

Decent work and unpaid care labour: The missing link in Ghana's Labour Policy.

By Araba Annan



Introduction

Ghana's legal framework promotes equality and non-discrimination between men and women in all spheres of life. The **1992 Constitution of Ghana**, particularly **Chapter 5**, guarantees participation by all citizens and abhors discrimination on any grounds, including the workplace and labour market. It upholds human rights principles that include the right to decent and safe working environments. Similarly, the **Labour Act, 2003 (Act 651)** reinforces equality in employment and calls for fair treatment for all genders across economic sectors.

The Concept of Decent Work

Decent work is a type of employment that has certain conditionality including:

- Fair and adequate wages;
- Safe and secure working conditions;
- Job stability and protection from arbitrary dismissal; and
- Access to social protection, such as pension and old-age benefits.

The commitments in its legal framework notwithstanding, Ghana continues to experience significant **deficits in decent work**, manifested in underemployment, poor job quality, income insecurity, and gender based inequalities.

Informal Economy

The **informal economy** refers to economic activities that are, in law or in practice, not fully covered by formal labour arrangements. Many informal workers operate outside legal protection, or where laws exist, they are poorly enforced. This leaves millions particularly women without access to fair wages, safe working environments, or social protection. Most people in the informal sector can be said to be in vulnerable employment. In Ghana and other developing countries, women are disproportionately represented in vulnerable employment, especially in informal, agricultural, and care sectors, where job security and legal protection are weak.

Vulnerable employment

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), **vulnerable employment** refers to work characterized by insecurity and lack of social protection, comprising *own-account workers* those who work for themselves without employees and *family workers* who assist in family enterprises without formal pay or contracts. Such workers face heightened risks of economic shocks, exploitation, and limited promotion.

Vulnerable employment is characterized by insecurity, instability, and lack of social protection or employment benefits. It typically involves jobs where workers have limited rights, low wages, and little or no access to formal work arrangements, such as contracts, pensions, or health insurance.

The **Ghana Statistical Service Labour Report (2024)** indicates that vulnerable employment remains significantly higher among females than among males, with a persistent gender gap of about 20 percentage points between 2022 and 2023.

Women and Informal Work

Women's economic activities in Ghana are predominantly concentrated in the informal economy, which employs approximately **80 percent of the working population**, compared to only **14 percent** in the formal sector (Baah-Boateng et al., 2020). Common occupations within the informal economy include **petty trading, street hawking, small-scale farming, shop assistants, head-porters (Kayayei), and chop bar workers**. These occupations share several defining characteristics. First, they are largely **unregulated**, offering limited legal or social protection for workers. Second, they are **highly feminized**, with women constituting the majority of participants. Finally, these workers are **among the lowest paid**, reflecting persistent gender inequalities in income, job security, and access to economic opportunities.

Challenges and Gaps

With an estimated 15 million populations, promoting decent work is essential for **poverty reduction and sustainable development**.

- **Low wages and income insecurity:** The current national minimum wage of **GHS 19.97 per day (approximately GHS 539.19 per month)** is grossly inadequate compared to the rising cost of living.
- **Precarious employment:** Many women in the informal sector accept whatever payment is offered, often below the minimum wage, due to limited job alternatives.
- **SME vulnerability:** Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), which employ a large share of informal workers, struggle to sustain operations under rising costs, often resulting in layoffs and job losses.
- **Lack of enforcement:** Weak monitoring and regulation in the informal economy mean that decent work principles—such as fair wages and safety—are rarely upheld.
- **Sexual harassment- women are faced with it they must stay there.**

These gaps make it imperative for the government to strengthen policies that promote fair wages, extend social protection, and improve working conditions across both formal and informal sectors.

Unpaid Care Work: The Invisible Labour

Another dimension of inequality in Ghana's labour market is **unpaid care and domestic work**, a form of labour overwhelmingly carried out by women. Women spend countless hours performing household chores, caring for children, the elderly, and other dependents. These responsibilities sustain families and communities but are not recognized as “real” work deserving of pay.

While men's productive hours in formal employment are compensated, women's unpaid labour remains **invisible and undervalued**, widening the poverty and gender gaps. Women spend significant productive time in caregiving, reducing their access to paid employment and leadership opportunities.

The **Ghana National Gender Policy (2015)** explicitly acknowledges the unequal distribution of unpaid and informal care work as a major contributor to gender inequality. It identifies women's disproportionate engagement in unpaid domestic and caregiving roles as a barrier to their full participation in education, employment, leadership, and decision-making processes. To address these challenges, the policy calls for the **recognition, reduction, and redistribution** of unpaid care work.

Specifically, the policy advocates for:

- **Investment in social and physical infrastructure**—including childcare centers, elderly care services, water and sanitation, and energy access—to reduce women’s time burdens.
- **Promotion of shared household responsibilities** between men and women through community education and behavioural change initiatives.
- **Integration of care work considerations** into national development planning, labour policies, and gender-responsive budgeting frameworks.
- **Data collection and research** to make unpaid care work visible and valued within the national economy.

By emphasizing these measures, the policy aligns with international frameworks such as the **Beijing Platform for Action** and **Sustainable Development Goal 5.4**, which promote the recognition and equitable sharing of unpaid care and domestic work as essential to advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Data from the **African Women’s Inclusion Index (AWII)** highlight how persistent care burdens continue to hinder women’s empowerment and leadership across the continent. Cultural norms, inadequate public services, and weak infrastructure reinforce a cycle in which women and girls disproportionately shoulder unpaid care responsibilities. In Mali, for instance, women spend an average of **24.7 hours per week** on unpaid care and domestic work compared to **6.6 hours for men**, representing a **monetized value equivalent to 17.6% of GDP** (UN Women, 2023). Furthermore, due to the high prevalence of illness and disability across all age groups in Africa, each unpaid caregiver is estimated to carry **three units of care**, compared to a global average of **2.34 units** (Africa Care Index, 2022).

The Supplementary Act on Gender Equality of Rights Between Women and Men for Sustainable Development, in the Economic State of West Africa (ECOWAS) Region, 2015. This is a strategic framework for strengthening Gender Equality in the ECOWAS region. The Act urges member states to account for women’s unpaid care and reproductive roles in policy planning. The Act specifically urges member states to promote the inclusion of women’s unpaid work in the national accounts system and the promotion of appropriate technologies for the reduction of domestic tasks. Yet Ghana’s progress remains slow. Many women still lose their jobs during maternity leave. They are either replaced in their absence or having their contracts terminated. (Sarfraz et al, 2021)

Impacts of Unpaid Care Work

1. Time Poverty

Women and girls—who are primary caregivers in most Ghanaian and African communities—experience severe time constraints. This limits their opportunities for

personal care, rest, education, skills development, and meaningful participation in public life.

2. Mental Health Challenges and Burnout

The Continuous, demand of care responsibilities without adequate support often leads to stress, fatigue, anxiety, and depression. Many caregivers experience burnout due to the emotional and physical strain.

3. Limited Access to Decent Work

Because a large portion of their time and energy are spent on unpaid care, women often end up in low-paying, informal, or part-time jobs that offer little security or upward mobility.

4. Restricted Career Progression

Unpaid care responsibilities reduce women's ability to engage in training, networking, or full-time employment, confining them to roles with limited professional growth and leadership opportunities.

5. Reduced National Productivity and GDP Contribution

When women cannot fully participate in the labour market, countries lose significant economic value. Unpaid care work, though essential, is not captured in GDP, leading to an underestimation of women's real contribution to national development

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

To ensure inclusive and equitable labour participation, Ghana must move beyond legislative intent to **transformative implementation**.

Key steps include:

1. **Extending labour protections** and social security coverage to informal workers, especially women.
2. **Improving minimum wage enforcement** and reviewing wage levels to align with living costs.
3. **Formalizing informal sector operations** and supporting SMEs to expand employment capacity.
4. **Recognizing and valuing unpaid care work**, integrating it into national accounts and social protection schemes.
5. **Investing in care infrastructure**, such as childcare centres, paid family leave, and flexible working arrangements to enable women's fuller participation in the workforce.
6. **Expanding access to basic social amenities and infrastructure**—including potable water, health facilities, and sanitation services particularly in rural and underserved districts. This will reduce the time women spend on unpaid domestic tasks and improve community wellbeing.
7. **Strengthening public health systems** to prevent avoidable illnesses and ensure a healthy population. A robust healthcare system reduces women's unpaid caregiving burden and enhances overall productivity.

In conclusion, recognizing women's unpaid care work and ensuring decent work for all are not just issues of fairness—they are **fundamental prerequisites for inclusive growth, poverty reduction, and gender equality** in Ghana.

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