

Unpaid Care Burden and Gender Inequality in Vietnam: A Review Analysis

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Бреме на неплатените грижи и неравенство между половете във Виетнам: обзореан анализ

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Abstract

Unpaid caregiving is a crucial aspect of gender inequality that needs to be addressed within the overall national strategy. In Vietnam today, women remain the primary workforce responsible for unpaid caregiving, but their contribution has not been adequately recognized. As women increasingly participate in paid employment, the unpaid care burden is not shared by men and the public service system, leaving women under significant pressure and disadvantage. This article aims to identify the reality of the unpaid care burden in Vietnam, its contributing factors, and its consequences for women. The study utilizes a literature review method with a systematic and purposeful search, screening, and selection process. Sixty-eight documents were included in the analysis and citations out of an initial 145 documents searched from reputable sources. Gender inequality stemming from the burden of unpaid caregiving on women is not only reflected in the fact that they have to dedicate more time to this work than men, but also in a series of consequences related to educational opportunities, employment, income, career advancement, and self-care. This burden is maintained and reinforced by persistent traditional gender norms, inadequate national policies, and a lack of public services commensurate with societal development. The vulnerability of gendered unpaid caregiving is further highlighted in the context of increasing contemporary social issues such as population aging, labor migration, disease outbreaks, and climate change. Therefore, unpaid caregiving is no longer a private matter for women or a family issue; it is a structural and public policy issue. The research findings provide a basis for policies aimed at redistributing care work and highlight the need for investment in care infrastructure, social services, and gender equality in Vietnam.

Keywords: unpaid care, vietnamese women, gender inequality, family division of labor, care economics

Резюме

Неплатените грижи са ключов аспект на неравенството между половете, който трябва да бъде разгледан в рамките на цялостната национална стратегия. Днес във Виетнам жените продължават да носят основната отговорност за неплатените грижи, но техният принос не е адекватно признат. Тъй като жените все по-активно участват в платената заетост, тежестта на неплатените грижи не се споделя равномерно от мъжете и системата на обществените услуги, което поставя жените под значителен натиск и в неравностойно положение. Настоящата статия има за цел да анализира състоянието на тежестта на неплатените грижи

във Виетнам, факторите, които я обуславят, и последиците ѝ за жените. Изследването използва метод на систематичен преглед на литературата със структуриран и целенасочен процес на търсене, скрининг и подбор. В анализа са включени и цитирани шестдесет и осем документа от първоначално идентифицирани 145 публикации от реномирани източници. Неравенството между половете, произтичащо от тежестта на неплатените грижи, поемани от жените, се проявява не само във факта, че те отделят повече време за тази дейност в сравнение с мъжете, но и в редица последици, свързани с образователните възможности, заетостта, доходите, кариерното развитие и грижата за себе си. Тази тежест се поддържа и възпроизвежда от устойчиви традиционни полови норми, неадекватни национални политики и недостатъчно развити обществени услуги, съответстващи на общественото развитие. Уязвимостта на основаните на пола неплатени грижи се откроява още по-ясно в контекста на нарастващи съвременни социални предизвикателства като застаряването на населението, трудовата миграция, епидемичните взривове и изменението на климата. Следователно неплатените грижи вече не са личен въпрос на жените или проблем единствено на семейството, а представляват структурен въпрос и въпрос на публичната политика. Резултатите от изследването предоставят основа за разработването на политики, насочени към преразпределение на грижите, и подчертават необходимостта от инвестиции в инфраструктура за грижи, социални услуги и равенство между половете във Виетнам.

Ключови думи: неплатени грижи, виетнамски жени, неравенство между половете, разделение на труда в семейството, икономика на грижите

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Unpaid care is an essential part of social reproduction, a fundamental condition for the functioning of the family, the labor market, and society. Unpaid care is a gender-segregated labor structure in society, not merely a naturally occurring domestic activity. Cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, the elderly, and the sick at home are often understood as unpaid care work. Based on Moser's concept of reproductive role in Gender Role Theory, the majority of unpaid care work falls under the women's reproductive role (Moser, 1989). However, despite their crucial contribution to labor productivity, maintaining the functioning of the family, and laying the foundation for the labor market and social life, this type of labor is often unpaid, inadequately measured, and poorly recognized in public policy (Addati et al., 2018; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), 2016a). As the primary provider of unpaid care while still participating in the production process, women are negatively impacted in many aspects of their personal lives. The most significant impact is the burden of unpaid care, which directly affects women's access to economic opportunities and empowerment within the household, even as they have more opportunities in education and employment (Addati et al., 2018; UN Women, 2016a).

In Vietnam today, women are increasingly involved in productive roles and paid work, while still bearing the majority of caregiving responsibilities within the family (UN Women, 2016a; Nguyen and Ha, 2019; CARE & CAF, 2022). Vietnam has seen some progress in gender equality, reflected in the widening wage gap between men and women (Vu and Yamada, 2018), leading to positive changes in women's roles and status within the family, contributing to income and participating in family decisions (Nguyen, 2024). However, there remains an uneven distribution of time for unpaid care between men and women in families across diverse social groups (Vu, 2014; Vu, 2019; Nguyen & Ha, 2019), including among young couples (Knodel et al., 2005; Vu, 2021). The title "capable in work and home" widely promoted in state agencies, on the one hand, encourages women to participate in society and contribute positively to paid work, and on the other hand, reinforces the expectation that women must excel in family caregiving. The standard of "capable in home" is an important principle alongside the standard of "capable in work," reflecting the expectations and pressure placed on women in unpaid care.

Equality in access to education and employment hasn't caught up yet with substantive equality within the family, resulting in an uneven distribution of time, responsibilities, and opportunities between men and women (Knodel et al., 2005; Higgins, 2015; Vu, 2019; Nguyen & Ha, 2019; Global Institute for Women's Leadership & Investing in Women, 2024). Thus,

inequality in caregiving is not simply about who works more; it is reflected in the power and gender role negotiation of men and women within the family.

The unpaid care burden on women is exacerbated by the increasing number of contemporary social issues. Population aging, labor migration, disease outbreaks, climate change, and the interplay of these issues have made unpaid caregiving a major social policy challenge. Furthermore, the simultaneous influence of multiple mechanisms makes the gendering of unpaid care work difficult to address through interventions targeting individual mechanisms alone. The shortage of public care services, particularly for vulnerable groups such as young children, older persons, and those requiring long-term care, is a significant factor. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the value of unpaid care work, reduce and redistribute care work within families, enhance the active participation of social service systems, and invest in care infrastructure (Global Institute for Women's Leadership & Investing in Women, 2024; UN Women, 2016a; UN Women et al., 2021). Thus, unpaid care needs to be analyzed through a multidimensional and intersectional approach that takes into account the interplay among various social issues (Nguyen, 2022). Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach helps to more fully identify the underlying causes and consequences of this problem, providing a basis for proposing appropriate and effective solutions.

This article therefore focuses on addressing the following important question: how existing studies explain the current situation, underlying causes, and impacts of the burden of unpaid care work on Vietnamese women. To address this question, the article argues that unpaid care work is not merely a moral responsibility of women or the sole responsibility of families. This suggests several policy recommendations aimed at redistributing care responsibilities between men and women, and between the family, the market, the community, and the state.

Research methods

To define the research content, a literature review method was chosen to search for and filter relevant data on the topic of unpaid care and gender inequality in Vietnam. To ensure transparency in the literature selection process, the study applied the PRISMA 2020 principles (Page et al., 2021) in the guidelines for systematic review and pooled analysis.

All Vietnamese and English literature on the same topic, including theoretical works and research published between 1989 and 2025 in reputable sources, was compiled as a basis for review and selection. Based on key keywords such as unpaid care, unpaid care labor, care economics, care and gender inequality in care, gender division of labor, productive role, reproductive role, family care, etc., the authors grouped the literature by topic for convenient

analysis.

To ensure the scientific value of the documents for the overall analysis, the author identified four criteria that the documents must meet:

- 1) Documents must directly address unpaid care, gender division of labor, family care, child/elderly care, elderly care, or care policies;
- 2) Documents must be international articles with a DOI; academic publications in Vietnam in reputable journals; reports from international organizations, and policy documents with high credibility;
- 3) Documents must be directly related to the research context in Vietnam or research similar issues in other contexts/comparative frameworks;
- 4) Documents must have clear publication information and a link to the available source.

Based on these four criteria, the author searched for and compiled 145 initial documents, then filtered and retained the 68 most suitable documents for analysis and citation. Documents that did not meet the criteria, had duplicate content, or were unsuitable for analysis were excluded.

The author uses the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the coding, grouping, and thematic construction process based on the application of Guest et al. (2011). From the compiled literature, the author groups the main themes into: the current state of gender-based care assignment; causes and policies affecting unpaid care; the consequences of the unpaid care burden on women; the impact of contemporary social issues on unpaid care; and policy implications. To ensure the scientific validity of the arguments and evidence, the author conducts a multi-source comparison. The cross-checking method helps ensure the reliability of the arguments and evidence presented during the analysis. This analytical method provides a deep and comprehensive explanation of the structural mechanisms maintaining the unpaid care burden on Vietnamese women.

Results

1. The Current State of the Gendered Division of Unpaid Care Work in Vietnam

Unpaid care work is common but unequally distributed by gender in Vietnam. Time-use data show that women spend approximately 1.6–1.9 times more time on housework and unpaid care work than men, both at the national level and among ethnic minority groups (UN Women et al., 2021; CARE International in Vietnam (CARE) & Center for Analysis and Forecasting (CAF), 2022; General Statistics Office of Vietnam (GSO), 2024). Vietnam's

National Strategy on Gender Equality sets targets to reduce this gap to 1.7 times by 2025 and 1.4 times by 2030, indicating that time inequality in care work remains an important policy issue (Government of Vietnam, 2021). The persistence of this division is also confirmed by empirical studies. In a market economy, women still spend more time than men on unpaid care work and continue to face the double burden (Packard, 2006). Notably, this situation is prevalent and stable in families with varying characteristics, such as family structure, age, income, education level, and employment status of husbands and wives. Given these characteristics, the issue of substantive gender equality within the family hasn't caught up yet with the transformation of women's economic power and status within the family.

An important characteristic that makes genderization in unpaid care so persistent and difficult to change is that it is formed very early in the upbringing and shaping of responsibilities for boys and girls in Vietnamese families. Therefore, the issue is not only about gender norms but also framed within daily family habits, causing girls to tend to spend more time than boys on unpaid housework, with the gap widening significantly at puberty and in the 16-17 age group (Vu, 2014). Knodel et al. (2005) point out that the gender-based division of labor structure in the family has not really changed, even though men in some families have become more involved in childcare. The issue is that a comprehensive change and active participation of men in sharing household chores, along with strong support from policy systems and public services to create a significant transformation in the gender-based division of labor structure in the family.

Alongside the family, activities outside the community (related to living infrastructure conditions) also reflect gender inequality in the division of unpaid care. For example, in areas with difficult socio-economic conditions, women continue to be the primary group undertaking unpaid work that is time-consuming and labor-intensive. ActionAid Vietnam (2017) noted that women have to participate in activities such as gathering firewood and fetching water to maintain daily life. This demonstrates that the socio-economic conditions of the locality are closely related to the gender imbalance in unpaid caregiving among women. When gender norms in the community intersect with inadequate infrastructure and limited public services, the unpaid care burden on women expands and increases.

The gendered nature of unpaid labor is occurring simultaneously in both rural, mountainous, and developed urban areas. In urban households with relatively high living standards and good economic conditions, women remain primarily responsible for unpaid caregiving. Despite the advantages of modern living conditions and conveniences, urban

women face a crossroads between paid work during regular office hours and unpaid caregiving. This reality restricts women to fixed office hours while simultaneously requiring them to utilize their personal leisure time for family care. This overlap directly results in limited time for rest, learning, skill development, and social participation for women (Global Institute for Women's Leadership & Investing in Women, 2024). For example, middle-class women in Ho Chi Minh City have to simultaneously maintain professional work, care for their families, and participate in cultural and social activities (Higgins, 2015). Given this reality, the unpaid care burden is being restructured through new forms in the context of modern urbanization.

The aforementioned behavioral manifestations of gendering unpaid caregiving in Vietnam are often accompanied by or stem from individuals' perceptions and attitudes regarding their responsibility for unpaid caregiving. Up to 60-70% of women surveyed in Matsuda's (1997) study believed that, regardless of whether they participated in paid work or not, women were primarily responsible for household chores. This perception has, in reality, implicitly and naturally linked unpaid caregiving to the roles of wife and mother. Furthermore, the concept of filial piety strongly emphasizes the responsibility of caring for elderly parents to their children - in Northern Vietnam, the elderly tend to live with their married sons more often than their daughters - thus daughters-in-law and granddaughters become the primary caregivers (Friedman et al., 2003). As science and technology continue to advance, many families have invested in and used more convenient and modern machinery and equipment, but this has not helped to change the gender gap in unpaid caregiving in the family. In some cases, modern household appliances even lead to men's participation in household chores and caregiving faster than women's (Vu, 2019).

Thus, the current state of the gendered division of unpaid care work in Vietnam shows that women participate more and spend significantly more time than men performing unpaid work. Traditional gender norms and gender stereotypes (Nguyen, 2017) that persist today have significantly contributed to shaping and maintaining gender inequality in unpaid care within the family and the community. This reality reflects the persistence and resistance to change of an unequal gendered division of labour, in which women remain primarily responsible for care work, while men's participation has yet to result in more equal sharing.

Causes of the Gendering of Unpaid Care in Vietnam

The current state of the gendered division of unpaid care work in Vietnam reveals several reasons for this gender bias.

First, the gender bias in unpaid care stems from traditional gender norms and persistent

gender stereotypes. While the old notion that men are expected to occupy the public sphere, whereas women are expected to remain in the domestic sphere has gradually faded, the notion of "men build houses, women build homes" still strongly influences the thinking and corresponding behavior of men and women in the division of household chores (UN Women, 2016a; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020). The idea that "men build houses" continues to position men as the economic pillar: earning money and having the right to decide on all matters, big and small, within the family. Meanwhile, women, seen as homemakers, are naturally associated with the responsibilities of housework and family care. Undeniably, this gender norm simultaneously places pressure on men to be the economic pillar and on women to undertake unpaid caregiving. This concept, with its positive connotations of a harmonious division of labor within the family, actually puts pressure on both genders. It deprives women of the ability to participate in economic responsibilities and drives them to unpaid caregiving, while men are also pressured to earn money, and their responsibility to share caregiving duties within the family is obscured. This belief, in the context of the government's increasing promotion and strengthening of national goals for gender equality, has created a contradictory gender role. In this system, women are encouraged to participate in paid labor but still bear the primary responsibility of unpaid caregiving (Santillán et al., 2002; Matsuda, 1997).

Alongside the ideology of gender norms, the labor market structure also strongly influences the gendering of unpaid care in the Vietnamese context. The Đổi Mới (Renovation) policy (1986) provided impetus for women's engagement in the paid labor sector; however, the public care service system and mechanisms for sharing care responsibilities within the family have not developed correspondingly. This asymmetry places women under a double burden: on the one hand, participating more deeply in the labor market to meet the demands of economic growth, and on the other hand, continuing to undertake the majority of unpaid care work within the family. Thus, the new context increases opportunities and demands for female human resources in the paid labor market but does not simultaneously increase public care services or encourage men to share unpaid care responsibilities within the family (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2018). This, in turn, becomes a barrier limiting women's ability to participate in the labor market and empower themselves economically (Global Institute for Women's Leadership & Investing in Women, 2024). This reality reflects the paradox that the labor market is increasingly "mobilizing" female labor for economic growth, but the cost of social reproduction continues to be passed on to women's unpaid caregiving labor within the family. Nevertheless, unpaid caregiving is still not fully recognized in economic and social

policy measurement systems, causing the value of this type of labor to continue to be underestimated.

Furthermore, the shortcomings in the policy structure and public care service system are also significant reasons for the gender shift in unpaid care in Vietnam. In Vietnam, care policies lack comprehensive coverage and do not directly redistribute care responsibilities. Enhancing women's economic status depends significantly on public policies aimed at reducing and redistributing the burden of unpaid care (UN Women, 2016c). The Vietnamese government is making significant efforts to achieve gender equality - emphasizing substantive gender equality through participation in numerous international conventions on gender equality and the improvement of the legal framework. Currently, Vietnam has enacted the Law on Gender Equality (2006), the Law on Marriage and Family (2014, effective 2015), the national strategy on gender equality (2021-2030), and many social security policies. However, seemingly neutral policies that do not take gender differences into account may inadvertently maintain or exacerbate gender inequality (Luong, 2013). Furthermore, current policies still heavily emphasize the role of the family in caring for children, the elderly, and dependents. Recent policy discussions have also highlighted a significant gap in support for children under three years old, the group requiring the most intensive care (Nguyen, 2025). The issue is that policy objectives should move towards recognizing, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care work (UN Women, 2016a). In addition, the lack of care services for specific groups such as the elderly, children, and those with health problems is a significant contributing factor. Dang et al. (2022) showed that access to childcare services has a significant positive impact on employment, income, and household poverty. This finding reinforces the notion that childcare is a real burden for female workers.

In addition, the rapid population aging, combined with the lack of a corresponding service system for elderly care, causes the burden of care to revert to the cultural characteristics of elderly care, which is closely tied to kinship and continues to be gendered within the family (Friedman et al., 2003). The labor of women in the family, especially daughters-in-law, daughters, and middle-aged women, becomes central to elderly care activities. Based on the above analysis, a warning is issued: Vietnam needs to develop a long-term care system and care economics that are appropriate to the rate of population aging (World Bank, 2021; United Nations Population Fund Vietnam (UNFPA), 2025).

The central responsibility of unpaid care becomes even heavier for women in rural, mountainous, and ethnic minority areas. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, poverty, and

limited access to public services significantly increases the time women must spend on unpaid care work and maintaining family life. This impact is particularly evident in poor women, rural women, and women from ethnic minorities, who simultaneously face disadvantages in economic resources, infrastructure, and social care services (ActionAid Vietnam, 2017; CARE, & CAF, 2022).

Multilayered intersectionality of roles creates significant pressure on women to balance these pressures. When support services are unavailable or unaffordable, the unpaid care burden often forces women to make choices directly related to paid work, such as reducing working hours, choosing flexible work, or even abandoning paid work altogether. Therefore, market reforms without appropriate inclusive policies and services cannot bring about fundamental changes in the gender division of labor (Teerawichitchainan et al., 2010). In this context, it is essential to properly assess the economic value and acknowledge the crucial contribution of unpaid care to the stable functioning of the family and the national economy. Ignoring or downplaying the value of unpaid care work diminishes the reproductive role of women. This contradicts the current trend that women's unpaid work is recognized in many contexts as having a significant economic contribution. However, the importance of unpaid care work is still not acknowledged in policies on employment, childcare, and elderly care (Le & Efroymson, 2008). If it continues to be obscured, unpaid care will continue to be overlooked in policy design as well as in the statistics of the contribution of various sectors to the national economy. Consequently, the value of unpaid care will continue to be underestimated, and women's efforts in this work will remain confined to a gender duty rather than providing a tangible economic contribution to the family.

Consequences of the Burden of Unpaid Care for Women

It is readily apparent that unpaid caregiving responsibilities are linked to women's gender roles, leading them to make both silent, unrecognized contributions and to bear the brunt of these multifaceted consequences. These impacts are often primarily manifested in areas such as paid employment opportunities, income, career development, health, and women's dependence on men.

First, the burden of unpaid care reduces women's employment opportunities, income, and career development prospects. International Finance Corporation and World Bank Group (2021) found that 40% of women who were not engaged in any form of paid employment identified care responsibilities as the primary reason, compared to only 2% of men. This impact is particularly pronounced among ethnic minority women, with 52.1% being excluded from the

labour market due to the burden of unpaid care, compared to 28.9% of men (CARE International in Vietnam (CARE) & Center for Analysis and Forecasting (CAF), 2022). Care responsibilities also influence occupational choices. Women tend to work part-time, choose informal employment, or accept more flexible jobs with lower incomes.

Caregiving responsibilities also influence career choices. Women tend to work part-time, opt for informal employment, or accept flexible but lower-paying jobs. Evidence shows that women aged 25 and over tend to choose jobs closer to home for convenience in fulfilling family responsibilities (UN Women, 2016a); 30.6% of workers reported that caregiving responsibilities were a barrier to career change (CARE & CAF, 2022). Therefore, the gender wage gap in Vietnam has persisted through many stages of economic development (Vu and Yamada, 2018). The unpaid care burden has prevented many working-age women from accessing paid and decent employment, leading to significant gender income inequality in both low-income and high-income groups. In Uong Bi, Quang Ninh, women and men may start at the same point in their careers, but unpaid caregiving responsibilities make it difficult for women to "catch up" with the pace of men's career progression (ActionAid Vietnam, 2017). The clear gender divide in occupations reveals the social value and advancement opportunities of different occupational groups. Jobs dominated by women often have lower salaries, fewer training and promotion opportunities, thus reproducing gender inequality throughout the working life (Asian Development Bank, 2025). This demonstrates that unpaid caregiving also hinders women's advancement and ability to contribute. Women working in the informal sector are nearly twice as likely as men to leave employment and become economically inactive because of unpaid care responsibilities. Women face a greater risk of withdrawing from employment as care responsibilities within the family increase.

When women and men spend less time on unpaid care work, their participation in paid work increases. Access to childcare services enables women to engage in formal employment, work longer hours, and earn higher incomes (IFC & World Bank Group, 2021; Dang et al., 2022). Unpaid care is directly associated with labour market participation (ActionAid Vietnam, 2017). When women face constraints in employment opportunities, income, and career development, their future access to economic resources and social protection is also reduced. Reduced access to economic resources and social protection limits women's access to education and training, hinders the accumulation of human capital, and reproduces gender inequality over the long term (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2023). It also limits women's access to and benefits from tax and social protection policies (UN Women, 2016b).

The double burden borne by women constrains their ability to pursue stable employment, career advancement, and continuous skills development (Barcucci et al., 2021).

In addition to affecting labour market participation and income, the burden of unpaid care substantially reduces women's time for rest, self-care, and social participation. When women are constantly required to demonstrate competence in both the public and private spheres (Higgins, 2015), they work long hours, have little rest, and are severely impacted in caring for and rehabilitating women. Studies show that women undertake the majority of unpaid care work, leading to an accumulated time and care burden (UN Women, 2016a). Consequently, they are negatively impacted by the care burden on women's physical and mental health. This burden impairs physical health and increases psychological stress, reducing life satisfaction and quality of life for caregivers, especially women (Le et al., 2025).

Unpaid care increases dependence and perpetuates long-term disadvantages for women/girls in Vietnam through four mechanisms: reduced time for education and training, limited participation in paid employment, pushing women into flexible but low-income jobs, and the reproduction of the norm that women are natural caregivers. The fact that women and girls assume the majority of caregiving responsibilities exacerbates time poverty, limits human capital accumulation and opportunities to participate in the labor market, thereby diminishing women's economic independence (UN Women, 2016a; UN Women et al., 2021). Girls are at risk of reduced opportunities for education and skill development due to early unpaid caregiving. Disadvantages in education and skill development directly impact employment opportunities, income, and career advancement later in life (International Development Research Centre, 2017). Unpaid care, if not addressed in a gender-balanced manner with the active participation of the policy and public service system, will continue to reinforce women's economic dependence, reproduce gender inequality, and perpetuate intergenerational disadvantage for women and girls (Nguyen et al., 2022; UN Women, 2021). Therefore, it can be asserted that gender inequality in the family in Vietnam stems from the structural mechanism of gendered unpaid care.

The Impact of Contemporary Social Issues on Unpaid Care

The care crisis in Vietnam is becoming increasingly vulnerable in the context of rising contemporary social problems. First, labor migration restructures care practices but does not eliminate their gendered nature. When family members are spatially separated, care is reorganized through direct care, remote care, and caregiving (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Hoang et al., 2015; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2020). However, this restructuring does not change the

inherently unequal nature of the caregiving division. In Vietnam, care remains predominantly familialized along gender and generational lines with prominent women's participation in kinship networks (Hoang et al., 2012; Tran, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2022). Care is redistributed across borders but remains feminized (Yeates, 2004). When women migrate, men must adapt to caregiving tasks traditionally considered women's work, while also facing pressure from traditional masculine norms (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011). Conversely, when men migrate, women who remain often have to assume both productive and reproductive roles simultaneously (United Nations Viet Nam, 2010).

Combined with labor migration, population aging continues to increase the need for long-term care in the context of limited public services. With limited public services and the increasing need for long-term care, the responsibility for caring for the elderly continues to fall on households (GSO & UNFPA, 2021). In these households, women (including daughters, daughters-in-law, and granddaughters) often assume this caregiving role (Friedman et al., 2003; Le et al., 2025).

Furthermore, climate change also increases the burden of care in a gendered way. Maintaining livelihoods during crises is achieved through caregiving work within families and communities (Resurrección, 2013). Thus, natural disasters exacerbate gender inequality as women are simultaneously exposed to higher health risks and pushed into high-intensity care roles in the context of prolonged flooding (Tran and Nitivattananon, 2011). At the same time, they are increasingly playing a crucial role in flood risk management and response at the household level (Ly, 2024). However, this participation is not commensurate with their status in risk planning and governance processes.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of the family-based care system and women's unpaid labor. With social distancing, job disruptions, and reduced social services, women faced increased caregiving pressures (UN Women, 2020; United Nations Vietnam, 2020). In Vietnam, women had to dedicate more time to childcare, caring for relatives, and household chores during social distancing (United Nations Vietnam, 2020). This trend is consistent with international evidence showing that women continue to assume the majority of unpaid caregiving responsibilities and are more strongly impacted by increased caregiving needs during the pandemic (International Labour Organization, 2022). Besides the burden of both paid and unpaid caregiving, women also faced increased psychological and emotional pressures in the context of the crisis (McLaren et al., 2020). Thus, the pandemic is seen as a prime example of the intertwined care crisis, in which informal employment and the excessive

care burden on women are prominent features of developing economies (Bui, 2025). These findings clearly demonstrate that unpaid care is no longer a problem solely for women or families. Unpaid care needs to be viewed as a vulnerable social security structure, especially in the context of increasing and overlapping complex contemporary social issues such as population aging, labor migration, disease outbreaks, and climate change.

Discussion

From the above analysis, it can be affirmed that unpaid care in Vietnam is a gender-divided labor structure. This is the main finding of the study. Paradoxically, Vietnamese women have significantly increased their educational attainment and are an important labor force for the market economy; nevertheless, women remain the primary group responsible for unpaid care work. This indicates that the development of the economic and educational aspects, along with the government's efforts to achieve gender equality, has not been sufficient to create a more equitable distribution of unpaid care responsibilities within the family. This finding further reinforces the observation from research on the economics of care in various social contexts, according to which unpaid care is seen as a mechanism closely linked to gender inequality in the household and the labor market (Addati et al., 2018; UN Women, 2016; ILO, 2018). Although many families have begun to shift roles toward men, some family groups are showing a greater tendency towards men's involvement in managing household finances and childcare. Unfortunately, this shift is not uniform or widespread, so overall, despite societal development and economic modernization, inequality in caregiving has not automatically decreased. Women participate more in paid labor, but the responsibility for caregiving remains primarily theirs. The family remains largely self-sufficient in meeting most caregiving needs, while the state, market, and community have not fully assumed this function. In this structure, women bear the majority of the time and opportunity costs and, consequently, are held back more than men in accessing paid employment, income, and career advancement opportunities. Thus, care inequality is restructured rather than eliminated in the context of modernization (Horat, 2018) and reflects the slow pace of change in social structure rather than the underdevelopment of the economy. This interpretation is consistent with Moser's concept of reproductive roles, Razavi's care diamond, and the care economy approach, which highlights the invisibility of the costs of social reproduction.

The main contribution of this paper is to show that care inequality in Vietnam is a result of the intertwining of gender norms, labor market structures, policy gaps, and a shortage of public care services. Contemporary social changes such as labor migration, population aging,

climate change, and epidemics do not create care inequality from the outset, but rather deepen existing inequalities. Therefore, economic growth and expanded employment opportunities for women are insufficient to promote substantive gender equality if the care structure is not restructured in a coordinated manner. The burden of care reduces women's opportunities for income generation, economic accumulation, and the ability to benefit from tax policies. Consequently, unpaid care also needs to be placed within a gender-sensitive fiscal policy framework to promote substantive gender equality.

This study is primarily limited by its reliance on a literature review, thus being dependent on the scope, quality, and dispersion of available data sources. Given the fragmented nature of research on unpaid care in Vietnam, which is limited by subject, social group, and geographical area, the ability to make comparisons across regions, population groups, and development stages remains restricted. Based on the findings of this study, further research with a mixed design and interdisciplinary approach is needed to deeply assess the impact of unpaid care on employment, health, well-being, and gender inequality. More importantly, the analysis of the relationship between unpaid care and contemporary social issues needs to be expanded to provide stronger evidence for policies aimed at gender equality and sustainable development.

Conclusions

The stable development of families and society is impossible without the contribution of the care economy; however, the gendered, yet unrecognized, responsibility of unpaid caregiving stifles women - the primary caregivers - and perpetuates their dependence on men. When women face disadvantages in employment opportunities, income, and career advancement (International Labour Organization, 2025a, 2025b), they continue to be victims of gender inequality. Therefore, addressing the issue requires changing outdated traditional gender norms, promoting inclusive policies, and developing diverse public services.

Expanding educational and employment opportunities for women will only be truly effective when accompanied by a comprehensive strategy to address the factors shaping and maintaining the unbalanced division of labor in caregiving. Therefore, unpaid caregiving is clearly no longer a private matter for women or families. Unpaid care should be viewed as an issue of social development, gender equality, and public welfare. When considering unpaid care as a structural issue of social development and public policy, recognizing, mitigating, and redistributing care responsibilities among families, the state, the market, and the community should become essential policy directions to promote genuine gender equality and sustainable development in Vietnam.

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