

ACTION AID SPEECH: UNPAID CARE

My favorite memory growing up was when my great aunt, cousins and I were making a Christmas cake. All the women in the family working together to make sure this tradition is passed down through us. I was grateful for this experience. However, even at the early age of twelve I noticed how any of male relatives, cousins, and uncles, were sitting in front of the television. Not worrying or helping us. I kept quiet when I noticed this and did not question it. Mostly because I already knew the answer, “women and girls are just better at this type of thing”. Today I still see the same patterns of these gender roles of care. When someone tells me that their husband is babysitting their children, when female family members are given more chores in the household than their brothers and when women that I work with who rush home to take care of their children every day. We justify this by the overused saying “girls just mature faster.” I wondered why we pay people to carry out services like cleaning when women are typically doing it every day and not being paid for it. I learned that this is called unpaid care.

Unpaid care work is the daily maintenance task that is required to sustain a human being, a household and economy, and as the name suggests it is for free. Caring is a very critical life-sustaining activity that ensures the well-being of everyone. So why do we treat it as less than any other professional job? Especially when everyone has either performed it or benefited from it. Traditionally this was not as much as a problem when marriage was seen as a business deal. In which the roles of the man and woman were defined clearly. Men were the breadwinners of the family. They worked all day so they could support their family financially. While women made sure all the household chores were done, took care of the children and made sure her husband had a dinner to come home to every night. Now women have the opportunities to get jobs and to climb up the corporate ladders in the world and even become CEOs. However, the burden of performing unpaid care is still something that is expected upon women. Women are expected to take maternity leave when their child is born. We are expected to make sure all the household chores are done. Women are expected to be able to drop and collect their children to and from school. All which is unpaid but still holds women back from doing their best in the working world and something men do not have to face. Women are always at work, even if they are at home.

Women perform over three quarters of unpaid care and domestic work worldwide. Men are the people making decisions on things that affect women on this issue. Such as childcare, paid parental leave and minimum wage. Why aren't women, who are being the most affected by this, not allowed to have say on policies that will affect them? What happens if women stop performing unpaid care? Iceland answered this question in 1975. When on October 24th, 1975, 90% of women in Iceland refused to work, cook, or look after children. A radical women's movement asked the question: “why don't we just all go on strike?,” according to the guardian. This, they argue would be a powerful way of reminding society of the role women play in its running, their low pay, and the low valued placed on their work inside and outside the home. The entire country came to a standstill. Men had to leave work early or bring their children to work. Schools, shops, nurseries, and fish factories had to shut down or run at half capacity.

This action is to be believed as paving the way for the world's first democratically elected female president, Vigdis Finnbogadóttir.

So, what are the solutions going forward? First, we actually need to take the focus away from women. We need ungendered care policies. There isn't an equal paternity and maternity leave for men and women in most countries. This must change. We need to give men the same opportunity to provide care as women. We can do this by making sure we provide equal maternity and paternity leave to both parents. The problem of care also disadvantage's men. Men are expected to go back to work in a week after welcoming their child into the family. Care is gender neutral. This isn't fair on men or for women. This is why the issue of unpaid care is not only a women's issue but a human issue, that we must solve. In Sweden in 1975 they became the first country to introduce a gender-neutral parental leave. Today 480 days (about 1 and a half years) that new parents are entitled to three months are specifically reserved just for dads. It's not equal but it is a lot. Now when you walk through the streets of Stockholm its quite common to see men spending one-on-one time with their child, while mom is of working. This is why I believe that a change in culture is just as important as the policies we make. Take Japan for example. They offer dads a year off, but dads rarely ever take it. This shows how progressive policies are insufficient on their own. We must question our own beliefs on who provides care. We need the government to step in and provide free childcare for all. Something as basic as childcare is what keeps women at home, because by the time they go to work and pay for it, they might as well just stay at home and take care of their children themselves. We need to start questioning: why is it usually women who are advertising cleaning products on television? Why do we praise dads for collecting their kids from school when we do not do the same for mothers? Why do we expect women to be a full-time worker and homemaker? The more we ask ourselves these questions the better we do for people who carry out unpaid care every day.

So, when we ask the question "who cares?" the answer must be everyone. As everyone is affected by unpaid care. Whether you perform it or benefit from it. "Freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all kinds of oppressions," a quote from Nelson Mandela. Thank you for listening to me today.