The underlying gender bias in unpaid care work is a critical factor contributing to gender inequality, says the International Labour Organization's (ILO) latest report. The ILO’s 2017 global sample survey established that 70% of women were eager to be in paid employment outside their home. But an ILO study last year found that only about 45% of women had jobs. This underscores the gap between their desires and reality.

The report, ‘A quantum leap for gender equality: For a better future of work for all’, which was launched earlier this month, shows that unpaid care work posed the biggest impediment to women’s employment. Some 21.7% of women of working age are engaged full time in caregiving without pay, says the report. Only 1.5% of men fall in this category.

The impact of unpaid work on women manifests itself at many levels. There is motherhood penalty (which means that mothers in the workforce experience additional disadvantages compared to women who are not mothers). This is more acute for women with children in the 0-5 age group than among those with older children. In addition, there is also the parenthood employment gap that unfairly privileges fathers. The ILO reports an increase in both these groups in several countries that were surveyed. More starkly, there is a wage penalty associated with motherhood, as opposed to a wage premium linked to fatherhood, over an entire career span. This translates into a leadership penalty. Only about 25% of women with young children are said to occupy managerial positions. This contrasts with some 75% among fathers in comparable situations.

A skewed distribution of unpaid work yields unequal dividends from educational attainments. Gender enrolment gaps were said to have closed by 2017 in secondary and tertiary education. But women make up over 69% of youth who are not in employment, education or training. These numbers should explain why the bulk of women drift into unpaid care activities. In most of the developing world, even when they are engaged in paid work, it is predominantly in the unorganised sector.

Among adults with a university degree, 41.5% of women are either unemployed or outside the labour force, compared to 17.2% among men. But those who manage to break through barriers are better qualified than men and rise to the top even faster. Across the world, over 44% of women managers hold an advanced degree, as compared to 38.3% among male counterparts.

A rebalancing of current roles is critical to expand the arena of paid work for women and reduce the long working hours for men. That may also be the answer to promoting women’s participation in the workforce.

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