The sound of birds serenading the break of day wakes Jean Pierre Niyonsenga and his wife, Jeannette Mugeni. The couple's day starts with cleaning and preparing children for school, where they share household responsibilities.

At six o'clock, the household is busied up with the wife cleaning the house and compound while the husband prepares breakfast for their three children.

Commendably, Niyosenga finds it normal to accompany their 4-year-old kid to school.



Jean Pierre Niyonsenga and his wife, Jeannette Mugeni at their home in Muyumbu, Rwamagana District

Sharing domestic work between the couple wasn't always the case; the unpaid care work belonged to the wife, and the husband was only responsible for looking after livestock and other economic activities like his profession as a Maison.

"Now, I share domestic work with my wife," says Niyonsenga. "I can sweep or wash my child without any problem," he emphasizes.

Niyosenga's behavioral change is a result of social behavior training on unpaid care work courtesy of Réseau des Femmes, a local NGO that is working with IPAR (Policy Analysis and Research – Rwanda) to implement the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) – East Africa Project in Rwanda.

Started in March 2021, the research project funded by the International Development Research (IDRC) is done by IPAR while Réseau des Femmes implements activities targeting 1,100 couples in five districts of Burera, Gicumbi, Musanze, Nyabihu and Rwamagana.

Part of the activities was awareness conducted on reducing and redistributing unpaid care work (UCW), which refers to work without payment carried out in the home and the community, mainly by women and girls that could, at least in theory, be paid for.

Before the project, experts at IPAR-Rwanda contend that no study had been conducted to evaluate whether interventions help change the attitudes and beliefs upheld by both genders. The local research institute believes that evidence reached

scientifically can be put forward for policymakers to address gender inequality.

Ismael Byaruhanga, a Research Fellow at IPAR-Rwanda, says they are assessing the impact and scalability. “We are evaluating the impact of a holistic, participatory approach/program on reducing unpaid care work. So, we came in as IPAR to evaluate what Réseau des Femmes was doing so that we come up with evidence.”

Based on the baseline findings and monitoring visits studying the short-term impact along with learning the mid-term survey, IPAR has already published a working paper, and a general article pending publication is under review.

The project ends in March 2024 and addresses the systemic barriers ingrained in generations and enhanced by the patriarchal society.

Ismael Byaruhanga, a Research Fellow at IPAR-Rwanda(left) with colleagues from Réseau des Femmes while distributing water tank

“We’re trying to help uproot the issue of social norms in a patriarchal society – so much ingrained in generations indicate to boys and men that there are some activities they cannot do at home – unpaid care work,” says Byaruhanga.

“It requires some intervention to change the mind, attitude, and societal beliefs,” he adds. “Findings show that even some women would not feel comfortable seeing their boy children engaged in household chores like cooking and sweeping.”

The girl child is instead told to do all the chores because society is built that way, and most traditional wives cannot tolerate finding husbands in the kitchen doing chores like washing dishes.

Laurence Nikuze, from Mikamo village in Musanze District, says some household chores are only women’s tasks, like cooking, sweeping, washing clothes, and bathing children.

Nikuze observes that her husband now willingly does the household chores because of the training the couple received on the issue. This has allowed her time to engage in other income-generating activities and join a savings group.

Laurence Nikuze, from Mikamo village in Musanze District joined a savings scheme which helped her get a small loan to buy livestock

Samuel Hakizimana underlines that some work, like cooking or washing dishes, was previously considered not men's duties, "but we can do them comfortably," he says.

As a way forward, Byaruhanga explains they are trying to come together with those working in unpaid care to develop coordinated efforts to inform policymakers.

Meanwhile, there is growing fear that some countries, including Rwanda, may not achieve the 2030 targets for Sustainable Development Goal 5, attracting increasing concern from stakeholders, according to a recent report released in 2023.

The apparent vast inequality between women/girls and men is blamed mainly on the fact that more women and girls than men are participating in unpaid care work.

A case study in rural Rwanda among parents with at least one child under 12 shows that wives spend 35.2 hours doing UCW compared to 14.3 hours for men, and women spend 40.4 hours engaged in productive work in contrast with 54.1 for men.

"However, the proportion of their waking hours spent in productive and UCW is very different. Wives, on average, spend 37 percent of their time doing UCW while men spend 15 percent," the report adds.

Methodology of the study

In five sampled districts by IPAR-Rwanda, four sectors were selected in each district, two of which are treatment areas while the others are control areas.

"We have a treatment and control group. The study is designed so that you get two groups of people with similar characteristics in terms of demographics, geography, and age," reveals the Researcher.

According to the set criteria, the family should be a couple – husband and wife living together and they should have children, at least one below the age of 12. The treatment group is where you do interventions – to treat the problem.

During treatment activity undertaken by Réseau des Femmes, selected families were given water tanks and training on sexual reproductive health and positive masculinity, while women were trained on entrepreneurship and financial literacy.

According to Byaruhanga, they wanted women to have the skills to use the time to generate some income with entrepreneurship activities and competitively get absorbed in the financial sector, open savings accounts, and finally be financially included. One thousand one hundred households have benefitted from the project.

Jean Pierre Niyonsenga and his wife Jeannette Mugeni from Muyumbu in Rwamagana District participated in the training. Mugeni is now working as a tailor, which was previously impossible for her because of the domestic work she had to deal with alone.

“These days, I work for around eight hours daily; I could not even afford five hours at my tailor shop because of the burden of household chores,” observes Mugeni.

Changing the tide

Stakeholders advocate for a solution to UCW by calling on the government of Rwanda to implement the 3Rs – Reduce, Recognize, and Redistribute, where reducing refers to the application of labor-saving technologies, gender-responsive infrastructure, and high-quality public services. While redistributing, recognizing, and acknowledging the contribution of UCW is upholding affordable, accessible care services that men and boys take on more responsibility.

Jeannette Mugeni irrigating her kitchen garden, the water tank allows her to have enough water at her home

“Men who think theirs is only to make money and join drinking sprees every evening to come back home to be fed and sleep without knowing what has been happening at home certainly need to change their attitude and mindset,” advises Niyonsenga.

He adds that things can be better when you share household responsibilities; this can also help fight poverty if you work together.

After the training by Réseau des Femmes, Nikuze and her colleagues formed a

savings scheme. She is happy things have improved in her life, and with the extra time, she acquired other responsibilities as the village leader.

Despite the inequality between women and men, stakeholders recognize Rwanda’s interventions and favorable policies to empower women. The country has spared no effort in getting women into the workforce, and it is part of its social policy but also essential for its economic growth and poverty reduction plans.

Women’s productive employment boosts GDP and supports household incomes, lifting families from poverty. At the same time, having an income gives mothers more influence and bargaining power within the family, a lever to counteract customary norms and patriarchal control.