

Where There is a Will encouraging policymakers to value unpaid labour

Abstract

Unpaid labour, notably caring labour, is one of the most important and productive sectors of our society. Its inherent and measurable value has been stressed by scholars and practitioners, feminists and those doing unpaid work for generations. Yet policymakers continue to sideline it. This article describes the improvements that would flow from recognising and responding to the importance of unpaid labour, the values and cultural narratives that help explain the lack of policymaking will, and the potential for counters to these narratives.

Keywords economics, unpaid work, policy, gender, equity, framing, narratives, values

Unpaid work, especially care work, is like the water that citizens drink, irrigate their soil with and use to generate their electricity. It is fundamental to paid work and social functioning. As when riverbeds run dry, if unpaid labour ran out, the consequences would be severe. Yet its value is poorly recognised in policy. This neglect is surprising given the decades of research, by feminist economists in particular, on the critical importance of unpaid labour (Waring and Steinam,

1988; Saunders and Dalziel, 2017). This research has shown that gross domestic product (GDP) is an insufficient measure of human progress, as it fails to account for many productive and valuable activities – especially those done mainly by women, including reproductive work, caring work and domestic work.

New Zealand is now poised to introduce new ways of measuring economic well-being, via the Treasury's Living Standards Framework (Burton, 2018). In addition, policymakers have many opportunities to recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid labour more equitably. There is, of course, a vast literature around 'valuing' unpaid labour (Beneria, 1999; Anielski, 2001; van den Berg and Spauwen, 2006). Typically this has involved assigning a dollar amount to the relevant hours of work. However, it is precisely our habit of acknowledging only those activities with a market value that has rendered unpaid labour so invisible to policymakers. Emphasising market value also makes it difficult to see the importance of an activity's intrinsic value. In what follows, therefore, I use the word 'value' to denote non-monetary ways of making unpaid labour, the people doing

it and their impacts more visible and better accounted for in policymaking.

Unpaid work in New Zealand: a snapshot

In this article I focus specifically on the work of producing new people, caring for children, caring for adults, and household domestic work such as cleaning, washing, and shopping for and preparing food. While volunteer work is also a type of unpaid labour, involving at times caring and domestic work by women, it is deserving of detailed and separate discussion.

New Zealand time-use surveys, the last of which was carried out in 2009, show that women continue to do the bulk of unpaid caring and domestic work (Statistics New Zealand, 2011). They spend an average of 4 hours and 20 minutes a day on unpaid labour, against 2 hours and 32 minutes for men. Most men's 'work' is paid (63%), while most women's 'work' is unpaid (65%). Māori and Pacific women carry out more childcare than do New Zealand European women. European and Māori women do a disproportionately large amount of unpaid caregiving for ill or disabled people (Grimmond, 2014). The majority of carers of ill or disabled people are women in their fifties (Harper, 2013).

Although assigning market values to unpaid labour is problematic, it can be useful as a means to estimate that sector's size in relation to other productive sectors. Conservative estimates made in 1999, assuming payment at the median wage, valued unpaid labour at \$40 billion annually, equivalent to 39% of contemporary GDP. Unpaid work done by women in 1999 accounted for \$25 billion (Statistics New Zealand, 2001), making it the largest productive sector.

Valuing unpaid labour in policymaking

For policymakers seeking to properly value unpaid labour, Diane Elson's 'triple R approach', based on the concepts of recognition, reduction and redistribution, provides a useful framework (Elson, 2008).

Recognition

If policymakers were committed to recognising the value of unpaid care work, they would regularly measure it. Time-use

surveys would occur more frequently than once every ten or so years, and would be carried out as distinct, stand-alone research. Data analysis would report distributional differences across gender, ethnicities and sectors of work. Such surveys would also capture simultaneous work – situations where, for instance, a parent carries out childcare at the same time as doing paid work. Research shows that men and women work quite differently when doing unpaid labour: when men care for children they typically spend more time playing and reading, while women will simultaneously carry out other domestic tasks (Queisser, 2016). This reinforces the need for research to accurately reflect women's experiences as a starting point.

unpaid labour, improving the robustness of policymaking.

Attempts to improve children's well-being and reduce child poverty would also benefit from properly recognising unpaid work. While there has been cross-party agreement on new child poverty reduction legislation, there has been little discussion of formally valuing unpaid labour as a poverty reduction strategy.

Current poverty alleviation and welfare policies focus on encouraging parents into paid work, yet this may increase total productive work beyond their capacity (especially for sole parents), thus exacerbating their mental distress (Baker and Tippin, 2002; Hodgetts et al., 2016) while not boosting overall well-being.

While many societies have strong underlying cultural narratives about the meaningfulness of caring work, especially parenting, the day-to-day tasks can nonetheless be tedious.

Cost-benefit analyses could also be amended to incorporate unpaid work. The usefulness of such an approach can be seen in the health sector, where the costs/harms and benefits of unpaid labour are, in some cases, already included. This has resulted in revised policy recommendations (Krol, Papenburg and van Exel, 2015). In one case, the types of interventions recommended for people with Alzheimer's disease were altered when unpaid care was included. In other cases, an intervention for rotavirus became more cost-effective when carers' outcomes were included, while an intervention for cataract surgery became less cost-effective when carers' costs were included (Goodrich, Kaambwa and Al-Janabi, 2012). While cost-benefit analysis often involves assigning a dollar value to outcomes, it can place equal importance on measures such as quality-adjusted life years, which account for the wider, non-monetary costs and benefits to, for instance, carers' well-being. On similar lines, government agencies' Budget bids could incorporate the costs and benefits of

Moreover, extensive analysis of large-scale interventions with sole parents living in poverty shows that simply moving them from welfare to work, using conditional payments and welfare sanctions, improves neither their overall economic situation nor the outcomes for their children (Kaushal, Gao and Waldfogel, 2006; Waldfogel, 2007; Duncan, Gennetian and Morris, 2008; Duncan, Magnuson and Votruba-Drzal, 2014).

In contrast, international evidence suggests that when policymakers recognise unpaid labour, they can better address both goals. Consider, for instance, the policy of paying a generous and unconditional family benefit, such as those distributed in Australia and Sweden (and in New Zealand until the early 1990s). As well as recognising the work of parenting, this contributes to multiple beneficial outcomes. By reducing the need to take on potentially inappropriate paid work, it reduces parental stress, thus directly enhancing children's well-being. And if it is set sufficiently generously it can significantly

reduce child poverty rates and improve the negative impacts of poverty (Cooper and Stewart, 2013). Similar arguments can be made for policies such as longer paid parental leave for sole parents, advance payment of child support by the state, and paid and extended leave for caring for sick children. (In Sweden, for instance, parents receive up to 120 days' paid leave a year to care for a sick child.)

Reduction

The second element of Elson's approach concerns reduction, either of unpaid work itself, where appropriate, or of its negative impacts. While many societies have strong underlying cultural narratives about the meaningfulness of caring work, especially

- improving accessibility of basic services: e.g. better transport for those looking after people with a disability.

Such measures are especially important in an area that receives little attention, reproductive work. Around two thirds of first-time New Zealand mothers experience a significant intervention during birth, including epidurals, instrumental deliveries due to prolonged labour, episiotomies and caesarean sections. These interventions all markedly increase the risk of long-term injury (Ministry of Health, 2017). Such injuries significantly diminish people's ability to undertake basic activities and to cope with the additional and demanding work of caring for children. Yet ACC recognises neither these injuries nor the

childcare, or significantly more generous childcare subsidies.

A focus on redistribution would also direct policymakers' attention towards enabling men and non-birthing partners to do more unpaid caring work and other domestic labour. The relevant policies might include expanding paid parental leave conditions for all genders (Brandth and Kvande, 2002), and specific interventions known to reduce gender and motherhood pay imbalances in different sectors (Sin, Dasgupta and Pacheco, 2018) and other signal effects from the labour market (Stafford and Sundström, 1996).

Such policies can help address broader economic inequality as well as specific inequalities in the division of labour (Ekberg, Eriksson and Friebe, 2013; Patnaik, 2018). Greater male involvement in caring for their children also has numerous benefits (Callister, 1995). International research has emphasised the need to make men key actors in the drive to enhance women's economic empowerment (International Labour Organization, 2014).

The valuing of unpaid labour would have differential impacts on Māori. Unpaid caregiving for adults and those with illness or disability is, researchers suggest, integral to te ao Māori (Collins and Willson, 2008). It has many positive cultural and psychological dimensions. But it is also work that exacerbates existing socio-economic and health inequities experienced by Māori. Māori may forgo paid work to do unpaid work, even though they already have lower economic well-being. The emotional and physical burdens of caring work are also felt more strongly by Māori, because they already have poorer healthcare access and experiences (Alpass et al., 2013; Hokanson et al., 2018). A lack of social recognition for this work exacerbates the risk of negative effects (Collins and Willson, 2008).

Many Māori deemed 'unemployed' or 'underemployed' are working as carers for the elderly, people with disabilities and whāngai (adopted) children, or taking active roles in maintaining marae. In 2015, Counties Manukau District Health Board found that Māori experienced both a high unemployment rate (13%) and a very high rate of work without pay (87%). Māori

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parenting, the day-to-day tasks can nonetheless be tedious. Washing, cleaning, breastfeeding, preparing food and even playing with children can become stressful in their own ways. For those caring for the ill or disabled, both the physical work and the emotional load involved can be significant.

In valuing this work, policymakers would actively support research and policies that look to reduce the volume of some unpaid work, while also investing in reducing its negative impacts. These measures have three dimensions (Hirway, 2015):

- technology to assist in the work: e.g. physical technologies to reduce lifting while caregiving, or health technologies and supports to overcome breastfeeding difficulties;
- supports to reduce drudgery and stress: e.g. reducing the hours of caregiving carried out by any one person, or improving mental well-being services for those carers who experience greater mental distress (Dalgety, 2010; Krassoi Peach and Cording, 2018); and

considerable impacts on the individuals, families and communities that care for those afflicted. Hence, policymakers give little attention to the need to reduce the negative impacts of reproductive work. If reproductive work was properly valued, ACC would provide support for birth injury rehabilitation. It would also be motivated to implement evidence-based policies to reduce rates of birth injury, such as national strategies and programmes to help reduce both prolonged labour and New Zealand's high rates of caesarean section births.

Redistribution

The redistribution of unpaid work could entail more equal divisions of labour between men and women within households, but also within wider social institutions. For example, some unpaid work could be made the responsibility of the public sector – or even the not-for-profit sector or the market, if accompanied by appropriate funding. This could occur through the provision of universal free

working within the board catchment were nearly twice as likely as non-Māori to do unpaid caring work for someone who was disabled or ill, both within the home and outside it (Robson et al., 2015). Consequently, valuing unpaid caregiving properly could lead to a redistribution of formal paid care work in ways that recognised the unique needs and cultural meaning of unpaid labour for Māori. This in turn could play a significant role in delivering more equitable health and well-being outcomes for Māori.

Policy options

A wide range of policies will be needed to address the undervaluation of unpaid work. Given space constraints, I will focus on a handful of particular importance.

First, New Zealand needs to commit to regular time-use surveys. The OECD cites a lack of comprehensive time-use data as a reason to exclude unpaid labour from its *How's Life?* well-being framework (OECD, 2017). This framework, in turn, forms the basis of New Zealand's current Living Standards Framework, which is also missing any major analysis of the importance of unpaid labour (Smith, 2018). Better data, therefore, is necessary (though not sufficient) for unpaid labour to become more visible in policymaking.

Second, policymakers and politicians need to take clear and specific actions to meet goal 5 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which is to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'. One of its explicit targets is as follows:

Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate. (UNDP, 2018)

This is particularly important in light of the policymaking effort being devoted to the Living Standards Framework. The Treasury's own analysis shows that none of the framework's elements links directly to Social Development Goal 5. This is not a concern, it argues, because gender inequality is 'a cross-cutting issue that

applies to every domain' (Ormsby, 2018). But although the Living Standards Framework, as currently articulated, includes a measure for time use, it does not commit to measuring either the distribution or sustainability of unpaid labour in particular. Unpaid labour and gender equality therefore remain neglected.

In short, if policymakers do not explicitly create policies and practices to improve gender, ethnic or other structural inequities, they will inadvertently design in further inequity. A recent Treasury paper on tax expenditures, for instance, notes a significant number of expenditures in 2016 that could have a negative impact on gender equality (Morrissey, 2018). Yet this does not seem to be of wider concern

ensure that one of the country's largest productive sectors receives due consideration.

A third action worth highlighting relates to organisational shifts. There needs to be an organisational culture, within Treasury and other key policymaking institutions, where gender and equity analysis is championed and embedded, not individually applied as a special interest topic. Focusing on diversity and inclusion in the public service (see, for instance, State Services Commission, 2017) is necessary for such a change, but not sufficient. Leaders in the public service need to build a culture where equity analysis is systematically sought and applied. Their efforts should be oriented towards a new

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within the agency.

Ironically, the new Living Standards Framework does allow policymakers to value unpaid labour and address relevant inequities. The framework is concerned with the growth, distribution and sustainability of what it calls the 'four capitals': financial and physical, natural, social, and human capital. In effect, then, the ability to measure whether unpaid and paid labour is equitably distributed, and the impact such distribution has on its sustainability for different genders, ethnicities and levels of abilities, is technically built in. Yet this potential is not being realised, given the inadequacy of the framework's measures related to unpaid work. The author's personal experience, furthermore, is that unpaid labour has received serious attention within the Treasury from only a few very motivated individuals, most of them women. It is unacceptable, in a public service organisation, that it should be left to individuals with a personal interest to

public service goal to achieve equity for groups traditionally excluded from central social institutions (see Public Service Commission, 2018).

Such action would support a fourth change: embedding the use of not just gender but also equity analysis tools across all government departments. For instance, Suzy Morrissey highlights gender budgeting as a necessary public policy tool (Morrissey, 2018). However, equity analysis tools, much like time-use surveys, are only as useful as their users. They need champions across the public service, of all genders, ethnicities and disabilities, who are themselves actively supported to lead on this work. Applying the knowledge from implementation science will be critical to achieving such change (Bauer et al., 2015).

Dominant cultural narratives

The above policies are all well grounded. There is no lack of evidence as to which actions will help properly value unpaid labour. What is lacking is the will and

motivation to act upon the evidence. This, in turn, highlights the role of values and narratives. Research shows that when evidence conflicts with the dominant values in a society, and the 'stories' about how a problem came about and what will therefore solve it, citizens do not act (Berentson-Shaw, 2018). This emphasises the need for strategies that prioritise existing but not prevailing values, and identify narratives (or cultural explanations) that assist people to act upon evidence. Research suggests that politicians and governments can lead a move in public values, and that the public also acts to effect such change in politicians and policymakers (Hoff-Elmari et al., 2014.)

Data from the National Council of

than on collective values such as equity (Rashbrooke, 2018). This obscures the fact that, as Hirway observes, unpaid work is neither free nor unlimited. It is also a productive good and a basic building block of a healthy society, one just as important as the more formally constituted public and market sectors (Hirway, 2015). These institutions are profoundly interdependent; indeed, the unpaid labour carried out (largely) by women operates as an unrecognised subsidy to those reaping financial benefits in the formal market.

These well-established facts, however, have little place in narratives based around individualistic values such as success, wealth and power. Such values, and the decisions and actions associated with them,

equity (since it is women who produce and primarily raise children), the rights of all children to fully participate in society, and the importance of intergenerational care and the well-being of the collective.

The second narrative Fineman identifies is the 'foundational myth of autonomy and self-reliance'. In this myth, the inevitable dependency of all human beings at various points in their life cycle – and for some their entire lives – is ignored in favour of ideas of individual and family self-reliance. These myths can be seen in popular fiction, for example the bestselling American novel *The Little House on the Prairie*, which expressly celebrates the idea of self-reliance (Tharp and Kleiman, 2000). Potential counters to this particularly Western mythology include Māori values such as manaakitanga and cultural practices that are part of the mutual obligation to care for other people, wider communities and future generations.

Under the influence of the self-reliance myth, policymakers have devalued dependency while prioritising autonomy from the collective, often represented by government. Dependency, and the work required to support it, is often treated as a private issue. Benefits are provided through the welfare system, but generally to those attempting to reduce their dependency on government by seeking paid work. (There are, however, notable exceptions, including New Zealand Superannuation, which furnishes an unconditional income to those aged over 64, and the provision of income compensation, in cases of injury, via ACC.)

The myth of autonomy, Fineman argues, helps ensure that those who do caring work are significantly under-compensated and under-recognised. The myth also helps obscure the profound impact that unpaid caring work has on the functioning of both the market and the state:

The mandate that the state (collective society) respond to dependency, therefore, is not a matter of altruism or empathy (which are individual responses often resulting in charity), but one that is primary and essential because such a response is fundamentally society-preserving. (Fineman, 2000)

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Women's gender attitudes survey can help explain the narratives that surround New Zealanders' (both the public's and politicians') understanding of gender equity and unpaid labour. Around 80% of New Zealanders agree that tackling gender inequality is necessary to establish a fairer society, but 50% either think New Zealand has already achieved gender equality or are neutral on the question; 60% think that gender equality has no positive impact on valuing unpaid labour, or have no opinion (National Council of Women, 2018).

So, while champions of gender equity such as Kate Sheppard have a place in narratives of New Zealand progress, equity for women in New Zealand appears not to be highly valued (or understood), and the importance of valuing unpaid labour is not a dominant narrative. This is unsurprising given that current economic and social paradigms encourage politicians and policymakers to place greater emphasis on values such as individual independence from the state and enabling private markets

are prioritised in the dominant cultural stories told about the market economy, unpaid labour, caring work and self-reliance. Martha Fineman identifies two particularly powerful narratives that prioritise values unhelpful to formally recognising unpaid labour (Fineman, 2000). The first, which she terms the 'Porsche preference', is the view that having and raising children is a private choice analogous to acquiring a sports car, or indeed any other possession. Society, the argument goes, should not subsidise any such preference, neither the money spent on a car nor the labour devoted to a child. Yet, ironically, it is those having and raising children in an unpaid capacity who are subsidising both the market and government. The 'Porsche preference' narrative selectively ignores social and cultural differences around the having of children. For instance, around 30% of pregnancies are unplanned, and in te ao Māori children are seen as a taonga or treasure. It also ignores issues of gender

It is essential, therefore, to contest narratives that prioritise values unhelpful to achieving equity, justice and well-being across generations and groups. Simplistic models that focus on monetary values, markets, independence and self-reliance, treating children as a private good, must be replaced with values and narratives that help move the public, policymakers and politicians to focus on collective well-being.

Practically, what is required in a New Zealand context? As discussed earlier, recent data shows that most New Zealanders do believe gender equity matters. Yet around half the population don't see gender inequity as an urgent policy problem, and so are unlikely to accept the need to act on valuing unpaid labour. We require a deeper understanding of these dominant values and cultural narratives that hamper efforts to prioritise gender equity and value unpaid labour. We need to utilise mixed methods of research to identify values, effective narratives and other techniques of communication that can counter unhelpful narratives and help reveal the well-documented evidence on the importance of valuing unpaid labour to more New Zealanders (Kendall-Taylor, 2010; Manuel and Kendall-Taylor, 2010; Kendall-Taylor and Levitt, 2017). In other words, we need to understand how to talk

about unpaid labour in ways that encourage people to see and act upon the evidence.

Recent research also recommends shifting arguments away from the idea of reaping the economic and financial benefits of recognising women's work and unpaid labour (Elomäki, 2015; Berentson-Shaw, 2018). Developing new narratives focused on the financial benefits of valuing unpaid labour will not counter dominant narratives that also prioritise financial benefits and wealth acquisition in ignoring unpaid labour. Instead, we should focus on the intrinsic value of unpaid labour, and the collective benefits of recognising that more formally.

Properly valuing unpaid labour matters, ultimately, because equity, fairness and justice are all values that matter to the well-being of citizens in their lives together as a society. Activating these values is thus critical work; so too is the effective use of language – powerful metaphors, for instance – and of values-aligned messengers and champions. Evidence is never presented neutrally, so policymakers must give more attention to the science of narrative if they want the public to fully understand the evidence that underlies their policymaking. A belief in the neutrality of a factual narrative does not one any favours.

Conclusion

A serious injustice is embedded in policymaking when productive work, work which is not paid for and which is mainly done by women, is rendered invisible. Unpaid labour is arguably New Zealand's most productive sector. Both government and markets are dependent upon it to function. Yet policymakers barely recognise it, let alone work to reduce it or redistribute its benefits or costs more equitably. The case for doing so has been well made by countless scholars and practitioners, the evidence supporting their arguments is clear, and the policy options are well articulated. But for significant progress to be made, it is important to delve into the core values that drive the lack of action on unpaid labour, and identify other values that motivate greater consideration of the evidence. Policymakers can seek to understand problematic cultural narratives, such as the myths of self-reliance, in a New Zealand context, and investigate and invest in developing powerful counter narratives. This is vital to overcoming inaccurate narratives that allow both good evidence and unpaid labour to be ignored.

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