

## **Reducing and Redistributing the Burden of Unpaid Care Work for Development in Sub-Saharan Africa**

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### **Abstract**

*Sub-Saharan Africa is mostly affected by political instability, insecurity, and conflict, where the unpaid care burden often intensifies. The purpose of the study was to identify the main causes, consequences and strategies of unpaid care work for development in Sub-Saharan Africa. The study adopted mixed methods research design by combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. The findings of this study reflect the current state of unpaid care work in Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the extent to which it affects economic participation, social development, and gender equality. The central contribution of this study is that unpaid care work remains a critical barrier to gender equality and sustainable development in Sub-Saharan Africa. The research demonstrated that women disproportionately shoulder the burden of caregiving, limiting their participation in the formal economy. To solve the issue of gender inequality, the researcher proposed to use theoretical frameworks such as Gender and Development Theory (GAD) which emphasize the need for policy interventions to address gendered social norms that assign caregiving tasks predominantly to women. Though some efforts have been made by public and private institutions, much more needs to be done to reduce and redistribute the care burden. There is a clear call for Government intervention in the form of affordable childcare and elderly care services. New policies and collaboration between the public and private sectors and the Faith-Based and Civil Society Organizations are necessary to address the problem of unpaid care work in this region. Encouraging greater male involvement in unpaid care work may also bridge some of the gender disparities over time. Faith-Based Organizations and Private Sector should continue to play their pivotal role with the Governments in Sub-Saharan Africa.*

**Key Words:** *Unpaid Care Work, Sustainable Development, Women Empowerment.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

All over the world, unpaid care work is a crucial problem which influences the socio-economic level of people. Across the globe, women face inferior income opportunities compared with men. Women are less likely to work in formal employment and have fewer opportunities for business expansion or career progression (World Bank, 2022). The study showed that globally, female labour force participation has remained fairly flat over the last three decades, and today, roughly half of working-age women participate in the labour force. As argued by International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023), across all regions, more than half of all women (ages 15-64)

participate in the labour market except for South Asia, the Middle East and Africa where only a quarter or less do.

In developed countries such as the United States, Norway and Denmark, the care sector is one of the fastest-growing parts of the economy and paid care workers are a major part of the labour force. In those countries, women participate actively in that sector. By contrast, the countries with lower socio-economic strata, women stay home or work in agriculture, fishing and forestry (UN Women, 2021). In Uruguay, studies showed that women are experiencing significant challenges in juggling domestic and paid work activities women's employment (UN Women, 2022).

In many African countries, women bear a disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities in different ways. When compared to their husbands, women are daily overloaded in their responsibilities. The studies showed that they are in charge of looking after children, the sick, the elderly, and the guests. They manage the household and are often required to take care of their husbands. All these unforeseen work limit their opportunities for jobs, education, and political involvement which greatly confines their participation in sustainable development.

Discenza et al., (2021) state that women in Sub-Saharan Africa dedicate up to three times more hours daily to unpaid care responsibilities compared to men. For example, in Mali, women spend on average 21.6 hours per week on unpaid care compared to 5.7 hours for men. In Nigeria, women spend on average 2 hours and 15 minutes daily on childcare alone compared to 1.6 hours for men (International Capital Market Association [ICMA], UN Women & IFC, 2021). In Benin, women spend an average of 3 hours 41 minutes per day on unpaid care work (domestic activities, childcare, community service or volunteering) compared to 42 minutes for men (ILO, 2019). In Senegal, women spend an average of 4 hours 9 minutes per day on housework and childcare compared to less than 30 minutes for men (Oxfam, 2021). In Kenya, lack of access to childcare is a major barrier for women to participate in paid work (UN Women, 2022). In Tanzania, for example, 71.7 per cent of employed females work on their own farm or *shamba*, and many of these are subsistence farmers (Budlender, 2021). In Rwanda, two-thirds of the whole population work in agriculture. As per the most recent data from Rwanda's National Institute of Statistics, women make up approximately 52% of the total population. Rwanda's estimated population in

2022 was around 13 million, meaning there are roughly 6.7 million women in the country (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2022). The unequal distribution of care work hinders women's empowerment, perpetuates gender stereotypes, and contributes to economic and social inequalities.

In countries with political instability, conflict, and insecurity, women often bear a heavier care burden. They must balance the needs of their immediate family with providing support to the community during crises. This worsens gender inequalities and hinders progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to gender equality, decent work, and economic growth. The informal nature of unpaid care work presents challenges in measurement and regulation. However, recent evidence indicates that investments in public childcare services, family-friendly labour policies, and time-saving technologies can help alleviate the burden on women and promote a more equal distribution of care responsibilities in society. These initiatives, proven successful in other regions, may offer effective approaches for Sub-Saharan Africa.

This study seeks to analyze the impact of alleviating and distributing unpaid care responsibilities on sustainable development in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a focus on political instability and conflict. The research aims to explore how research, technology, and policy innovation can reduce the impact of unpaid care work and increase women's economic involvement in the modern economy.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### **Unpaid Care Work and Gender Inequality in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Care work is an essential element of sustainable economic development, social well-being, and the future of decent employment to satisfy the productive and reproductive needs of human beings. Each society is made by interactions between people either from the same family, ethnic group, working placement, school, etc. Though in a broad way, people support each other because human beings have unlimited needs, there is direct care for weak people like children, the elderly, the sick, and people living with disabilities. Care work encompasses two spheres of

work—unpaid care work, including both direct and indirect, that is provided by individuals for the household or community, and paid care work that is usually direct care performed for pay or profit (Kolovich & Newiak, 2024).

Researchers (Kolovich & Newiak, 2024) indicated that care work is systematically linked with economic inequality, poverty, and precarity. Most of the time, care work is largely performed by women and girls within the home in an unpaid manner. This affects marginalized households often because they lack essential infrastructure, such as clean water and fuel, so women spend more time on indirect care work. The high rate of unpaid care work is on the level of the households where the communities don't have internal regulations about how the responsibilities will be shared by all members. Studies have shown that most of the time, women and girls are likely to be concerned by unpaid care work more than husbands and boys. This unequal distribution of unpaid care work hinders women's empowerment in economic, political, and social spheres. The African culture is the main root cause of this unpaid care work because, in many countries, domestic work jobs are perceived as a women's issue. They contribute to gender inequality and limit women's access to formal employment and opportunities (Charmes, 2019).

The fact is that, in Sub-Saharan Africa, women spend a high average of 4.5 to 7 hours per day on unpaid care work, compared to men who spend less than 2 hours (ILO, 2018). How can women be able to participate in the labour force and contribute to the socio-economic development of the country? The feminist economic theory of the "Caring Economy" developed by (Folbre, 2012) is central to understanding the gendered nature of unpaid care work. Folbre's model suggests that unpaid care work is undervalued in mainstream economic analysis, even though it plays a vital role in supporting the formal economy. This study draws on Folbre's framework to explore how reducing and redistributing the burden of unpaid care work could promote gender equality and sustainable development.

For better social, economic, and political growth of women and girls, the sub-Saharan countries absolutely need better care policies and investment in care infrastructure. Kolovich and Newiak, (2024) argued that the unequal distribution of care is a key barrier to women's social, economic, and political empowerment. The fact that our societies prescribe women and girls as caregivers undermines their basic human rights and limits their opportunities and capabilities. Countries

should set up better care policies and infrastructures as the essential key to alleviating gendered inequalities and increasing women's quality life.

These measures should help governments reduce poverty and promote education and health for all in order to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. They also help to support inclusive economic growth and development. Indeed, investing in care systems linked to labor market policies has tangible advantages. It can create job, facilitate women's participation in the labor market, remove inequalities in the labor force and at the household level, and increase women's productivity in both paid and unpaid work. For instance, the Sub-Saharan countries need to set up measures that contribute to creating a resilient society and economy. The region is exposed to different crises like internal and external conflicts, climate change, and environmental degradation. Those crises increase care needs, make care work arduous and create all kinds of social injustice (Kolovich and Newiak, 2024).

### **The Role of Technology in Reducing Unpaid Care Work**

Recent studies have explored how access to technology can help reduce the time women spend on unpaid care work. For instance, World Bank (2021) research on Sub-Saharan Africa found that women with access to time-saving technologies, such as clean cooking stoves and improved water infrastructure, spend significantly fewer hours on domestic tasks. Technologies that reduce the time spent on fetching water, cooking, and cleaning can enable women to participate more actively in economic activities (World Bank, 2022). Investing in infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, has the potential to redistribute care work and improve women's economic participation.

To achieve that level, the Sub-Saharan countries should use the Capability Approach which is a theoretical framework developed by economist and philosopher Amartya Sen. It focuses on evaluating individual well-being, development, and social justice. This Capability Approach, emphasizes what people are able to do and be for better improvement of their lives (Comim et al., 2008).

## **Policy Interventions and Gender Equality**

Several policy-oriented studies have focused on how governments can address unpaid care work to promote gender equality. The United Nations Progress Report on Women (2019) emphasizes the importance of integrating unpaid care work into national economic policies and programs. Countries such as Rwanda and Kenya have implemented policies that seek to redistribute care responsibilities by providing childcare services and encouraging men to take on more caregiving roles (UN Women, 2019). However, these policies are still limited in scope and implementation, with the majority of care work continuing to fall on women's shoulders. To solve that problem, countries should use the theoretical frameworks such as Gender and Development Theory (*GAD*) which emphasize the need for policy interventions to address gendered social norms that assign caregiving tasks predominantly to women. This study builds on the *GAD* framework to advocate for more gender-sensitive policies that prioritize care work redistribution.

### **3.0 Methodology**

To collect the data, the researcher used the documentary method and conducted a survey both from the public and private sectors. In total, 53 respondents discussed the causes, consequences and the way forwards of the unpaid care work. The desk review helped to analyze existing literature, policy documents, and reports on unpaid care work in Sub-Saharan Africa. The researcher is involved in the systematic collection and review of secondary data from a variety of sources, including academic publications, government reports, and documents from international organizations such as the International Labor Organization (ILO), the United Nations (UN Women), and World Bank. The use of that desk review focused on identifying key trends, challenges, and policy interventions related to the burden of unpaid care work in the region. Specifically, the researcher focused on the studies that explore the gendered division of labour, the socio-economic impacts of unpaid care work on women, and the effectiveness of strategies for redistributing this work, such as the provision of public care services, social protection programs, and gender-sensitive labour policies.

A comparative analysis of the existing literature has been used to measure the consequences and the possible solutions of unpaid care work in the Sub-Saharan Africa. This analysis aimed to assess how unpaid care work is addressed within broader development frameworks. Therefore, a

thematic analysis approach has been used to synthesize findings from the reviewed literature, identifying recurring themes and gaps in existing research. The research ends with a set of recommendations for policy and pragmatic interventions for sustainable development.

## Results and Discussion

This section highlights the perceptions on unpaid care work, evaluates the consequences of unpaid care work on our well-being, identifies the redistribution strategies, analyzes the barriers to reducing unpaid care work and proposes Long-term solutions for sustainable development

### The Perceptions on unpaid care work

**Table 1:** The unpaid care tasks performed regularly

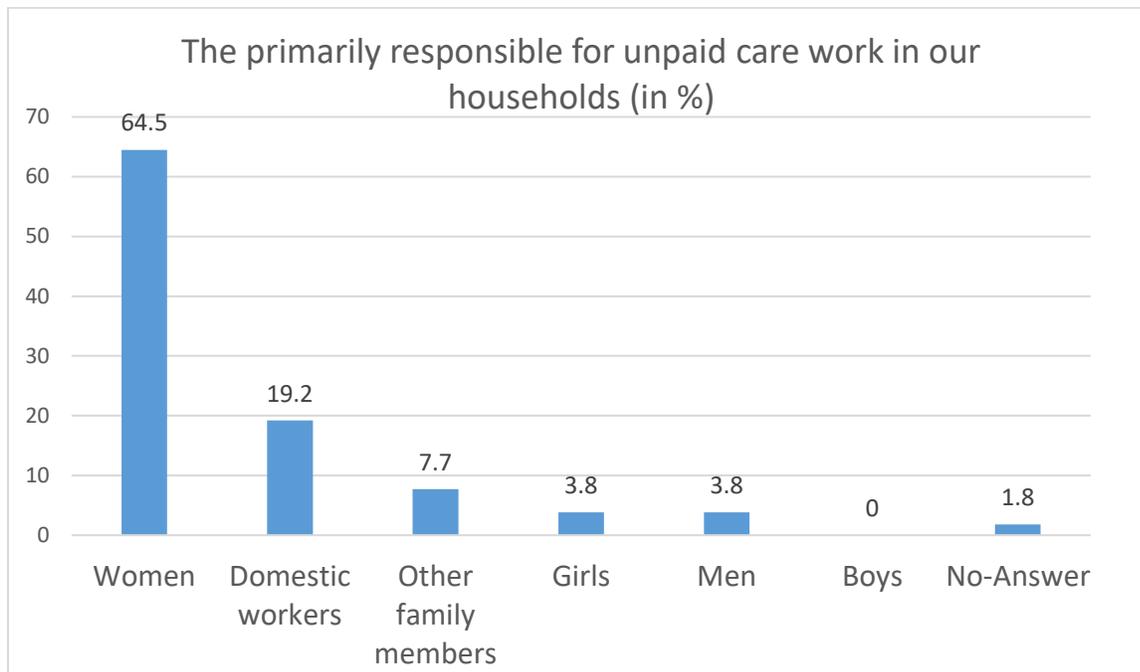
Description	No of respondents	Percentage
Childcare	25	48.1%
Cooking	10	19.2%
Cleaning	8	15.4%
Shopping	4	7.7%
Elderly care	4	7.7%
Laundry	1	1.9%
No-Answer	1	1.9%
TOTAL	53	100

**Source:** Survey 2024

The data showed that Childcare (48.1%) dominates unpaid work, other tasks like cooking, cleaning, and laundry are also highlighted. According to the time spent on the unpaid care work, the majority (39.2%) spend between 2-4 hours. Though a significant percentage (29.4%) reports spending less than 2hours daily, 25.5% and 5.9% spend more than 7hours and 5-7hours respectively. The results showed that the unpaid care work is not fairly distributed in household.

In this study, the researcher demonstrated that in Sub-Saharan Africa, women and men don't work proportionally. The figure below indicates that the unpaid care work remains

disproportionately shouldered by women, limiting their participation in formal employment, education, and political activities.



**Figure 1:** The primarily responsible for unpaid care work in our households (in %)

The data show that women and girls bear the majority of the burden (more than 85%) because, in the sub-Saharan Africa, the domestic workers are mainly female.

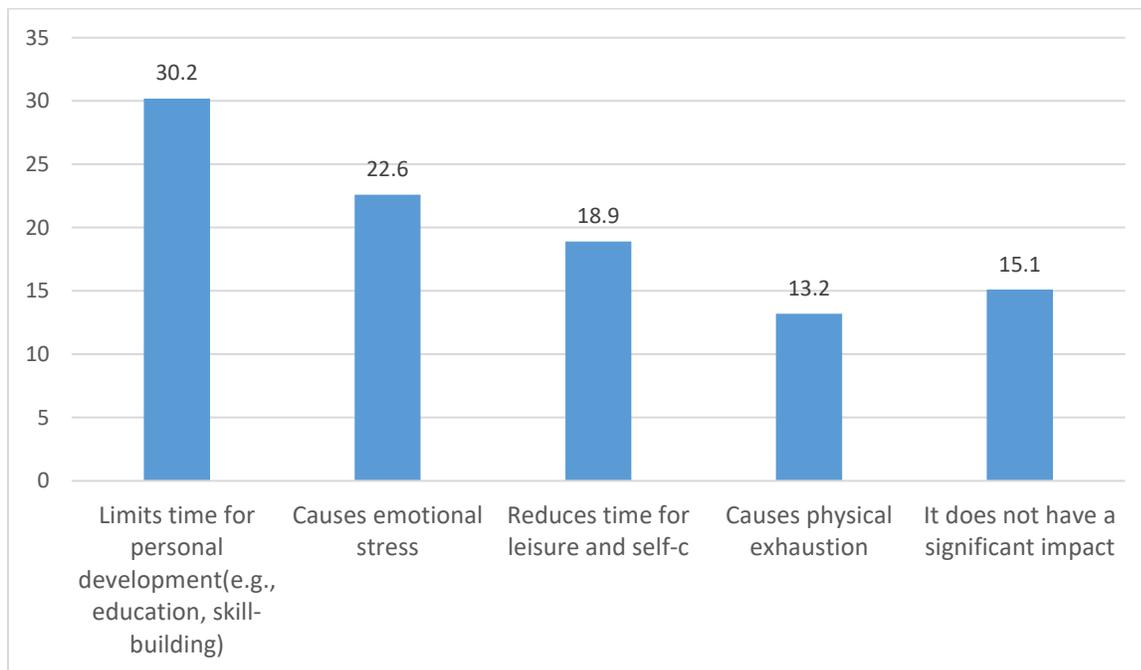
According to data from the International Labor Organization (ILO) and UN Women, women in Sub-Saharan Africa spend more than three times as many hours as men on unpaid care work. This gender disparity is more pronounced in rural areas, where access to public services and infrastructure, such as water and energy, is limited, further exacerbating the time spent on unpaid work. The study showed that women and girls are limited to the socio economic activities because they must spend much time caring the households. They don't access education as their husbands and brothers who after graduating are lucky to go to town for formal jobs. There is no equal chance between women and men. The African tradition considers the unpaid care work as a woman's issue.

In some African countries like South Africa, the unpaid care work disproportionately affects women. One of the root causes of this burden shouldered on women and girls is the lack of coordinated policy measures at both the national and local levels resulting in a fragmented approach that does not fully address the structural challenges of unpaid care work.

### **The Consequences of the Unpaid Care Work on our Well-being**

Most of the time, women and girls are concerned with the domestic jobs and spend many hours doing the unpaid care works where infrastructures are not developed. The study showed that the economic cost of unpaid care work is substantial, as it restricts women’s ability to engage in paid employment, resulting in a reduced labor force participation rate and perpetuating gender income inequality. Governments hesitate to set up norms about the unpaid care works. Studies have shown that if unpaid care work were monetized, it would contribute significantly to national GDPs across the region. This unequal distribution of care work also has a ripple effect on development, as women’s lower participation in the formal economy leads to reduced household income and lower investment in children's education and health. This, in turn, perpetuates cycles of poverty and hinders sustainable development.

The unpaid care work has negative impact as it is shown in the figure below.



**Figure 2:** Impact of the unpaid care work on our personal well-being in %

In this study, 30.2% and 22.6% reported that the unpaid care work limits personal development and causes emotional stress. An important number of respondents (18.9%) said that the unpaid care work reduces time for leisure and self-care while 13.2% reported that it causes physical exhaustion.

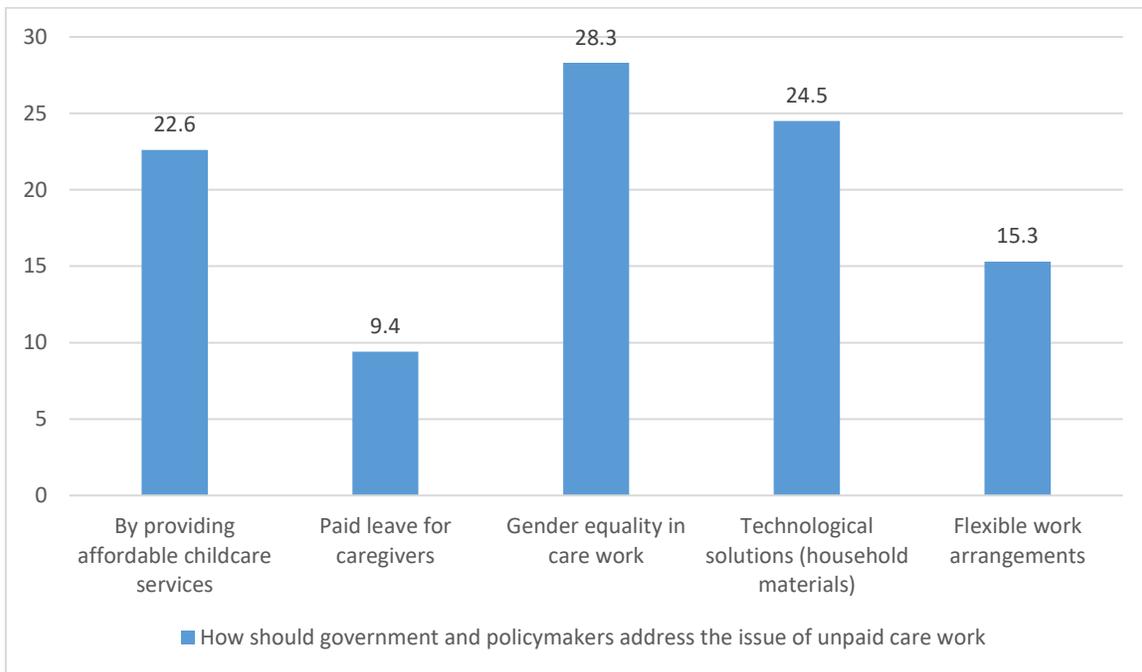
**Redistribution Strategies**

It is possible to make efforts to redistribute unpaid care work in Sub-Saharan Africa. Some strategies like policy interventions, social protection schemes, such as cash transfers and public employment programs, have provided women with financial relief. Though they have not significantly reduced the time burden of care work, the study showed that at least they have contributed to job creation and women empowerment. The government of Rwanda, and many others like Cabo Verde focused on maternal leave policies. They even tried to reduce the working hours in order to allow men and women to be together and take care of their children. Parental leave policies in some countries, such as South Africa, allow for shared care responsibilities, yet cultural norms around gender roles continue to prevent men from taking on caregiving duties at a substantial level.

With this regard, countries like Uganda, Kenya could find the community-based solutions such as cooperative child care centers and the provision of public services. Those solutions have been effective in some areas where, community childcare programs allow women to participate in vocational training and income-generating activities, while older children and elderly members of the community are cared for in shared spaces. Such initiatives demonstrate that redistributing care work requires a combination of public services, community engagement, and the transformation of gender norms.

The study showed that a good number of the Sub-Saharan African countries have made some progress in recognizing the importance of addressing unpaid care work, particularly through the adoption of policies promoting gender equality. For instance, Rwanda and Kenya have introduced social protection programs that target female-headed households and have made

strides in providing childcare services. The figure below indicates how government and policymakers should address the issue of unpaid care work.



**Figure 3:** How government and policymakers should address the issue of unpaid care work

First and foremost, governments and policy makers should promote gender equality in care work and provide affordable childcare services. Technology is also seen as an essential solution by producing household materials. Employers should be flexible in work arrangements and leave payment for caregivers.

### **Barriers to Reducing Unpaid Care Work**

This study showed that, despite various initiatives, significant barriers remain in reducing the burden of unpaid care work in Sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, Cultural values around gender roles are deeply ingrained, with care work often seen as a woman's natural responsibility. The lack of public infrastructure and services, such as access to affordable childcare and eldercare, that would help alleviate the care burden are still the main challenges. Additionally, the informal economy in which many women are employed lacks the regulatory framework needed to ensure that unpaid care work is recognized and addressed in labor policies.

Another key barrier is the lack of data on the contribution of unpaid care work to the economy. The governments don't invest in surveying about the role of the unpaid care work. Most national statistics fail to capture the full extent of care work done in households, leading to its invisibility in policy discussions. This underreporting not only diminishes the visibility of women's contributions but also makes it challenging to advocate for more comprehensive policy reforms.

### **Long-term Solutions, Gender Equality and Economic Development**

Reducing and redistributing unpaid care work is necessary for the future of this region. In fact, unpaid care work is not only a matter of gender equality but also a prerequisite for sustainable development in Sub-Saharan Africa. Without addressing the unequal burden of care, countries will continue to face obstacles in achieving their development goals, particularly those related to poverty reduction, education, and health. Long-term solutions should focus on building inclusive economies where care work is both valued and shared more equally among men and women. This would require a sustained commitment to gender-responsive policies and the recognition of care work as a fundamental component of economic and social well-being. Public and private sectors must work together for a better improvement of the current situation.

Faith-based organizations are not there for spiritual matters only. They also play an important role in addressing unpaid care work in Sub-Saharan Africa. The study showed that where religious institutions have initiated programs that promote the education of girls and women's economic empowerment, the unpaid care work has been reduced and redistributed by encouraging shared responsibilities within families. One of the strengths of these Faith-Based Organizations is that they often operate in areas where government services are limited, providing critical support in the form of caregiving networks, education, health, and advocacy.

### **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

First of all, the Governments should stop conflicts and wars in the region. They should promote gender equality. With this regard, the Governments should implement gender-sensitive labor policies, including paid parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and social protection schemes that recognize the contributions of unpaid caregivers. Secondly, the Governments should set up

policies which include the expansion of public services, such as accessible and affordable childcare, eldercare, and healthcare facilities.

Another strategy is the redistribution of unpaid care work within households. Governments should motivate the citizens, to promote men's involvement in caregiving. Educational programs should target both men and women to foster an understanding of shared responsibilities within families. Additionally, investing in infrastructure, such as improved access to water and energy, can significantly reduce the time women spend on daily care tasks, allowing them more opportunities for formal employment and personal development. Faith-Based and Civil Society Organizations must play their roles in promoting gender equality across the continent.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

The findings of this study reflect the current state of unpaid care work in Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the extent to which it affects economic participation, social development, and gender equality. From this study, it is clear that unpaid care work remains a critical barrier to gender equality and sustainable development in Sub-Saharan Africa. The research demonstrated that women disproportionately shoulder the burden of caregiving, limiting their participation in the formal economy. Unpaid care work remains a significant barrier to women's economic participation and overall development in Sub-Saharan Africa. Though some efforts have been done by public and private institutions, much more needs to be done to reduce and redistribute the care burden. There is a clear call for government intervention in the form of affordable childcare and elderly care services. It is necessary to set up policy reforms, to involve in community engagement, and to make other efforts to change cultural norms that hinder women's empowerment in order to foster gender equality and contribute to sustainable development in Sub-Saharan Africa. Encouraging greater male involvement in unpaid care work may also bridge some of the gender disparities in time use. Faith-Based Organizations and Private Sector should continue to play their pivotal role with the governments in the Sub-Saharan Africa.

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