



Australia Awards

Socioeconomic Incentives for Unpaid Care Work at Household Level in Cambodia: Needs, Challenges and Opportunities

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Objective

The study aims to identify the key needs, challenges, and opportunities faced by caregivers, particularly women and other marginalized groups, and to generate evidence that can inform the design of more inclusive, effective, and gender-responsive support mechanisms.

Research Question

How do unpaid carers at the household level in Cambodia experience and respond to the socioeconomic incentives and policy measures intended to support them, and what do their lived experiences reveal about existing needs, challenges, and opportunities for improvement?

Conceptual Framework

Understanding Unpaid Care Work

- Essential care to family members—children, elderly individuals, and persons with disabilities—without direct monetary compensation

Typology of Care Work at the Household Level

- Direct
- Indirect
- Supervisory care

Socioeconomic incentives aspect

- Financial and Economic Dimensions
- Recognition and Valuation
- Policy and Institutional Support
- Household Dynamics and Gender Division of Labor

Research Design

❑ The study adopts an exploratory research approach and feminist social research approach.

❑ Data Collection Method

- Geographical area: Phnom Penh and Prey Veng Province (Baphnom District)
- Sampling approach: Purposive sampling
- The study uses qualitative methods



In-depth interview with care givers



Key Informant Interview



Policy Analysis

Ethical Considerations

- Approval obtained from National Ethics Committee for Health Research
- Informed consent and confidentiality maintained throughout
- Do-no-harm principle applied: Interviewers trained on psychological first aid with professional counselor on standby

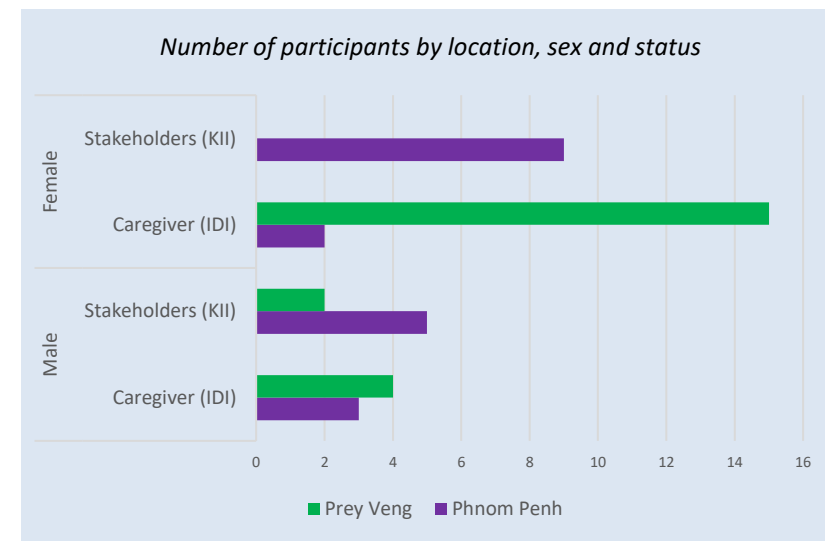
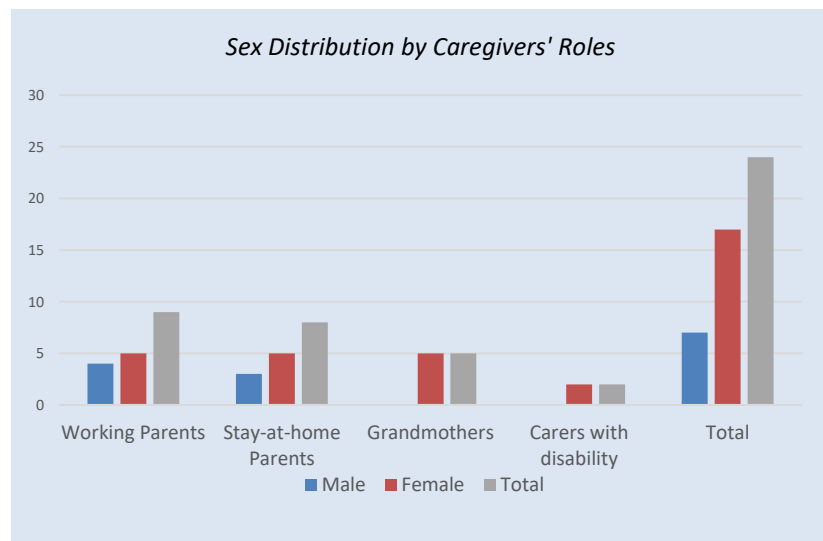
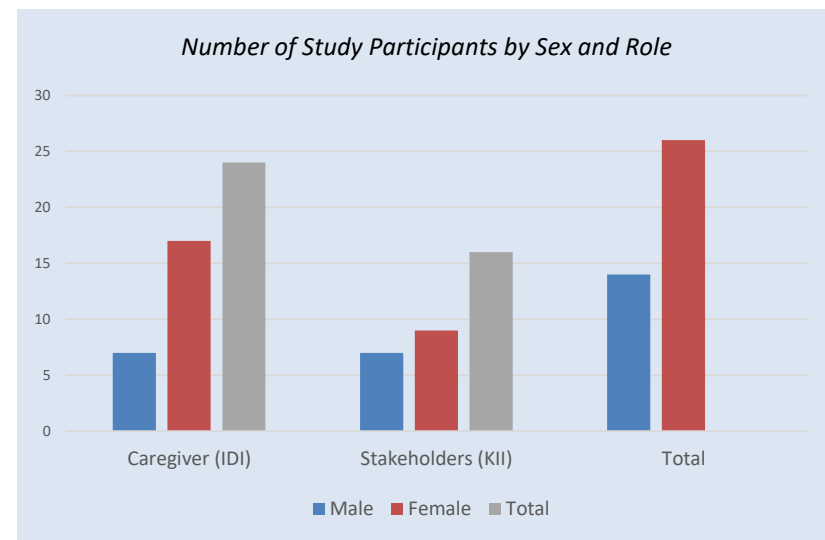


★ Research Findings

Research Data

Demographic Profile of Participants

- 40 total participants (14 males)
- 24 care givers (07 males)
- Care givers age range: 20-68 Years old
- 05 households hold ID Poor status
- 09 Key Informants Interview with 16 participants (07 males) from 09 institutions.



Realities of Unpaid Care Work

Types & Scope

- Diverse Care Recipients: Unpaid care work targets highly dependent family members, involving intensive childcare, complex elderly care, and comprehensive support for people with disabilities, which frequently overlap.
- Direct and Indirect Tasks: Caregiving universally consists of both direct personal and indirect household labor (e.g., cooking, cleaning, laundry).
- Invisible Supervisory Care: While constant, supervisory care is rarely recognized or labeled as "care work" by caregivers because it is intangible and usually performed simultaneously with other daily chores.
- Heavy Mental Load: The constant preoccupation with caregiving creates a severe mental burden, leading to significant psychological exhaustion and stress, particularly among older caregivers.

Care Intensity & Complexity

- The "Invisible" Dual Role
- Beyond Time Measurement
- Complex family dynamic and caretaking roles

Socioeconomic Challenges and Needs

Financial and Social Protection:

➤ Challenges:

- Loss of employment and income
- Ongoing trade-offs between paid work and caregiving responsibilities
- Heightened financial stress and debt
- Reduced socioeconomic mobility

➤ Needs:

- Direct financial assistance and social protection
- Flexible and home-based income opportunities
- Formal policy recognition
- More responsive and caregiver-centered policies

○ "I used to work in a factory, but when I had a child, I had to stay home because my parents had passed away and there was no one to take care of the child" (IDI6)

○ "In the past, I used to go to wash dishes... at weddings... now I stop because I can't stay away from home... If it's near, I can manage it" (IDI23)



➤ Opportunities

- Transition to Explicit Recognition
- Leverage Digital Infrastructure
- Develop Care-Sensitive Interventions
- Address Intra-Household Inequality

Socioeconomic Challenges and Needs

Health and Social Services

➤ Challenges:

- Negligent of Caregiver Health
- Financial barriers to healthcare
- Lack of access to
 - Mental Health Support
 - Local Specialized Care
 - Professional and Trusted Childcare

➤ Needs:

- Accessible and affordable healthcare and long-term care services
- Respite care and burnout prevention
- Community-led psychosocial support
- integrated care systems



○ "I take care of my mother, I don't think about myself" (IDI10)

○ "One day sick, one day well... but when the child is sick, the mother doesn't dare to be sick anymore" (IDI21)

○ "When I was really depressed, I thought to myself, 'Oh my God, if lightning strikes me and kills me, it would be better'" (IDI 10)

➤ Opportunities

- Universal and independent health protection and decoupling health protection from employment
- Integration of mental health and chronic care
- Closing the "care gap" in early childhood.
- Transitioning caregivers to "rights-holders"
- Professionalizing local care infrastructure
- Inclusive support for caregivers with disabilities

Socioeconomic Challenges and Needs

Education and Training:

➤ Challenges:

- Competing caregiving responsibilities
- Inflexible training schedules and delivery methods
- Heavy unpaid care workload
- Care responsibilities continue during training
- Lack of caregiver-responsive training environments
- Limited access to information
- Restricted access to education and training

➤ Needs:

- Training in practical caregiving skills
- Flexible vocational and technical training (e.g., TVET)
- Training that supports home-based and flexible livelihoods (including support for flexible entrepreneurship)



"When we go to study and the session starts... we have to leave quickly... we have to run to home and have to go to the session again..."(IDI 10)

➤ Opportunities

- Leverage existing lifelong learning and TVET policies
- Use Community Learning Centres/Lifelong Learning Centres
- Adapt training programmes to caregivers' needs
- Increase awareness and outreach
- Promote livelihood-focused vocational training
- Expand TVET curricula to include care-related professions

Socioeconomic Challenges and Needs

Recognition and Psychological Support:

➤ Challenges:

- Lack of social recognition of caregiving
- Invisible emotional and psychological burden
- Stigma surrounding mental health and help-seeking
- Limited policy recognition
- Restricted Social Participation
- Social Isolation and no time for rest, self-care

... "Many people are suffering but nobody sees their difficulties as carers"
(ID17)

➤ Needs:

- Formal and social recognition of unpaid care work
- Reshaping gendered norms through public awareness
- Institutionalizing respite care services
- Leveraging traditional and religious platforms
- Caregiver-responsive policies

➤ Opportunities

- Operationalizing Constitutional Recognition
- Accelerate implementation of the national care economy framework
- Promote public awareness and local norm change
- Evidence-based policy through data integration
- Leveraging informal networks for mental health in combination with professional services
- Utilizing traditional and religious platforms for support
- Bridging rural implementation gaps

Socioeconomic Challenges and Needs

Employment and Work-Life Balance:

➤ Challenges:

- Limit workforce participation
- Misalignment between prevailing formal work models and the realities of unpaid care work
- Limited employment options (part-time or informal sectors)
- Limited access to decent and secure employment

"According to the Dharma, we have karma... we are here to take care of our mother, we are exhausted... but we fight to overcome all obstacles"(IDI10)

➤ Needs:

- Formalizing flexible work models
- Caregiver-friendly policies into formal labor structures
- Access to secure and decent employment
- Developing "Return-to-Work" reintegration programs

➤ Opportunities

- Build on existing labour protections
- Transformative parental leave for shared responsibility
- Revise workplace childcare policies
- Expand labour and social protection coverage
- Strengthen financial support for caregivers
- Strengthening the "Work-Life Balance" Legal Framework

Socioeconomic Challenges and Needs

Cultural expectation and Gender norm:

➤ Challenges:

- Caregiving as a family obligation (Culturally)
- Unpaid care work remains highly gendered
- Childcare is feminized
- Differential recognition of caregiving labor by gender
- Intergenerational cycle of feminized care
- Rigid gender roles, power imbalance, and GBV risk

➤ Needs:

- Greater recognition and respect for unpaid care work within households
- Promotion of equitable sharing of caregiving responsibilities
- Broader societal and policy recognition of unpaid care work

➤ Opportunities

- Transitioning from “norm-accommodating” to “norm-transformative” policies
- Reforming legal frameworks to promote shared responsibility
- Diversifying the care ecosystem beyond the family
- Addressing the “guilt gap” through cultural narrative re-engineering
- Institutionalizing incentives for equal caregiving
- Strengthening integrated social protection packages
- Expanding the definition of “essential care”

Policy Recommendation

- **Financial and Social Protection:** Alleviate economic pressures on caregivers through targeted cash transfers, microfinance initiatives for home-based enterprises, and the formal integration of caregiving into national social security systems and adopt care-based circular economic.
- **Health and Social Services:** Expand access to essential services by increasing local/mobile health clinics, establishing community-based mental health and respite care programs, and heavily investing in affordable, widespread childcare and eldercare services.
- **Education and Training:** Empower caregivers through flexible, community-based vocational and dual-purpose training programs that accommodate their schedules, provide childcare during sessions, and utilize technology for better outreach.
- **Recognition and Psychological Support:** Establish policy frameworks that officially recognize unpaid care as legitimate, valuable labor, while fostering supportive community environments through peer support groups and inclusive engagement spaces.
- **Employment and Work-Life Balance:** Institutionalize flexible work arrangements and family-friendly workplace policies, supported by structured return-to-work initiatives and financial incentives for employers who adopt care-friendly practices.
- **Cultural Expectations and Gender Norms:** Challenge rigid traditional gender roles through nationwide public awareness campaigns, community dialogues, and targeted programs that encourage men to actively share caregiving responsibilities and address gender-based violence.

Research Recommendation

- ❑ Evaluate different financial incentive models for unpaid caregivers and their impact on household wellbeing
- ❑ Conduct impact assessments of psychosocial support programs and recognition initiatives on caregiver mental health
- ❑ In-depth examination on the impact of traditional and social gathering on psychosocial well-being among older caregivers
- ❑ Investigating mental load and supervisory care among caregivers in Cambodian changing context
- ❑ Research on career trajectories and work-life balance of caregivers in formal and informal sectors
- ❑ Investigate gender dynamics in caregiving, exploring social norms and policy effectiveness in promoting equality.
- ❑ Gender analysis on unpaid care giving roles in relation to gender based violence in domestic sphere within Cambodia context
- ❑ Examine relation between unpaid care work and paid work connection for female caregivers
- ❑ Assess men and women understanding on weaponizing incompetent and mental load around care work performance withing household

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