



# **UNLOCKING EQUALITY: EXPLORING UNPAID CARE WORK AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WOMEN'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN PALESTINE'S TECH SECTOR**

# Insights from Research: Empowerment, Challenges, and Pathways Forward

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## Overview

Unpaid care work (UPC) is an essential part of economic activity and societal well-being globally. According to the International Labor Organization, UPC includes both direct and indirect care that is given without payment and is mostly performed by women and girls inside homes. This involves responsibilities like providing care for young people, the elderly, or the sick, as well as chores around the house like cooking and cleaning. It excludes the manufacture of items or their processing for domestic use, such as farming or manufacturing garments at home. Nursing and assistance with dressing are examples of direct care labor, whereas cleaning, cooking, and grocery shopping are examples of indirect care work that supports direct care activities. However, it is often undervalued and underappreciated, leading to its exclusion from policy agendas and reforms. In Palestine, there is a lack of research on UPC, particularly in the tech industry, which is a fast-developing economic sector in a country with one of the highest unemployment rates globally. This brief addresses the significance of UPC, particularly in relation to Palestine's tech industry and its impact on women's development in the tech sector, and fills this research gap with tangible outcomes and recommendations.

The tech sector offers a number of potential economic opportunities, which is especially important in Palestine's high-unemployment context that includes a significant youth population. The tech industry in Palestine offers opportunities for economic growth and job creation, especially for women seeking flexible work hours. However, the unequal distribution of unpaid care responsibilities, heavily influenced by social and cultural norms, hinders women's participation in the workforce, including the tech sector. This "double burden"<sup>1</sup> paid and unpaid work faced by women often leads to career disruptions and perpetuates gender inequality.

Despite the tech sector's growth potential, addressing inequalities in UPC is crucial for inclusive development. With women increasingly entering the workforce, they often struggle to balance unpaid care duties and career advancement. The gender gap in unpaid care responsibilities and employment needs attention from both public care policies as well as private sector, civil and community services.

This brief calls for unpaid care solutions that allow women to pursue careers while managing an equitable share of household responsibilities, suggesting that employers can play a role in supporting these initiatives. By understanding and addressing the challenges posed by unpaid care, the tech industry in Palestine can foster an environment where women can thrive professionally and personally. Multiple tech-related sectors hold promise to lead the charge towards substantive reform and improvements, congruent with the disruptive and forward-thinking the tech industry promotes.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferrant G, Pesando LM, Nowacka K. Unpaid Care Work: The missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes. OECD Development Centre. (2014). Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid\\_care\\_work.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid_care_work.pdf), pg. 1. Accessed (8/9/2023).

## Research Objectives and Methodology

This research explores the implications of UPC on women's economic and social development in the tech sector in Palestine<sup>2</sup>. It employs a mixed-methods approach, including:

- Online cross-sectional surveys collected from 229 women working and/or those actively searching for work in Palestine's tech sector in March 2023.
- Face to face semi-structured interviews with 11 women working for Mercy Corps Palestine and Gaza Sky Geeks (GSG).

The findings are intended to inform strategies for fostering gender equality and social inclusion within the Palestinian tech ecosystem. Given that this is relatively nascent, opportunity exists to address and embed solutions towards achieving a greater impact on gender equality and social inclusion.

The brief provides a multistakeholder call-to-action using recommendations from the perspectives of the women in this study and grounded in what can be realistically achieved in the Palestinian context - economically, politically, culturally and structurally. These efforts require the public and private sectors to partner and collaborate alongside other institutional actors such as non-profit organizations, government donors and their agencies for financial resources, technical advice and advocacy efforts. Additionally, programs, such as GSG and other civil society organizations play a critical role in bridging the gap to affected communities, and providing feedback on, credibility to and nuance for any activities implemented.

## Key Findings

### Women Participant Demographics and Work Status

#### *Women Survey Respondents (n=229)*

- Almost 90% of surveyed women are under 35 years old, with more than half belonging to the 25-34 age group and residing in Central Gaza.
- Almost 35% are married and/or engaged and 33% have children.
- 5% of women in the sample have chronic diseases or disabilities, of which a significant number (7 out of 12) are in paid employment and the rest actively searching for a job.
- More than a third of the surveyed women work as project-based freelancers, while a quarter are actively seeking a job due to the high unemployment rate in Palestine.
- Women in the youngest age group (18-24 years old) experience the highest unemployment rate.
- Additionally, the estimated average monthly income of surveyed women at 1,607 NIS is lower than the minimum wage set by the government<sup>3</sup>, and about two-thirds of them hold a bachelor's degree.
- 48% of women are at a mid-career level, 28% at early-career, and 24% at advanced career level.

<sup>2</sup> The complete findings of the study are estimated to be available by December 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, October - December 2022, <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=4419>.

- The average number of dependents on women is 2 while the average household size is 5.

#### Women Interviewees (n=11)

- 64% are under the age of 35 years old.
- All interviewed women work for Mercy Corps Palestine (MCP) and in the Gaza Sky Geeks (GSG) programme, living in either Gaza (55%) or the West Bank (45%).
- Womens' marital status is variable, with 64% married and almost 20% single working mothers.
- The majority of interviewed women are at a mid-career level with an estimated average monthly income of 5500 NIS.
- The average number of dependents on women is 4 while the average household size is 5.

## Unequal and Gendered Burden of UPC

More than 70% of women surveyed consider their primary role as paid work, 20% consider unpaid care work as their main responsibility, and less than 10% consider both paid and unpaid care work. However, women often face societal expectations and norms that reinforce traditional gender roles, leading to the unequal distribution of UPC within households.

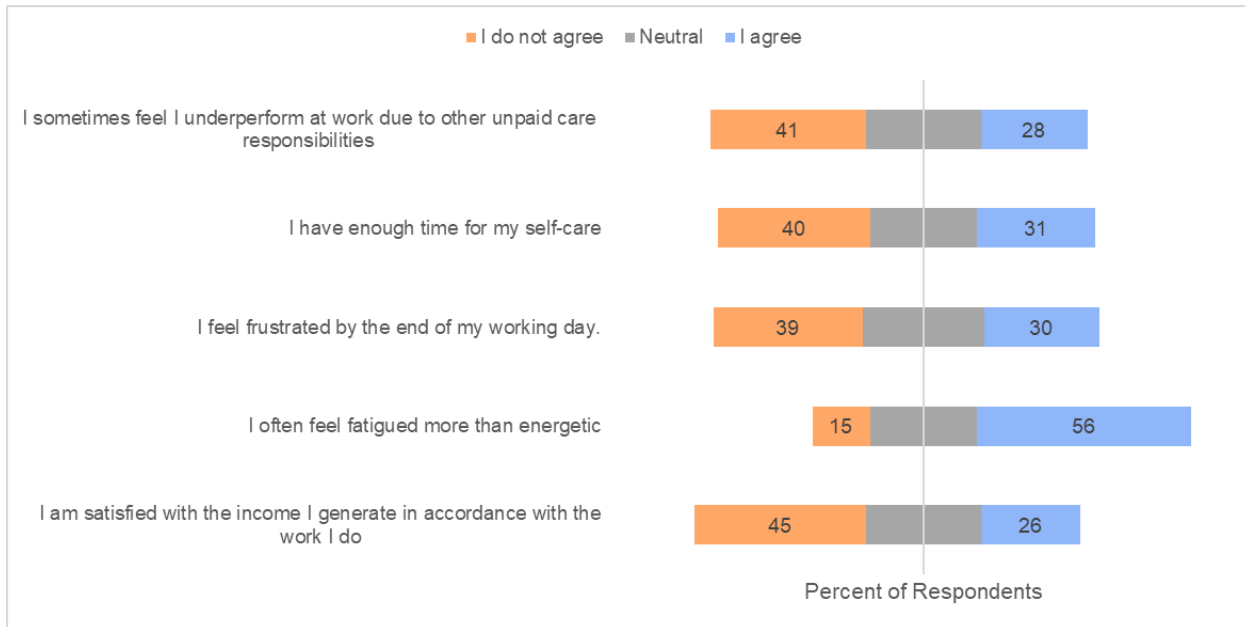
*“Everyone expects you to give up your dreams and ambitions if you are financially stable for the sake of children and the satisfaction of your husband.”*

— Survey Participant

While joining the labor force is seen as an economic necessity for many women, the study finds that once employed women also find fulfillment and purpose outside of their traditional household roles. These dual incentives create a major motivating force to remain in employment for women, even if they **are expected to shoulder the burden of both paid and unpaid work** in the family. The unequal share of UPC impacts women's work-life balance, job security, and overall well-being where women often have to make sacrifices, compromising their self-care and mental health to balance their dual responsibilities. When non-working women in the household are able to absorb a share of the UPC, this in turn limits their opportunities for employment and/or personal time, thus simply spreading the burden amongst women. Where outsourcing is an option, the cost is often unequally borne and results in a material financial sacrifice for working women. What might not be immediately apparent is the effect of unevenly distributing UPC, especially when some or all of it is delegated to external sources. Despite women entering employment to contribute to their families and seek fulfillment, they frequently have to allocate over 50% of their earnings to cover unpaid care responsibilities in exchange for this 'opportunity,' a situation that places a particularly heavy burden on mothers.

## Job Satisfaction and Career Development

According to survey results, 40% of surveyed women believe their jobs are often threatened by obligations to their families. This is consistent with the finding that women spend more time performing unpaid caregiving tasks than men in their households, which makes juggling job and family obligations extremely difficult. Although 70% of surveyed women believe their primary role is paid work and 70% claim their primary motivation for entering the workforce is to generate income, many (45%) are dissatisfied with this income considering the value they bring to the job. It is therefore not surprising that 56% often feel more fatigued than energetic (Figure 1).

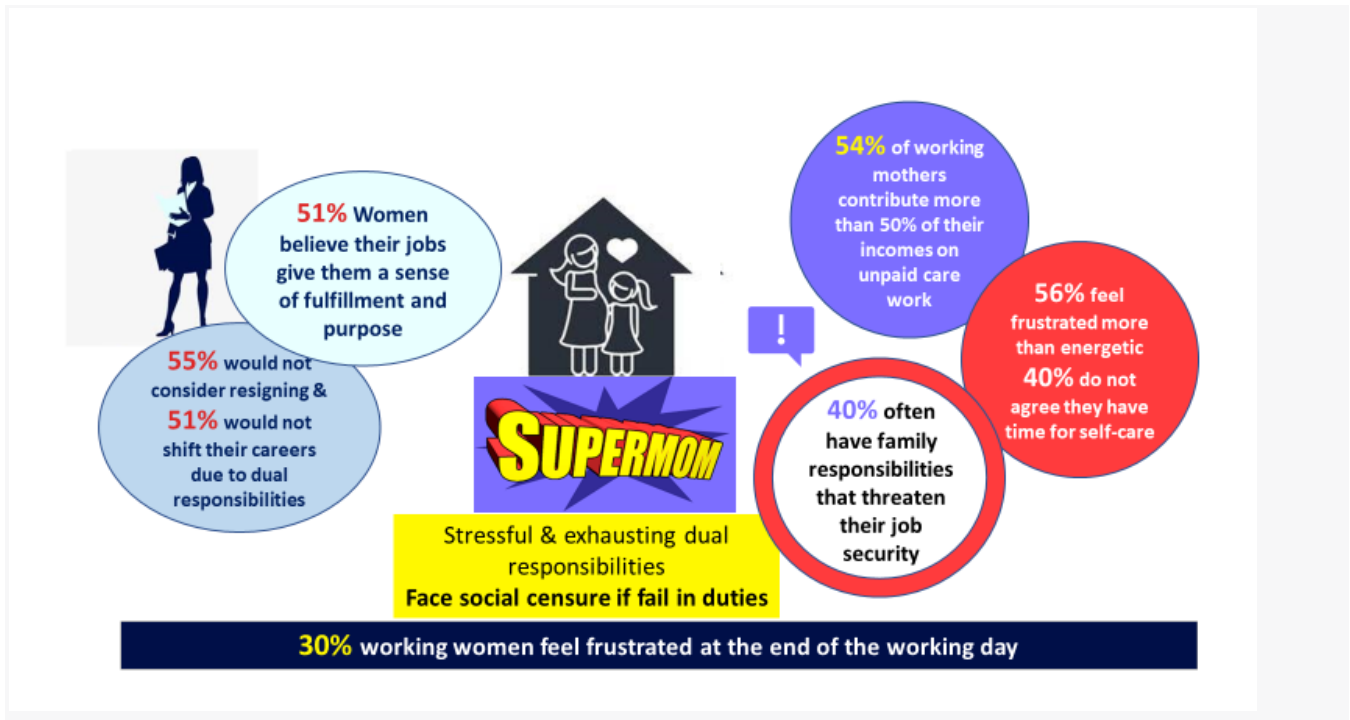


**Figure 1** Surveyed women's extent of agreement with well being related statements

Working conditions are not adequately accommodating for women, especially for working mothers, who often contribute more than 50% of their incomes to UPC (Figure 2). The lack of support, such as flexible working hours and on-site childcare, can lead to women leaving the formal labor market during child-bearing years and facing challenges when trying to re-enter.

*“I can outsource indirect unpaid work like cooking, cleaning, other chores to my extended family member, elder children, or even external outsource, but I need to take care of my children.”*

— Interviewee



**Figure 2** Surveyed women's attitudes towards dual responsibilities

The survey results show that 56% of women respondents often feel fatigued rather than energetic. This sentiment is not specific to mothers and particularly strong among single women, with 54% agreeing. This was also found among the interviewed women since both single and married women expressed experiencing burnout. In interviews, most women noted having no time for self-care, and struggling to prioritize self-care due to their dual responsibilities. These findings highlight the negative impacts of UPC on women's psychosocial wellbeing and ultimately their perceptions of their career planning and development.

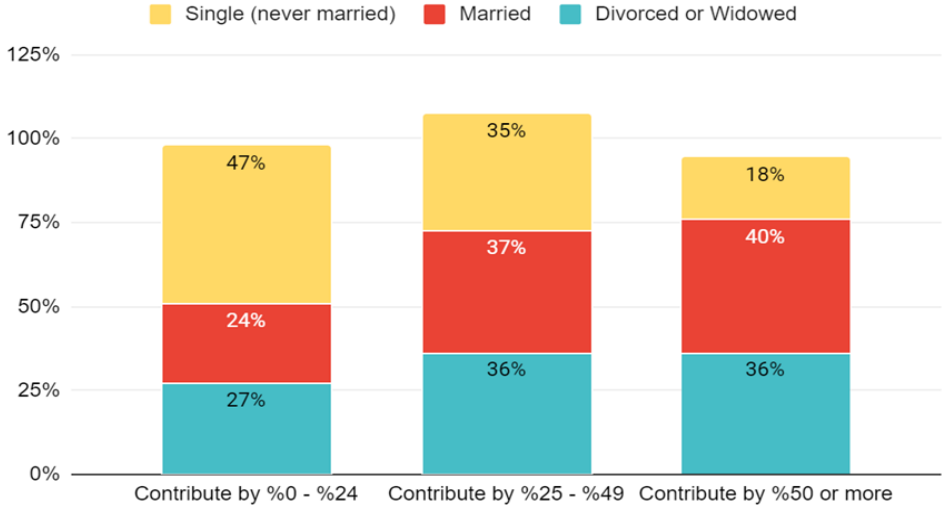
*“Wellbeing means disengaging from obligations. I hardly ever have time to take care of my wellbeing and mental health. I feel overburdened, frustrated, and worn out every day. Even on the weekends, I devote my time to household tasks that are entirely my responsibility, and this puts me under mental strain.”*

— Interviewee

## Financial costs of UPC

The research underscores the need for policy changes and workplace adaptations to better support women in achieving a healthy work-life balance and career advancement by addressing the unequal burden of UPC. Unpaid work, especially when combined with family obligations like child and elder care, clearly hinders women's social and economic growth, as experienced in the hours and intensity of UPC. Less

obvious is the impact of disproportionately allocating UPC when some or all of it is outsourced. While women enter the workforce to support their families and find purpose, they must often allocate more than 50% of their income to UPC for this ‘privilege’, which is particularly burdensome for mothers.



**Figure 3** Surveyed women's net allocation of income towards unpaid care costs by marital status

Compared to married women, single women make smaller financial contributions to home expenditures. This study found that 47% of single women contribute up to 24% of the family’s unpaid care expenses, whereas 40% of married women contribute more than 50% of their incomes (Figure 3). All interviewed women stated that they would spend less on these costs if they did not work, but they still wanted to keep their jobs as it offered them a feeling of purpose and fulfillment beyond simply meeting the household’s financial needs.

In interviews, women revealed that entering the workforce involves negotiating with family members, often compromising by contributing a significant portion or all of their income to cover household and childcare expenses. Despite inadequate incomes for outsourcing unpaid care, women are willing to allocate their earnings for this purpose in exchange for participation in the labor market. Working allows women to outsource care tasks, focus on career advancement and experience valuable self development. As they transition to work, women find fulfillment beyond traditional household roles, becoming contributing members of the workforce rather than the sole unpaid caregiver in the house.

# Recommendations

## UPC Solutions and Further Research

The study’s findings show that women in Palestine are disincentivized from paid work by restrictive social norms with unreal, almost ‘goddess-like’ expectations of women to handle both paid and unpaid work with reserves of compassion and desire to connect with others. Juggling work and unpaid care responsibilities negatively affects women's work-life balance, job security, and psychosocial well-being. Despite these

challenges, most women are determined to maintain their careers, but they often sacrifice their self-care and mental health to meet their dual responsibilities.

It is crucial for all stakeholders within the tech industry and beyond to take action. Addressing the double burden faced by Palestinian women in the tech sector requires various multi-sectoral efforts. If implemented properly, such recommendations could be highly impactful with relatively low-costs in the Palestinian context. The following are recommendations informed by the study's findings on how to address this double burden and opportunities for future research.

In the **short-to-medium term**, measures to promote women- and family-friendly workplaces should include:

1. Awareness workshops for positive behavior change in unpaid care distribution
2. Training and skills development opportunities for women
3. Work-life balance workshops
4. Providing psychosocial wellbeing support
5. Providing flexible work arrangements
6. Providing childcare solutions

In the **medium-to-long term**:

1. A national women's leadership program should be established that centers on:
  - a. Tools for women's empowerment
  - b. Enforcing labor laws
  - c. Advocating for gender equality
  - d. Creating mechanisms to address sexual harassment in the workplace.
2. Providing longer maternity and paternity periods and extended support for new parents

Finally, suggestions for further research on UPC in Palestine's tech sector include:

- Research involving a larger sample size, including men and a more representative sample of Palestinian women that considers factors like disability and household socioeconomic status.
- Research on understanding the costs of unpaid care work.
- Examining how recruitment practices impact women's labor force participation.
- Research gathering specific data on women's workplace experience to help identify vulnerabilities related to gender discrimination, working conditions, and other relevant factors.