

CARE & DOMESTIC WORK COUNTED: THE TRUE VALUE OF ETHIOPIA'S UNPAID WORK

Key messages

Ethiopian women spend 41 hours weekly on Unpaid Care and Domestic Work (UCDW) compared with men's 21 hours. UCDW contributes significantly to the Ethiopian economy, its estimated value representing between 16.8% and 22.6% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), depending on the valuation methods. Women's unpaid labor alone constitutes 9.5 to 11.6% of Ethiopia's GDP. These findings challenge conventional economic frameworks that exclude unpaid labor from GDP measurements, perpetuating its invisibility in national policy discourse.

1| WHY COUNT WOMEN'S WORK?

Globally, UCDW is mostly carried out by women, significantly restricting their access to education, employment, political engagement, and leisure.^a According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), women perform three times more unpaid care work than men, a burden that perpetuates gender inequalities across societies. Unfortunately, these unpaid domestic and care activities are not taken into account in both the conventional national accounts and the calculation of GDP in most countries, and Ethiopia is not an exception. This means women's domestic economic contribution is largely unreported. Including the value of time spent on UCDW in national accounts is a first step towards gender equality and is in line with international commitments such as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), African Union Agenda 2023, and Ethiopia's policies. In Ethiopia, UCDW is gaining increasing recognition within gender and social protection policies. Despite notable government commitments, such as relatively progressive policies, the implementation of the Time Use Survey in 2013, and some efforts by development partners, there remains a lack of evidence about UCDW's contribution to the economy by way of counting women's work or quantifying the 'gendered economy' in Ethiopia.

^aOxfam (2014). Factors and norms influencing unpaid care work. <https://shorturl.at/gADM4>

This policy brief not only seeks to offer evidence on the extent of UCDW's contribution to the Ethiopian GDP but also provides suggestions for policy recommendations to elevate UCDW's visibility in national policy discussions.

2| APPROACHES

The policy recommendations in this brief are grounded in NEWA's recent study report that quantified the economic contribution of UCDW to GDP, valuing these activities as if they were compensated as paid labor. This analysis employed the National Time Transfer Accounts (NTTA) framework, which extends traditional economic measures by capturing time spent on non-market activities like caregiving and domestic work and assigning it a monetary value based on appropriate wage rates. By integrating this approach with the market-focused National Transfer Accounts (NTA), the study provides a critical and more inclusive lens to quantify contributions traditionally excluded from GDP, thereby addressing the systemic invisibility of unpaid labor and offering a robust evidence base for policy action.

The study quantified UCDW, including community services, by integrating two primary datasets. The foundational data on time allocation came from the 2013 Ethiopian Time Use Survey (ETUS) a nationally representative survey of 20,122 households (14,009 from Rural area and 6113 from Urban area). The ETUS collected time-use diaries from 52,262 individuals aged 10 and above. However, to align with Ethiopian legal working age, the analysis for the current valuation, the sample was restricted to 44,468 individuals aged 15 and older. For the valuation purpose, Ethiopian Urban Employment Unemployment Survey, which was collected in 2022, was employed. The data contains the monthly wage paid to casual employees and persons in the public and private sectors. The surveys contained information from 28,795 households across the country.

The next step within the NTTA framework involved placing a monetary value on the time spent on a particular unpaid activity. Following established methodology, the analysis employed two primary valuation approaches: the Replacement Cost approach and the Opportunity Cost approach. The Replacement Cost approach values time spent on UCDW based on the hourly earnings of individuals performing similar tasks in the market sector. The current analysis employed the cost approach to estimate the monetary value of unpaid work performed by persons aged 15 and above. In addition, for comparison purposes, Opportunity Cost approach was also applied.

3| KEY FINDINGS

The following key findings are reported from the study.

1| UCDW represents a significant, yet overlooked, pillar of the Ethiopian economy: UCDW contributes between 16.8% and 22.6% of Ethiopia's 2022 GDP, valued by the Replacement Cost and Opportunity Costs methods, respectively. More specifically, the total estimated annual wage value of UCDW and community services in Ethiopia, valued by the Replacement Cost Method, amounts to ETB 1,039.23 billion, representing 16.8% of the 2022 GDP as shown in Table 1. This establishes UCDW as one of the largest sectors in the national economy, despite its complete exclusion from official accounts.

2| The burden of UCDW is disproportionately carried by women, reinforcing systemic gender inequalities: A stark gender divide exists in time allocation. Women spend an average of 41 hours per week on UCDW, compared to men's 21 hours. This unequal distribution of responsibilities limits women's participation in productive economic activities, which averages only 30 hours per week, compared to 39 hours for men.

Likewise, when the replacement cost method is applied and disaggregated by gender, it reveals a stark contrast: women contribute ETB 589.30 billion (9.5% of GDP), significantly more than men's ETB 449.92 billion (7.3% of the GDP). This reveals the disproportionate burden of unpaid labor borne by women, reflecting societal norms and cultural practices where domestic work and caregiving are largely viewed as female responsibilities. Similarly, the Opportunity Costs approach further confirms the imbalance, with women contributing ETB 717.18 billion (11.6% of GDP) compared to men's ETB 677.70 billion (11.0% of GDP). This gap may stem from entrenched societal norms where women disproportionately take on domestic and care-giving responsibilities.

These findings challenge conventional economic frameworks that exclude unpaid labor from GDP measurements, thereby perpetuating its invisibility in national policy discourse. The hidden economic value of UCDW underscores its essential contributions to economic productivity, social welfare, and family cohesion, highlighting its foundational role in sustaining both households and broader economic systems. Recognizing UCDW as a legitimate economic activity offers a critical opportunity for Ethiopia to address long-standing gaps in social protection, labor policy, and economic planning.

Table 1: Annual value of unpaid work (ETB) and GDP share by demographic group (Replacement Cost Method)

		Male	Female	Total	Percentage share of GDP
Age group	15-17	23,448,141,421	36,016,982,388	59,465,123,808	1.0%
	18-60	393,038,088,645	519,395,883,986	912,433,972,631	14.8%
	61+	33,437,098,624	33,891,585,372	67,328,683,996	1.1%
Residence	Urban	86,220,436,125	128,402,233,154	214,622,669,279	3.5%
	Rural	363,702,892,564	460,902,218,592	824,605,111,156	13.3%
Region	Tigray	21,373,438,886	36,103,000,770	57,476,439,656	0.9%

Afar	6,382,737,624	9,958,497,881	16,341,235,505	0.3%
Amhara	145,351,122,584	152,717,372,409	298,068,494,993	4.8%
Oromia	156,537,773,080	216,518,365,456	373,056,138,536	6.0%
Somali	5,732,619,372	13,268,446,901	19,001,066,272	0.3%
Benishangul-Gumuz	4,384,817,888	6,711,985,265	11,096,803,153	0.2%
SNNPR	87,325,792,268	120,395,595,206	207,721,387,474	3.4%
Gambella	1,552,703,533	2,613,111,873	4,165,815,406	0.1%
Harari	1,347,790,618	1,723,680,271	3,071,470,889	0.0%
Addis Ababa	18,034,365,637	26,262,357,593	44,296,723,229	0.7%
Dire Dawa	1,900,167,199	3,032,038,123	4,932,205,322	0.1%
Total	449,923,328,689	589,304,451,746	1,039,227,780,436	16.8%
Note: GDP 2022 in USD			118,970,000,000	
Average exchange rate in 2022 (1USD to ETB) ^b			51.9425	
2022 GDP in ETB			6,179,599,225,000	

Similarly, applying the Opportunity Cost method reveals that the total estimated annual wage value of unpaid domestic work, care, and community services in Ethiopia amounts to ETB 1,394.88 billion. This represents 22.6% of the 2022 GDP, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Annual value of unpaid work (ETB) and GDP share by demographic group (Opportunity Cost Method)

		Male	Female	Total	Percentage from GDP
Age group	15-17	32,579,353,944	39,532,684,610	72,112,038,554	1.2%
	18-60	592,965,387,303	628,934,775,199	1,221,900,162,502	19.8%
	61+	52,153,057,326	48,710,731,600	100,863,788,926	1.6%
Residence	Urban	133,277,039,646	163,578,061,520	296,855,101,166	4.8%
	Rural	544,420,758,928	553,600,129,888	1,098,020,888,816	17.8%
Region	Tigray	27,530,762,422	42,837,945,229	70,368,707,652	1.1%
	Afar	8,197,509,499	10,537,489,747	18,734,999,247	0.3%
	Amhara	186,146,020,674	164,155,439,455	350,301,460,129	5.7%
	Oromia	251,910,422,086	271,157,895,184	523,068,317,269	8.5%
	Somali	10,569,944,310	16,940,822,604	27,510,766,915	0.4%
	Benishangul-Gumuz	7,239,629,517	8,747,258,170	15,986,887,687	0.3%
	SNNPR	148,396,509,373	158,267,762,490	306,664,271,864	5.0%
	Gambella	2,810,737,377	3,204,201,855	6,014,939,232	0.1%
	Harari	2,278,891,603	2,087,095,811	4,365,987,414	0.1%
	Addis Ababa	29,817,620,850	35,590,335,554	65,407,956,404	1.1%
	Dire Dawa	2,799,750,861	3,651,945,308	6,451,696,169	0.1%
	Total	677,697,798,573	717,178,191,408	1,394,875,989,981	22.6%
		11.0%	11.6%	22.6%	
Note: GDP 2022 in USD			118,970,000,000		
Average exchange rate in 2022 (1USD to ETB)			51.9425		
2022 GDP in ETB			6,179,599,225,000		

^b <https://www.exchangerates.org.uk/USD-ETB-spot-exchange-rates-history-2022.html>

3| The economic value of UCDW comes with opportunity costs that undermine women's economic empowerment: Regression analysis demonstrates that every additional minute spent on UCDW reduces time available for productive work, creating a direct trade-off that disproportionately affects women. The Opportunity Cost Method, which estimates UCDW's value at ETB 1,394.88 billion annually, captures the magnitude of this trade-off and its implications for economic growth. This finding underscores the urgent need for policies that enable women to balance unpaid and paid work.

4| Deeply entrenched gender norms perpetuate the unequal distribution of UCDW, hindering progress toward gender equality: The study revealed that 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 like cooking and cleaning, while men's contributions are typically and largely limited to less frequent, physically demanding, or mobility-intensive activities, like collecting firewood and traveling for domestic purposes. These gendered divisions of labor, rooted in cultural norms, systematically entrench women's economic marginalization.

5| Recognizing and addressing the economic and social dimensions of UCDW is essential to building an inclusive and sustainable economy: This study provides evidence to guide policymakers, development practitioners, and advocates addressing the systemic undervaluation of UCDW. By highlighting both its economic and social implications, the report lays the foundation for transformative actions to build an economy that values all contributions, ensuring that no one—especially women—is left behind.

4| POLICY OPTIONS

Based on the evidence presented, the following actionable insights are targeted at policymakers, the private sector, civil society & media, households, and communities.

A| Recognize and Value Unpaid Care and Domestic Work (UCDW)

Formal recognition of UCDW in national accounting is essential to highlight its economic contribution and inform equitable policy-making. This can be achieved by incorporating UCDW into GDP calculations and national statistics to ensure visibility in economic planning; conduct routine Time Use Surveys (TUS) that break down UCDW by location, gender, age, and disability; and ensuring development policies are in line with gender-responsive budgeting by incorporating UCDW valuation.

B| Reduce UCDW Burdens through Infrastructure and Technology

Time and labor-saving technologies can significantly improve women's domestic workloads, particularly in rural areas where tasks like water collection and firewood gathering are time-intensive. This can be achieved by investing in clean water systems, renewable energy, and improved cooking technologies (e.g., solar-powered pumps, fuel-efficient stoves). It also requires enhanced access to affordable labor-saving tools by supporting private sector innovation through financing and commercialization incentives, and strengthening government and development partner initiatives, such as those led by the Ministry of Innovation and Technology and the Ministry of Water and Energy, to scale up rural-friendly solutions.

C| Expand and Strengthen Childcare Services

The promotion of childcare services is critical and should involve expanding mandatory childcare services to private industries alongside public sector provisions. Building on successful local and global best practices, it is important to promote subsidized, community-based childcare models. Furthermore, public-private partnerships and donor support should be enhanced to make childcare affordable for low-income families, and inter-ministerial coordination must be improved to standardize and regulate childcare services nationwide.

D| Redistribute UCDW Responsibilities between Men and Women

Tackling cultural and social norms is important to address the UCDW agenda. Systematic efforts are needed to shift attitudes and encourage shared responsibilities. This includes launching national behavior change campaigns via media, religious institutions, and community leaders to promote equitable household roles, integrating gender equality into school curricula teaching boys and girls about shared caregiving from an early age; scaling up male engagement programs to normalize men's participation in care work; and promoting male role models who actively engage in caregiving, domestic work, and community service to challenge gender norms and inspire broader male participation.

E| Promote gender-responsive Labor Policies

While Ethiopia has improved parental leave policies, enforcement and awareness remain weak, particularly in the private sector. There is a need to promote the use of existing policies through awareness campaigns and to expand flexible work arrangements, such as remote work, adjustable hours, for workers balancing paid and unpaid labor. Additionally, social protections, including health insurance and childcare support, should be extended to informal sector workers, who face the greatest care-work burdens. Furthermore, strengthening stakeholder engagement across government, the private sector, civil society, media, and also at households is crucial.

F| Professionalize Domestic Work to Reduce UCDW Burdens

Formalizing Ethiopia's domestic work sector offers a dual solution by reducing women's unpaid care burdens while creating decent employment opportunities. This can be achieved through certified training programs in childcare and household management, standardized contracts, and labor protections to improve service quality. The sector should be formalized by establishing minimum wages, social security benefits, and reasonable working conditions. At the same time, public awareness campaigns can help recognize domestic work as skilled labor and promote fair treatment. Key implementation steps include creating national certification standards, enforcing fair wage laws, introducing tax benefits for formal employment, reducing stigma through public awareness campaigns, and integrating domestic workers into childcare systems. This comprehensive approach addresses both care redistribution and decent work creation within Ethiopia's labor market context.

G. Future Research and Data Improvements

The current data limitations constrain policy precision, so future efforts must prioritize inclusivity and timeliness. The following actions are critical: periodically conduct fresh Time Use Surveys to reflect evolving care dynamics; include disability data to capture unpaid care contributions of persons with disabilities; and address old data limitations by advocating for government-funded TUS initiatives to ensure sustainability.

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