



Unpaid Care Work Among Utah Women: A 2024 Update

Setting the Stage

Unpaid work, including childcare, eldercare, housework, and other tasks, is vitally important to the foundations of strong families, communities, and nations; in fact, such domestic work has been called “the work that makes all other work possible.”¹ According to Oxfam, the monetary value of women’s unpaid work is estimated to be \$10.8 trillion each year,² and women worldwide spend a significantly larger portion of time than men performing this critical work.³ This happens for many reasons, including personal values and choices, cultural and social norms, unconscious biases, and specific economic and employment considerations. Researchers and thought leaders urge individuals and societies to recognize that unpaid work is indeed work, to value it as such, and to explore how unpaid work can be more evenly distributed.

This research snapshot focuses on three areas:

- 1) Provides an overview of unpaid care work and its division between women and men both globally and locally,
- 2) Explores factors leading to high rates of unpaid work among Utah women, as well as the resulting implications, and
- 3) Shares approaches to redistribute unpaid work to ensure Utah women can address other vital areas of their lives.

Overview of Unpaid Care Work

In 2023, men between the ages of 15 and 64 across the world spent 2.76 hours on unpaid work per day, while women spent 4.52.⁴ In general, the amount of time women spend on unpaid care work varies from two to ten times more than men, depending on region and other factors.⁵ The numbers are significant because such systemic differences can have deep implications for women’s economic, mental and physical wellbeing,⁶ and if current trends continue, the next generation of women will spend 2.3 more hours per day than men on unpaid care and domestic work.⁷

While the gap between men and women’s unpaid work is largest in developing nations, it remains significant in the United States. According to the American Time Use

Survey tables, US women who participate in unpaid work average 4.92 hours per day compared to 3.79 hours per day for US men.⁸ The gap in Utah is wider than the national average: women spend 5.55 hours per day in unpaid work vs. 3.22 hours for Utah men.⁹ It should be noted that while this snapshot focuses primarily on unpaid care work generally performed in the home, Utah women also spend significant time volunteering in church and community work.

Unpaid care work comes in many forms—childcare being one of the most common—which is significant in Utah as the state has one of the highest fertility rates,¹⁰ the largest family size,¹¹ and the largest share of women who work part-time in the nation.¹² Many women prioritize caring for household children over other pursuits and may do so for a variety of reasons. For some women, choosing to raise children full time is fulfilling and empowering; for other mothers, a combination of raising children and employment would be more ideal, but affordable/quality childcare options are challenging. There are also cultural factors that contribute to women’s understanding of choice as it relates to their roles in home and family; these are nuanced and complicated discussions. It is difficult to isolate cultural influence from choice, but research shows that maternal and family wellbeing increases when mothers can attain their preferred work situations.¹³

In the US, 23.7% of women report that an average day includes caring for household children, compared to 15.0% of men.¹⁴ These women spend an average of 1.97 hours per day providing primary “active” care, while men report spending 1.46 hours per day.¹⁵ In Utah, the gap between women and men’s childcare activities is wider; Utah women spend an average of 1.9 hours versus 1.29 hours spent by men caring for household children.¹⁶

Another significant type of unpaid care work involves elderly relatives. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), there are 37.1 million eldercare providers in the US, of which 58.9% are women.¹⁷ Over one-fourth of these women (27.8%) report providing care on an average day, spending 3.6 hours doing so. Additionally, 14.4% of female eldercare providers have provided care for 10 years or more. Utah data are similar, and a recent survey regarding caregivers’ experiences in Utah reports that 61.4% of

caregivers are female, nearly half of caregivers (including men) work full time, and 23.0% report spending more than 20 hours per week (an average of at least 2.9 hours per day) in care work—97.0% of which is unpaid. Interestingly, male caregivers in Utah are more likely to be age 65 or older (28.0% compared to 21.0% of women), with annual household earnings of over \$100k (41% of men compared to 34% of women).¹⁸

An additional source of unpaid work is household management. The BLS reports that 85.4% of US women and 70.3% of US men spend some time in an average day doing household activities.¹⁹ Interestingly, just 22.2% of men report engaging specifically in housework on an average day, compared to 47.1% of women. Of those who engaged in housework, women report spending an average of 1.73 hours on an average day while men report 1.40 hours.²⁰ In Utah, about half of women also do housework every day, while only 15.7% of men do (below the national average). The data suggest that the gap in time spent on housework between Utah men and women has narrowed in recent years, with Utah women spending 1.62 hours per day on housework and men spending 1.17 hours, (compared to the 1.88 and .94 hours, respectively, reported in our [2017 snapshot](#)).

Results from a 2023 study contribute additional context. Researchers explored Utahns' perceptions of challenges women and girls face,²¹ including issues related to home and family. Of 3,041 respondents, there was varied agreement regarding the statement, "I feel the load of domestic labor is shared equitably within my home," with 26.0% strongly agreeing, 35.1% agreeing or somewhat agreeing, and 43.9% feeling neutral or disagreeing on some level. Interestingly, men were more likely to agree, as were respondents without children. A second statement, "I feel the load of caregiving is shared equitably within my home," also elicited mixed responses, though more respondents (56.0%) indicated some level of agreement, 20.1% indicated feeling neutral, and 23.8% disagreed on some level. Again, men were more likely to agree, while parents of teenagers were less likely to agree. These data indicate a disconnect between Utah men and women's perceptions of distribution of unpaid care work. More research to explore factors contributing to the disconnect is needed.

Relationships, households, and families typically require emotional and mental work, which is yet another form of unpaid work. Women perform most of the emotional labor in intimate relationships; mental health professionals highlight that emotional work *is* work, and it takes a toll.²² Experts have also recognized that even when men participate in the day-to-day work of running a household, women often do the mental work of the home, such as noticing, planning, managing, scheduling, organizing, and ensuring that

the family's needs are met. Consequently, women may not devote energy to their own economic and personal wellbeing because of the responsibility for the managerial, cognitive, and emotional load associated with family life.²³

Throughout the world, men spend more time doing paid work each day than women do, but when unpaid work is added in, women are working more hours a day than men—they just are not getting paid for it.²⁴ Moreover, due to societal expectations for women to undertake a greater load of unpaid labor, there is a tendency for women to seek flexible or part-time work arrangements. Conversely, engaging in these types of employment further amplifies the probability of women assuming additional unpaid responsibilities, whether by choice or because of "availability." This is also true in Utah, and, ultimately, whether work is paid or unpaid, there is still work to be done. While family situations differ, family and individual wellbeing improves when there is a more fair and balanced distribution of unpaid labor.²⁵

Both work for pay and unpaid care work are critically important to the wellbeing of Utah families and society, but unpaid work is largely absent from public economic and policy discussions.

In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on unpaid work. During the pandemic, 60.0% of women and 54.0% of men worldwide reported that they increased the amount of time spent on unpaid care work.²⁶ Women, on average, increased their time spent on childcare by 5.2 hours per week compared to 3.5 hours for men.²⁷ Furthermore, more women than men left the labor market to take care of their children during the pandemic.²⁸

Because Utahns have traditionally placed a great emphasis on family, it is not surprising that many women in the state prioritize the work of caring for children and other loved ones. However, uneven distribution of unpaid labor between men and women can have negative consequences, including making women financially vulnerable.²⁹ When women with caregiving responsibilities engage in paid employment, they often face greater professional setbacks because of the care work they do, which may result in their taking more time off, refusing promotions, and choosing fewer hours.³⁰ In fact, women are five to eight times more likely than men to have their employment affected by unpaid care work.³¹

In addition to economic risks, women who bear a heavy share of unpaid work are also vulnerable to decreased physical, emotional, and mental health.³² Depression, stress, and feelings of isolation are especially common among caregivers for the elderly.³³

Factors Contributing to Disparities in Unpaid Work

Many factors contribute to the variance in the time men and women spend doing unpaid care work. Cultural values are

a primary factor; countries in which traditional gender norms are deep-rooted have some of the highest disparities in the amount of unpaid care work performed by women and men, and it begins early. Compared to boys of the same age, girls ages 5–14 spend 160 million hours more on unpaid work throughout the world each day.³⁴ In the US, girls spend an average of two hours more per week on household duties than boys, and when boys do chores, they are more likely to be paid.³⁵ These early disparities can hinder girls' education, reinforce gender stereotypes, and establish enduring patterns that create significant challenges for women. In addition to gender, race and ethnicity also affect unpaid care work, with Black and Hispanic women reporting the highest rates of unpaid caregiving compared to other racial and ethnic groups.³⁶

While the US generally has a smaller gender gap for time spent in unpaid work than many nations, factors varying from state to state can significantly influence women's experiences. For example, rates of female participation in the state labor force, political leanings of state government, and societal expectations regarding family responsibilities are all factors that have been shown to influence how men and women engage in unpaid work in their respective families and communities.³⁷ Utah's unique culture, which both influences and is influenced by political, religious, and static gender role ideologies, inevitably plays a role in an imbalanced load of unpaid care work.

Major life transitions, such as marriage and childbearing, are also factors that influence how unpaid work is distributed in families. Women who marry or bear children at younger ages carry a larger portion of unpaid work than women who make life transitions when they are older.³⁸ As Utah has the youngest median marriage age for both men and women in the nation,³⁹ and Utah mothers are younger at first birth compared to the national average,⁴⁰ these factors are especially relevant for Utahns.

What Utahns Can Do

Both work for pay and unpaid care work are critically important to the wellbeing of Utah families and society; however, unpaid work, often referred to as “invisible,”⁴¹ is largely absent from public economic and policy discussions. Of course, though this work is unpaid, it holds significant economic value. Salary.com's survey of mothers' “job roles” estimates that in 2021 the approximate median annual salary for stay-at-home mother in the US would be

\$184,820.⁴² While this exercise is largely symbolic, outsourcing the unpaid work performed by women would cost tens of thousands per year.

Addressing the gap in unpaid work is critical to improving the wellbeing of Utah girls, women, families, and society. Transformative change will require policies that recognize and redistribute the load of unpaid labor. To advance the wellbeing of women, girls, and all individuals in Utah, consider the following recommendations:

- Build social support networks and provide coping skills, problem-solving strategies, communication, and resilience training for unpaid care workers—including both men and women—to help in managing household responsibilities.
- Collect and report comprehensive data on unpaid work (including how it relates to employment status) to inform the design and implementation of resources and to evaluate the impacts of policies and programs.
- Educate the public on the various forms of unpaid work, the value of the work being performed, and the costs of unpaid labor on girls and women in Utah.
- Encourage companies to promote work-family balance for both women and men, creating innovative and affordable solutions for families trying to navigate the responsibilities of paid and unpaid work.
- Increase access to affordable, flexible, and universal childcare. Consider “cash for care” subsidies to compensate parents for school/daycare closures and other issues that increase the unpaid labor burden on families.
- Promote awareness and education about gender roles and stereotypes, challenge static gender role ideologies, and promote more balanced divisions of labor within households.

Conclusion

Overall, Utah individuals, organizations, and communities place a high value on families. In many cases, however, the important work of building these families is being disproportionately performed by women, often perpetuating vulnerabilities and challenges. Efforts to encourage a more balanced distribution of unpaid care work between men and women—including legislation and workplace initiatives, public discourse, and individual choices by family members themselves—will strengthen Utah families.

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