

What do you mean by unpaid work?

When we talk about unpaid work, we are referring to the many things that women do at home and in the community. At home, women manage the household, do hands-on tasks that are vital to everyone's survival, and do the bulk of the caregiving. Caregiving, especially the work involved in bearing and nurturing children, is a constant responsibility, requiring a non-stop physical and emotional commitment from women. Along with their at-home responsibilities, women do formal volunteer work in community-based organizations, government institutions, and faith communities. And, they provide countless hours of informal work as supportive friends, neighbours, and citizens. Work is work is work. It occurs any time that they expend their energy whether or not they receive payment in return.

Are you saying that people should get paid for everything that they do?

Not necessarily. Assigning a monetary value to everything that people do is an impractical solution that is not viable in our current market-driven economy. However, it is important to value everything that people do. For years, women have had to be content with being praised for their tireless efforts on everyone else's behalf. But, praise will not support women throughout their retirement. What needs to change is that we must acknowledge that, yes, women do this work and, no, they do not receive cash for it. Then, we need to ask ourselves the question, given that reality, what can we do to equalize things for women?

A case currently being considered by the Federal Court of Canada illustrates how our society could work towards equity through appropriate policy development. In that case, Kelly Lesiuk, a mother of two young children who worked part-time in order to meet her caregiving responsibilities, is challenging the fairness of the *Employment Insurance Act* because it requires her to accumulate the same number of hours as a male worker who does not have her at-home responsibilities. As well, she points out that the eligibility requirements are more stringent for part-time workers and 70% of those workers are women. The Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF) is intervening in the case and they suggest that the federal government should consider the reality that women have extra responsibilities when they are determining eligibility for benefits. That way, society could give tangible support to women's employment realities and women would not have to bear the entire financial burden themselves.

Why do you consider unpaid work a women's equality issue? Don't men do unpaid work too?

Yes, of course, men do work for which they are not paid. But, typically, they don't do it as frequently as women and they generally don't experience the financial hardships felt by women as they try to balance their commitment to the paid workforce with their at-home responsibilities.

Women are more likely to do unpaid, at-home chores and to provide care to children, people with disabilities, and seniors. Therefore, women, in general, do not have similar opportunities to generate income, to contribute to retirement savings, and to be eligible for employment-related benefits. This inequity has a negative impact on women's financial wellbeing throughout their working years and on their financial security during their retirement years. If you want to understand why gender inequities persist, start by examining the impact of unpaid work on women's lives. It costs women a lot to make the choice - voluntarily or otherwise - to do work for which no cash value has been assigned.

This is more than a financial issue, though. The lack of value for women's contributions pervades our society. How are women supposed to feel their own worth when their work is not acknowledged, let alone respected or rewarded?

Why do women want unpaid work to be measured?

If something is invisible, it cannot be understood or valued. Accurate measurement will help address inequities and will illuminate the policy development process.

For example, right now, through measures such as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), we get regular reports on how the economy is doing. These reports, though, do not reflect the whole picture. Here on Prince Edward Island, women make contributions to our three main industries - tourism, farming, and fishing - that are never measured. In a family-run tourist operation, for example, the woman may do cleaning, accounting, and maintenance work for which she is not paid. In difficult years, the woman's outside income may be what sustains many farming businesses. And, in fishing households, women may put in unpaid hours as they maintain accounts, prepare meals, and purchase equipment. When we get reports on these sectors, we only learn about the results of cash transactions. That approach ignores women's contributions and, at the same time, provides inaccurate information about the state of the economy. Thus, the inequitable situation is allowed to continue and government continues to set economic and social policy using incomplete information.

How would measuring unpaid work affect policy development?

If we considered unpaid work, we would learn for the first time what it really takes to make our society work. We would not be making decisions within the framework of a fictitious, cash-only world. One would hope that making decisions based on a complete picture would result in a more balanced and appropriate social and economic policy. For example, when health systems made budget cuts in the early 1990s, patients began to be released into home and community care in greater numbers and with more severe health issues. Governments began balancing their

books, satisfied that they had met their financial crisis in an appropriate way. There was little or no consideration of who was picking up the burden of care. That fell primarily to women. Caregiving responsibilities have immediate and long-term emotional, physical, social, and financial impacts. The costs may have been removed from public accounts but they remain with women.

Are there any other reasons why measurement is important?

Over the years, the lack of measuring and valuing of women's work has resulted in various forms of economic injustice. For example, in divorce situations, if a woman has been a stay-at-home worker, the spousal support that she receives in no way reflects her economic contribution to the household. And, in personal injury suits, women who work at home do not receive fair settlements. The attitude that women's unpaid work is worthless pervades our society and emerges in numerous ways that cause women hardship and distress.

What sort of measurement makes sense?

In 1995, the World Conference on Women in Beijing, accepted a means of measurement called a time-use survey. In such a survey, women list a task and the time it takes to complete the task whether the task was paid or unpaid. The neat thing about this approach is that tasks done simultaneously get measured individually, something that is important for women who, as a survival measure, tend to do a number of tasks at the same time. What a breakthrough in thinking! Traditional measures turn women into men and pay no attention to what really happens in women's lives. Now, the question is, will any government actually utilize these time-use surveys in their policy-making processes?

How can a dollar value be assigned to unpaid work?

The two main ways that have been used to put a value on unpaid work are:

- 1) Third person criterion or replacement cost - What would it cost to pay a third person or a replacement to do the work being completed by the unwaged worker?
- 2) Opportunity cost - What is the cost of the lost paid work opportunities unavailable to the unwaged worker because of her responsibilities plus the cost of her unwaged work?

Each approach has certain limitations. For example, the replacement costs typically assigned to women's work reflect current market value, not real value, and, so, are quite low. These calculations are a beginning step to understanding the economic value of women's work with much more work to be done.

What kind of questions are asked on the *Census* about unpaid work?

Canada has been an international leader in the measuring of unpaid work. After years of grassroots advocacy, the 1996 *Census* contained the first questions regarding time spent on unpaid work. These three questions, which appeared again on the 2001 *Census*, asked about time spent in the past week doing unpaid household work and home maintenance, time spent on unpaid child care, and time spent on care and assistance to seniors. The questions did not include volunteer work and that is an important omission. Statistics Canada estimates that volunteer work in Canada amounts to the equivalent of 615,000 full-time jobs. The questions are also presented in what some unpaid work activists call a “marginal” fashion - as stand-alone questions separate and apart from questions regarding paid work. And, there were no questions about unpaid work done in the paid workplace such as unpaid overtime. Overall, though, even with these limitations, the *Census* questions began the process of making women’s unwaged work visible and, therefore, unavoidable. The 1996 *Census* results showed that women performed significantly more unpaid work in all categories. This is valuable information. Next month, Statistics Canada will release the results of the 2001 *Census* questions on unpaid work and we look forward to seeing that information.

Are you saying that there is a bias for paid work compared to unpaid work?

Definitely. You need only look at government-sponsored employment programs for single mothers to detect this bias. Women are put through a cycle of training and work placements designed to meet the goal of obtaining full-time paid employment. The single mother may share that goal or she may believe that the work that she is doing in the home is valuable in itself. Regardless, in order to survive financially, she must participate in these endeavours and leave the care of her children to others.

What are some of the issues surrounding the measuring and valuing of unpaid work?

One big issue is the “love” factor. A lot of women say that they do the work they do because they love their families, their communities, and humanity, in general. Some may resist the idea of putting a dollar value on work that is driven by personal values of caring and concern. The two aspects are not incompatible, though. Many paid workers perform their jobs out of concern for others. And, women themselves are deserving of the comfort and security which they seek to provide to others.

What is the link between the market economy and unpaid work?

The market economy - those activities reported through means such as the Gross Domestic Product - could not exist without the informal economy of unpaid work. Selma Jones,

Coordinator for the International Women Count Network says, “They don’t count women’s work but they count on it.” What if women stopped working for a day? Things would fall apart. Think about the work that women do in the home. It is far more essential to everyday survival than anything that may happen in the office of a highly paid CEO - usually a male!

Women are participating in both economies at the same time. Changes in one economy affects the other. For example, in times of recession, when a full-time employee loses her paid employment, she must work harder at home to produce the goods and services she might previously have paid for with her salary. She will do her own child care, do more home cooking, and perhaps increase her involvement in community work to compensate for government cutbacks. Or, having a woman working in the home may be the reason why a male partner can meet the overtime or travel demands of his paid workplace. Women have been described as the “shock absorbers” for the formal economy. They provide the cushion needed to ride through times of crisis. Yet, they are unrecognized and unrewarded for that role.

Does the involvement of women in unpaid work affect their paid work?

Undoubtedly and in many different ways. First, it is important to note that work traditionally dubbed as “women’s work” is not typically well paid or highly respected. Think about child care workers, human service workers, personal care attendants, and cleaners. Their low pay and status reflect the view that such jobs require little skill, talent, or energy. In fact, these are essential jobs requiring considerable ability and stamina. Second, the skills that women develop in their unpaid work receive no recognition or merit in the paid workplace. So what if a woman can run a household, care for children, and do a dozen other things at the same time? What does that have to do with being an effective manager? That kind of attitude means that, in order to “succeed” in the workplace, on top of their many other responsibilities, women will likely have to take additional workplace-sanctioned training in order to have their skills recognized. Third, while on the job, their family responsibilities continue. Who is likely to stay home with a sick child? Who is likely to take an elderly parent to a doctor’s appointment? These tasks typically fall to women. If women are working in an environment that ignores these realities, then she will experience difficulty in managing her workload and meeting expectations. Fourth, to be involved in the paid labour force, women have to pay for child care. This affects their ability to engage in work in the first place and affects their net earnings. Fifth, in female-dominated professions, unpaid overtime is a regular part of the work experience. For example, child care workers on PEI are typically not paid for planning time or meetings. And, finally, a lot of women try to balance their responsibilities by working part-time or being self-employed. These more tenuous work arrangements can result in fewer benefits and decreased income. The links between paid and unpaid work are numerous and undeniable.

Is it the government's role to make these changes?

It is the government's role to acknowledge this reality, to learn about it, to make appropriate accommodations for women's unpaid responsibilities, to create policy that reflects real life situations, and to share resources accordingly.

It is everyone's role to take a look at their expectations, assumptions, and biases and to change their practices accordingly. Will women start saying no to the myriad of societal expectations? Will men start saying yes to the things that have traditionally fallen on women's shoulders? After all, child bearing and breastfeeding are the only biologically determined "women's work." Any other division of labour must be the result of falling into old gender roles and accepting the values associated with those roles.

What is the situation here on Prince Edward Island?

The issue of unpaid work is particularly acute here on PEI. About 20% more Island women participate in the paid labour force than the national average. Most of the Island's part-time workers are women. We have a tradition of family-run enterprises where the woman may or may not be receiving financial compensation for her work. Many women work in seasonal jobs requiring long, unpredictable hours that are difficult to balance with home and family responsibilities. Women receiving social assistance are being moved into low-paying service jobs. All these things are happening but nobody knows what they mean for women's wellbeing and status. The Island economy is operating in a gender-blind manner that does not account for what women are doing and does not analyze immediate and long-term impacts.

What would the future look like if we valued unpaid work?

We would be looking at a whole new type of society - one that is respectful of everyone's contributions and treats all people fairly. We would look at our lives with much wider eyes. Right now, we see things through the filter of our paid work. That is, apparently, what gives our lives value and meaning when, in fact, our lives are so much richer and more varied than that. Women themselves would value what they do and assert their right to their share of society's benefits. Evelyn Drescher from the grass roots organization "Mothers are Women" sums it up this way: "Keeping unpaid work uncounted is a form of slavery. Until we are all free, none of us are free."