Women’s economic empowerment, care economy and the COVID-19 impact: policy challenges and opportunities in North and Central Asia

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Women’s economic empowerment and care economy

Women economic empowerment

- Critical for gender equality
- Pre-requisite for equitable and sustainable economic growth and development (efficiency linkages at micro and macro levels)
- Key role for family well-being (linkages with care economy)
Care economy

➢ Essential for sustaining human life, reproduction of workforce and societies
➢ Generator of employment and a pre-condition for labour force participation
➢ Care work (paid and unpaid) is mostly done by women
➢ Lacks visibility
➢ Central in the 2020 Agenda (SDG 5, target 5.4 calling for recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work);

Comprehensive care policies – fundamental to women’s economic empowerment and gender equality
UNECE works on women’s economic empowerment and gender equality through:

- Intergovernmental meetings – UNECE Regional Forum for Sustainable Development, UNECE Beijing Regional review meetings on the progress and challenges on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in its 56 member States
- Exchanging experience and lessons learned at sub-regional level - SPECA Working Group on Gender and SDGs with member States in Central Asia
- Improving women’s capabilities: capacity building workshops, including on information and communication skills, methodology and use of sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics, supporting SMEs of women entrepreneurs
- Increasing access to opportunities and resources – normative work on standards, research and policy recommendations
- Data - methodology and use of sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics, including on SDG 5, time-use surveys, on-line database on sex-disaggregated data.
UN Development Account project on integrating care in economic and social policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

➢ UN DA project tranche 13: *Strengthening social protection for pandemic response*; with the participation of UN Regional Commissions in partnership with other institutions, including UN Women.

➢ UNECE and UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia cooperation focus on strengthening care economic policies for the COVID-19 response in the region

➢ A regional overview of the policy initiates as a first response: *Response Policies and the Care Economy: Mapping economic and social policies in the ECE region* with analysis on the impact of the implemented policies: *Women's economic empowerment and the care economy in the ECE region*

➢ Regional studies: *Empowering Women through Reducing Unpaid Care Work and Public investment in the care economy in the ECE region: Opportunities and challenges for gender equality in the COVID-19 recovery*

➢ Case studies on Childcare, Women’s Employment and COVID-19 Impact for Kyrgyzstan, Serbia and the Republic of Moldova

➢ Capacity building workshops and policy dialogues

➢ Guideline for integrating gender and care in recovery policies

➢ Policy design and implementation plan to integrate care in recovery policy of Kyrgyzstan
Impact of COVID-19 and its consequences on women and girls

A. Situation prior to COVID-19: Inequalities across the region persist

- Women are less likely to participate in the labour market.
- Gender segregation in the labour market remains prevalent.
- The gender pay gap persists.

B. COVID-19 has exacerbated gender inequalities

- Reductions in paid hours of work, job losses (Kazakhstan - 26% of women reported a job loss compared to 22% of men); deterioration of working conditions - more women as “essential” workers, in health care, childcare and services (76.8% female care workers)
- Informal economy
- Women entrepreneurs (Kyrgyzstan: 72% of women-led MSMEs could not repay their loans, 61% men)
- Decline in remittances (Kyrgyzstan: 88% of women reported a decline in remittances, 47% of men)
- Switch to work from home (Armenia 32%, Kyrgyzstan 75%, fig.1)
- Other non-economic factors, such as violence, access to health services
- Loss in capabilities for girls, girl-specific risks
Proportion of employed respondents who switched to working from home during COVID-19, by sex, selected countries

Impact of COVID-19 on care (unpaid work)

- Massive increase in unpaid care work: extra care work mostly done by women due to closed schools and care institutions
- Care work during quarantine, recovery, long COVID
- Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan: 80% of women reported a rise in household tasks, compared with 58% of men
- 60% of women spent more time on care for children and/or elderly family members (62% Georgia)
- 43% or more of women spent more time cooking and serving meals (67% Kyrgyzstan)
- Care work during quarantine, recovery, long COVID

Increased public attention for the importance of care work, the need to recognize, value and measure care work and redistribute it between women and men.
Impact of COVID-19 on care (paid work)

- Loss of care-employment opportunities, including for private-sector childcare workers, domestic workers, home-carers
- Home-based (informal) child and long-term care services disappeared
- Health sector, elderly care: working conditions, overtime, risk of infection, inadequate PPE (ECDC: 3.4-fold higher risk of infection for frontline health workers)
- Psychological consequences of dealing with COVID-19 patients and health emergency

Increased public attention for the importance of care work and care services, paid and unpaid, the need to recognize and redistribute care work between women and men; the need of public investment and the role of the state in care services, infrastructure, working conditions, pay.
Policy response and recovery: opportunities for building back better

- Care should become a priority in policy and decisionmaking
- Challenge: Fiscal space, cost-benefit analysis necessary
- Care and gender mainstreaming of emergency and reconstruction, include female-dominated sectors of the economy, women-owned enterprises, care enterprises

Unpaid care work
- Leave, benefits, access to services, flexible work for persons with care responsibilities
- Protective equipment and vaccination for unpaid care workers
- Policy innovation: e.g. safe, quality childcare during pandemic, rural services

Paid care work
- Investment in care sector has multiple benefits, spillover effects
- Adequate compensation and bonus payments for (health) care workers
- Policy innovation: e.g. extension of social protection schemes (precarious and informal care employment), coverage of migrant care workers