

## Exploring the impact of unpaid domestic and care work on academic productivity and career advancement in Sri Lankan universities

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Unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW) consume significant time and energy, yet remain largely undervalued and rarely recognized within economic or institutional frameworks. Deeply entrenched gender norms, coupled with family expectations and obligations, disproportionately assign this burden to women, restricting their right to development and equal participation in society. Globally, UCDW has been recognized as a structural barrier to women's access to employment, career advancement, and leadership roles. A 2017 study found that over 67 percent of Sri Lankan women of working age identified UCDW as the primary reason for their inability to participate in paid work, despite their willingness to do so. The higher education sector offers a telling example of this imbalance. For women academics, the multidimensional nature of UCDW including household management, caregiving responsibilities, and cultural expectations limits research productivity, delays promotions, and reduces representation in leadership, thereby constraining their professional growth and weakening the capacity of Sri Lanka's higher education system to fully harness its talent. While universities have adopted certain mechanisms such as flexible work schedules, maternity leave, and limited childcare facilities, these measures remain inadequate, unevenly implemented, and insufficient to address systemic inequities. Such gaps not only compromise the professional growth of women academics but also undermine the ability of Sri Lanka's tertiary education system to fully utilize the skills and contributions of its workforce. This shortfall is especially critical during the economic crisis, when maximizing human capital and closing the gender gap are vital. This study, employing qualitative methods and primary data collected from academic staff, investigates the extent and impact of UCDW within Sri Lankan universities. It further proposes evidence-based legal, policy, and institutional reforms, aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 5.4, which calls for recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work, as well as international best practices, to recognize and redistribute UCDW, thereby advancing gender equality and strengthening women's participation in academia.

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