

Unpaid Care Work and Adolescent Girls: Gendered Labour Systems and Early Economic Pathways

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ABSTRACT

Unpaid care labor is a traditional but underestimated element of economies, and feminine implications are disproportionately placed on adolescent girls. This paper discusses the types and extent of unpaid care labour performed by teenage girls, gender labour regimes that inform and determine these tasks and the implications on early economic trajectories. Based on a mixed methodology, the research will combine some quantitative data on time utilization and education and early economic involvement with qualitative data on social norms, household decision-making, and institutional organization. The results indicate that paid care work is a daily, intensive aspect of the life of adolescent girls, which creates a high level of time poverty limiting schooling, skills acquisition, and participation in the labour market. Care does not simply get distributed but is structurally entrenched in gendered systems of labour that exist in the household, community and the institution. The systems make the roles of caregiving normal in girls but do not give them enough public or institutional support, and thus recreates early economic disadvantage.

The paper also proves that the cumulative and intergenerational consequences of care work in adolescence create pathways of school-to-work and direct girls towards more precarious economic or care-oriented career paths. Viewed through the prism of feminist economics, social reproduction theory, and the human capital theory, the results present the simultaneous maintenance of economic systems and the collapse in the economic potential of girls in the long term. The paper is relevant to the care economy scholarship in the sense that it preempts the portrayal of adolescence as an important life course phase in the reproduction of gendered inequality. The policy implications include the importance of care sensitive education systems, intensifying of social protection and specific interventions, which acknowledge, mitigate, and redistribute unpaid care work. Unpaid care in girls of adolescent age is a problem that needs attention in order to achieve gender equality and inclusive economic growth.

Keywords: Unpaid work in childcare; Female adolescents; Gendered labour; Care economy; Early economic trajectories; Time poverty; Human capital; Social reproduction.

INTRODUCTION

Background and contextualizing Unpaid Care Work and Adolescent Girls.

Unpaid care work is an underlying, but systematically underestimated element of the economic and social systems in the world. The economist feminist view that the care practice of domestic labour, caregiving, and household maintenance is the reason why labour markets remain sustained based on the reproduction of human capital with no formal compensation has long been expressed (Ferrant et al., 2023; UN Women, 2024).

Although women are most frequently subjected to this burden, adolescent girls are in an especially vulnerable situation with the care economy. Girls are at the crossroad of age and gender and are becoming subject to domestic and nurturing duties at early ages, often to the detriment of education and skill building (Plan International, 2024; UNICEF, 2025). Such inequalities in early distributions of unpaid labour can impact life-course patterns in manners that have not been well accounted in conventional economic models.

The Gendered Systems of Labour and the initial distribution of Care.

Gendered labour systems work in a manner that imposes highly institutionalized social conventions to allocate care roles to females since childhood. In homes, neighborhoods, and organizations, female teenagers are socialized into caring positions that are presented as logical extensions of femininity instead of economic ones (Sinha, 2024; OECD, 2025). These standards increase in the adolescent stage, which is another critical stage when the time use of girls becomes more gender-differentiated than of boys (Ferrant et al., 2023). The outcome is accumulated care load which limits the opportunities of girls in attending school, leisure, and paid jobs. Available statistics imply that the early experience of unpaid care socializes gendered labour demands, which strengthen structural inequality that continues into adulthood (UN Women, 2023; Delbiso et al., 2025).

Early Economic Pathways and Unpaid Care Work.

The economic impacts of the unpaid care work at the adolescent stage are not limited to the time poverty effects in the short run but also to determine economic directions in the long run. Research indicates close correlations between the intensive care loads and poor school attendance, low educational attainment, and late or unfirm entry to the labour market (Camilletti, 2025; UNICEF, 2025). Regarding the human capital factor, time spent on unpaid care is a lost investment in skills development and labour market readiness (OECD, 2025; ILO, 2024). These initial limitations only accumulate, creating continuing income disparities and job segregation. Although they have become more prominent, the unpaid care work done by adolescent girls continues to be overlooked in economic policies, usually being outnumbered in the general studies of women labour without age distinction (Plan International, 2024; UN Women, 2024).

Research Gap and Problem Statement.

Though the unpaid care work has been given prominence in the gender and development academic field, it has been shown that research that has been conducted on this issue is tilted towards adult women leaving women of this age group analytically underrepresented in research. In cases where adolescents are involved, the care responsibilities are, more often than not, seen as being secondary variables, but not core factors of economic outcomes (Population Council, 2024; UNICEF, 2025). In addition, numerous studies have been based on aggregate household-level data that hides gender and age relations within the household (Sinha, 2024; Ferrant et al., 2023). Empirical convergence of gendered systems of labour, intensity of unpaid care and the early economic pathways are scarcely incorporated in a single critical approach. This disparity limits future theoretical progress and policy sensitivity, especially in the under- and middle-income settings as care shortages are progressively handed over to girls at their adolescent stage (Delbiso et al., 2025; OECD, 2025).

Study Objectives and Guiding Questions

To examine the nature and intensity of unpaid care work undertaken by adolescent girls within gendered labour systems.

To analyze how unpaid care responsibilities influence adolescent girls' early economic pathways, including schooling, skills acquisition, and labour market participation.

To assess the structural and institutional factors that sustain gendered divisions of care work and shape adolescents' early economic opportunities.

Theoretical and Analytical Orientation.

The theoretical orientation of the study is interdisciplinary because it acknowledges unpaid care work as an economic and a social phenomenon. Feminist economics argues that the care is omitted in national accounting, whereas social reproduction theory puts care labour as the key to maintaining capitalist economies (UN Women, 2023; Sinha, 2024).

Human capital theory also helps to shed light on the opportunity costs associated with young girls spending their time not in school and developing skills in unpaid care (Camilletti, 2025; OECD, 2025). The combination of these views allows the study to take a step further than the descriptive account to question the role of care work as a structural process in defining early economic inequality over the life course.

Policy, Practice: Significance to Theory, Policy, and Development Practice.

The research has a number of contributions. In theory, it contributes to the care economy scholarship by preempting the concept of adolescence as an under-theorised phase of reproducing the labour inequalities of gender (Ferrant et al., 2023; Delbiso et al., 2025). Policymaking the results would mean something to the education planning, social protection, and labour policy, especially in situations with inadequate care infrastructure, which increases household dependency on unpaid labour of girls (ILO, 2024; UNICEF, 2025). To the practice of development, the research will be useful to justify interventions to redistribute the responsibilities of care and safeguard the economical potential of girls in accordance with international obligations related to SDG 5.4 on acknowledging and appreciating unpaid care work (UN Women, 2024; OECD, 2025).

Scope and Delimitations of the Study.

The study scope is strictly aimed at unpaid care work by the adolescent girls in the gendered labour systems with special consideration to early economic results. Although the study acknowledges the intersectionality between age, gender and socioeconomic status; it does not make an effort to measure the entire macroeconomic worth of unpaid care work. In its turn, it is more concerned with relational and institutional processes that influence the use of time and opportunities among girls (Sinha, 2024; UNICEF, 2025). The scope of the analysis is confined with the quantity of the available data and situational specificity instead of scope. Such limitations guarantee the analytical clarity and allow being relevant to the wider discussions of gender, labour, and development.

Organization of the Paper

The rest of the paper is divided into four chapters. Chapter Two is a literature review and expounds on the theoretical framework that will guide the study. Chapter Three gives the strategy used in the research including research design, data sources and methods of analysis. Chapter Four provides and discusses the findings relative to the objectives of the study and theoretical perspectives. A concluding chapter of the paper summarizes the main findings and presents policy implications, as well as future research directions. This organization provides a logical flow between theory and evidence as well as contribution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Unpaid Care Work

Definitions and Scope of Unpaid Care Work

The concept of unpaid care work is broadly discussed as labour performed in households and communities, which maintains the daily existence, and redefines the working labour force, such as domestic work, caregiving, and housekeeping. Feminist economics describes unpaid care as productive labour that is an integral part of economic systems - even though unpaid care has been systematically excluded from the national measure of income production and labour measurements (UN Women, 2024; Sinha, 2024). The current academic literature highlights that unpaid work goes beyond physical work and also involves the emotional, supervisory, and relationship labour, which are compounded in circumstances of service shortages (Ferrant et al., 2023; OECD, 2025). Theoretically, unpaid care is being increasingly viewed as a form of structural labour markets, instead of a domestic task, which connects the micro-level behaviors to macroeconomic results (ILO, 2024; Delbiso et al., 2025).

The Problems of Measurement and Economic Invisibility.

Although there is increased awareness of unpaid care work, it continues to be invisibly hidden in economic measurement systems. Traditional labour force surveys would focus on paid jobs to ensure that unpaid care is statistically inconsequential and, because of political interests, not discussed (UN Women, 2023; ILO, 2024). Time-use surveys are crucial measures; however, they do not adequately represent adolescent population and intra-household gender dynamics and may result in people's burden for girls being understated (Ferrant et al., 2023; Sinha, 2024). Moreover, when aggregated at household level, age- and gender-specific patterns of the allocation of care remain unclear, which makes the analysis less precise (OECD, 2025). This invisibility perpetuates policy bias in as much as economic planning frameworks do not plan with regard to unpaid care constraints, when they design education, labour or social protection interventions (Plan International, 2024; UNICEF, 2025).

Relevance of Unpaid Care Work to Adolescent Girls

The recent literature is starting to refer to adolescent girls as a vulnerable and highly under-studied group of people in the care economy. It has been demonstrated that the disproportionate number of care responsibilities goes to girls in their adolescence, especially in situations featuring poverty or morbidity or poor public care provisions (UNICEF, 2025; Population Council, 2024). This is the time when there is an increase in educational and developmental pressures, time poverty is particularly decisive (OECD, 2025; Plan International, 2024). Studies show this unpaid care undertaken during adolescence is not temporary but formative, affecting aspirations, self-perception and economic agency (Camilletti, 2025; Ferrant et al., 2023). The unpaid labour of care conceptualized as an adolescent perspective, therefore, provides a deeper insight into the production of gendered labour inequalities at an earlier stage of the life course.

Gendered Labour Systems and Adolescence.

Social Norms and the Gendered Division of Labour.

The social norms reinforce the gendered systems of labour naturalizing the linkage of women and girls to care work. These norms function through processes of cultural expectations, moral obligations and gender socialization that become accentuated in adolescence (UN Women, 2024; Sinha, 2024). It is always demonstrated empirically that the unpaid care workload of the girls is growing rapidly in the period of puberty, whereas the time use of boys is shifting towards leisure or income earning activities (Ferrant et al., 2023; OECD, 2025). These trends are indicative of social construction and not biological predisposition. Initial internalization of care roles informs the educational decisions, the career ambitions and value of economic position, which support gendered labour division in the life course (Plan International, 2024; UNICEF, 2025).

Household, Community and Institutional Labour Arrangements.

The gendered division of labour is entrenched throughout the household, community and institutional structures. At the domestic level, caring is often distributed among the adolescent girls as a coping mechanism to economic shocks, disease, or poor social services (Delbiso et al., 2025; UNICEF, 2025). The community expectations also support the fact that girls should support the auxiliary caregiving outside their immediate families (Population Council, 2024; UN Women, 2023).

Institutional arrangements, especially in the educational systems, do not always take care burdens into account and unconsciously penalize girls by restricting their attendance structures and scarce support structures (OECD, 2025; Plan International, 2024). These overlapping structures all make the normalization of unpaid labor as the role of girls, institutionalizing inequality in various social spheres.

Adolescence as a Stressful Change in Care Expectations.

Adolescence is a critical phase where the expectations of care increase with the increasing educational and economic needs. According to scholars, the result of such convergence is increased vulnerability to time poverty on the girls, and this has long-term repercussions in terms of human capital formation (Camilletti, 2025; UNICEF, 2025).

Unpaid adolescent care is not declining with age but, rather, serves as a training experience in the future labour division by gender and contributes to continuation into adulthood (Ferrant et al., 2023; OECD, 2025). This period is increasingly recognized as a strategic intervention point - at which it is possible to redistribute care and support girls to have time autonomy to interrupt these established labour inequalities before they are structurally fixed (UN Women, 2024; Population Council, 2024).

Early Economic Pathways and Unpaid Care Work.

Education, Time use and Skills Accumulation.

There is a strong literature that associates unpaid care work with negative education among the adolescent girls. High care intensity is linked to lower school attendance, lower attainment and higher drop out risks (UNICEF, 2025; Plan International, 2024). Time use evidence shows that unpaid care time utters capitalism with study time, homework completion as well as participation in enrichment (Ferrant et al., 2023; Sinha, 2024). In terms of skills accumulation, care responsibilities restrict the accessibility of vocational training and informal learning opportunities that are required to prepare people to the labour market (Camilletti, 2025; OECD, 2025). These limitations hamper the ability of girls to develop competitive human capital at an influential phase of development.

School-to-Work Transitions and Labour Market Entry

The compensated care work in the adolescent stage has long-lasting effects on school-to-work transitions. And research shows that girls responsible for intensive care work are more likely to be under-pressure with delayed entry into the labour markets or are pushed to precarious jobs or the informal sectors with low pay and little protection (ILO, 2024; OECD, 2025). Profound effects of early care burdens affect career choices toward flexible or care work reproducing inequality in wages (Sinha, 2024; UN Women, 2024). These initial inequalities become cumulative in the future impacting the job security, earnings patterns, and accessibility of social protection systems (Camilletti, 2025; Ferrant et al., 2023).

Economic Disadvantage Intergenerational Transmission.

Unpaid family care work also leads to the effect of intergenerational reproduction of economic inequalities as it reproduces the gendering of labour within families and the community. Daughters of women with heavy care burdens are substantially more likely to take on similar positions to perpetuate cycles of time poverty and constrained opportunity (Delbiso et al., 2025; Plan International, 2024). Faults in the public care infrastructure put an unfair burden on households, whose burden is taken up by adolescent girls (UNICEF, 2025; UN Women, 2023). In the long run, such dynamics become a bedrock of entrenched poverty and inequality, manifesting broader objectives of development and gender equality (OECD, 2025; ILO, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Valuation of Care and Feminist Economics.

Feminist economics gives a conceptual base on which to understand unpaid care based on exclusion of non-market labour as a central issue in economic theory and policy. According to this view, care work is productive labour, which is necessary to be economically maintained, although it is systematically undervalued because of the gendered relations of power (UN Women, 2024; Sinha, 2024). Feminist economists have advocated for the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care, especially in terms of women and girls (Ferrant et al., 2023; OECD, 2025). Applied to the adolescent life stage, this framework draws international attention to the presence and significance of early life care responsibilities in skewing economic participation before formal entry to the labour market as a window extending life course feminist critiques.

Economic Systems and the Social Reproduction Theory.

Social reproduction theory places the unpaid care in the context of larger systems of politics and economics, highlighting that the capitalist economies depend on unpaid labour in order to reproduce workforce across

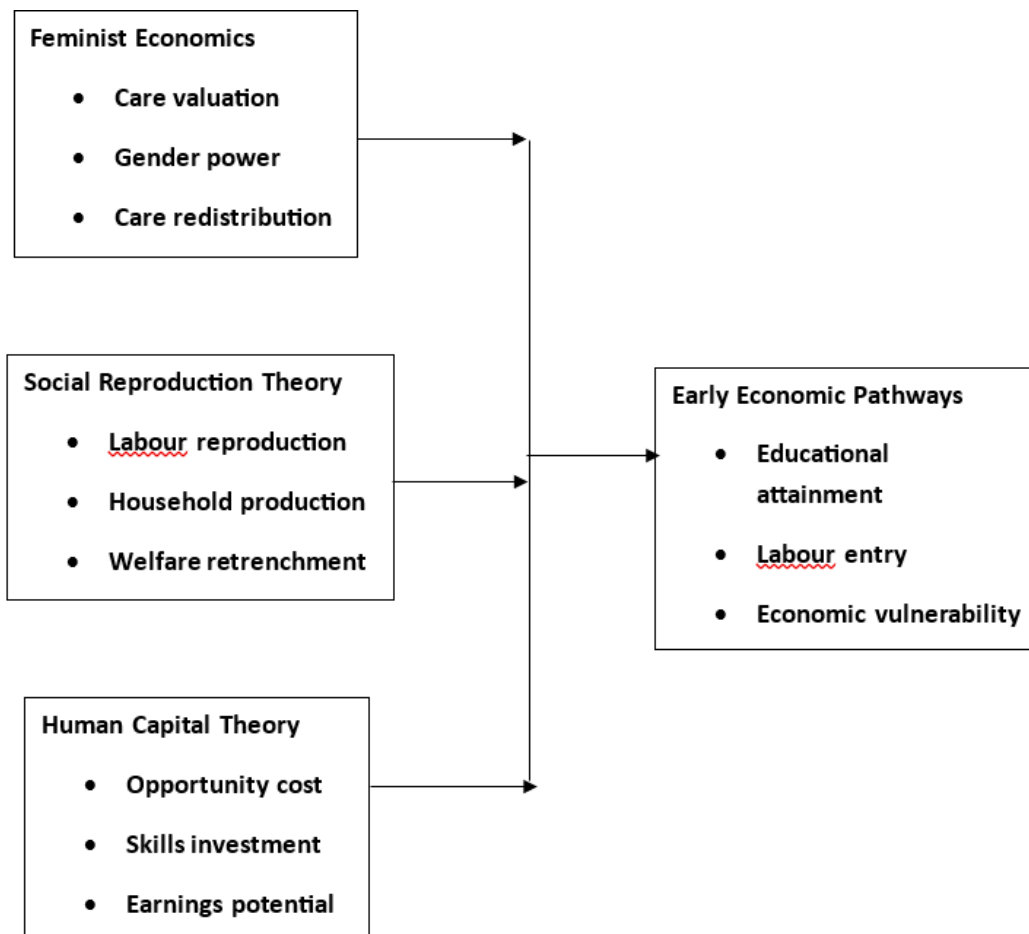
generations. Households are conceptualized as places of labour production where care supports existing and/or future workers (UN Women, 2023; Delbiso et al., 2025). In the case of adolescent girls, the framework indicates that care responsibilities were handed downwards due to the welfare retrenchment, economic shocks, and institutional failures (Sinha, 2024; UNICEF, 2025). The social reproduction theory therefore correlates micro-level care practice to macro-level inequality which provides a strong tool to analyse macro-level structures.

Human capital theory and opportunity cost.

The human capital theory complements feminist and social reproduction theories by predicting the opportunity costs of the unpaid care work. Investments in education and skills acquisition, work experience in the labour market causes future productivity and earnings potential to be lower due to time spent on care during adolescence (Camilletti, 2025; OECD, 2025). Despite the fact that traditional models usually ignore gendered constraints, there has been recent scholarship that incorporates unpaid care as a factor determining the unequal returns to education and labour (Ferrant et al., 2023; ILO, 2024). The use of this framework on adolescent girls makes it clear that development of the consequences of early care over time leads to economic punishment.

Conceptual Framework that Informs the Study.

This paper utilizes the conceptual framework of feminist economics, social reproduction theory, and human capital theory to cut across and embrace a holistic conceptual approach that the unpaid care work is a critical process of defining the early economic pathways of adolescent girls. Gendered labour systems are used for its labour allocation, unpaid care intensity limitations to education and skills accumulation and this rear reflects in unequal labour market outcome (UN Women, 2024; OECD, 2025). It is explicitly structured with structural, institutional, and individual-level variables, which are used to select the variables and analytical strategy. This combined strategy allows conducting a thorough analysis of unpaid care as a cause and an effect of gendered economic inequality.



METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

The research design targeted in this paper is a mixed-method research design that has been informed by a pragmatic epistemological orientation, which will allow the author to integrate both quantitative and qualitative evidence on the intricacy of unpaid care work in adolescent girls. Mixed methods are especially suitable for care economy research, whose main dimensions - time use patterns, institutional structures and lived experience - intersect (UN Women, 2023; OECD, 2025). Quantitative components can be used to systematically examine the intensity of care, its education, and the initial economic outcomes, and qualitative components can be used to reveal gendered principles and the process of decision making that defines the allocation of care (Sinha, 2024; Ferrant et al., 2023). This construction is in line with feminist and development studies accentuating measurement and meaning such that analytical connectivity and policy concreteness can be achieved (ILO, 2024; UNICEF, 2025).

Study Population and Study situation.

The research lies in the framework of a socio-economic environment where there is a high dependence on unpaid labour in the household because of the lack of an adequate care infrastructure and a still-present set of gender inequalities. This type of environment has been well-documented as an account of care burden transfer to adolescent girls (UNICEF, 2025; Delbiso et al., 2025). The target group is the adolescent girls age 10-19 years and who are engaged in regular unpaid care work at home or community. Inclusion criteria are based on girls who were involved in domestic works, caring or supervision and attending schools or participating in early labour. This group is analytically applicable because adolescence is a tight context of transition where gendered labour demands become more intense and lead to long-term economic patterns (OECD, 2025; Plan International, 2024).

Data Collection Methods

The research employed secondary data so as to have methodological triangulation and strength.. Secondary data is used where reasonable, including country time-use surveys (national), education statistics, etc. are used to put the findings in perspective (OECD, 2025; ILO, 2024). The data collection instruments will be age-sensitive and gender-sensitive and pilot-tested to increase the reliability and transparency. The strategies are consistent with the best practices in adolescent and care economy studies (UNICEF, 2025; Ferrant et al., 2023).

Data Analysis Techniques

The descriptive and inferential methods were used to analyze quantitative data which investigates the patterns of unpaid care intensity and the correlations between these patterns and educational and early economic outcomes. Human capital and feminist economic views are the driving forces of these analyses as they focus on opportunity costs and structural constraints (Camilletti, 2025; OECD, 2025). Thematic analysis of qualitative data is used to determine the recurrent norms, institutional processes, and experiences that form care responsibilities (Sinha, 2024; UN Women, 2023). The findings are integrated during the interpretation stage to enable the contextualisation of the quantitative trends using a qualitative understanding. The transparency of coding processes, the triangulation, and the theoretical alignment are the methods of ensuring analytical rigor (Ferrant et al., 2023; ILO, 2024).

Ethical Considerations

The ethical concerns that emerged when conducting research on adolescents and unpaid care work are very much on the issues of vulnerability, power dynamics, and protection. Together with assent of the participants of the adolescent age, informed consent is obtained on behalf of guardians in accordance with international ethical standards (UNICEF, 2025; UN Women, 2024). Indeed, confidentiality and anonymity are upheld to ensure that the participants do not face social or family consequences. As care labour is gendered and many consider it a normal practice, specific care is taken not to reinforce the stigma or distress during the data collection process

(Plan International, 2024; Sinha, 2024). Indicators to protect study subjects in case of exposure to harm or exploitation are put in place so that the study is well-founded in affording the well-being of the participants during the research (ILO, 2024; OECD, 2025).

INVESTIGATION FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Patterns of Unpaid Care Work among the Sample of Adolescent Girls. 4.1.

The results indicate that unpaid care work is an active and regular part of the life of adolescent girls, not an addition and occasional activity. Girls also reported doing various care activities, such as household chores, taking care of the siblings or ill family members, and supervision in the homes. In line with the world evidence, the intensity of care rose with age, especially in mid and late adolescence, which is associated with the growth of gender expectations (UNICEF, 2025; Ferrant et al., 2023). The time-use data show that the hours spent on unpaid care were significantly larger among girls than boys of similar ages, which supports gendered divisions of labour at an early age in life course (OECD, 2025; Sinha, 2024). These trends are consistent with other previous research findings that have found adolescence to be a major period of labour differentiation.

Table 4.1: Common Forms of Unpaid Care Work Undertaken by Adolescent Girls

Type of Care Work	Description	Frequency
Domestic chores	Cooking, cleaning, water and fuel collection	High
Caregiving	Caring for siblings, elderly, or sick household members	Moderate–High
Supervisory care	Monitoring younger children	Moderate
Emotional care	Providing emotional support within households	Moderate

Such results confirm previous data according to which unpaid care is multi-dimensional and is frequently undervalued when it is classified as physical domestic labour selectively (UN Women, 2024; ILO, 2024).

Intensity, Time Poverty, and Daily Trade-Offs.

The degree of unpaid labor was directly converted into time poverty among the teenage girls. A lot of participants mentioned that they had to balance care obligations with schooling, and did not have much time to rest, study, or have leisure time. This reflects the results of the international community, in which unpaid care places a major limitation on the discretionary time of girls, which influences the cognitive development and well-being (Plan International, 2024; UNICEF, 2025). Quantitative data suggested that girls who had increased care loads were more prone to skip days at school or be late especially when stress existed in the home. The distributions of these trade-offs were not unorganized but organized on gender lines, and thus are socially ingrained (not chosen) (Ferrant et al., 2023; OECD, 2025). Time poverty therefore became one of the key mechanisms of connecting unpaid care to early disadvantage.

Gendered Labour Formations of Care Responsibilities.

Gendered labour structures at the household, community and institutional levels had a significant influence on the distribution of unpaid care labour. In the homes, the girls used to be sent to take care of the home since it was believed that they were suitable, mature and obedient, and not because it was available or preferred. The results resonate with the feminist arguments that situate the issue of the distribution of care in the context of power relationship and not in terms of efficiency (Sinha, 2024; UN Women, 2024). These expectations were reinforced by community norms and female children could be expected to take care of people outside their immediate families. These realities were not well suited by institutional arrangements, especially in education systems, and implicitly favored the students that were not burdened by care (OECD, 2025; Plan International, 2024).

Table 4.2: Structural Factors Influencing Care Allocation

Level	Structural factor	Effect on care burden
Household	Gender norms	Disproportionate assignment to girls
Community	Social expectations	Expanded care roles
Institutional	Rigid school structures	Penalisation of caregivers

All these overlapping structures normalised the unpaid care work of girls.

Care Responsibilities and Educational Outcomes.

The results prove the existence of a definite correlation between the intensity of unpaid care and the outcomes of education. Girls who bore more care responsibilities had a poor attendance rate, less time in school to study, and were at risk of having to repeat their grades. The findings coincide with the available literature that associates unpaid care with disruption in education and poor academic achievement (UNICEF, 2025; Ferrant et al., 2023). Notably, the impact was cumulative and the more the care was required, the more the impact. According to qualitative data, girls spent more time attending to the household than at school because of the party of conscience and pressure burdened by family, confirming the fact that unpaid care is a constraint, not a voluntary practice (Sinha, 2024; Plan International, 2024). Via education systems, inequality was therefore indirectly reproduced by not taking care burdens into consideration.

Implications to Skills Development and Human Capital Formation.

In addition to the formal education, because of unpaid care, skills development that were essential in early economic activity was limited. Girls claimed that they had little access to vocational training, extracurricular, and informal learning opportunities because of time. Human capital wise, such unrealised opportunities are huge opportunity costs that diminish future earning potential and competitive labour markets (Camilletti, 2025; OECD, 2025). The results confirm the points that unpaid care not only reduces the education level but also general skill-building activities that are crucial to improving economic mobility (ILO, 2024; UN Women, 2024). Such limits are especially also detrimental in the adolescent stage, when the returns to skills acquisition are great in the long term.

School to Work and Early Labour Market Performance.

Another way that early labour market directions were influenced was through unpaid care. Sustained care burdened girls had a higher likelihood of later labour market entry or low remunerated and care-related jobs. These trend lines indicate more general gendered division of labour markets, where initial restrictions direct girls into detrimental working careers (OECD, 2025; ILO, 2024).

The qualitative data also showed that the experience of care was frequently viewed as future domestic preparation instead of as portable labour skills. Such devaluation reflects the feminist challenges of labour markets that prioritize the productivity of the market, at the expense of abilities involved in care (UN Women, 2024; Sinha, 2024).

Intergenerational Aspects of Unpaid Care work.

The findings of the study point at the high intergenerational aspects of passing unpaid care to other people. Girls often reflected the role of female caregivers in their families and perpetuated cross-generational care. This tendency confirms the signs that unpaid care is simply a system of reproducing gendered labour inequalities over time (Delbiso et al., 2025; Plan International, 2024).

This dynamic was aggravated by structural weaknesses in the provision of care since the state shifted the costs of care to the households and eventually to adolescent girls (UNICEF, 2025; UN Women, 2023). Reproduction

of care across generations was thereby found to be a social convention and an economic policy during a constrained circumstance.

Feminist Economics Interpretation.

As explained in terms of feminist economics, these results prove the systematic undervaluation of care labor and its early inculcation of economic inequality. The invisible labour of girls supports both households and communities, yet it does not fit in any economic indicators and policy-making processes (UN Women, 2024; Sinha, 2024). The analysis shows that this undervaluation starts long before the labour market entry, and these assumptions that gender inequality is only realized in the adult age are difficult to hold. Feminist economics in this way constitutes a critical prism to perceive in which unpaid care is situated as discrete economic production with distributive effects in the long run (Ferrant et al., 2023; OECD, 2025).

Social Reproduction Theory Interpretation.

In terms of social reproduction, the results are used to show how the unpaid care work of adolescent girls maintains economic systems due to its capacity to reproduce labour power between generations. Households are one of the locations of labour production, and girls absorb the burden of care in reaction to the institutional and welfare deficiencies (UN Women, 2023; Delbiso et al., 2025). The abacus of shifting care responsibilities to adolescents articulates larger structural processes, such as shortfalls in the provision of public services and strain on the labour market. Social reproduction theory therefore reflects the personal experiences in perspectives of systemic processes, which depend on unpaid labour to ensure economic sustainability (Sinha, 2024; UNICEF, 2025).

Interpretation through Human Capital Theory

The human capital theory also explains how unpaid teenage care has economic consequences. The hours spent in care also decrease the investment in education and skills which decreases the future productivity and earning potential (Camilletti, 2025; OECD, 2025). The results indicate that these opportunity costs are gendered and accrual based, which leads to an endemic labour market inequality. By combining human capital theory with feminist and social reproduction theories, one may gain a more subtle perspective on how unpaid care maintains economies and limits economic growth of individual people (ILO, 2024; Ferrant et al., 2023).

Synthesis of Findings

Generally, the results show that care work among teenage girls is structural, gendered, and economical. Social norms and institutional patterns resulting in patterns of care distribution create time poverty and restrict early economic trajectories. Viewed in terms of complementary theoretical perspectives, unpaid care becomes one of the causes and consequences of gendered inequality. These revelations support the need to put the unpaid care in the forefront of the economic calculation and policy, especially at the adolescent stage where interventions can have long-term payoffs (UN Women, 2024; OECD, 2025).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION.

Synthesis of Key Findings

This paper aimed to explore unpaid labour among teenage girls, the gendered labour regimes that construct their roles and the effects on early career trajectories. The results indicate that unpaid care work is not a peripheral activity but it is central to the everyday lives of adolescent girls, and it levels off in mid and late adolescence. The burden of care was demonstrated to create chronic time poverty, disruption of schooling, limitation on skills acquisition and the formation of early labour market patterns. These patterns are structurally created instead of being chosen by individuals, and they are based on some deeply rooted gender norms and institutional gaps (Ferrant et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2025). Unpaid care, in turn, becomes one of the fundamental processes under which economic inequality along gender lines is replicated long before adulthood (OECD, 2025; Plan International, 2024).

Gendered Systems of labour and Early Inequality.

The research also shows that gendered labour systems of providing unpaid care work of adolescent girls exist at household, community, and institutional levels. The normative expectations that make girls the natural caregivers drive allocation of care, which is supported by public coping and lack of publicly available care infrastructure (Sinha, 2024; Delbiso et al., 2025). These burdens are often not recognised or accommodated in educational institutions and girls who have care giving responsibilities are indirectly penalised. The combination of these overlapping systems makes unpaid care a feminine responsibility and instils inequality in various spheres (UN Women, 2024; OECD, 2025). The results highlight that being poor early in life is not accidental but patterned structurally using gendered labour set-ups.

Theoretical Contributions

The research has a number of theoretical contributions to the care economy and gender scholarship. First, its focus on forecasting adolescence expands the feminist economics paradigm to address adult women in addition to showing that the devaluation of care has been earlier in the life course than commonly thought (UN Women, 2024; Sinha, 2024). Second, the introduction of a social reproduction theory shows how unpaid care among teenagers is maintaining economic systems by filling the institutional and welfare gaps (UN Women, 2023; Delbiso et al., 2025). Third, the long-term opportunity costs of care paid unpaid by applying human capital theory to the adolescent care burdens are noted in the research in terms of linking an early time poverty to the enduring labour market inequality (Camilletti, 2025; OECD, 2025). These efforts promote a life-course approach to treatment and discrimination.

Policy Implications

The implications of the findings are significant in policy design in the field of education, labour, and social protection. The education systems should acknowledge unpaid care as a systematic issue to learning and implement flexible school attendance, school-based care assistance, and special retention strategies to teen carers (UNICEF, 2025; Plan International, 2024). Care deficit policies must also include direct investment in childcare, elderly care and community services to lessen the use of child labour (unpaid) by girls (ILO, 2024; UN Women, 2024). There is also a need to introduce a life-course perspective to labour and gender policies, as the early care burden determines future labour market performance and contributes further to gender inequality (OECD, 2025; Ferrant et al., 2023).

Programme and Practice Implications.

To the development practice, the research highlights the importance of programmes that redistribute care responsibilities and autonomy of time by girls. The use of care-sensitive elements, including time-saving infrastructure, community norm change, and family-level intervention should also be included in intervention efforts aimed at addressing adolescent girls and breaking their gendered expectations (Population Council, 2024; UN Women, 2023). The skills development and youth employment programmes need to consider the care constrained participation and completion. Notably, programmes must not depict the strength of girls in coping with care as triumph, but rather pay attention to structural circumstances that have the strength to compel girls to bear the burdens (Plan International, 2024; UNICEF, 2025). The approaches are in line with international engagements to acknowledge, identify, and redistribute unpaid care work.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Although the study can be considered as robust, a number of limitations must be taken into consideration. The assessment is largely based on the concept of unpaid care work in particular socio-economic conditions that can restrict the possibility of generalisation in different settings. Time-use data measurement limitations and self-report care activities make underestimating care intensity (especially emotional and supervisory labour) possible as well (UN Women, 2023; Sinha, 2024). Also, not all information sources are of a cross-sectional type and this restricts the ability to make causal assumptions about the long-term economic consequences. These shortcomings

do not make the contributions of the study irrelevant; only that they point out areas that should be cautiously interpreted.

Future Research Directions

The future studies should take the longitudinal design to follow up on long term economic impacts of the unpaid care work which is performed at adolescence stage especially the transitioning into adulthood and stable employment. Intersectional dynamics (such as disability, rural-urban location, and household composition) where they might increase the care burden should also be given more attention (Ferrant et al., 2023; OECD, 2025). Mathematically, analytical accuracy can be made using better time-use tools that overtly record the contributions made by adolescents to care (UNICEF, 2025; ILO, 2024). Lastly, cross-country comparative research might also enhance the comprehension of the mediation of the relationship between unpaid care and early economic paths by policy regimes.

Concluding Remarks

To sum up, this research shows that the fact that adolescent girls do unpaid care work is a major but overlooked cause of early economic inequality. The study identifies adolescence as one of the key intervention sites by combining empirical evidence and feminist economics, social reproduction theory, and human capital theory. The identification and response of unpaid care at this early phase is important to gender equality as well as to the sustainable economic growth more generally (UN Women, 2024; OECD, 2025). The issue of care is thus not an outer social issue, but an essence economic need.

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