

Study argues 'girly economics' data necessary for full picture of economy, equitable policy

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Any parent can tell you that work doesn't stop when you leave the office and go home. Yet national and international economic statistics only consider the work that happens "at the market," or outside the

home—not caring for children, cooking, cleaning or caring for elders, tasks largely handled by women, in calculating economic statistics like gross domestic product.

A new study from the University of Kansas argues for including such work, or "girly economics," for a full understanding of work happening in the country to produce better labor statistics and equitable public policy.

Misty Heggeness saw firsthand how data often overlooked work in the home during her time with the U.S. Census Bureau. Now an associate professor of public affairs & administration and associate research scientist with KU's Institute for Policy & Social Research, she has written a study about how care work at home has been traditionally overlooked, how it leads to incomplete economic statistics and how such numbers are necessary for good public policy.

Heggeness presented the paper, titled "The Girly Economics of Care Work: Implications for Economic Statistics," at the American Economic Association annual meeting in January, and it was published in the *AEA Papers and Proceedings*.

"Women are and have always been economic agents. If we were to collect information about [economic activity](#) in a broader sense, what we would find is women are more active than men," Heggeness said. "The total amount of paid and unpaid economic activity show for people working full-time jobs, women engage in about one additional hour of economic activity per day."

The study is linked to a [project](#) Heggeness has launched. The Care Board is an effort to gather existing data and statistics on the care economy and make them available in one online location with a dashboard to help researchers, policymakers and others find useful information. The

project will generate new statistics on such economic data as well.

Heggeness cites an Institute for Women's Policy Research study that found among working adults, women average one extra hour per day on unpaid household chores and care work than men. And while an hour per day may not seem significant, over the course of a year, that adds up to 249 additional hours, or 31 days of additional work by women.

The consequences of excluding such data have been in place for decades. Heggeness points out that in 1953, the United Nations standardized a system of measurements to determine gross domestic product. One of the most widely used economic statistics in the world, GDP does not include work done inside the home.

The United States does, however, collect data on care work outside the home. Such data shows that roughly 14% of the U.S. labor force is engaged in teaching, janitorial and cleaning services, and child care. That represents 23.4 million people, more than the state of Florida. But with unpaid care work in the home, such as caring for children or other family members, confusion can reign during times of economic crisis.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the additional stress on parents was widely reported. In addition to their full-time jobs, parents had to ensure kids could take part in online learning from home and saw other domestic tasks increase dramatically as well. The concern was that the additional stress would drive many parents, especially mothers, to leave the labor force.

But a lack of reliable statistics on unpaid [care work](#) left both journalists and economists scrambling to determine just how much additional work was done and carried implications that women's work in the formal sector of the economy was less important than men's, Heggeness said.

"There are components about global and national history, whether intentional or not, that have been driven historically by men and that are determined by a monetized wage or price," Heggeness said. "If we limit ourselves to that, we are blinding ourselves to the realities women contribute to the economy and keeping it going."

After pointing out how unpaid care activities—what she calls the underbelly of the economy—are not included in official statistics, Heggeness wrote about the urgency of including such data, as the economy would not function without it.

As a result, researchers, statisticians and economists cannot accurately track economic phenomena like a pandemic, growth or recessions without including all economic activity in primary measures. Similarly, it is difficult to measure how overworked or stressed care workers might be, and policymakers cannot develop effective policy to address such problems without a full slate of information, she wrote.

"To not generate statistics with depth and nuance now is an egregious flaw in the profession. We owe it to society and the generations that come after us to use the rich depth of cumulating administrative and real-time data on our economic lives both within and outside of our homes to generate a more complete picture of the modern caregiver and more accurately estimate their economic contributions to society," Heggeness wrote.

"With urgency, we must update national accounting systems and leading economic statistics to capture the modern realities of work, care and the economy and incorporate these statistics into mainstream views of our economy."

More information: Misty L. Heggeness, *The Girly Economics of Care Work: Implications for Economic Statistics*, *AEA Papers and*

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