
The Invisibility of Women's Unpaid Work in Gender Policies

Aylén Rodríguez Ferrari

Despite significant improvements in gender equality over the last few decades, the gender pay gap persists. The unequal distribution of unpaid care work is one factor that explains the wage difference between men and women. On average, women spend disproportionately more time on unpaid care work and domestic chores than men, and they are more likely to work part-time, reduce working hours, or turn down promotions due to family responsibilities. This behavior creates a work-experience gap between men and women. Considering that years of work experience may determine wages, this article analyzes the work-experience gap as an underlying cause of the gender pay gap and advocates for family-friendly policies that promote affordable access to child care, paid family leave, and flexible, but predictable, paid work schedules.

<https://doi.org/10.4079/pp.v28i0.4>

AYLÉN RODRIGUEZ FERRARI is a second-year MPP student with a Social Policy concentration and a Spanish Fulbright scholar. She has a degree in Law and a master's degree in Microfinance. Her specialization is in gender, poverty alleviation, and financial inclusion. She has been working for more than five years in the international development sector in Latin American countries in particular.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Dr. Anil Nathan for his guidance and encouragement to submit this paper. She also thanks her Policy Perspectives editing team, especially her Associate Editor, Tessa Atkinson-Adams, for her invaluable and careful editing as well as her Faculty Reviewer, Professor Christopher Carrigan, for his thoughtful feedback. Their contributions helped take this paper to the next level. Finally, she thanks “Santi” for his unwavering support. The author acknowledges all individuals who dream, fought, and continue to fight for equality in all spheres of our lives.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, women have significantly increased their participation in the labor market. Women have outpaced men in college enrollment and they are becoming more represented in traditionally male-dominated positions (Ansel and Boushey 2017). Yet the gender pay gap persists all over the world. For instance, in the United States, women earn on average 80.5 percent of men's wages (WCEG 2019).

Typically, women and men enter the labor market near income parity. However, once women are left to deal with time-consuming family responsibilities, such as caregiving for children or elders, they tend to reduce their paid work, creating a work-experience gap between men and women and a decrease in women's income (Pew Research Center 2013). While the unequal distribution of unpaid work has not always been considered in gender pay gap policies, recent studies highlight the value in considering the "double burden" in balancing paid and unpaid work that women disproportionately face (Ferrant, Pesando, and Nowacka 2014).

This article argues that the policy discussion should consider the roots of gender discrimination in addition to direct interventions, such as laws on equal pay. First, this paper demonstrates that the ways men and women allocate their time is influenced by gender roles, which exacerbates the gender pay gap. Second, it explains how women's labor decisions incentivize gender discrimination in the labor market. Finally, it advocates for family-friendly policies that address work-family conflicts and encourage mothers to stay connected to the labor market.

WHEN "TIME IS MONEY" IS NOT FOR EVERYONE

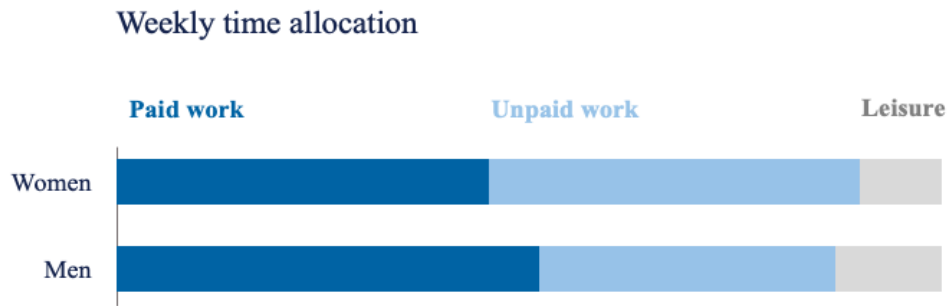
Individuals have a fixed endowment of time that can be split between paid work, leisure, and unpaid work. As shown in **Figure 1**, men and women spend this endowed time differently (Glynn 2018). Women devote a disproportional amount of time to unpaid work, such as caregiving and domestic chores. As a consequence, they tend to participate in paid work part-time, turn down promotions, or even quit their jobs more frequently than men (Boushey and Glynn 2012). This behavior perpetuates gender stereotypes that can constrain women's ability to participate in the labor market (Pew Research Center 2013).

While the way men and women spend their time can be considered an individual preference, studies suggest that the choice might not be completely voluntary (Alonso et al. 2019). Social norms and gender stereotypes have a measurable influence on employment decisions (WCEG 2019). According to the US Department of Labor (Women's BLS 2016), 76.3 percent of mothers are employed full-time versus 95.6 percent of fathers; 23.7 percent of mothers are employed part-time versus 4.4 percent of fathers. This suggests that while motherhood has a significant impact on women's paid labor participation, fatherhood does not have the same effect on father's labor decisions.

As shown in **Figure 1**, in the United States, women spend an average of four hours per day doing paid work and about the same number of hours in unpaid work (OECD 2020). Compared to men, women spend fewer hours in paid work and devote substantially more hours to unpaid work.

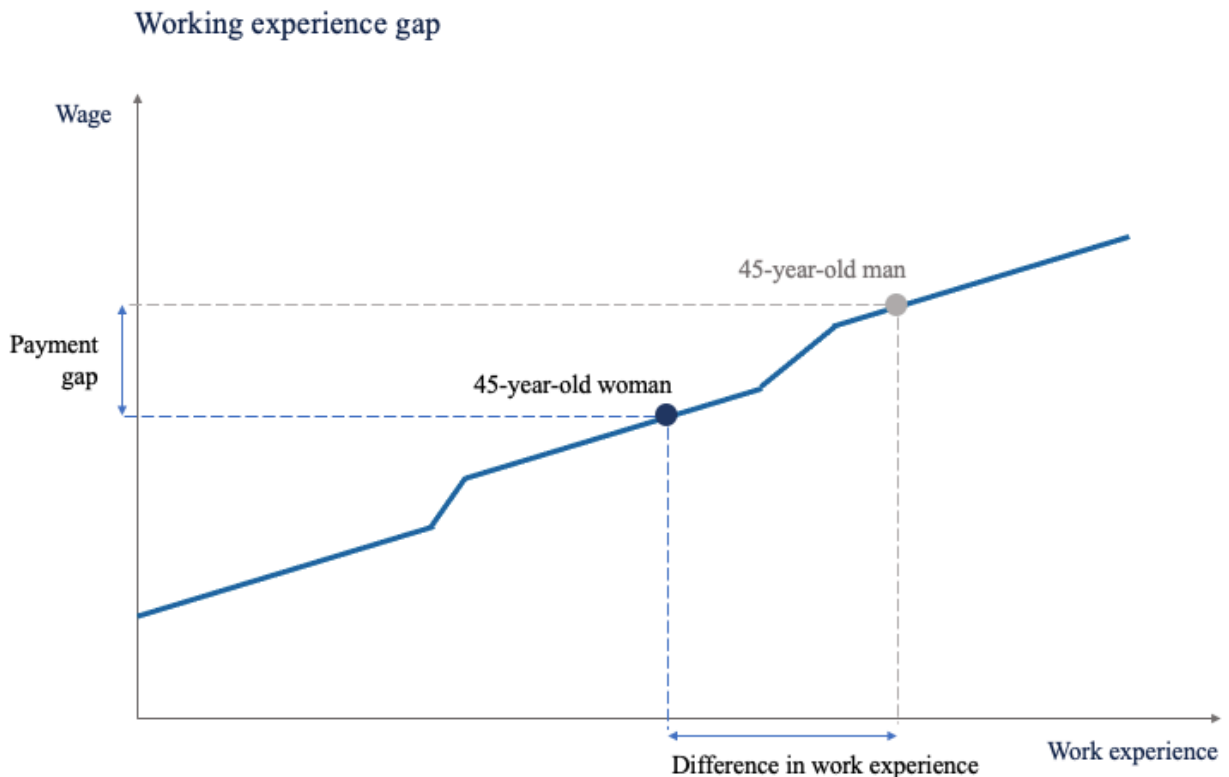
Consequently, women’s workdays expand on average by 2.3 hours, a phenomenon colloquially known as the “second shift” (Hochschild 2003). For example, data suggest that women devote 60 percent more time than men to unpaid care work and domestic chores in the United States (Alonso et al. 2019). Men spend 5.5 hours per day doing paid work and around 2.5 hours doing unpaid work. Compared to mothers, fathers enjoy more leisure hours and spend less time on unpaid work, such as child care (Glynn 2018).

Figure 1.



Source: Author’s visualization

Figure 2.



Source: Author’s visualization

As a result, shown in **Figure 2**, women have less paid working experience than their same-age male counterparts, which has an impact on salary (WCEG 2019). While women and men may start their career life at near income parity, when women take on more care-related responsibilities, career interruptions and the need for reduced working hours create a work experience gap (WCEG 2019). Some studies suggest that around 10.5 percent of the difference in pay in the United States is attributed to the work-experience gap (Blau and Kahn 2007).

DISCRIMINATING, JUST IN CASE

The reality that women suffer family-related work interruptions more frequently than men coupled with gender stereotypes incentivizes discrimination against women in the labor market (Pew Research Center 2013). This discrimination manifests not only in the gender pay gap, but also in less training and fewer opportunities for promotions for women (Ferrant, Pesando, and Nowacka 2014; Pew Research Center 2013). Studies distinguish two types of discrimination in the labor market: statistical discrimination, which stems from an information asymmetry between the employer and employee; and taste-based discrimination, based on employer prejudices against women.

Employers usually do not have full information about the lives of potential employees and may infer, based on statistical evidence and historical stereotypes, that women candidates will need to stop working for a period of time for caregiving responsibilities. Consequently, the employer will make employment decisions based on the statistical evidence that women are more likely than men to take time off due to family needs (Nechyba 2017). Even if a particular woman enjoys an equitable distribution of unpaid work, or if a particular man participates the same as or even more than his partner in household labor, without that information, the employer's assessment will still be based on a stereotype and consequently will not judge that individual's availability for paid work accurately. Thus, it is likely that the employer invests fewer resources in a female employee's development. Evidence shows that stereotypes around motherhood responsibilities also impact women's wages. Women without children earn 96 percent of their male counterparts' wages, while married women with one or more children earn only 76 percent of their male counterparts' wages (Glynn 2018, 7).

Statistical gender discrimination happens at every level of the labor force. Among top management, women make up only 20 percent of top executive positions (Huang et al. 2019). Women also remain underrepresented in American business and politics (Pew Research Center 2013). They are less likely to be hired into manager-level jobs, and they are far less likely to be promoted into those positions; for every 100 men promoted or hired to manager, 72 women are correspondingly promoted or hired. Stated differently, men represent 62 percent of manager-level positions (Huang et al. 2019). The disparities that exist in the private sector appear in government as well. In 2019, women held 24 percent of seats in the US Congress, represented 29 percent of state legislators, and made up 18 percent of governors (Represent Women 2019).

In contrast to statistical discrimination, taste-based discrimination stems purely from the prejudices of employers against female employees. For example, one-half to two-thirds of the difference in wages between men and women remains objectively unexplained. Scholars argue that the reason for this pay gap is taste-based discrimination (Berniell and Sánchez-Páramo 2011). Another manifestation of gender-based discrimination is the persistence of lesser-paid, female-dominated occupations, also called "women's work" (Pew Research Center 2013). Women are overrepresented in child care services, teaching assistance, or health care services (NPWF 2017), while men are more likely to have access to managerial and better paid positions (Huang et al. 2019).

In addition, women face cultural barriers that constrain their paid labor participation. For example, mothers may be discouraged by relatives from doing paid work, who argue that the mothers must provide direct care for their children. This is true even for the most advanced countries, where women spend at least 20 percent more time on unpaid work than men (Alonso et al. 2019).

As Nechyba (2017) highlights, it is crucial to understand the root of discrimination in order to eradicate it. Taste-based gender discrimination can only be eliminated by changing misperceptions of women through education, cultural shifts, and female leadership. However, statistical discrimination will persist as long as it makes financial sense for employers and the market in general to favor male employees. The asymmetry of information that causes statistical discrimination can be eliminated if men and women practice equitable family responsibilities, softening the double burden women face. Following a new work distribution formula, women would be less associated with unpaid domestic roles and men would have new opportunities to assume domestic chores and care work. This requires existing gender patterns to shift toward greater balance and equality. Therefore, a more equal distribution of unpaid care work between men and women is critical to eradicating, or at least mitigating, statistical gender discrimination (Ferrant, Pesando, and Nowacka 2014).

LOOKING FOR FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES

Increasing women's participation in the labor market matters both for women's quality of life and the health of the economy. Studies suggest that economic growth is lower when women do not make full use of their productivity potential (Alonso et al. 2019). Including more women and improving pay parity between genders leads to a significant growth in family income and GDP (Woetzel et al. 2015). Policymakers can improve macroeconomic performance through policies that increase women's participation in the labor market and eliminate the gender pay gap. In doing so, policymakers should consider the work experience gap and the barriers that constrain women's full participation as they work to develop policies that address these issues (Ansel and Boushey 2017). Family-friendly policies, such as access to affordable child care, gender-neutral paid family leave, and flexible, but predictable, work schedules are essential tools for alleviating work-family conflicts, increasing women's labor participation, and facilitating mothers' ability to stay connected to the labor market—an effect known as “mothers' labor attachment” (WCEG 2019). Considering that the cost of child care in the United States has increased by 25 percent in the past decade, subsidized child care is a proven, effective policy approach for preventing working

mothers from quitting their jobs or reducing their number of weekly working hours (Bergeron et al. 2014; Committee on Education Labor 2019). Family-friendly policies may also allow women to devote more time to paid work or leisure (Alonso et al. 2019).

Another relevant policy approach to managing women's unpaid work responsibilities is gender-neutral paid family leave. Mothers with access to paid maternity leave are more likely to return to the labor market if they do not need to spend time searching for a new job. Also, when fathers receive paid parental leave, women have more flexibility in how much time off they take to care for newborns (Ansel and Boushey 2017). Still, extended maternity leave may harm female labor reincorporation. Instead, encouraging paid paternity leave policies may be preferable as it can increase men's contribution of care work and incentivizes an equal distribution of household responsibilities (Andersen 2018).

Finally, policies that regulate flexible, but predictable, work arrangements are also needed to promote women's labor participation (Alonso et al. 2019). Because women are overrepresented in low-wage occupations, they are more likely than men to have fluctuating hours, short notice of work schedules, and little input into when and how much they work (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019). Unpredictable scheduling practices make it hard for women to meet both family and job responsibilities (National Partnership for Women & Families 2017). To mitigate this effect, policymakers can regulate schedule predictability by establishing universal standards for scheduling hourly employees in targeted industries, such as retail, food service, and hospitality.

CONCLUSION

Women and men allocate their time between paid and unpaid work differently. Women spend disproportionately more time on unpaid work than men due to care work and domestic chores, leading to a work-experience gap that grows exponentially over time. The unequal distribution of unpaid work can explain part of the gender pay gap that persists despite the significant advancements achieved in gender equality over the last few decades.

The role of women as the primary caregivers in the family directly affects how they participate in the labor market and the types of positions for which they apply. Even if paid work participation is a personal and free choice, studies suggest that often how much and where women work is highly influenced by gender stereotypes and statistical discrimination. Thus, the gender pay gap can be explained not just by the disproportionate share of unpaid work borne by women and the effect that has on relative experience, but also by the perception that women will be the primary caregivers.

To help create more opportunities for women and fuel economic growth, policymakers should consider the differences in time allocation between men and women and the barriers that constrain women's employment decisions when drafting legislation. They should mitigate the gender pay gap by designing family-friendly policies that promote an equal distribution of unpaid care work between men and women. Considering inequality in unpaid care work as a variable in the gender pay gap helps explain why the gender pay gap persists even when educational attainment among women and men has largely equalized.

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