

ERF Policy Brief

Women's Unpaid Care Work in Egypt: Gender Gaps in Time Use

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About the authors

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In a nutshell

- A new time-use module in ELMPS 2023 provides the opportunity to examine women's time spent on unpaid care work and employment-related activities, relative to men.
- A total of 84% of Egyptian women aged 15-64 participated in unpaid care work daily, compared with only 34% of men.
- Women of working age (15-64) allocated an average of 5.4 hours per day to unpaid care work, more than five times the amount of time spent by men on similar tasks.
- Marriage and childbearing lead to an increase in the time women spend on unpaid care work, with married women spending six times as much time in unpaid care work as married men.
- Employed women faced a double burden of having to balance their unpaid care work and employment commitments, with married women who were wage employed being the most time-constrained.
- Deeply entrenched social expectations prevent more equal redistribution of unpaid care work, despite shifts in personal beliefs on gender norms.

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Gender disparities in time allocation are one of the key features of gender inequality, hindering women's full participation in economic and social life (UN Women and ERF, 2020). Traditional gender norms play an important role in shaping the gendered division of labor, especially in developing countries. Drawing on Atallah and Hesham (2024), this brief summarizes the results on women's and men's time spent on unpaid care work and employment-related activities. The analysis draws on the new time-use module of the 2023 wave of the ELMPS, which uses a time diary approach. The questionnaire asked respondents to report the time they woke up and went to sleep as well as all activities performed between waking up and sleeping, over a 24-hour period, including the nature and duration of each activity. Activities were recorded in 15-minute intervals, with the interviewer selecting the activity type from a list based on the 2016 International Classification of Time-Use Statistics (ICATUS).

Unpaid care work: A prominent gender disparity in time use

A total of 84% of women aged 15-64 performed unpaid care tasks on a daily basis, compared to only 34% of men, creating a gender gap of around 3:1. This gap widens to 5:1 for direct care activities like face-to-face child and elderly caregiving. On average, women of working age (15-64) spent more than five times as much time on unpaid care work as their male counterparts. Results confirm that marital status is a key predictor of how much time women spend on unpaid care. Married women who were wage employed performed the highest number of hours per week of total work (paid and unpaid), exceeding the number of hours for wage-employed men. These findings are consistent with previous studies, which highlighted the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, especially for employed married women (UN Women and ERF, 2020).

Time use by socio-demographic characteristics

In Egypt, time use patterns for men and women are strongly influenced by socio-demographic factors such as age, marital status, education, and area of residence. While education and residence contribute to variations in time use, age and marital status remain the central factors in shaping gendered time use.

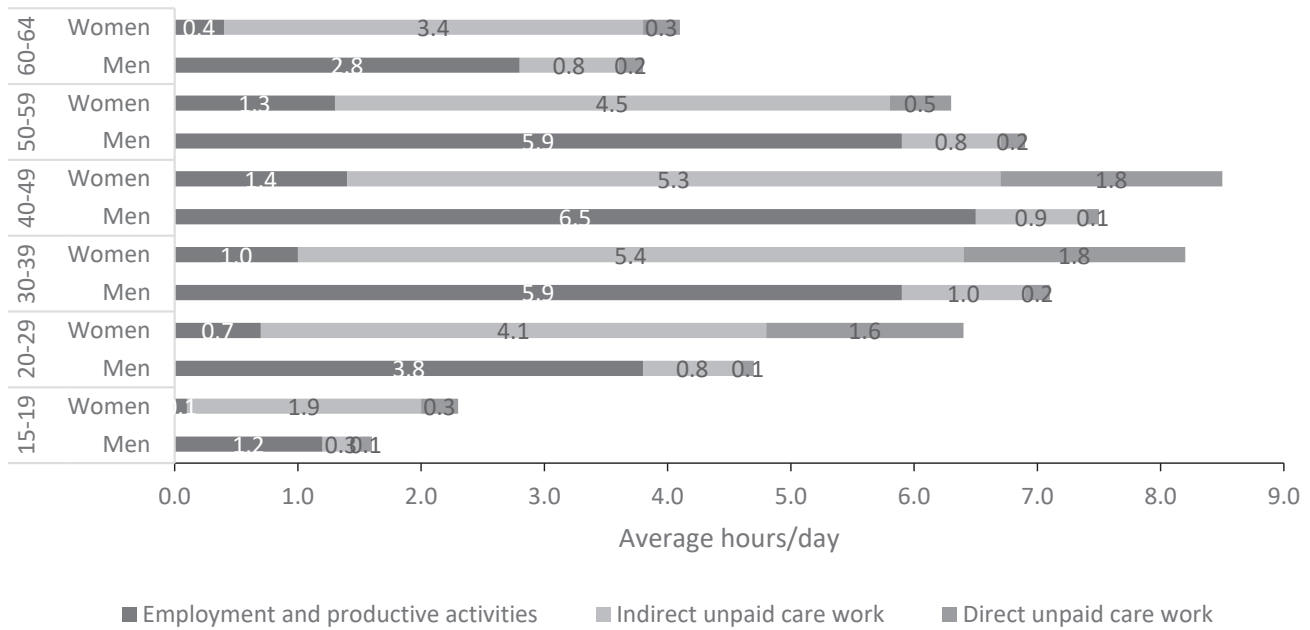
Gender differences in time-use begin early, with women's unpaid care work, especially indirect care work (e.g., household chores), increasing sharply from adolescence (Figure 1). For women aged 15-19, this care work averages 2.2 hours per day and climbs to 7 hours per day during their thirties and forties, coinciding with family responsibilities that peak around marriage and family formation. Consequently, women in these age groups experience the highest female-to-male ratio in unpaid care hours, ranging from 6:1 to 7:1. Daughters also spent more time on unpaid care work relative to sons, suggesting that gender inequality in unpaid care work exists well before marriage and increases as women marry and are faced with added responsibilities. When considering both unpaid care work and employment, women aged 15-39 spent longer hours of total work than men, primarily due to their unpaid care responsibilities. This gender gap narrows slightly among women aged 50-64, reflecting a reduction in family care duties as they age.

Marital status is the second key factor shaping time-use. Married women dedicated over twice as much time to unpaid care work as both unmarried women and men, averaging 6.8 hours per day, or 47.6 hours weekly (Figure 2). Married men, by contrast, focused largely on employment, spending six times as much time on paid work as married women, who spent an average of only 0.9 hours per day in employment. This heavy time demand reflects traditional caregiving roles that intensify with family responsibilities. Consequently, the female-to-male ratio in unpaid care was highest among married individuals at 6:1 compared to 4:1 for the never married individuals. Divorced and widowed women also spent more time on unpaid care than men in similar circumstances, though divorced men and widowers contributed more to unpaid care work than married men, slightly narrowing the gender gap. For instance, the female-to-male ratio stands at 4:1 and 3:1 for the divorced and widowers(ed), respectively.

Education and the region of residence also shape time-use, though their impacts are more subtle than age and marital status. Highly educated women spent slightly less time on indirect care work but engaged more in direct caregiving, while educated men contributed somewhat more to unpaid care work, slightly reducing the gender gap. Among university graduates, the female-to-male ratio for unpaid care work was lowest at 5:1, yet important gender disparity remains. By

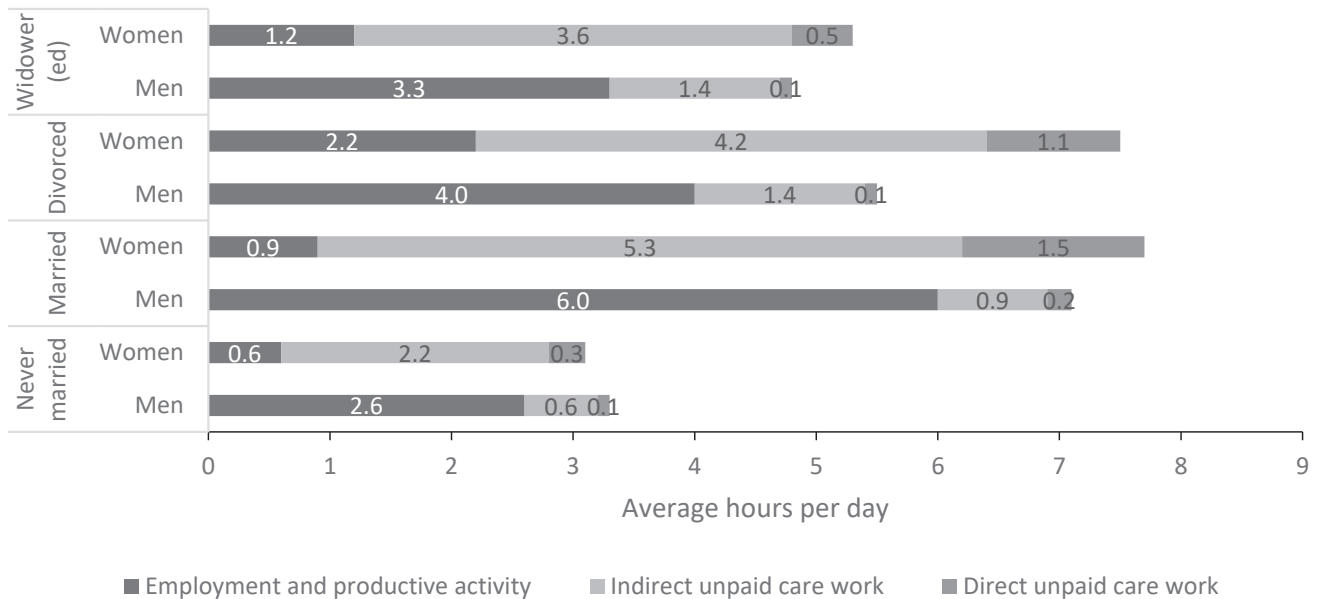


Figure 1. Time use (average hours per day) by type of activity, sex and age group, ages 15-64



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2023 time-use module.

Figure 2. Time use (average hours per day) by type of activity, sex and marital status, ages 15-64



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2023 time-use module.

location, rural women dedicated more time to unpaid care—averaging 5.9 hours daily compared to 4.7 hours for urban women—resulting in a larger gender gap in rural areas, where women spent seven times as much time on unpaid care work as men, relative to five times

in urban settings. In terms of employment, rural men spent more time in employment than urban men, while rural women spent less time in employment than their urban counterparts (see Atallah and Hesham (2024) for further details).

Time use by household and family dynamics

The presence of young children in the household raises women's time spent on unpaid care work, especially direct caregiving. Women with children below six years old spent the highest number of hours per day on unpaid care work, including the most hours on direct caregiving tasks (Figure 3). The time dedicated to direct caregiving declines as children get older, falling to 1.2 hours on average for women with children aged 6-18 and only 0.4 hours when the youngest child is above 18. While the time spent on indirect care work was also lower for women with older children, the decline was not as pronounced. This suggests that indirect care work is more rigid than direct care work, as the latter appears to be more responsive to care needs in the household. Household wealth also played a role, with the time spent on indirect care work falling from 4.7 hours per day for women in the bottom wealth quintile to 3.9 hours on average among women in the top wealth quintile.

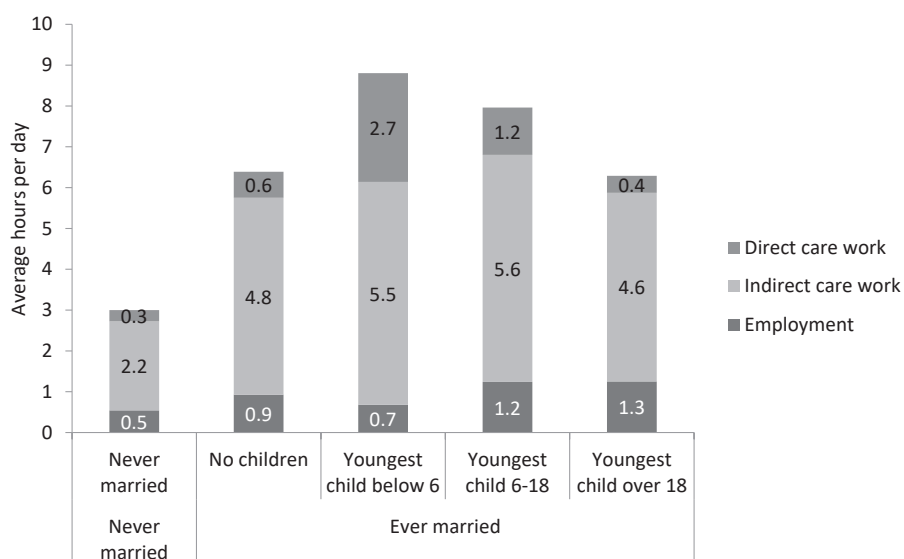
Time use by labor market status

Across different labor market statuses, ever married women spent substantially more time on unpaid care work relative to never married women. Among the ever-married, unemployed and inactive women spent nearly 7 hours on unpaid care work per day, representing two hours more than their employed peers. On the other

extreme, employed women who were never married represented the female group with the shortest time spent on unpaid care work at just below two hours per day. For men, marriage does not appear to influence time spent on unpaid care work among those active in the labor market (employed or unemployed). The only labor market status where there is a visible variation in unpaid care work is for those out of the labor force, whose average time spent on unpaid care work doubles from a total of 30 minutes among the never-married to one full hour per day for ever-married men.

By employment status, women employed in waged jobs who were never married spent relatively more time on employment and less time on unpaid care work compared with those who have been married. By institutional sector, women employed in the public sector had the highest number of hours of total work (unpaid care work and employment) with an average of 10.5 hours per day. Ever married women in informal private sector wage employment also performed a high number of total work hours per day (10.1), followed by 9.5 hours for women in formal private sector wage employment. Across the different employment statuses, never married and ever married men spent a similar amount of time on unpaid care work, around 0.9-1.1 hours. This suggests that while working women tend to manage both their employment and unpaid care work responsibilities in response to marriage, this was not the case for working men whose contribution to unpaid care work remains minimal, regardless of their marital status.

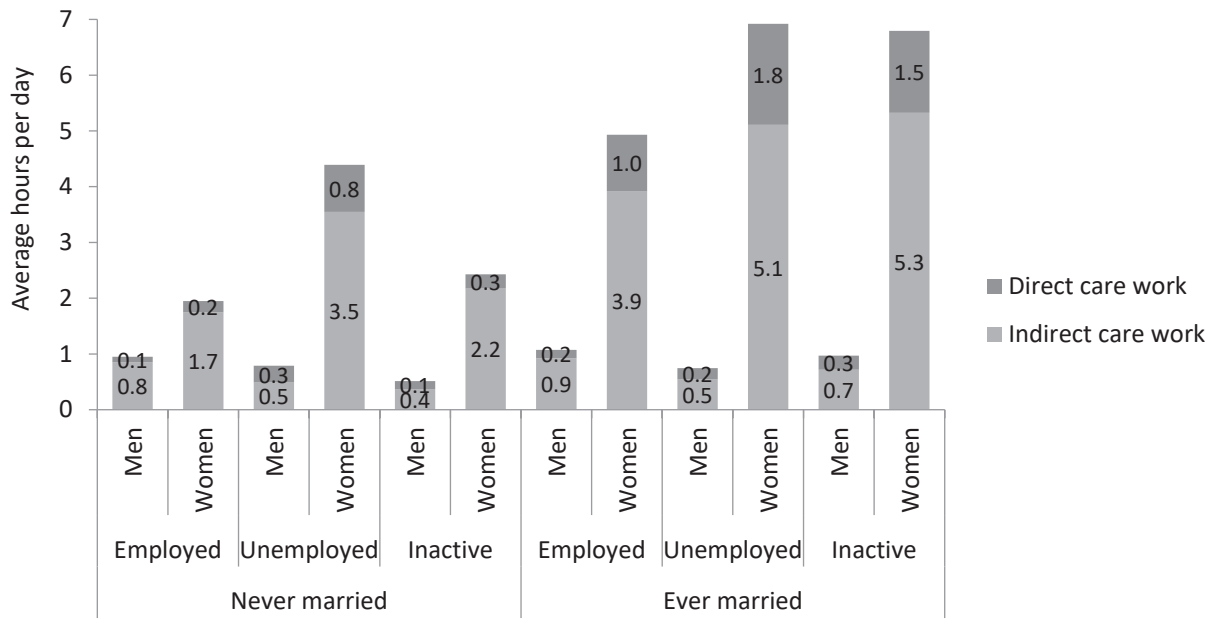
Figure 3. Women's time spent on unpaid care work (average hours per day) by marital status and household composition, ages 15-64



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2023 time-use module.

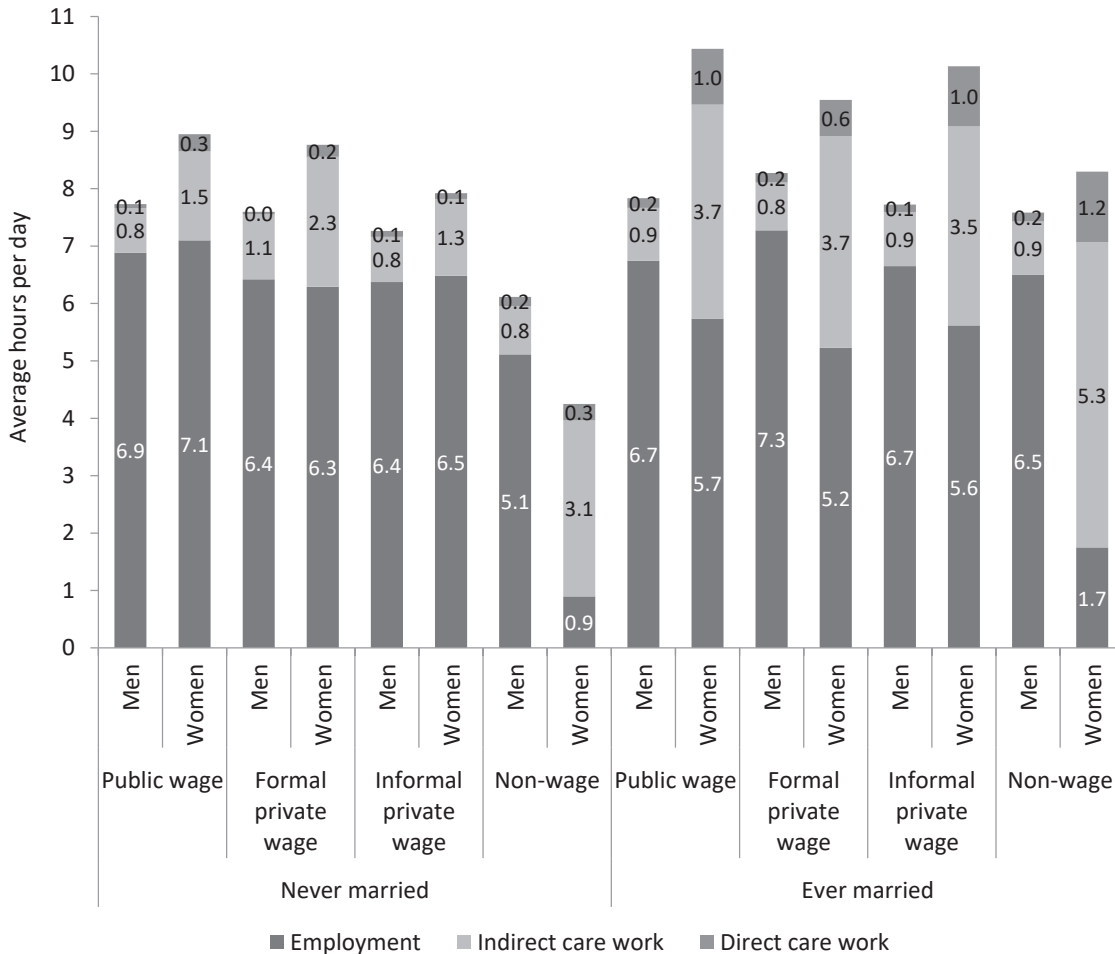


Figure 4. Time spent on unpaid care work (average hours per day) by sex, labor market status and marital status, ages 15-64



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2023 time-use module.
 Notes: Standard (search required) labor force definition is used with seven-day reference period.

Figure 5. Time spent on employment and unpaid care work (average hours per day) by sex, employment status/institutional sector and marital status, ages 15-64



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2023 time-use module.
 Notes: Institutional sector of current primary job, seven-day reference period



Time-use by gender norms

Time-use patterns are strongly associated with societal gender norms. In traditional societies where women are expected to be responsible for caregiving tasks, substantial gender inequalities in time spent on unpaid care work and job activities are likely to prevail. To assess the association of gender norms with patterns of time use, we use a series of questions designed to assess gender-role attitudes and beliefs across four key areas: views on gender equality, traditional gender roles, female labor force participation (FLFP), and childcare.¹

Exploring gender norms for men and women, women are more supportive of equal gender roles. However, results show less agreement around men's help in indirect unpaid care work (household chores) and the use of child care services to go to work, notably among men. Figure 6 shows that nearly 27% of men disapproved of helping their working wife with household chores and 45% disapproved of the use of childcare services to go to work. In contrast, women show stronger consensus than men for the use of childcare services to go to work, although 33% also disapproved.

Men's views on equal treatment of boys and girls have a little association with the time they spend on unpaid care work. Men with more egalitarian attitudes tend to spend slightly more time on direct caregiving, but not on indirect care work like household chores. This is especially true when they believe they should assist their working wives with household chores. But their belief in helping their working wives with childcare does not change their time use patterns. For women, those who approve of husbands' help in raising children, spend less time on unpaid care work and more time on employment.

Policy implications: The need for recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work

Patterns of time-use among working-age Egyptians (15-64) reveal pronounced gender disparities, with women being disproportionately engaged in unpaid care work. This calls for a multifaceted approach aiming at redistributing and reducing the unpaid care work gap between men and women.

¹ For more details on gender norms assessment, see Atallah and Hesham (2024).

Promoting gender equality through education

Our key findings highlight strong gendered patterns in unpaid care work. This responsibility starts early and intensifies during marriage and childbearing years. Gender disparities in both employment and unpaid care work begin as early as ages 15-19, making it essential to promote gender equality through education. Schools and universities can integrate gender-equitable concepts into curricula and activities, as recommended by IMAGES and UN Women (2017).

Strengthening the link between gender-role attitudes and unpaid care work distribution

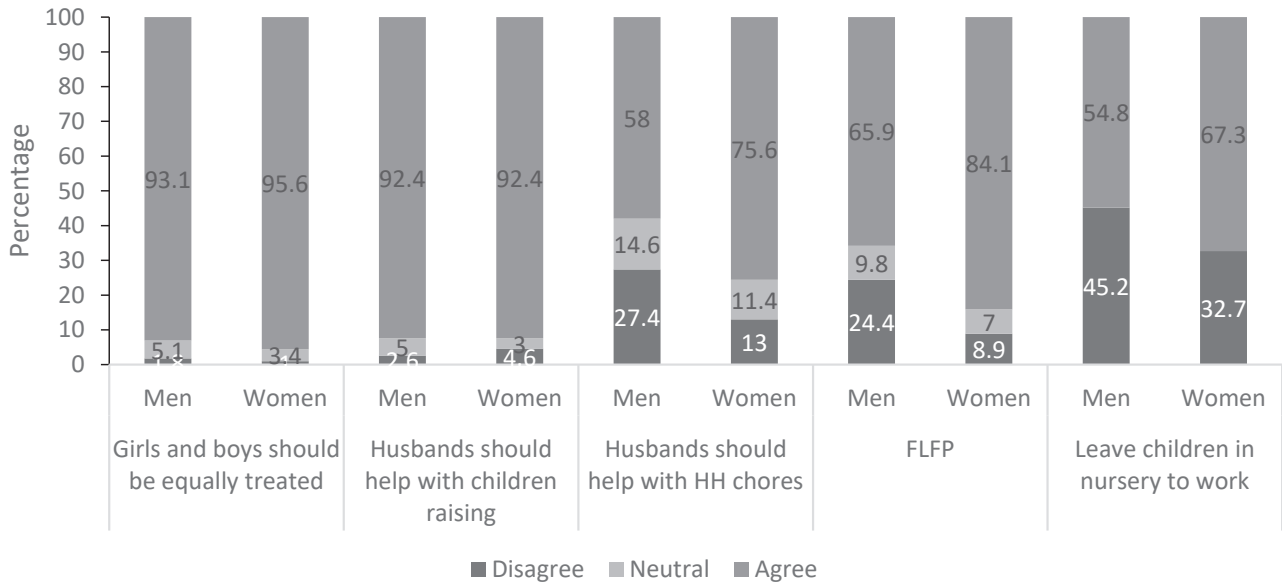
Although egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles and care-sharing exist, they have little association with actual time use which hinders the equitable redistribution of unpaid care work. To address this, traditional gender norms should be gradually shifting into more egalitarian ones that have a concrete effect on time-use patterns. These initiatives to change gender norms should engage both men and women to challenge misconceptions and foster a deeper understanding of gender equality. By addressing misconceptions and highlighting the challenges faced by women, such programs can motivate men to take on a more active role in caregiving, thus promoting a more balanced division of responsibilities.

A required nexus between market-based solutions and government interventions

Family dynamics further intensify unpaid care work. Women with young children or multiple dependents, especially in rural or lower-income households, report spending higher hours in unpaid care work. Wealthier households, however, might be able to reduce their indirect care work through market-based care solutions or time-saving appliances (Assaad and Ragab, 2024). To ease women's care burden, access to affordable, quality care services is crucial, especially through government-subsidized childcare and eldercare (Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017). Without such support, low-income families face challenges in accessing care services, underscoring the need for government intervention.

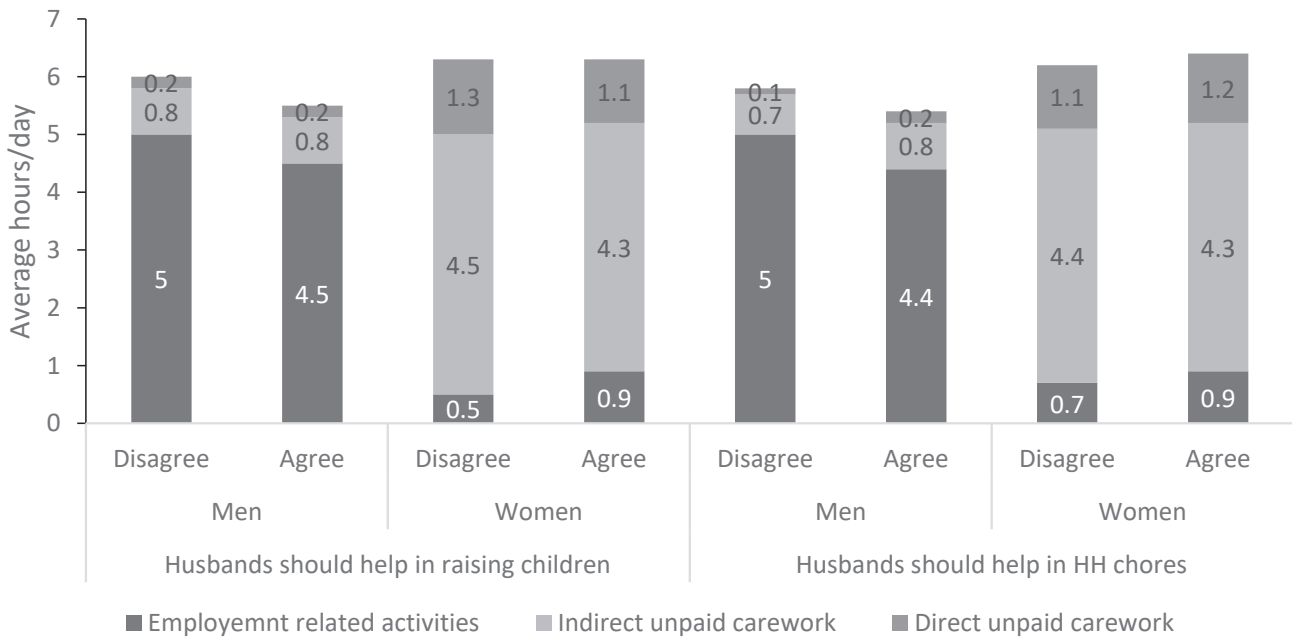


Figure 6. Distribution (in %) of attitudes towards gender norms by sex, ages 15-64



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2023 time-use module.

Figure 7. Time use (average hours per day) by sex and attitudes towards gender roles, ages 15-64



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2023 time-use module.



The need for workplace policies and care provisions

Employed women, particularly those in wage employment, face a “double burden” as they balance both paid and unpaid responsibilities. Married, wage employed women report the highest hours of total work (both unpaid care work and employment), representing around 10 hours per day. This underscores the importance of creating supportive working conditions for women. For those working in the formal sector, it’s important to recognize the need for workplace policies that accommodate their unique challenges. Flexible work arrangements, on-site childcare, and paid family leaves for all employees can promote a more balanced division of unpaid care work. Petts and Knoester (2018) warn that, unless there is a shift in foundational gender norms, paternity leaves will not be effective, and men will continue to be viewed as “temporary helpers”.

In a nutshell, this policy brief underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to reshaping gendered time-use patterns in Egypt. Policies aimed at promoting gender equality in time use should not only focus on structural changes—such as infrastructural services, care services and workplace support—but also address deeply ingrained social norms. Implementing these policies can encourage shared responsibilities in both unpaid care work and employment, helping Egypt move toward gender equality. As several alternatives are proposed, a thorough evaluation of policy effectiveness is essential to identify the most appropriate strategies for the Egyptian context using rigorous policy evaluations.

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