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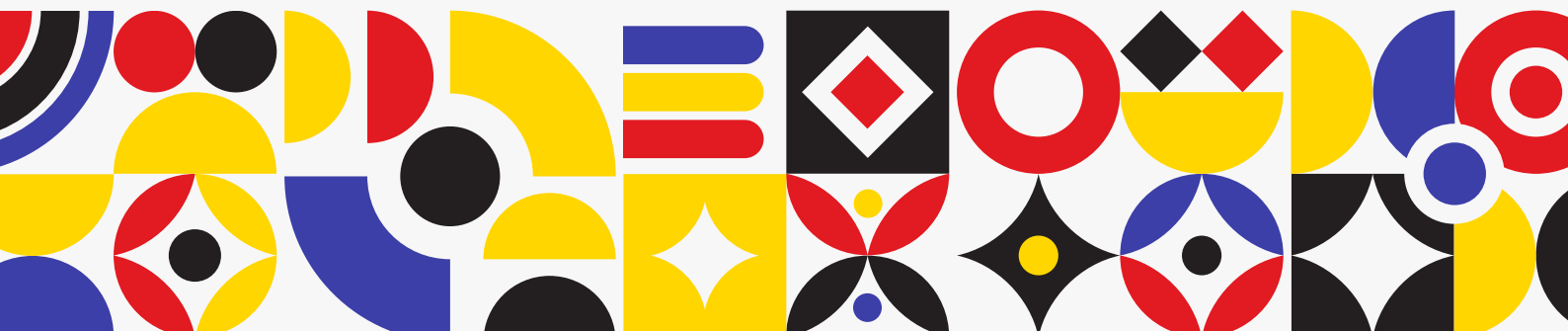
The Invisible Load: Women, Work, and the Weight of Unpaid Care in Rural Ghana

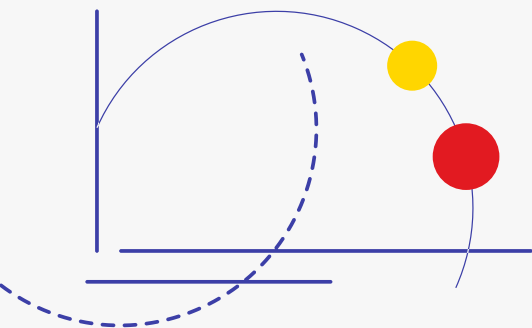


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Across many communities in Ghana and beyond, the story is the same women rise before dawn, care for children, fetch water, clean, cook, tend to small farms, and provide food for their families. They do this daily, tirelessly and without pay. This is unpaid care work: the invisible engine that keeps households and societies functioning, yet is largely unrecognized and undervalued.

What is Unpaid Care Work?

Unpaid care work includes domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, fetching firewood and water, and caring for children, the sick, or elderly. It's called "unpaid" because, unlike formal employment, it receives no financial compensation — yet it contributes enormously to social and economic well-being.

In the rural communities surveyed, this work is overwhelmingly carried out by women and girls. Men, on the other hand, are seen as primary breadwinners, engaging in income-generating activities like farming, cocoa trading, teaching, or hunting.

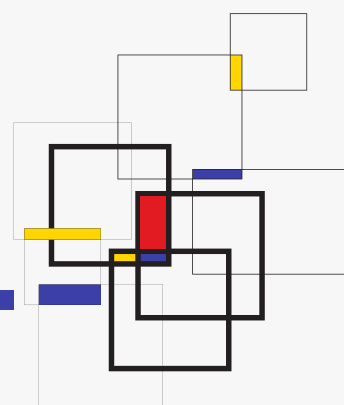
This division of labour may seem "normal" or even culturally justified but it's also deeply gendered, unequal, and limiting for women's growth and opportunities.

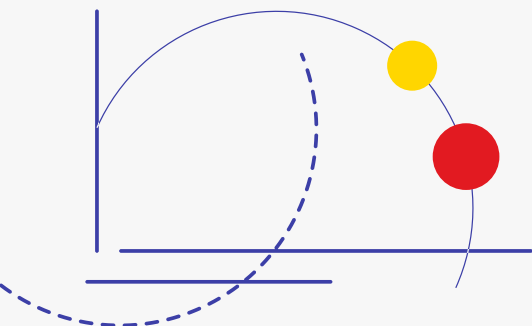
Gender Norms and the Unbalanced Scales of Labour

Community insights highlight how entrenched gender roles reinforce this unequal distribution. Women are expected to "naturally" handle reproductive and care roles, while men enjoy greater freedom to pursue income, leisure, or leadership.

These perceptions aren't just individual attitudes — they're reflections of deep-rooted societal norms that associate domestic work with femininity, and decision-making and income with masculinity.

This imbalance in responsibility leads to disparities in power and autonomy within households. Women are often overworked, underappreciated, and excluded from key decisions — simply because their labour is unpaid.





When the Care Stops, Everything Stops

What happens if women stop doing care work?

Community members readily admit: everything falls apart. Yet, despite the centrality of women's unpaid care, their contributions remain underappreciated — viewed as expected duties rather than real labour. This double burden robs many women of rest, education, economic freedom, and time for themselves.

On average, women in our communities start their day as early as 3:30 a.m. and may work up to 16 hours. Meanwhile, men have structured income-earning roles, more rest, and more leisure time.

Shifting the Burden: A Call for Redistribution

Redistributing care work is not about making men “help” — it's about shared responsibility. It's about transforming cultural beliefs that assign value only to income, and redefining what productive work looks like.

Efforts to achieve gender equality must focus on:



Recognizing unpaid care work as real labour.



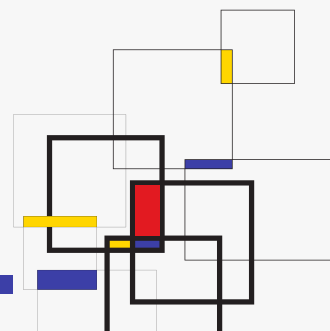
Reducing the burden of care on women through infrastructure, support services, and time-saving tools (e.g. access to clean water, energy, childcare)



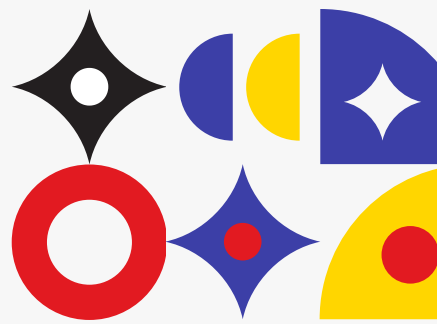
Redistributing care responsibilities more equally between men and women



Rewarding care work — not just financially, but with respect, policy protections, and visibility in economic data



THE WAY FORWARD



To create truly inclusive, equitable communities, we must stop ignoring the invisible load carried by women and girls every day. Changing norms takes time, but it begins with awareness, education, and leadership. Community members including men need to be part of this transformation.

As development practitioners, policy makers, and community leaders, we must ask:
Are we valuing all work equally? Or only the work that earns a wage?



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