

# COVID-19 and the Unpaid Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific





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## Preface

To leave no one behind and to reach those furthest behind first are the essential ambitions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Within that mandate, Sustainable Development Goal 5 (achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls) must be a cornerstone of actions taken to achieve a prosperous, inclusive and sustainable future for the Asia–Pacific region.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the risks and vulnerabilities for women and girls across the region. Yet, all the while, women have taken up essential roles in the pandemic response as front-line health care workers as well as in their homes. The introduction of lockdowns, mobility restrictions and school closures have greatly increased the time spent on household chores. Women have had to clean, wash, cook and care for home-schooling children and household members who are sick or elderly. Many of the hard-fought gains over the past decades have been reversed, and existing inequalities have further deepened. Even before the pandemic, women and girls in Asia and the Pacific spent on average up to 11 hours a day on unpaid care and domestic work — four times more than men.

This report on the unpaid care and domestic work in Asia and the Pacific in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals that of the various socioeconomic policy response measures instituted to date, less than 30 per cent are care sensitive and only 12 per cent are gender differentiated. Although governments are striving to build back stronger and build more-resilient economies and societies, the few gender-responsive and care-sensitive measures that have been put in place have been short-lived or are at risk of being rolled back or undone once the crisis eases.

Unpaid care work is mainly performed by women and girls due to many factors, including social and cultural norms. From early on in their lives, the gendered nature and unequal burden of care and domestic work limit girls' access to and opportunities for quality education, economic security and decent work. Although care work has traditionally been valued for its role in social reproduction, it remains largely unrecognized as an important macroeconomic variable that can contribute to sustainable economic growth and enhance the well-being of our societies.

This report argues that a unique opportunity is upon us to better address the risks and vulnerabilities of women and girls and help them out of poverty, exclusion and marginalization. Governments must seize this opportunity to invest in the care economy by recognizing, redistributing and reducing unpaid care and domestic work. Such investments will help relieve the care burden and generate decent employment, which in turn will increase the resilience and long-term growth of economies.

Unpaid care and domestic work can no longer be overlooked. It should be included in national statistics and data analysis. Time-use surveys should be used to discover and measure the scope of unpaid care work, to inform gender-sensitive policymaking and to provide a value of unpaid care work and its contribution to household well-being and national income. National-level coordination, including between ministries, is essential for a whole-of-government approach to reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. A good example is the establishment in some countries of an integrated care system that includes affordable and good-quality care support services for children, older persons and family members with disabilities.

Coordinated efforts are also required with labour market regulations and social protection measures that redistribute unpaid work and foster a better work–life balance. A mix of policies are needed to enable women and men to better reconcile the time requirements of the workplace with those of unpaid care work at home, including parental leave, care leave, care insurance schemes and flexible work arrangements.

The uneven distribution of care and domestic work prevents women in the Asia–Pacific region from shaping the critical decisions that countries are making to recover from the pandemic. They must be part of the solutions and strategies that will affect the well-being of people and the planet for generations to come. Pandemic recovery is our chance to engineer a reset, reignite the Decade of Action for the Sustainable Development Goals and chart a path to an equal future for women and men.

## Acknowledgements

This report, *COVID-19 and the Unpaid Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific*, was prepared as part of the Development Account Project on Strengthening Social Protection for Pandemic Responses: Identifying the Vulnerable, Aiding Recovery and Building Resilience. It responds in particular to the stream on “strengthening a gender emphasis in designing policies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the care economy”.

The report was developed through collaboration between the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in the United Kingdom, under the overall direction and guidance of Srinivas Tata, Director of the Social Development Division with ESCAP.

Cai Cai, Chief of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Section with ESCAP, led the research team comprising Channe Lindstrøm Oguzhan, Social Affairs Officer with ESCAP, and Deepta Chopra, Research Fellow and Meenakshi Krishnan, Research Officer from IDS. The report was authored by Deepta Chopra and Meenakshi Krishnan.

Peer review was done by Joni Simpson, Senior Specialist on Gender, Equality and Non-Discrimination, International Labour Organization; Marian Baird, Professor of Gender and Employment Relations and Head of the Discipline of Work and Organisational Studies, University of Sydney; and İpek İlkkaracan, Professor of Economics Istanbul Technical University.

Karen Emmons edited the report, and Daniel Feary designed the publication.

## Explanatory notes

The analyses in the *COVID-19 and the Unpaid Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific* report are based on data and information available up to the end of April 2021. Groupings of countries and territories or areas referred to are defined as follows.

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References to dollars (\$) are to United States dollars, unless otherwise stated.

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