systematically tackling discriminatory cultural and social norms is critical to address the UCDW agenda for shared responsibilities.
- 4** Government has made progress, including sectoral gender policies, functioning gender structures, in-office daycare centers, and openness to revising guidelines.
- 5** However, institutionalization remains a challenge. UCDW is not consistently integrated into gender mainstreaming frameworks, program design, or budgeting across ministries.
- 6** The M&E systems lack full indicators, reporting, and accountability responsibilities of sectors, and their coordination remains weak.

1 | WHY UCDW MATTERS

UCDW is the backbone of the national economy and the mainstay of every Ethiopian household, yet it is not recognized. It sustains families, ensures the well-being of children and older people, and fills systemic gaps in childcare, health, and social services. Yet, because it is unpaid and typically performed by women and girls, it remains absent from national statistics and economic planning. When valued using recognized international methods, its contribution is comparable to that of larger or more formal sectors. However, because UCDW is not included in GDP, employment statistics, or fiscal frameworks, policymakers lack the complete picture needed to design effective development, labor, and social protection policies. This omission lowers the visibility of thousands of hours of work performed across rural and urban households every day.

Socially and gender-wise, UCDW is unevenly distributed. Women's disproportionate responsibility for cooking, cleaning, childcare, care for the elderly and the sick, water and fuel collection, and household management directly limits their entry and progression in education, health, formal and high-value employment, business opportunities, and leadership. Girls often sacrifice schooling due to caregiving roles

within the household. Married and working women face a “double shift,” managing both paid and unpaid labor with little external support. This gendered care burden reinforces the cycle of poverty, reduces women’s lifetime earnings, and widens gender gaps in economic empowerment. At the household level, women have less decision-making power because they engage in activities not recognized as “productive.” At the national level, failure to recognize and redistribute UCDW prevents inclusive growth and weakens Ethiopia’s ability to meet its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and Agenda 2063 gender equality commitments. Addressing UCDW is therefore not only a matter of fairness, but also it is an economic and development priority. Reducing women’s care burden and expanding accessible care services unlocks new labor supply, strengthens human capital, supports children’s development, and promotes national productivity. With strong evidence now available and institutional interest growing, Ethiopia can take decisive steps to make UCDW a core development concern.

2 | APPROACHES

This current policy brief draws on two complementary research streams undertaken by NEWA in partnership with the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MoWSA). The first study measured and valued UCDW using the 2013 Ethiopian Time Use Survey (ETUS), the most comprehensive dataset of its kind, covering more than 50,000 respondents and combined with wage data from the 2022 Urban Employment and Unemployment Survey (UEUS). Applying the National Time Transfer Accounts framework and both replacement and opportunity cost valuation methods, the study quantified the annual monetary value of UCDW and revealed gender disparities in time allocation, productivity, and opportunity costs. The second study examined how UCDW is (or is not) integrated into national and sectoral gender mainstreaming efforts through implementation research across five pro-poor ministries, using desk reviews, interviews with gender focal units, and analysis of planning, coordination, budgeting, data systems, and interventions related to UCDW and intersectionality. Together, these studies provide a holistic evidence base, demonstrating both the economic urgency of addressing UCDW and the institutional levers and barriers that must be tackled to enable effective policy action.

3 | KEY FINDINGS

The research reveals a consistent narrative: UCDW is economically vital but institutionally under-recognized, and women and girls bear its disproportionate burden due to entrenched gender norms and limited policy response.

A UCDW IS A MAJOR BUT INVISIBLE ECONOMIC SECTOR

The valuation exercise shows that UCDW, if counted, would contribute between 16.8% and 22.6% of Ethiopia’s GDP, valued by the Replacement Cost and Opportunity Costs methods, respectively. These figures surpass the contribution of many formal sectors, demonstrating that UCDW is not a peripheral activity but a cornerstone of the national economy.

B WOMEN SHOULDER SIGNIFICANTLY MORE UNPAID WORK

Women spend 41 hours per week on UCDW compared to men’s 21 hours. This “care gap” restricts their ability to join the labor market, pursue education, political participation, or engage in entrepreneurship as well as leisure. Regression analysis from the valuation study shows that every additional minute spent on unpaid care reduces time allocated to paid work, illustrating the economic trade-offs women face.

C DEEPLY ENTRENCHED GENDER NORMS PERPETUATE THE UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF UCDW

Traditional societal perceptions of gender roles dictate the types of unpaid work performed by men and women. Women are overwhelmingly responsible for routine, time-consuming caregiving and domestic tasks, such as cooking and cleaning, while men's contributions are typically limited to less frequent, physically demanding, or mobility-intensive activities, like collecting firewood and traveling for domestic purposes.

D INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENTS EXIST BUT ARE UNEVENLY IMPLEMENTED

The implementation research shows encouraging signs: All studied ministries acknowledge the care burden's influence on sector outcomes; gender focal units exist and are positioned to support mainstreaming; several ministries have established on-site daycare centers, an important institutional recognition of the care burden; some ministries show openness to revising outdated guidelines, signaling momentum for reform. Despite this, UCDW is not consistently or explicitly integrated into gender mainstreaming frameworks, program design, or budgeting. Ministries often reference UCDW indirectly, such as discussing girls' school dropout or women's employment barriers without systematic strategies. In addition, the M&E system lacks full indicators, reporting, and accountability responsibilities of sectors, and its coordination remains weak.

E INTERSECTIONALITY IS INSUFFICIENTLY ADDRESSED

Sector guidelines rarely incorporate disaggregated data or strategies tailored to rural women, low-income households, women with disabilities, or other groups disproportionately burdened by care work. Without an intersectional approach, the most vulnerable women and girls risk continued exclusion.

F INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY, RESOURCES, COORDINATION, AND ACCOUNTABILITY ARE LIMITED

Gender focal structures often have minimal budgets, limited staff, and insufficient training on UCDW and intersectionality. Cross-ministerial collaboration, although mandated, is weak in practice. Outdated national guidelines further hinder systematic mainstreaming.

4 | POLICY OPTIONS

Transformative action on UCDW requires more than recognition of its scale, and it demands structural changes in planning, budgeting, service delivery, labor policy, data systems, and institutional culture. The following policy options draw on valuation evidence, institutional diagnosis, and global best practices. They reflect what Ethiopian ministries can realistically adopt and implement, given administrative structures, public sector routines, and current reform directions.



1. ENSURE NATIONAL POLICY REFORM AND STRENGTHEN MONITORING AND PLANNING SYSTEMS TO MAKE UCDW VISIBLE

A) A key opportunity lies in embedding UCDW within Ethiopia's macroeconomic and planning architecture. This includes: integrating UCDW into the national planning and performance frameworks; the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the Ministry of Planning and Development should embed UCDW indicators into annual planning guidelines, sector plans, and performance scorecards. Ministries should be required to report and ensure accountability on time-saving, care-supporting interventions in annual plans.

B) Before approving major programs (e.g., water, education, employment), ministries should assess how their initiatives increase or reduce care burdens. This tool can be integrated into the existing gender mainstreaming template.

C) Update and harmonize national and sectoral gender mainstreaming guidelines. Explicit UCDW sections should be incorporated into the revised national guideline and cascaded across sector-specific frameworks, ensuring consistency and clarity on institutional responsibilities.



2. EXPAND AND INSTITUTIONALIZE CARE SERVICES ACROSS GOVERNMENT AND WORKPLACES

The government can reduce care burdens within its own institutions by becoming a model employer and expanding care services nationwide by implementing the following measures.

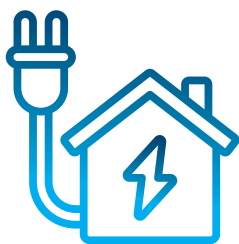
A) Scale the establishment of workplace daycare centers.

B) Building on existing ministry daycare centers, the Ministry of Labor and Skills (MoLS) and MoWSA should strengthen and monitor standards and incentives for all public institutions, universities, and large private firms to operate quality daycare services.

C) strengthen and monitor care-supportive workplace policies. This includes flexible working arrangements, breastfeeding-friendly spaces, and protection for pregnant and lactating employees.

D) Pilot "Care-Friendly Public Offices." Selected ministries should demonstrate best practices in care-responsive Human Resource Policies, flexible work hours, and family support services, such as offering public transport, to inspire replication across the public sector.

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3. REDUCE UCDW THROUGH INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICE DELIVERY INVESTMENTS

Line ministries can directly reduce the hours women spend on unpaid care through targeted investments.

A) Expand access to water, clean energy, and sanitation. The Ministry of Water and Energy's (MoWE) programs should use UCDW valuation evidence to promote and prioritize water access points, rural electrification, improved cooking technologies, and renewable energy for household use in collaboration with stakeholders.

B) Invest in community-based childcare centers and mobile care services. The MoWSA, Ministry of Health (MoH), and Ministry of Education (MoE) can collaborate on multifunctional community centers providing childcare, early learning, disability care, and elderly support, particularly in low-income and rural areas.



4. PROMOTE SHARED RESPONSIBILITY AND BEHAVIORAL CHANGE

Redistribution of care cannot be achieved through policy alone; it requires cultural and social shifts.

A) Launch a national "Care movement". Using mass media, schools, religious institutions, edutainment, and community dialogues, this initiative can normalize men's participation in domestic work. MoWSA can coordinate with MoE to incorporate care equality into curricula and civic education. Civil Society organizations can play a great role.

B) Introduce incentives for men's engagement. This includes encouraging take-up of paternity leave, recognizing model families who share care roles, and rewarding workplaces that promote gender-equal caregiving.



5. STRENGTHEN LABOR MARKET AND SOCIAL PROTECTION POLICIES

Reducing UCDW requires transforming how labor market and social protection systems acknowledge care responsibilities.

A) Advocate for flexible work arrangements in the civil service and private sector. Flexible working hours, options for remote work, and phased return after childbirth should be standard components of labor regulations.

B) Extend maternity, paternity, and parental leave. MoLS and MoF can explore cost-sharing models between employers and government to make extended leaves feasible, particularly for small businesses.

C) Protect and professionalize domestic workers. Formalization, including contract templates, fair wages, occupational safety, and certification, can reduce women's unpaid burden while creating decent jobs. Ethiopia can adapt successful models from South Africa, Uruguay, and the Philippines.

D) Build care into social protection programs. Safety nets (e.g., PSNP- Productive Safety Net Program) can provide targeted support for households with high care needs or caregivers facing labor-market exclusion.



6. IMPROVE DATA, MEASUREMENT, AND MONITORING SYSTEMS

Reliable measurement is essential for long-term policymaking.

A) Institutionalize periodic Time Use Surveys. The Ethiopian Statistical Service (ESS) should integrate time-use modules into the Household Living Standards Survey, ensuring updated and disaggregated UCDW data every 3–5 years.

B) Develop a national Care Economy Satellite Account. This will enable Ethiopia to estimate the economic contribution of UCDW annually—supporting macroeconomic analysis and policy design.

B) Include UCDW indicators in annual reports and dashboards. Ministries should be accountable for reporting care-related progress, including targets for childcare expansion, rural infrastructure, and intersectional gender outcomes. Also, there is a need to strengthen the enforcement of monitoring and accountability mandates of the MoWSA, alongside the reporting responsibilities of sector Ministries.



7. STRENGTHEN INTERSECTIONALITY AND TARGETED INTERVENTIONS

To ensure equitable outcomes, policies must explicitly address the varied care burdens women face.

A) Tailor interventions for rural women, women with disabilities, low-income households, and pastoral communities. This includes localized care centers, mobile services, disability-inclusive infrastructure, and water and energy solutions adapted to pastoral mobility.

B) Integrate intersectional analysis into all revised guidelines and planning tools.

This will ensure that care policies reflect the realities of diverse groups, not a one-size-fits-all approach.

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NEWA is a not-for-profit network established in 2003 by a group of women aspiring to create synergy and a stronger advocacy voice for women's advancement. It is one of the pioneer national civic society networks working for the respect of the political, economic, social, and legal rights of women. This policy brief is based on two studies conducted as part of a larger project titled 'Coupling Unpaid Care and Domestic Work (UCDW) with Local Development Agenda for Improved Care System in Ethiopia.' The project was supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and implemented by the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA) in partnership with the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs.

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