

Double burden of paid and unpaid labor leading to poorer mental health in women, review finds

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New research reveals unpaid labor is associated with poorer mental health in employed women, but the effects are less apparent for men.

Published in the *Lancet Public Health*, University of Melbourne researchers have conducted a review—the first of its kind—to bring together and assess the existing evidence examining the gendered association between unpaid labor and mental health.

Of the 14 studies included—totalling more than 66,800 participants worldwide—five examined unpaid labor (inclusive of care), nine examined housework time and, of these, four also examined childcare.

Researchers found that in addition to the economic penalty [women](#) experience shouldering most of the world's unpaid labor load, there is a mental health cost as well.

Overall, in 11 of the 14 studies examined, women self-reported increased depressive or psychological distress symptoms with increasing unpaid labor demands. For men, only three out of a possible 12 studies reported any negative association.

"We found substantial gender differences in exposure to unpaid labor, with women uniformly doing more in every geographical and time setting—in more than 35 countries—around the world," research lead Jen Ervin said.

"This double burden of paid and unpaid work exposures women to greater risk for overload, time poverty and poorer mental [health](#). Crucially, women are also routinely trading off paid work hours to meet their disproportionately high unpaid labor responsibilities."

Ms Ervin said the study highlights the need for greater attention and meaningful action to drive greater equity in the division of unpaid labor.

"There is an undeniable mental load that accompanies unpaid labor and [family responsibilities](#). Reducing the disproportionate unpaid labor

burden on women, by enabling men to take on their equal share, has the potential to improve women's [mental health](#)," she said.

In addition, researchers say substantive policy changes, such as universal childcare and normalizing flexible working arrangements for men are urgently required to enable real change.

Researchers conclude that this review highlights the need for further high-quality longitudinal research in this area, the need to better understand nuances within different dimensions of unpaid labor, as well as the need for a consistent approach in how unpaid [labor](#) is defined and measured.

More information: Double burden of paid and unpaid labour leading to poorer mental health in women, review finds, *The Lancet Public Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/S2468-2667\(22\)00160-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(22)00160-8)

Provided by University of Melbourne

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