

# The Time Tug-of-War: Unveiling the Negative Impacts of Unpaid Care Work on Adolescent Girls Living in Rural Pastoralist Settings in Kenya.

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In the tapestry of daily life, the role of adolescents often goes beyond the boundaries of classrooms and extracurricular activities. A significant, yet often overlooked, aspect of their lives is the impact of unpaid care work. As they strive to meet the rigorous demands of their academic pursuits, an additional layer of responsibilities in the form of household chores can turn their daily lives into a time tug-of-war. Homework, exams, and extracurricular activities must be completed in addition to other household responsibilities. Adolescent girls living in rural pastoralist settings face even greater multi-layered and intertwined challenges of societal norms, expectations, and traditional roles leading them to carry an unequal share of unpaid care work responsibilities from an early age.

In Wajir County, Kenya- a rural pastoralist region that often experiences severe droughts and is characterized by high poverty levels and poor schooling indicators, especially for girls, deep-seated gender norms often dictate traditional roles for boys and girls within the household with girls bearing a disproportionate burden of household responsibilities such as cooking, fetching firewood, water collection and animal care. The search for pasture and water for their animals sends them from their homes for days at a time, exposing them to physical and sexual violence risk and making it unlikely that they will attend school.

Unpaid care work in these contexts also often reinforces cultural norms and deeply ingrained gender inequality that sets expectations around women's primary role in the domestic sphere, potentially influencing life choices, including early marriage and motherhood. As they try to navigate the world of chores, the weight of unseen labor and the constant demand for their time and energy within their homes can inadvertently limit their academic performance and education opportunities and prospects. These responsibilities may have several negative implications for their well-being and overall development.

In 2015, the **Population Council-Kenya** set out to implement the Adolescent Girls Initiative Kenya (AGI-K) program in Wajir County; a randomized control trial aimed at testing a combination of multi-sectoral and multi-level (individual, household, and community) initiatives among 11-14-year-old girls in health, violence prevention, wealth creation, and education to understand what combination of interventions works best to improve the well-being of adolescents.

Evidence collected in 2021 from the AGI-K program highlights the multifaceted ways in which unpaid care work impacts education and health outcomes for adolescents living in rural pastoralist communities. Of the 1933 adolescents interviewed, at least 71% reported spending more than two hours on household chores during school days. Our study findings reveal that several negative impacts are associated with unpaid care work. We observed that girls who spent more time conducting unpaid care work were less likely to have completed primary school and more likely to have lower numeracy scores. Unpaid care work was linked to both early pregnancy and early marriage with girls who spent more time on unpaid care work being three times more likely to have ever been pregnant and almost four times more likely to have ever been married.

Unpaid care work is deeply ingrained in the fabric of pastoralist societies, shaping the experiences of adolescent girls who navigate the delicate balance between tradition and evolving societal expectations. Evidence from the Kenya **Women Economic Empowerment Community of Practice** (a project funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and convened by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)) shows that recognizing the impact of unpaid care work is a crucial step toward fostering an environment where adolescent girls can thrive and contribute meaningfully to their communities. We can create pathways for adolescents in pastoralist areas to navigate their responsibilities through targeted interventions such as after-school safe spaces programs to support girls in doing their homework and studying without immediately shifting to housework. Raising awareness on the value of girls' education, educating communities on how too much housework can detract from school, and advocating for gender equality and norms change work can unlock girls' potential, and build a more inclusive and equitable future.

*Population Council-Kenya is a member of the Kenya WEE CoP convened by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)*