

# **VOLUNTEERING, UNPAID CARE WORK AND GENDER IN LOWER-INCOME COUNTRIES**

Anna Barford, Kate Brockie and Niall O'Higgins





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## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

<b>ICATUS</b>	International Classification of Activities for Time-Use Statistics
<b>ICLS</b>	International Conference of Labour Statisticians
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Office/Organization (according to context)
<b>ISCED</b>	International Standard Classification of Education
<b>LFS</b>	labour force survey
<b>NEET</b>	not in education employment or training
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SNA</b>	System of National Accounts
<b>TUS</b>	time-use survey
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNECE</b>	Economic Commission for Europe
<b>UNSD</b>	United Nations Statistics Division
<b>UNV</b>	United Nations Volunteers

## KEY POINTS

There is a conceptual overlap between voluntary work and unpaid care work, as some voluntary work provides care work outside of the household. Many other volunteering activities do not count as care work, and unpaid care work for one's own household is not classified as volunteering.

Time spent doing voluntary and unpaid care work relates to one another, often in distinctly gendered ways. Both voluntary work outside the household and unpaid care work within the household provide valuable contributions to individuals and communities, helping to maintain the preconditions of social and economic life.

Lower-income countries have received relatively little coverage in the research literature and statistics on unpaid care work and volunteer work. Existing data suggest that, in lower-income countries, women shoulder much greater unpaid care workloads than their male counterparts while men participate in volunteering at higher rates. In this report, a case study of Bangladesh addresses the relative lack of evidence on volunteering in lower-income countries, employing labour force survey (LFS) and time-use survey (TUS) data to explore volunteer work and unpaid care work.

There are gendered patterns to the distribution of care work and volunteer work. Globally, care work both in the home and outside of the home is predominantly undertaken by women. Volunteering comprises a diverse range of activities and there are gendered patterns regarding who performs which type of role. Volunteer roles involving care tend to be done by women; the analysis presented in this study estimates that in Bangladesh, female volunteers spend 80.4 per cent of their volunteering time on care work activities compared to 40.6 per cent of male volunteers' time. This gendered pattern may stem, at least in part, from the ways in which specific programmes mobilize volunteer labour.

Motivations for engaging in volunteer work include meeting social needs, volunteers' personal identity, skills development, income-generation and improving employment prospects. Some volunteers receive stipends that represent a significant contribution to their income. While volunteering and care evoke ideas of altruism and concern for others, they may also stem from a sense of social obligation and personal aspirations. Despite its crucial role in societies and economies, care work in one's home is still not typically associated with improvements to employability and income.

To some extent, the nature of and demand for care and volunteering are shifting, partly due to technological developments, climate change and demographic change. Yet key concerns remain, including that there is a risk that volunteer and unpaid care work are underappreciated and unrecognized despite performing crucial functions for society and the economy.

Direct (or informal) volunteering, which is not done through a formal organization or programme, is particularly overlooked in the literature. Its informal nature means that it tends not to offer benefits such as a stipend, skills development, certification or a boost to future employability but can play a vital and meaningful role for volunteers and their communities. More research is needed to understand this type of volunteering, its contribution, the experience volunteers gain and their longer-term effects.

The value of volunteering and care work can be constrained by the conditions under which it is provided, for example if volunteers lack the equipment or support they need. Sometimes the expectations put on unpaid carers and volunteers are excessive. This can result in care deficits, for example in the wake of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, chronic disability and demographic shifts have disproportionately placed care responsibilities on (often older) female family members and female volunteers due to rigid gender roles.

Substantial progress in recent years has been made towards capturing statistics on unpaid household care work; the International Labour Organization (ILO)-United Nations Volunteers (UNV) partnership on the measurement of volunteer work has made important contributions to statistical measurement of volunteer work. However, unpaid care work provided as volunteer work outside the household is often omitted from statistics on care work. As of 2024, the ILO is preparing a framework for the measurement of care work to address data gaps and promote international comparability of future data. This definition should explicitly incorporate unpaid care work carried out for those outside the household or family through volunteer work.

Some forms of volunteer work are associated more closely with “getting on” (accessing aspirational opportunities), whereas other forms are primarily related to “getting by” (systems of reciprocal support). In Bangladesh, female volunteers are predominantly involved in direct informal volunteering that provides care services to those outside the household or family, and which is more closely associated with reciprocal support. By contrast, male volunteers are more often engaged in community- and organization-based volunteering, which is nearer to “aspirational” volunteering. These gendered characteristics of volunteering in Bangladesh reflect existing divisions of labour between the productive and reproductive spheres, with implications for how this volunteer work is recognized and valued within societies and labour markets.

Looking ahead, attention should be paid to the conditions in which unpaid care work provided by volunteers takes place. This will help to ensure adequate resources, fair recognition and appropriate support. Further, the gendered distribution of voluntary care work translates into differential labour market and income opportunities for women and men. This can be addressed by policies that promote skills recognition, appreciate the value of this work in its diverse forms, and ensure equitable access to volunteer opportunities.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Unpaid care and volunteering are valuable to society and the economy, as both contribute to societal well-being and economic development. Unpaid reproductive labour in the home prepares families for work and study. In 2011 unpaid care represented US\$11 trillion in purchasing power parity (ILO 2018). Meanwhile volunteers support diverse social, health and environmental initiatives. Both unpaid care and volunteering can be seen as important civic activities (Herd and Meyer, 2002; Evers and von Essen 2019).

At the same time, both volunteering and unpaid care have both been described as forms of work that are sometimes invisible (Daniels 1987; Ward 2022). This is in part due to prevalent “folk understandings” that work is something you are paid to do. Such understandings can mistakenly undervalue what is often seen as “women’s work” while positing paid work as a moral contribution to society (Daniels 1987). This work can be made invisible by cultural values, a lack of legal definition of this work as “employment” (because volunteering is a form of work but is not employment), and the spatial segregation of this work (Hatton 2017). This work is, nevertheless, highly visible to those who do it.

As forms of work, unpaid care and volunteering can be highly gendered. Worldwide, women do 76.2 per cent of all unpaid care work (ILO 2018, p. 43). For some 606 million women and 41 million men, performing unpaid care work meant that they were unavailable for employment (ILO 2018, p. 83). Gender divides in volunteering, while historically and geographically specific, often involve female volunteers doing more voluntary care work than their male counterparts.

Volunteering is a prominent part of development agendas (Brown and Prince 2015). As Baillie Smith et al. (2021) noted, “Volunteering has gained growing geopolitical significance, with volunteers identified as one of a number of new development actors, located within global diplomacy and identified as critical to the achievement of key strategic development policies and objectives.” International attention to voluntary work includes several United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions on volunteering, all of the *State of the World’s Volunteerism Reports* published to date by United Nations Volunteers (UNV) (UNV 2011, 2015, 2018, 2021), as well as the celebration of the International Year of Volunteers (2001) and its ten-year anniversary (2011). Most recently, the UNGA proclaimed 2026 as the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development. Volunteering is seen as a crucial component of the actions required to progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNV 2021).

Care has been largely overlooked by policymakers (Chopra and Sweetman 2014), but attention to care has started to build. New political commitments include “Our Common Agenda” by the United Nations Secretary-General, which calls for a reconsideration of the care economy, and the initiation in October 2023 of an “International Day of Care and Support”. In June 2024, “decent work and the care economy” was the subject of a general discussion at the 112<sup>th</sup> International Labour Conference (ILO 2024). Care is fundamental to achieving the SDGs, and unpaid care is the subject of SDG Target 5.4, to “recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work”.

Both unpaid care and volunteer work can bring benefits. These include benefits to the individuals performing this work, and to households, families, communities and society more widely. Depending upon the specifics of volunteering, the structures of services, social protection and skills recognition for those doing unpaid care work, these activities have consequences for people’s current and future working lives (ILO 2024a; Halim et al. 2022; Gyórvári-Tumpek and Kenderfi 2022; O’Higgins 2022).

The work presented here stems from a broader partnership between UNV and the ILO, which has the aim of advancing the measurement of volunteer work; it is primarily written for policymakers, statisticians,

researchers and practitioners. In what follows, we review and analyse the gendered patterns of volunteering and unpaid care work in lower-income countries by combining a literature review with a statistical analysis of Bangladesh. This is in part a response to the “very limited gendered analyses of volunteering, especially in the global South” (Cadesky et al. 2019, no page), as well as a recognition of the interactions and similarities between volunteering and unpaid care work. Unpaid care work influences people’s availability to engage in voluntary work, and vice versa, while gender norms play a role in shaping people’s engagement in both voluntary work and unpaid care work.

The report concludes by calling for a series of actions to better recognize, understand and enable those involved in volunteer and unpaid care work. These include the need to expand national statistical offices’ measurements of unpaid care (both within and beyond the household/family); to conduct further qualitative research that could improve understandings of the diverse and often culturally-specific meanings and experiences of volunteering and unpaid care; and to improve policies and boost the efforts of practitioners to both disrupt strongly gendered patterns of volunteering and care work and to interrupt gender inequalities in the world of work that stem from them.

## 1.1 What are unpaid care and volunteering?

Unpaid care work and volunteering are both forms of work that in principle take place without financial remuneration.<sup>1</sup> For some, these activities occur alongside other forms of work, such as a paid job. For others, these activities are their main work activities, perhaps as a “job” in itself, as a route into paid employment, as an alternative activity that may increase where labour market demand is low, or to meet the care needs of others including when state services are weak or non-existent or care demand is especially high (e.g. Fadel et al. 2024; Barford et al. 2021a; Barford and Gray 2022).

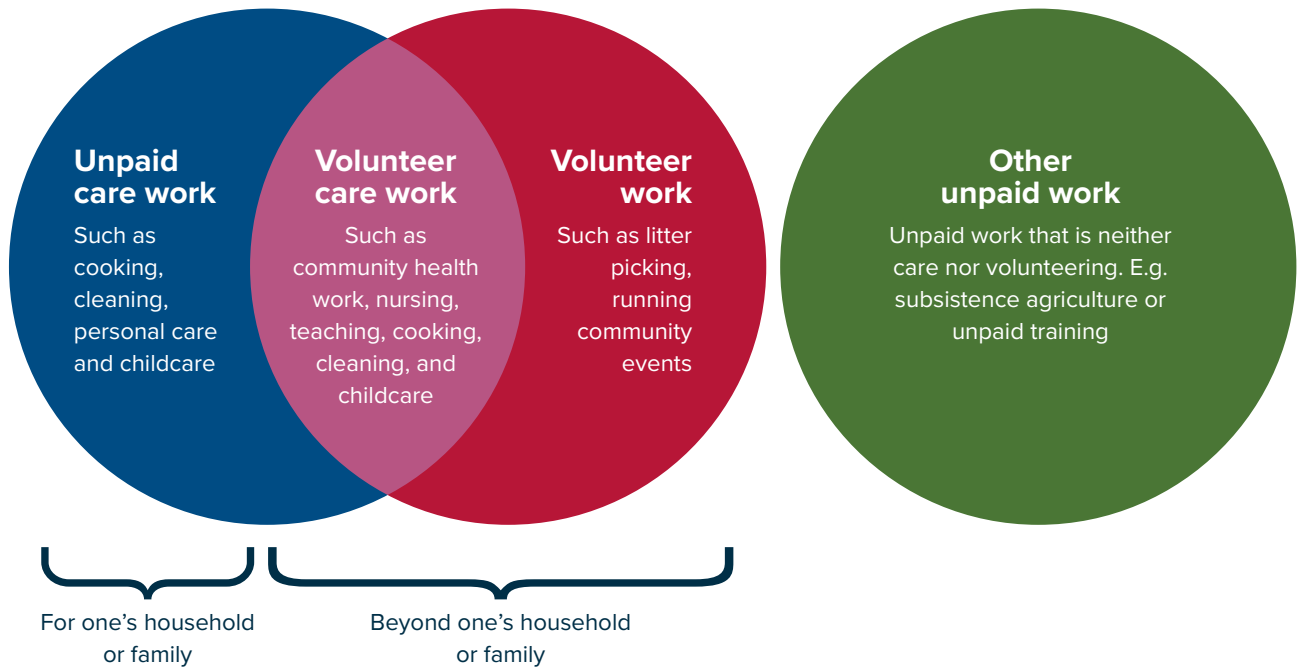
Unpaid care and volunteer work overlap conceptually:

“Since it is unpaid, volunteer work is indeed work, but it is not employment. Similarly, but distinctly, unpaid care activities are work — but not employment. There is an overlap here, in that unpaid care work undertaken in the context of the family and/or household is not volunteer work, but unpaid care work undertaken outside the family is.” (O’Higgins 2022, p.7)

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<sup>1</sup> Volunteering often does involve some form of remuneration, normally justified in order to cover the costs incurred by volunteers. In some contexts, especially where alternative job opportunities are limited, this can make volunteering attractive due to the income it generates. For example, Fadel et al. (2024) find that in Uganda one-third of the sample of refugee youth volunteers cited “getting money” as one of their motivations for volunteering.

**FIGURE 1.** Differences and overlaps between unpaid care work, volunteer work and other unpaid work



Note: Other forms of unpaid work exist which are neither care nor volunteer work.

Unpaid care work beyond one's own household or family is a form of volunteering. When unpaid care work is provided to one's own household or family, however, it is not categorized as volunteering (figure 1). Indeed, with an emphasis on unpaid domestic and care work undertaken as a contribution to "own use" household production, the term "unpaid domestic and care work" has come to be synonymous with "unpaid domestic services provided *for household or family members*," (our emphasis, UN 2021). Paid care work outside of the household is a separate category that, because it is paid, is not volunteer work (for instance, paid nurses, paid teachers and paid domestic workers). Unpaid care work undertaken outside the family is a further separate category termed "volunteer care work" and considered largely akin to paid care work, distinguished only by the fact that it is unpaid (ILO 2018, chapter one). Indeed, the International Classification of Activities for Time-Use Statistics (ICATUS) 2016 identifies "unpaid caregiving services for household and family members" as major division 4 (UN 2021, p.11), whereas volunteer care work is not separately identified (figure 2).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It is, of course, separately identifiable from the survey questions, as the approach adopted below in the Bangladesh case study shows.

**FIGURE 2.** Volunteer work, care work and their relation to resolution I of the 19<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS), ICATUS 2016 and the 2008 System of National Accounts (SNA) production boundary

	Destination of final production								
	For own final use		For use by others						
Forms of work (19 <sup>th</sup> ICLS)	1) Own-use production work		2) Employment (work for pay or profit)	3) Unpaid trainee work	4) Other work activities	5) Volunteer work			
	of services	of goods				in market and non-market units	in households producing		
Care work (ILO, 2018)	Includes Unpaid care work		No	Includes care employment	Includes unpaid trainee care work	No	No	No	Includes volunteer care work
ICATUS 2016	3, 4. Unpaid domestic and care services for family members		1. Employment and related activities		5. Unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work				
Relation to SNA 2008	Activities within the SNA production boundary								
	Activities inside the SNA General production boundary								

Note: In the overlap between unpaid care work and volunteer work, the “volunteer work” column intersects with the “care work” row so that unpaid care work in “producing households” is at the intersection. Unpaid care work also appears under the “own-use production work” column. Also note the existence of other forms of unpaid work, namely own-use production of goods and unpaid trainee work (which may include unpaid care work); these are not addressed in this paper.

Source: Adapted from ILO 2018 and O’Higgins 2022.

The extent to which a distinction between the nature of care work engaged in for the benefit of family and non-family can usefully be drawn in practice, especially when one is talking of direct – as opposed to organization-based – volunteering is an empirical question worthy of further investigation. This is beyond the scope of the current paper.<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, however, volunteer care work, like “unpaid domestic and care work” (for family members) and, indeed, paid care work, is strongly gendered. Much of what follows focuses precisely on the interactions and intersection between unpaid care work and volunteer work – or volunteer care work as it is termed in figures 1 and 2.

For both volunteer work and own-use production work (which includes unpaid care in one’s own home), the production of goods falls within the 2008 System of National Accounts production boundary, whereas services fall outside of this but are counted within the general production boundary (ILO 2023b). This means the following activities are excluded from gross domestic product (GDP) calculations: “(i) preparation of meals, laundry, cleaning and shopping; (ii) care of children, the elderly, the sick and persons with disabilities within the household; and (iii) volunteer services provided through organizations and groups” (Razavi 2007).

<sup>3</sup> For one thing, as discussed below, the boundaries of the family, in terms of perceived caring responsibilities may not coincide with the household as defined in surveys. Moreover, responsibilities felt by community members one to another may, indeed, transcend those of the family, and so the distinction may become further blurred.

Unpaid care within and beyond one's own household falls outside of the System of National Accounts production boundary, while other forms of volunteering fall within this production boundary. The exclusion of own-use production of services in the 1993 revision of the System of National Accounts (Razavi 2007, p.4-5; Hirway 2005; the light grey area of figure 2) can be explained: "The own-account production of services within households is a self-contained activity with limited repercussions on the rest of the economy" (European Commission, IMF, OECD, UN and World Bank 2009, p.98). The "limited repercussions" of care are widely contested and, as a recent ILO report explained, "Societies and economies depend upon unpaid and paid care work to function, and to sustain human, social and economic development" (ILO 2024a, p.5).

According to the UNGA, volunteering consists of "activities undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor" (UNGA, 2002, p.3). For statistical purposes, volunteer work is defined by the 19<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) as "any unpaid, non-compulsory activity to produce goods or provide services for others" (box 1). The ICLS identifies two forms of volunteering: (a) "through, or for organizations comprising market and non-market units (i.e. organization-based volunteering) including through or for self-help, mutual aid or community-based groups of which the volunteer is a member"; and (b) "for households other than the household of the volunteer worker or of related family members (that is, direct volunteering)" (ILO, 2023b, 37(d)). In practice, direct volunteering also takes the form of everyday routine care work which is integrated into people's daily lives.

### Box 1. What is volunteer work?

As defined by the 19<sup>th</sup> ICLS, **volunteer work** comprises non-compulsory work performed for others without pay.

Specifically,

- **work** means any production of goods or provision of services.
- **non-compulsory** refers to the fact that people must engage in volunteer work willingly, without civil, legal or administrative requirement, without being forced.
- **others** – the beneficiaries of goods and services – can be all types of organizations, institutions or businesses (formal or informal) or individuals who are not members of the volunteer's household or family.
- **without pay** means that people engaging in volunteer work do not have any expectation to receive a payment for time worked or work done, that there is no agreement to exchange work for income (cash or in-kind). Compensation of some costs related to participation in voluntary activities (e.g. transportation, accommodation, meals) and stipends are not considered payment as their objective is to facilitate engagement in work and not to remunerate it. However, if the amount of cash received as stipend is higher than one-third of local wages, then the work cannot be considered unpaid.

Moreover, the 19<sup>th</sup> ICLS makes clear that, for volunteer work:

- the appropriate reference period is four weeks.
- during the reference period, the volunteer work should be engaged in for at least one hour to be counted.

Source: <https://ilostat ilo.org/topics/volunteer-work/>; ILO 2013, paragraphs 19 and 21.



Volunteering, like unpaid care, comprises a vast array of different types of organizational arrangements, activities and beneficiaries (see table 1). UNV's typology of volunteering identifies five volunteering categories: mutual aid or self-help; philanthropy or service to others; participation; advocacy or campaigning; and leisure (UNV 2020). Cross-cutting with this typology is how volunteering varies with culture, history, politics and religion (Agerhem 2004). Voluntary work can be understood as fulfilling multiple needs: "Altruism and self-interest ... mingle as voluntary work becomes a way of pursuing personal growth (education, training, an economic livelihood, and future jobs) as well as a collective good." (Brown and Prince 2015, p.38).

The recent Outcome of the General Discussion Committee on Decent Work and the Care Economy from the 112<sup>th</sup> International Labour Conference, states that care work "consists of, among others, activities and relations that pursue sustainability and quality of life; nurture human capabilities; foster agency, autonomy and dignity; develop the opportunities and resilience of those who provide and receive care; address the diverse needs of individuals across different life stages; and meet the physical, psychological, cognitive, mental health and developmental needs for care and support of people including children, adolescents, youth, adults, older persons, persons with disabilities and all caregivers" (ILO 2024b, p.3). A useful distinction exists between direct and indirect care, where direct care involves interpersonal interactions, and indirect care creates the conditions for care (table 1).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth emphasizing that the established uses of the term "direct" attach quite different meanings to care and volunteering. When referring to care work, the term refers to *direct* interaction with the recipients, such as in the case of childcare services or preparing food. In this context, the alternative is "indirect (care work)" which refers to providing the services that support care work – such as doing cleaning work in a hospital or cooking school lunches – and that create the conditions in which to provide care. When used in the context of volunteering, "*direct* volunteer work" refers to voluntary work carried out for the benefit of households other than the volunteer's own (as outlined above). The directness of "direct provision" lies in its person-to-person approach, not mediated by an organization. Thus, direct volunteering, often termed "informal" or sometimes "unorganized" volunteering, contrasts with "organization-based" (or "formal") volunteering. In what follows we use the three terms "informal", "unorganized" and "direct" volunteering as synonyms. The term "informal volunteering" is in line with common usage among practitioners and in the literature and is often, for that reason, preferred also in this paper.

**TABLE 1.** Examples of unpaid care work and volunteering

		Care recipients			
		Children	Older persons	Persons living with illness or disabilities	Adults (other than self)
Unpaid care work	<i>Direct / Interactive care</i>	Changing diapers	Spoon feeding or bathing	Spoon feeding or bathing	Counselling
	<i>Indirect / Support care</i>	Preparing food, doing laundry, cleaning	Preparing food, doing laundry, cleaning	Preparing food, doing laundry, cleaning	Preparing food, doing laundry, cleaning
Unpaid volunteer work	<i>Direct / Interactive care</i>	Providing childcare or educational services	Providing home care or assisting in institutional care	Providing nursing assistance or companionship	Counselling or providing educational services
	<i>Indirect / Support care</i>	Helping build schools	Helping organize or finance elder care services	Helping organize or finance domestic services for hospitals	Helping distribute resources such as food

Note: These forms of work are not included in the system of national accounts. Care needs vary widely among care recipients, and this table outlines examples of some forms of care.

Source: Based on Folbre 2014, table 2.

## 1.2 Focus and structure of report

This report addresses the intersecting activities of unpaid care and volunteering. To date, there is very little analysis of volunteering and unpaid care together. O’Higgins (2022) notes that research on volunteering to date has predominantly – albeit not exclusively – focused on modes of volunteering by people in or from higher-income countries. Further, reviews tend to focus on quantitative studies, which are powerful in showing trends and relationships, in preference to qualitative studies, which can access meaning and experience (O’Higgins 2022; Mueller et al. 2023).

This paper reviews the often-gendered patterns of volunteering and unpaid care work, presenting the global trends identified using available data on these topics, before focusing upon qualitative research in lower-income countries. The qualitative literature offers insight into the “contradictions, contestations and plurality of ways of volunteering within and between places” that risk being overlooked (Baillie Smith et al. 2021).

A detailed quantitative study of volunteering and unpaid care work in Bangladesh then follows, which highlights the gendered patterns of volunteering and unpaid care work in this lower-middle-income country. The case study draws attention to the overlap between these two forms of unpaid work and the potential implications for individuals carrying out this often overlooked but valuable work.

Seeking to contribute to the intellectual project set out by Baillie Smith and colleagues (2021) of “understanding of volunteering as a relational, contingent and emergent process”, this paper puts volunteering and unpaid care under the same lens to use comparisons and acknowledge interactions between these forms of work. This work also draws out issues concerning the measurement of volunteering and unpaid care work, contributing insights to ongoing ILO discussions on a statistical framework to measure care and to the UNV-ILO partnership on the measurement of volunteer work. Future work would be enabled by Member States further increasing their measurement and analysis of volunteering and unpaid care work through relevant LFS modules and TUS collection, alongside the expansion of existing qualitative research into the nexus between these activities.

## 2. UNPACKING UNPAID CARE AND VOLUNTEERING

### 2.1 Global trends of unpaid care work and volunteering

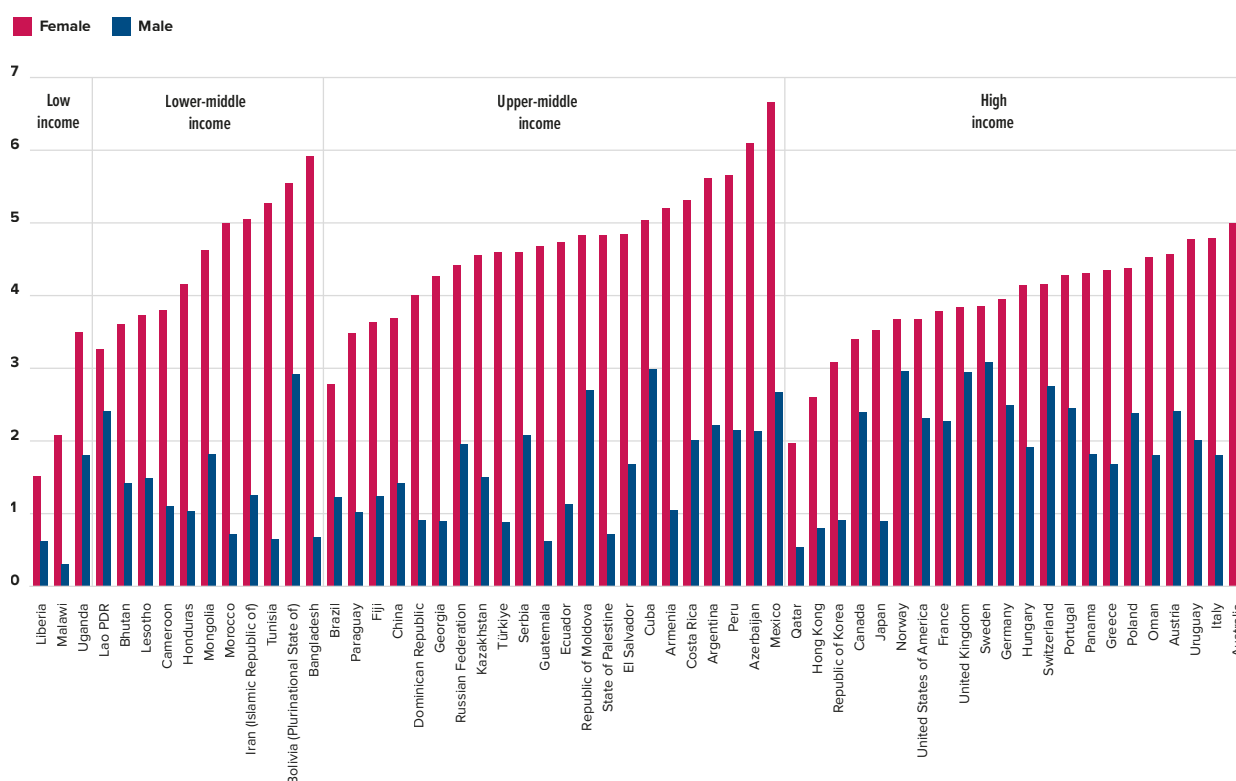
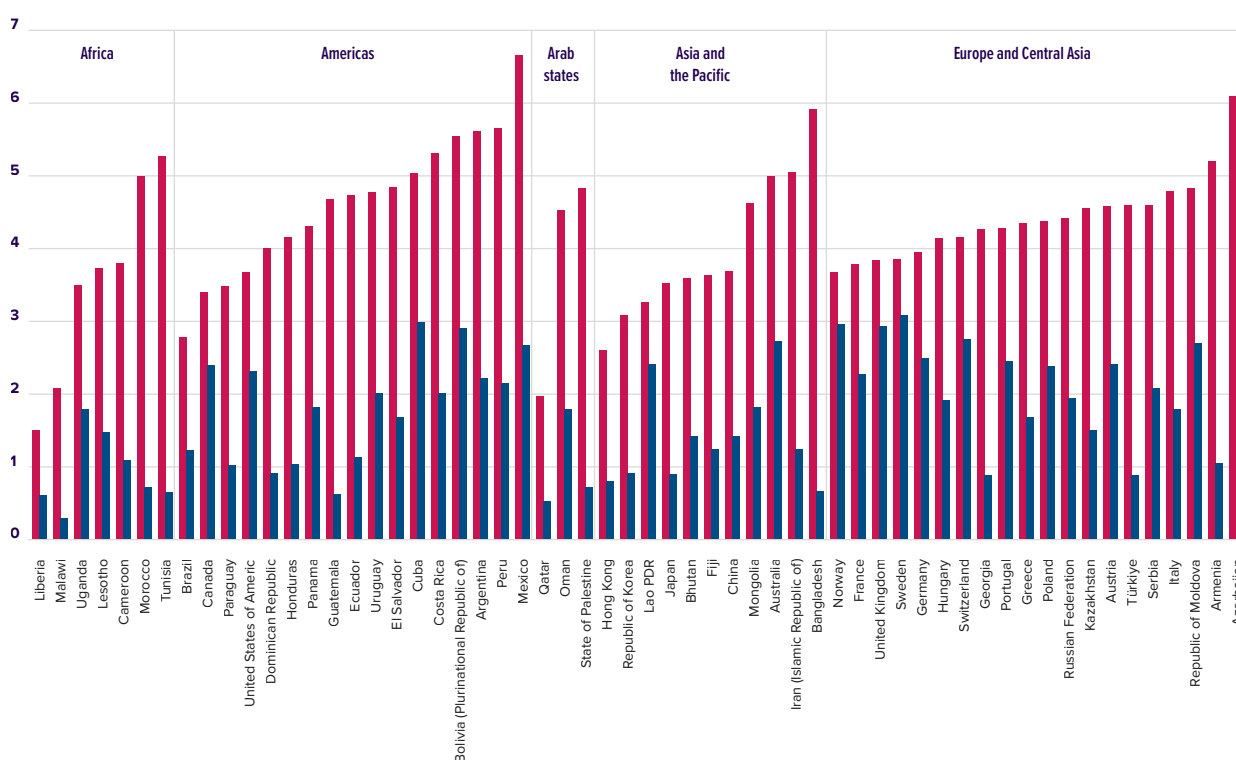
Recent emphasis on the importance of making unpaid care work and volunteer work more visible has led to a substantial increase in the collection of data regarding these two often overlooked forms of work (box 2). Notably, the availability of unpaid care time-use statistics and volunteer work data remains skewed, with many more high-income and upper-middle-income countries collecting relevant survey data compared to lower-middle-income and low-income countries.

#### Box 2. Measuring unpaid care work

Statistics on unpaid care work are derived from survey data on time-use, which quantifies how individuals spend their time over a short reference period. The United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) compiles statistics on unpaid care work at the global level, enabling cross-country comparisons of the time spent on unpaid care work by women and men. Time-use is classified according to internationally comparable guidance set out in the 2016 ICATUS, where unpaid care work encompasses all unpaid domestic work and direct care work carried out for household and family members (United Nations 2021). Crucially, in line with the current classification, any unpaid care work carried out for individuals outside the household or family is not included in the statistics for unpaid care work.

The format, reference period, and sample population of TUS data varies substantially, making true comparisons between countries challenging. The working definition of unpaid care work varies too. For instance, some time-use statistics factor in the travel time related to unpaid care work while others do not; others include care work carried out for other households as unpaid care, yet this would be expected to fall into the purview of volunteer work but outside the classification of unpaid care work outlined above.

Substantial differences between the time allocations of women and men to unpaid care work can be observed across countries of all income levels (figure 3a). It is well documented that the bulk of unpaid domestic and care work worldwide is performed by women, with recent estimates suggesting that women carry out three-quarters of unpaid care work globally (ILO 2018). This time commitment influences the time women have available for paid work, leisure and rest. The same data organized by region suggests that less intraregional variation exists among countries in Europe and Central Asia compared to other regions (figure 3b). Perhaps the most striking observation here is the lack of available comparative statistics for much of Africa, the Arab States, and Asia and the Pacific. The time spent by men on unpaid care appears to be lower in the aforementioned regions than in the Americas, Europe and Central Asia. However, more data is needed to draw a representative picture. Investment into the collection of time-use data in these regions is a crucial priority.

**FIGURE 3.** Time (hours per day) spent in unpaid care work population aged 15 and over, latest year**3a. By sex and country income group****3b. By sex and region**

Notes: The figure only includes surveys for which the age range of reported statistics is 15 years old and over to increase the legitimacy of the international comparisons. Countries in this sample are arranged by the five ILO regions and ordered according to the increasing average hours of unpaid care work carried out by women. Year of observation is as follows: 2022 for the United Kingdom; 2021 for Bangladesh, Georgia and Japan; 2020 for Switzerland; 2019 for Mexico, Mongolia, Republic of Korea and United States of America; 2018 for China, Kazakhstan and Uganda; 2017 for Brazil, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Lao PDR; 2016 for Cuba, Dominican Republic, Fiji and Paraguay; 2015 for Bhutan, Canada, Portugal, Serbia and Türkiye; 2014 for Cameroon, Greece, Italy and Russian Federation; 2013 for Argentina, Germany, Hong Kong, Poland, Qatar, State of Palestine and Uruguay; 2012 for Ecuador, Morocco and Republic of Moldova; 2011 for (the Plurinational State of) Bolivia, Norway, Panama and Sweden; 2010 for France, Hungary, Liberia and Peru; 2009 for Austria, Honduras and Islamic Republic of Iran; 2008 for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Oman; 2006 for Australia and Tunisia; 2005 for Malawi; and 2003 for Lesotho.

Source: Data for all countries sourced from UNSD database on unpaid care work, except for Bangladesh, which is calculated from the TUS 2021 microdata.

**TABLE 2.** Summary statistics of average hours of unpaid care work by country income groups and sex

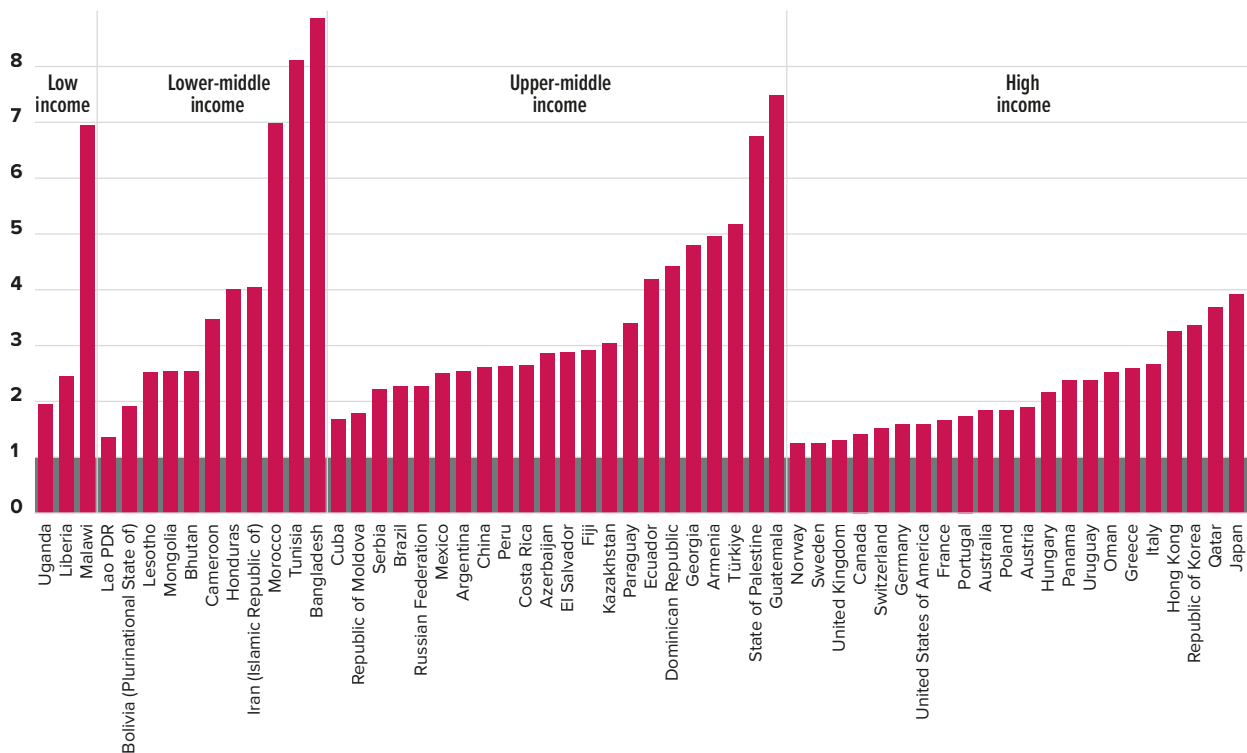
	Female unpaid care work average, hours per day (unweighted by income group)	Male unpaid care work average, hours per day (unweighted by income group)	Ratio of female-to-male unpaid care work average (unweighted by income group)
Low-income	2.4	0.9	3.8
Lower-middle-income	4.4	1.4	3.9
Upper-middle-income	4.7	1.6	3.4
High-income	3.9	2.1	2.2

Notes: Averages are the unweighted means of country statistics and are calculated across a restricted sample of just those surveys for which the age range of reported statistics is 15 and over to increase the consistency of the international comparisons. Countries in this sample are arranged by World Bank country income group and ordered according to the increasing level of unpaid care work carried out by women. See also the footnote to figure 3 (above) for the countries and survey year included in the sample.

Source: Data for all countries sourced from UNSD database on unpaid care work except for Bangladesh, which is calculated from the TUS 2021 microdata.

The amount of women's time spent in unpaid care work varies substantially within each income group. But the trend across lower-middle- and upper-middle-income country groups tends to be that more time is spent in unpaid care work compared to in high-income countries. The ratio of female unpaid care work to male unpaid care work is highest in lower-middle-income countries (table 2, figure 4). Compared to women in high-income countries, women in middle-income countries have larger unpaid care workloads, and they also are carrying out more unpaid care work in comparison to their male counterparts, and more when compared to high-income countries. The lack of data on unpaid care work for many lower-income countries frustrates the potential for gender-sensitive global analyses of unpaid care work.

**FIGURE 4.** Gender ratio of unpaid care work (female-to-male), by country income group, population 15 years old and up, latest year



Notes: The figure shows the daily ratio of female unpaid care work to male unpaid care work. The shaded section indicates where the gender ratio is equal to one or below; that is, above this shaded line, women spend more time than men performing unpaid care work. See also the footnote to figure 3 (above).

Source: Data for all countries comes from the UNSD database on unpaid care work except for Bangladesh, which is calculated from the TUS 2021 microdata.

Unpaid care provided through direct volunteering is excluded from the statistical definition of unpaid care work – which is, by definition, household- and family-based. While unpaid care work refers to domestic and direct care services provided for other household or family members, the operationalization of the definitions of household and family varies between countries, with implications for statistics on unpaid care and voluntary work (UNECE 2011, p.2). Family and household formations vary immensely, and some may be afforded different levels of recognition in national surveys, according to the national norms. In some survey instruments, the distinction between unpaid care work carried out for household or family members and unpaid care work carried out for those outside the household or family is blurred. While unpaid care work carried out for non-household or non-family members is still care work by nature, the statistical boundaries classify this as volunteer work in most cases as the recipients are outside of the household or family. The distinction between work that is for own-use and work that is for others is key to the ICATUS major divisions that underlie these statistical boundaries (figure 2). As a result, the unpaid care work provided as unpaid direct volunteering for other households is overlooked in calculations of unpaid care work. Harmonization of the statistical definitions of care work across surveys is needed to allow for more accurate comparisons across country contexts, and the 21<sup>st</sup> ICLS established this as a programme of work for the ILO (ILO 2024a, 22). Progress towards accurate and comparable measures of care work, in all its paid and unpaid volunteer-offered or household-based forms, is essential to bridging the statistical gap between overlapping forms of care work and volunteer work (box 3).

### Box 3. Measuring volunteering

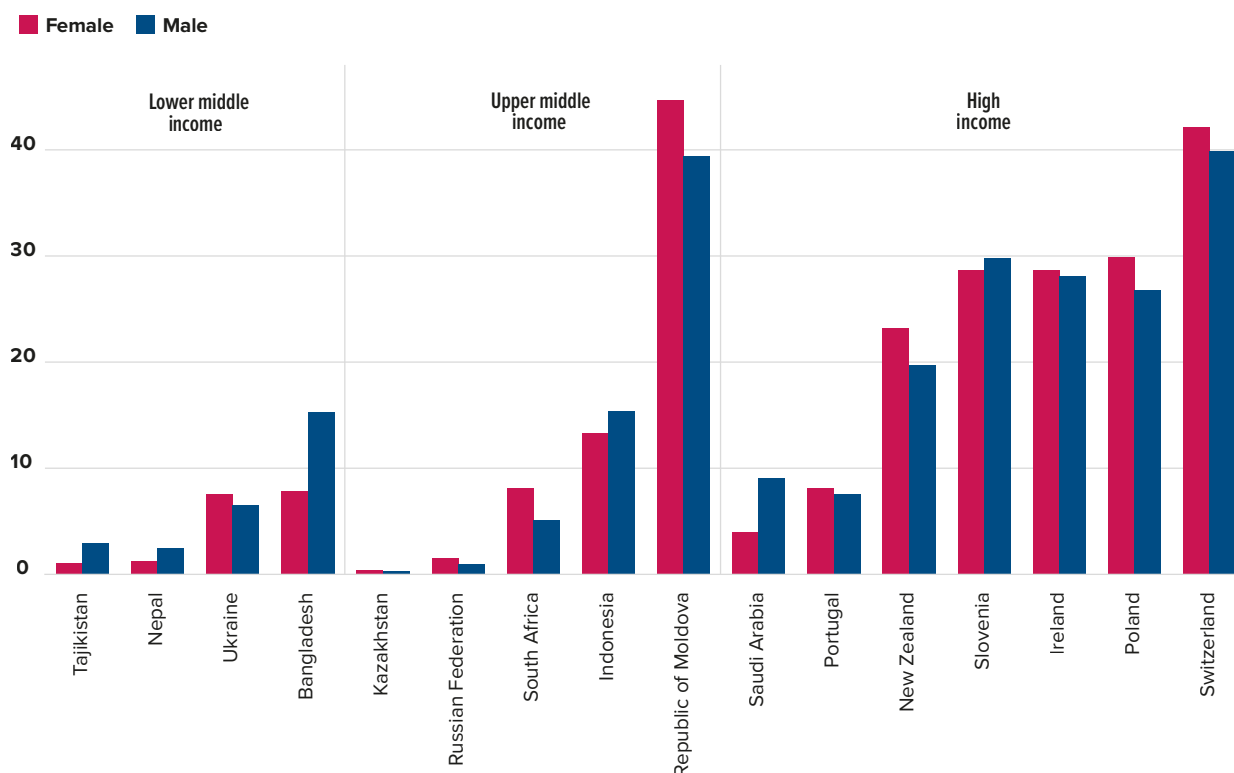
The ILOSTAT database collates statistics on volunteer rates, by sex, age and type of volunteer work. These statistics document the proportion of the population that has carried out volunteering work for at least one hour within a short reference period. Three main challenges arise from the existing data. First, there is no consistent reference period across countries even though the 19<sup>th</sup> ICLS has recommended a four-week reference period (see box 1 above). In practice, the length varies from one week to one year. Second, volunteer rates only go so far as to indicate how many individuals engage in volunteering, but not how much time is dedicated to this form of unpaid work. Third, information is not routinely available on either the type of volunteering – whether it is direct volunteering for other households or organization-based volunteering – or on the beneficiary of volunteer work. The distinction between types of volunteering tends to be available in the statistics for high-income countries, but it is much less prevalent in the available data for low- and middle-income countries. Fourth, data on the demographic characteristics of who is doing volunteer work is also limited, which constrains analyses of gendered and other patterns of volunteering. The implication is that statistics are lacking for the quantity of care work being carried out for other households under the broad definition of volunteering, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

An important additional challenge lies in the origins of the concept of “volunteering” that is currently used. Volunteering refers to “a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor” (UNGA 2002, annex 1.1). As much of the development and refinement of the concept of volunteering stems from the global North, some forms of volunteering that do not fit this framework may go unrecognized and unmeasured (Fadel et al. 2024).

Since 2017, the partnership between UNV and the ILO has sought to develop technical tools and guidance to foster more comparable and comprehensive statistics on volunteering. The ILO’s *Volunteer work measurement guide* on implementing the add-on module on volunteer work to national LFSs was published in 2021. The guidance, once operationalized through LFSs, will produce more harmonized and detailed statistics on national characteristics of volunteer work. The guidance suggests a conformity with the ICLS recommendation for a reference period of four weeks/30 days, as well as questions relating to the beneficiaries of volunteer work, the degree of organization, and time spent volunteering.

In recent years, attempts to better document the quantity of volunteer work being carried out have increased the availability of internationally comparable statistics on the proportion of populations that engage in volunteering activities. There is substantial variation in the degree of volunteering among the countries across country income levels (figure 5).



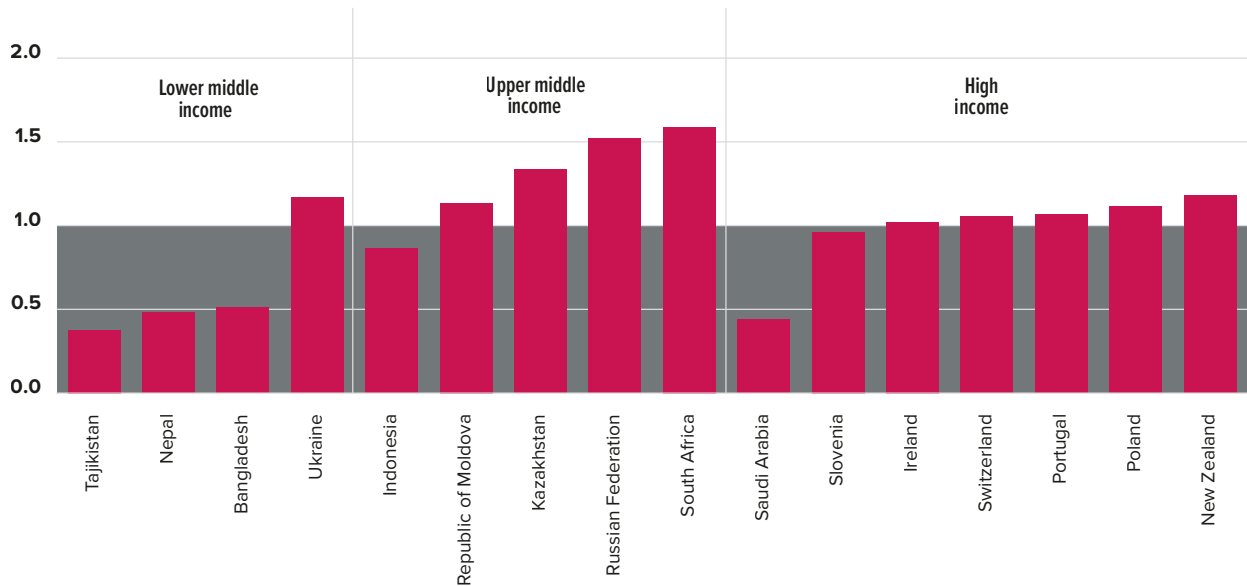
**FIGURE 5.** Volunteer rate by sex, four-week reference period, by country income group, latest year

Notes: The figure shows the proportion of the female and male populations at least 15 years old who engaged in at least one hour of volunteering during the four weeks preceding the survey. Included is a restricted sample of just those national surveys for which the reference period is four weeks to increase the consistency of the international comparisons. Countries in this sample are arranged by World Bank country income group and ordered according to the increasing female volunteer rate. Year of observation is as follows: 2022 for Bangladesh and Poland; 2021 for Kazakhstan and Ukraine; 2020 for Switzerland; 2019 for Slovenia; 2018 for Indonesia, Nepal, New Zealand, Portugal, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia and South Africa; 2016 for Tajikistan; 2015 for Republic of Moldova; 2013 for Ireland.

Source: Data for all countries is the latest available year and sourced from the ILOSTAT database on volunteering.

There tends to be a greater prevalence of volunteering in high-income countries compared to lower-middle- and upper-middle-income countries. Apart from Saudi Arabia, the volunteer rates of males and females in high-income countries are relatively similar within each country. In contrast, among the lower-middle-income countries displayed here, the male volunteer rate tends to be much higher than female volunteer rate (Ukraine is an exception).

The gender ratios in volunteering rates vary distinctly according to country income group. Nearly equal volunteering rates are evident between men and women in high-income countries, where the gender ratio is close to 1.0 for nearly all countries in the (albeit small) sample (figure 6). Interestingly, contrasting trends are observed for lower-middle-income countries where male volunteer rates tend to be higher, compared to upper-middle-income countries where female volunteer rates tend to be higher. Similar trends of a gender gap in volunteering in lower-income countries were found in the *2022 State of the World's Volunteerism Report*, and one suggested explanation was the effect of women's larger household care work responsibilities in these countries on their availability to volunteer (UNV 2021, p. 54). Further investigation is needed into the potential barriers to volunteering for women in lower-income countries, with a specific focus on how volunteering interacts with other substantial care work responsibilities and regional social norms.

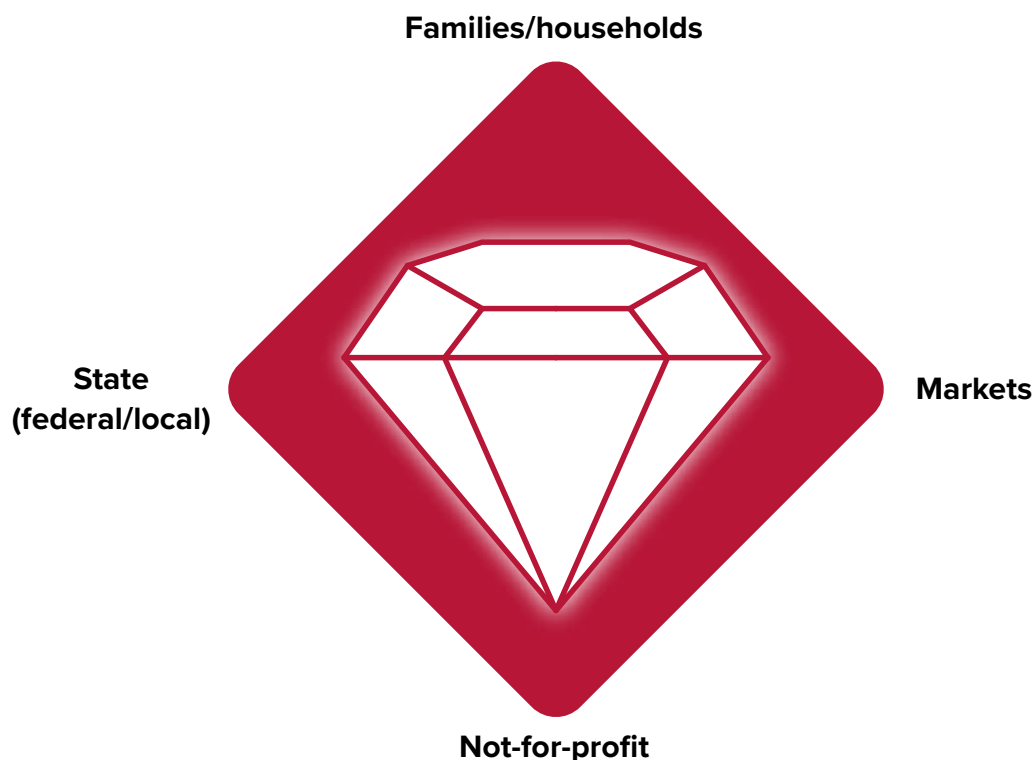
**FIGURE 6.** Gender ratio of volunteer rates (female-to-male), by country income group

Notes: The figure shows the female-to-male volunteer rate. The shaded section indicates where the gender ratio is equal to one or below; that is, above this shaded line the volunteer rate for women exceeds that of men. See also the footnote to figure 5 (above).

Source: Data for all countries is the latest available year and sourced from the ILOSTAT database on volunteering.

## 2.2 Societal value: meeting societal needs

Both unpaid care and volunteering can contribute to meeting various societal needs, needs that might go unmet without these forms of work. Shahra Razavi's care diamond neatly describes the key institutions involved in meeting care needs (figure 7). The diamond identifies the key providers as: the state (both local and national); markets; not-for-profit organizations; and families and households (Razavi 2007). Unpaid care work in one's own home falls within the "families/households" category, whereas volunteer work could take place within any of the other three under the auspices of the state, the private sector and not-for-profits (here, this can be understood to include direct volunteer work). Note that "not-for-profit" is a heterogeneous cluster that includes the community, voluntary, non-market or non-profit sector (Razavi 2007). Volunteer care work can also take place directly (or informally), from an individual, family or household to others beyond that family unit.

**FIGURE 7.** The care diamond

Source: Razavi, 2007, p.21.

Unpaid care work makes a substantial societal contribution in an arena that is sometimes mistakenly seen as disconnected from society and the economy. Many feminists have pointed out this mistake. Nancy Folbre describes care work as a “crucial dimension” of social reproduction which enables “individuals, families and society itself to continue” (2014, no page). Nevertheless, this crucial work is “largely unrecognized and undervalued” (Cadesky et al. 2019, no page).

The state, market and not-for-profit organizations are unable to meet the level of need that exists in many settings. This is often linked to a combination of low government spending (at times associated with a weak tax base), high level of need, and a low-income population (which caps access to paid-for private sector services). While some social needs are routinely met by families and the household or volunteers as a matter of preference (as is often the case with parenting), others might be better served by institutions. However, austerity policies have led state services to recede in many countries, so new gaps in provision have emerged. “As elsewhere in the world, volunteers in East Africa are nowadays filling in for services that in the 1960s and 1970s were regarded as the responsibility of the state” (Brown and Prince 2015, p.35; also Barford and Gray 2022). This raises fundamental questions about how volunteer work relates to paid work and the delivery of statutory services; this, however, is beyond the focus of this report.

Volunteer work is part of the development agenda. As Miranda (2011) and Brown and Green (2015) explain, at times the role of the volunteer can assume the function of intermediary between development programmes and the local community. Miranda (2011, p. 6) states, “The volunteer is now a formal category within development projects, with responsibility for community engagement.” Volunteers make these societal contributions through a plethora of roles in diverse organizations (box 4).

#### Box 4. Volunteer work in East Africa

“Volunteering is attractive both to African nationals and to outsiders, and volunteers can be found in many organizations including hospitals, churches, schools, orphanages, youth centers, nongovernmental organizations, government health clinics, and research organizations, and in a range of development, environment, welfare, and health projects and interventions. The volunteer is a prominent figure in East African development, public health, scientific research, religious organizations, and society.”

*Source:* Brown and Prince, 2015, p.31.

The term and statistical category of “volunteering” encompasses a broad range of activities carried out in a variety of forms for a range of human and non-human beneficiaries. These activities include mutual aid, self-help, formal service delivery and other civic participation; volunteer activities are done for the general public good, and of free will, with monetary reward not being the principal motivating factor (UNGA 2002, appendix 1). To be counted as volunteer work, the time spent volunteering should amount to at least one hour within a short reference period, which is recommended as four weeks (box 1 above). While much volunteering is formalized through facilitating organizations or networks, volunteering that is direct and unorganized predates the formal forms and historically has been a crucial means through which community members have reciprocally given and received support and assistance when needed (Einolf et al. 2016). Analysis of time-use data suggests that direct volunteering is carried out at a higher rate than formal voluntary participation (Henrickson et al. 2008; Windebank 2008). But direct volunteering is easily underestimated in some surveys because volunteers do not necessarily consider the everyday practice of these activities as “volunteering” and do not think to mention them when queried. (Einolf et al. 2016). That said, an estimated 70 per cent of all volunteering is direct (or informal) (UNV 2018).

Because of its informal, and consequently “less-visible-to-outsiders” nature, much less research has been directed towards understanding the motivations and value of direct (or informal) volunteering, especially in low- and middle-income country settings. A positive link has been identified between educational attainment, socio-economic status and participation in organization-based (or formal) volunteering (Egerton and Mullan 2008). Intriguingly, existing data on direct volunteering suggest that the same relationship does not exist between direct volunteering and indicators of deprivation; direct volunteering rates are often higher among more marginalized groups (Dean 2022).

Focusing on the dominant paradigm of volunteerism as a formalized process can overlook the vital value of direct volunteering in communities and societies. Direct volunteering is “generally embedded in different kinds of social practices, perhaps related more to interdependencies in community life” (Dean 2022, p. 537; box 5). In fact, a recent study with refugees engaged in volunteering in Uganda found that the formal/informal (or direct) volunteering distinction did not resonate with participants, so more inclusive terms were used (Fadel 2024). Diary-based time-use data analyses can more accurately assess who does direct volunteering, how much, and how this relates to care work.

In terms of direct volunteering, Beckwith and colleagues (2023) discuss young Palestinians’ voluntary societal contributions, which range from forms of political engagement to “community practices of mutual support” (Beckwith et al. 2023, p.202). Other direct forms of volunteering that support community development and well-being include “helping out neighbours, caring for older people or people with disabilities, supporting charities, assisting new immigrants, training sports teams, and administering schools” (Miranda 2011, p.6). Notably, in humanitarian situations, local volunteers are often the first responders, and they typically remain when international volunteers might be advised to leave. Local volunteers may continue their work without wider support systems and while facing dangers themselves (Thomas et al. 2018a, b).

### Box 5. Volunteer work in Indonesia

“Among the Indonesian people, for example, volunteerism is a long engrained tradition in people’s daily lives. Some of this is inspired by religious tenets. In Java people cite one approach, particularly in the rural areas, of practicing [sic] the custom of *gotong royong* “mutual assistance” in activities such as wedding ceremonies, funerals and house construction. Members of the community, youth and adults, provide volunteer assistance to their neighbours. The construction of social facilities – roads, bridges and worship buildings – are frequently carried out together, with people contributing person hours, expenses and facilities. In Toraja of South Sulawesi, *arisan tenaga* refers to mutual assistance in cultivating the farmland of one villager or a different group. The landowner provides only food for the volunteers, but in return, the landowner donates money to the group’s cash fund.”

Source: Agerhem 2004, p.9.

Care and volunteering intersect in responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which triggered a major demographic shift and soaring care needs. HIV/AIDS is often associated with long-lasting and chronic disability, often leading to a surge in demand for care that falls disproportionately to unpaid women due to the sometimes-rigid gendered divisions of labour (Folbre 2014; Akintola 2006). Meanwhile, high levels of HIV among women have curtailed their capacity to provide care (Folbre 2014). Volunteer work also contributes to community home-based care for people living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa, and this is actively encouraged:

“government rhetoric ... aimed at soliciting assent for volunteer service and which consists of romanticized and a-historicized constructs that are presumed to be shared by those targeted by the message. This initiative is therefore fuelled and supported mainly by the state. In this context, ‘volunteerism’, ... is supposedly ‘remunerated’ and ‘encouraged’ by the state” (De Wet 2012, no page).

Turning to health more broadly, community health workers are, by virtue of often being unpaid or underpaid, volunteers who provide essential services. Some estimates suggest that 60 to 85 per cent<sup>5</sup> of community health workers are unsalaried in lower-income countries – despite long-standing calls for fair compensation (Ballard et al. 2022). With insufficient qualified health professionals, some healthcare systems rely upon the voluntary labour of community health workers. This takes various forms, including volunteers providing health education and health promotion, detecting cases and treating common conditions in the community (Woldie and Yitbarek 2021). Community Health Volunteers successfully provide widespread, basic healthcare to many more people than otherwise could be reached. In the case of Nepal, female health volunteers deal with reproductive health and child health (box 6).

<sup>5</sup> The figure of 60 per cent refers to unsalaried community health workers in low-income and lower-middle-income countries; the figure of 85 per cent refers to Africa.

### Box 6. The contribution of female community health volunteers in Nepal

“In the 1980s, Nepal started a programme of female community health volunteers, commonly known as *mahila swoyemsewika*, which means ‘female volunteer’. In the early days, their roles were to support family planning, especially by distributing birth control pills and condoms. ... Female volunteers are behind the reduction in child and maternal mortality through programmes like immunisation, integrated management of childhood illnesses, family planning, and preparing pregnant women for delivery. Every governmental healthcare programme prefers to use the female community health volunteers to achieve the targets for their community-based programmes, owing to the trust they have developed over time by selflessly volunteering their services to the community. Their contribution to the community has been relentless.”

Source: Kandel and Lamichhane 2019, p. e19.

In terms of meeting societal needs, “Volunteer work is of significance in a time when social safety nets are weak and there are ever increasing demands on welfare organisations” (Niyimbanira and Krugell 2017, no page). Disasters are an acute example of this (box 7). Tanjeela and Rutherford’s (2018) study of volunteering and disasters in Bangladesh identified the importance of involving female volunteers. They explain that female volunteers more “fully comprehend” the issues that come with gender identity when in public, in particular in evacuation centres and relief queues. Engaging female community volunteers ultimately encouraged more women, teenage girls and children to use cyclone or evacuation centres, while also increasing disaster awareness among women in general. It is possible that diverse and inclusive volunteering programmes can offer similar benefits to other vulnerable groups.

### Box 7. Volunteer care work in conflicts and emergencies

“The contexts in which the volunteers worked varied, from recent and protracted armed conflicts, to civil unrest, to urban violence. According to the context, work included basic health promotion, first aid provision, delivering first aid training for communities, blood donation, and dead body management. For example, some volunteers in one context worked in communities of internally displaced persons to provide warm meals or distribute non-food items such as blankets and cash or vouchers, while in another situation volunteers worked in schools, community centres, and delivered life-saving messages and information house-to-house. In another context, volunteers provided ambulance services, often travelling into areas marred by urban violence in order to reach a person in need of assistance.”

Source: Cadesky et al. 2019, no page.

### 2.3 Intrinsic value: personal identity and skills

Volunteering and unpaid care work can be intrinsically valuable to the individuals undertaking these activities. However, this benefit is neither automatic nor inevitable. For some, the choice to do this work may be primarily driven by social pressure and obligation. A review of the literature found that “volunteering can enhance the lives of beneficiaries and volunteers”, and sometimes leads to improved health and well-being (O’Higgins 2022, p.10). In East Africa, “in a context of high unemployment voluntary work can confer value and identity to those on the margins of the labor market” (Brown and Prince 2015, p.37). Meanwhile, the prevalent view that caregiving is a woman’s role underpins the high female-to-male ratios of time spent on unpaid care work. Among all of the regions in the world, the Arab States report the highest female-to-male unpaid care work ratios: 19:1 in Jordan; 12:1 in Egypt; 7:1 in Palestine, alongside the lowest regional rate of female participation in paid employment (Assaad et al. 2020).

The intrinsic value to volunteerism and unpaid care also relates to the meaningful activity of caring for, or otherwise providing for, others. In research on the United Kingdom, Dean (2022) captures this with other synonyms such as “helping”, “kindness”, and “neighbourliness”. In Sri Lanka it is *Dana* or the practice of giving and receiving (box 8). The personal significance of giving and receiving care should not be a reason for this unpaid work going unrecognized, underappreciated or disproportionately requested from certain demographic groups.

#### Box 8. Volunteerism in Sri Lanka

“*Dana* or ‘the practice of sharing and giving’ is the most dominant motivation for volunteerism and remains the bedrock of volunteerism in the country. *Dana* is not only behavioural but also philosophical, since it liberates a person from *tanha* or craving for material and non-material possessions and desires. In the life cycle of any person there are significant ups and downs, birth, sickness and death, joy and pain, victory and defeat, and success and failure. In all such circumstances there is an imperative and compulsive need for mutual support and collective spirit. In Sinhalese this is called *duka –sepa beda hada geneema*, meaning ‘sharing of and reflection on adversity and joy’. As much as sharing it is also important to see each event in its right perspective especially in terms of *anitya* or impermanence of all things animate and inanimate.”

Source: Agerhem 2004, p.10-11.

Personal identity is another part of the intrinsic value of unpaid care and volunteering. As Brown and Green (2015) explain, volunteering is, in part, work on the self. For young, educated East Africans, professionalized volunteering offers a means to “fashion themselves as good citizens and as self-directed agents of community transformation” (no page). Similarly, research with BRAC community healthcare volunteers in Bangladesh, found that volunteering confers a recognized identity within the community. This may be especially valuable to the women recruited to this programme, who were often from low-income households and whose main identity was previously as a “housewife”. The conferring of positive identity to community health volunteers was less apparent for those who were inactive, irregular or low performing in their roles (Sarma et al. 2020). It is notable that volunteers valued having a new identity in addition to “housewife”, perhaps illustrating how unpaid care in the home is so often undervalued.

Working collectively towards a shared cause can also make volunteering meaningful and fulfilling, while reinforcing one’s agency and sense of self. In East Africa, in volunteer work, “self-fashioning and the desire to occupy a valued identity coexist with a desire for public recognition and presence, and for a sense of participation in something collective and meaningful” (Brown and Prince 2015, p.38). Young climate activists who had the opportunity to contribute to making films about climate change and climate action (Jones et al. 2023) represent one example of how these elements can productively coexist for volunteers.

Different forms of volunteering and unpaid care are treated and valued differently according to whether they are formal or direct, the type of activities involved and who is doing this work. Baillie Smith et al. (2017) highlighted this uneven valuing and consequently called for a change in how volunteering and development is commonly framed – the global South as host to volunteers from the global North. This framing has endured despite the notable number of volunteers from the global South. For instance, research about the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement found that those in paid professional roles were most prominent, followed by international volunteers, with local volunteers receiving the least attention and celebration. The authors explain how these constellations are shaped by “long-standing interests and investments in particular configurations of agency and authority in humanitarianism and development” (Cadesky et al. 2019, no page). In fact, the knowledge and skills of local or community volunteers need to be valued and recentred in relation to that from the global North, as this can rectify long-standing exclusions and inequalities while contributing to the sustainability of volunteer activities (Baillie Smith et al. 2022a). Perhaps as a reflection of such volunteering hierarchies, “local volunteering” in the global South and informal volunteering more generally have received very little attention (Cadesky et al. 2019; Dean 2022).

In East Africa, volunteering as a means of “self-development” includes forming new identities through new knowledge, new skills and new networks (Brown and Prince 2015, p. 38). An example of this is the research by Kasteng and colleagues (2016) with community health workers in Uganda. These volunteer community health workers reported that new skills were among the top reasons they initially volunteered and were among the main things that they gained by volunteering (table 3). Unfortunately this research is not gender disaggregated, so it is hard to tease out how motivations and value might differ between women and men. Community-based care networks span Latin America and can reinforce skills among rural and indigenous women. For example within the wider community care movement in Latin America, women in Chiapas, Mexico, learned to prepare their own herbicides and were supported with incubators to enable bird breeding to support the community during COVID-19 (UNDP et al. 2022).

**TABLE 3. Benefits of volunteering**

Reasons for volunteering	Most valued aspects of volunteering
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ helping improve community health (66%)</li> <li>■ gaining medical knowledge and skills (34%)</li> <li>■ gaining community trust (20%)</li> <li>■ learning to treat own children (16%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ learning to diagnose and treat sick children, watching them regain health and thereby helping the community (73%)</li> <li>■ obtaining training and new medical knowledge (59%)</li> <li>■ garnering appreciation and respect from the community (48%)</li> <li>■ gaining opportunities for social interaction (18%)</li> <li>■ learning to treat own children (11%)</li> </ul>

Source: Based on research with 45 community health workers in Midwestern Uganda, by Kasteng et al., 2016.



## 2.4 Economic value: income and employment

While unpaid care and volunteer work are, by definition, unpaid, this does not mean that economic value is not created. Nor does it mean that there are no economic benefits to the individuals doing this work. The contributions to social reproduction – which underpins the very existence of any labour market – are discussed above. This section turns to how unpaid care and volunteering relate to incomes and employment.

In terms of remuneration, unpaid care is, by definition, unpaid. However, it may be associated with a division of labour within the household whereby other household members bring in goods or an income (thus enabling the person doing unpaid work to do this work). Often unpaid care makes up part of a portfolio of work activities, typically leaving less time available to earn a living. It is estimated that women do 76.2 per cent of all unpaid care, which is 3.2 times more than men do. In terms of hours and minutes, this equates to women spending 4 hours and 25 minutes per day on unpaid care work, and men doing 1 hour and 23 minutes. Of course this varies widely within and between countries. If valued at the hourly minimum wage, then this would account for 9 per cent of global GDP – or US\$11 trillion (purchasing power parity, 2011 prices) (ILO 2018).

For organized voluntary work, it is well-established that there is often some form of remuneration. This has led at times to a blurring of the line between volunteering and low-paid work (Lewis 2015). In Eastern Uganda, young people's portfolio livelihoods may include volunteering "facilitated" by payments for participation or transport (Barford et al. 2023). Some volunteers receive monthly stipends that are reported to exceed what some employees are paid within the same organization. The term stipend supposedly renders volunteers' labour as "noneconomic", which is particularly relevant for refugees who often face legal barriers to wage-earning employment, setting up a business and accessing finance (ILO 2023a; Ward 2022). Note that the ICLS defines volunteer work as receiving stipends and payments that are less than one third of local market wages (ILO 2023b, paragraph 37b), in practice some "volunteering" is remunerated at higher levels. This arrangement may enable volunteer organizations to sidestep labour regulations that apply to employees but not to volunteers (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015).

Some volunteer roles appear rather similar to employment. In South Africa, the volunteer role of "community health worker" has evolved to have titles, job descriptions, and some form of remuneration in the form of a stipend. The stipend may be irregular and unsystematic, but if paid by the state it could amount to US\$100/month (South African rand 1,000) in 2012 prices (De Wet 2012). In East Africa, the collection of stipends, allowances and transport reimbursements, can enable volunteers to "scramble together a precarious livelihood" and thus "the distinctions between voluntary and paid labour are perhaps particularly blurred" (Brown and Prince 2015, p.36-37).

The matter of volunteer stipends raises a complicated set of challenges. For instance, volunteer work does not always provide sufficiently, which can be a reason for ceasing to volunteer or dissatisfaction with the role – this has been observed among men seeking to make a living for their family by volunteering (Kasteng et al. 2016; Okech et al. 2024; box 9). Conversely some volunteers have to ensure their incomes don't rise too high and render them ineligible for other forms of support (Ward 2022; box 10). Further, the divergent offers of volunteer organizations can lead to a hierarchy in which it is more desirable to volunteer (Lewis 2015). Volunteering may be differently rewarded within the same organization too, according to the status of the role performed (Ward 2022).

Direct volunteering and volunteering for smaller, local organizations, is much less likely to be accompanied by any form of income, including stipends. This can reduce potential volunteers' willingness to volunteer for local organizations, as observed in research in Korogocho, Kenya (Lewis 2015). In many contexts, direct volunteering can be understood as part of a strategy to collectively "get by", this might include activities such as offering advice or visiting a house-bound neighbour (Dean 2022). In fact, much of the research

on direct volunteering is called “mutual aid” or “self-help”, and it is easily missed in studies focused on volunteering (Dean 2022). Crucially, varied practices of remuneration of volunteers can produce multiple hierarchies between volunteers, places and types of volunteering (Baillie Smith et al. 2022b).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, young people in Indonesia and Nepal contributed to and benefited from reciprocity with neighbours and the wider community – something that was especially important given the insufficient social protection and patchy support for youth employment. Some of this took the form of an extension of the unpaid care work within the household/family, as meals or rice were shared with neighbours for example (Barford et al. 2024; Barford et al. 2021b). Direct volunteering tends to emerge to meet a specific community need (Lewis 2015). While this may not result in payment, it can enable the social reproduction of a community and build the foundations for reciprocal support in the future. This can apply to disasters and other moments that require community resilience, as seen in women’s leadership in community care in Argentina across the decades (Sanchís 2020; box 11). Meanwhile during the COVID-19 pandemic, Mexican sorority networks built the resilience of Indigenous and rural women (UNDP et al. 2022).

### **Box 9. Men, expectations and volunteer incomes among refugees living in Uganda**

“A male refugee volunteer typically finds himself vulnerable to social pressures to provide for the family, both nuclear and distant, since he is viewed as being in a more favourable economic situation. These expectations ignore intrinsic difficulties already facing refugee volunteers, such as unequal or delayed remuneration of stipends, and the types of language and labour inequalities outlined earlier. This reality has led to situations where some families are no longer keen to see their children participating in volunteering activities, as they see them as unbeneficial both in terms of producing immediate income as well as leading towards paid employment in the longer term.”

*Source:* Okech et al. 2024, no page.

### **Box 10. Treading a fine line with volunteer work, Syrian refugees in Jordan**

“With limited opportunities, and with ambiguous information surrounding the work permit process at the time of this research, many volunteers described how they felt like they had to rely on, and also ‘compete’ with, other Syrians looking for work with aid organisations as ‘volunteers’.

However, how they were classified in aid organisations’ databases also played a role: they worried that if they appeared to make ‘too much money’, they would no longer qualify as ‘vulnerable’ and would be ineligible for such volunteer programmes as ‘aid benefits’.

It was therefore this constant hustle to find income, and try at the same time to not appear to be making ‘too much money’ that in itself was a particular form of ‘hidden’ labour; and something that also contributed to volunteers’ insecurity because they were aware of their double, confusing position as workers and beneficiaries in the aid sector.”

*Source:* Ward 2022, no page.

**Box 11. Undervalued female leadership of community care in Argentina**

Argentina “has a substantial history of territorial social networking, of solidarities, of organizational forms and leaderships in slums and marginalized communities; and of the noteworthy protagonism of women in those experiences. These networks emerge forcefully in times of economic or social crises. We might say that economic catastrophes in our continent coexisted with the relevant role of organizations and women’s leadership at local levels.”

“During the 1980s Latin America was...hit [hard] by the so-called ‘debt crisis’, and this period was therefore known as ‘the lost decade’ due to its extremely negative impacts on productive activities, employment, and social conditions in the region.”

“[Women] organized canteens, kindergartens, communal clothing exchanges, school support, etc. At the same time, though, these actions reinforced their role as caregivers beyond the limits of their households, as an extended function projected onto the neighborhood.”

More recent fieldwork has found a notable “invisibility of this collectivization of care, which surpasses the limits of households and families, [and] possibly results from the fact that these are practices and experiences pertaining to extremely impoverished and overcrowded social strata.”

*Source: Sanchís 2020, p.17-19.*

When labour market demand is low, volunteering can be a viable alternative to employment and training (or reskilling). In many lower-income countries where there are not enough jobs, some young people who are not in education employment or training (NEET), are engaged in unpaid care work and volunteering (O’Higgins 2017; Barford et al. 2020, 2021a; Cieslik et al. 2022). At the same time, volunteering can provide a longer-term route out of NEET status and is often promoted as such (O’Higgins 2020). In fact, organized volunteering has become a prominent and prestigious activity in much of rural East Africa, which is especially interesting for people who are unemployed and seeking work experience and new connections (Brown and Prince 2015).

The relationship between labour market demand and formal volunteering is illustrated among community health volunteers for BRAC in Bangladesh. Sarma and colleagues (2020) describe the struggle to find volunteers who met the recruitment criteria. This difficulty was explained by the generally positive story of two decades of socio-economic gains for rural Bangladeshi people, meaning that there are more opportunities for paid work for people who might otherwise volunteer with BRAC. The consequence of this has been lowering the recruitment criteria to meet the demand for volunteers.

Various studies have found that volunteering can improve the chances of participants finding future employment and/or is sometimes associated with increased wages (O’Higgins 2022). The future employment prospects associated with formal volunteering are a recognized motivation for volunteering, whereas unpaid care work is often associated with worsening employment prospects despite the skills involved in this work. However, more research is needed on direct volunteering and job prospects. In the United Kingdom direct volunteering was associated with working class communities “getting by”, whereas more organized volunteering might be associated with “getting on” or upward social mobility and be considered a more middle-class activity (Dean, 2022). It is well-established that for many, a much sought-after “proper job” may not be available and as such, the goal that motivates some volunteers may be unlikely or impossible (O’Higgins 2017; O’Higgins et al. 2023b; Baillie Smith et al. 2022c; Barford et al. 2020).

Future job prospects are often an extrinsic motivator for volunteering (O'Higgins 2020; box 12). For volunteer community health workers in both Bangladesh and Uganda, the possibility that volunteering could lead to a better job in the future was important (Sarma et al. 2020; Kasteng et al. 2016). In Bangladesh, the experience, skills, new confidence and community connections that resulted from community health work did sometimes lead to new opportunities. For instance, several study participants were elected to the local council due to their popularity, while others used the experience to boost their CVs or to start a business (Sarma et al. 2020). Conversely, a 2016 study in Uganda by Kasteng and colleagues noted the importance of meeting community health workers' expectations to retain them as trained volunteers and run a programme that is sustainable in the long-term.

### **Box 12. Volunteering as a route to longer-term employment**

“For the young educated people aiming to assume volunteer roles in Kenya and the public servants working in Tanzanian rural districts who are also involved in small-scale, non-governmental organizations, volunteering is ... a formal position at the margins of the development establishment from which a move into some form of longer-term employment is a hoped-for possibility.”

Source: Brown and Green 2015, no page.

## **2.5 Limits to value**

As discussed above, volunteering and unpaid care can bring various forms of value. However, it is crucial not to idealize or overestimate these forms of value. When looking to volunteering and unpaid care to solve societal issues, volunteers and people performing unpaid care may face challenges in their work including the magnitude of the challenge compared to the level of support they receive for their activities. This can result in care deficits, which have been particularly acute in East and southern Africa. The hollowing out of a generation by HIV/AIDS has left “many older persons to provide care for their children’s children without someone to care for him or herself in old age”, and women often bear the brunt of this (Schatz and Seeley 2015, p. 1185).

Unpaid care work for one’s family or household may often preclude women from engaging in volunteering outside of the home. Unpaid care includes those tasks that create the preconditions for personal caregiving, such as preparing meals, washing clothes and dishes, and shopping. Much of this indirect care is more time-consuming and takes more effort in developing countries (compared to developed countries) due to the combination of inadequate infrastructure and fewer labour-saving devices in the home (Razavi, 2007; box 13).

In Bangladesh, the gendered responsibility for household work means many women are discouraged from working in the public sphere. Within households, women have different levels of privilege and self-determination about their work, in accordance with their marital status: “Within household gender dynamics, daughters-in-law are always more underprivileged than daughters, and divorced or widowed daughters are more neglected” (Tanjeela and Rutherford 2018, no page). Thus care work can block volunteering and other forms of work, yet it must also be remembered that “unpaid care work makes the reproduction of the volunteer [and paid] workforce possible” (Cadesky et al. 2019).

**Box 13. Care in lower-income countries**

“Carrying out both direct and indirect care is even harder in the global South in the face of [a] lack of basic amenities such as piped water to households, and essential public services including health, education and early childhood support. The drudgery associated with care is most serious for women living in poverty, who are unable to lessen the care load by investing in labour-saving technologies, paying for services from the private sector, or employing household help.”

Source: Chopra and Sweetman 2014, p.411-12.

Other forms of identity also play a role in access to volunteering. Notably, the South African Volunteer Activities Survey shows that Black people do nearly twice as much volunteer work as any other racial group (Niyimbanira and Krugell 2017). In Kenya and Tanzania, the professionalization of organized volunteering has led to restrictions on who can volunteer (Brown and Green 2015). In this context, volunteering opportunities – or the lack thereof – could reinforce existing socio-economic inequalities.

Several factors underlie the unequal access to volunteering opportunities among young refugees in Uganda (Okech et al. 2024). As volunteer work offers access to skills development and a chance to earn a living, this means that uneven access to volunteering can exacerbate socio-economic inequalities among people who have been displaced and are struggling to find work. Young refugees from South Sudan, Burundi, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo were found to have differential access to volunteering, according to language, gender and level of education. As such, it is important that volunteers are not seen as a homogeneous group but are instead understood as being influenced by how their intersectional identities play out in the particular context in which they live and work. The ways in which demographic characteristics translate into volunteering-related inequalities are tabulated below (table 4).

**TABLE 4. Inequalities in volunteering amongst refugees living in Uganda**

Characteristic	Mechanism
<b>Language</b>	Language shapes opportunities to volunteer and outcomes of volunteering participation among young refugees in Uganda. Refugees from the dominant ethnic/linguistic groups were most likely to gain short-term volunteering work as translators or research assistants – opportunities that were supported by a stipend.
<b>Gender</b>	Young men and boys get disproportionate access to volunteering opportunities compared to young women and girls. In part this is because girls’ unpaid domestic work prevents them from working long hours as a volunteer. There is also fear of sexual and gender-based violence, which could harm female volunteers especially.  Typically, girls and women have less freedom of movement than boys and men when moving with and outside of settlements. Owning a bike or motorbike can enable access to more opportunities from organizations and the private sector. Women may have less access to the places where volunteer opportunities are posted and less flexibility to participate.
<b>Education</b>	Formal education boosted young people’s opportunities to engage in programmed volunteering, because education acts as a benchmark for knowledge acquisition and skills transfer.

Source: Based on research by Okech et al., 2024.

For those who do volunteer, other barriers and forms of discrimination might come into play. Returning to Bangladesh for a moment, female community health volunteers face social and cultural barriers from the community in the course of their work. This makes it difficult or even impossible to complete tasks (Sarma et al. 2020). Tanjeela and Rutherford (2018) describe how gendered power structures undermine the capacity of Bangladeshi women, discourage their involvement and undervalue their work. This points to a need for offering greater institutional support to organized volunteers, possibly by training local leaders and raising community awareness (Sarma et al. 2020).

Among volunteers, the types of work may vary with gender and age. For instance in humanitarian response situations, the tasks completed by volunteers for the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies tend to be split by gender; women focus on care and health promotion, and men fill front-line emergency response roles such as first aid and ambulance driving (Cadesky et al. 2018, 2019). Similarly, for volunteers in climate change adaptation programmes in Bangladesh, men were overrepresented in leadership roles while women were allocated tasks that are thought to be less important. Men also took on the task of resource distribution – which involves money. In general, social and political institutions largely undermined and undervalued women’s contributions, therefore discouraging female involvement (Tanjeela and Rutherford 2018; box 14). As demographic transitions progress and elderly populations grow, including in lower-income countries that are predominantly youthful, intergenerational care volunteering and elderly people caring for one another are likely to increase. This growing care need requires a reconsideration of the new types of research that may be required to understand the needs, dynamics and responses (this is likely to involve unpaid care including by volunteers), including how best to provide sufficient quality care.

Despite these constraints and difficulties, volunteer work can also offer a chance to redress discrimination and social inequalities through cross-cultural dialogue and exchange. At times volunteering provides a distinct space for “men and women to make small moves outside their confined gender roles that are produced and reproduced in their communities” (Cadesky et al. 2019, no page). The creation of such alternative, parallel spaces can offer a way to disrupt existing hierarchies (Proefke and Barford 2023).

#### **Box 14. Gendered volunteer roles in climate change adaptation programmes in Bangladesh**

“... women in this [climate change adaptation] program were mainly involved in early warning dissemination, first aid service delivery, and evacuation of the elderly, pregnant women, and children during the pre-disaster stage and in the post-disaster stage return to their homes. In many cases, female volunteers were left with the sole responsibility for early warning dissemination. This was particularly a large burden during emergency periods, when every household within their community needed to be visited. Women were generally not active in the other two committees of work that focused on relief and rescue, particularly the relief committee as this is socially considered men’s work. Female volunteers are often required to take care of injured or sick people during any disaster, and to do this, they are provided with first aid training and toolkits.”

*Source:* Tanjeela and Rutherford 2018.

For some, volunteering and unpaid care can be unrecognized, extractive and even exploitative. The lack of recognition of volunteer work is observed in online volunteering. Li and colleagues (2022) share the example of the Reddit network of communities, which is run by volunteer moderators who themselves are frustrated that they are not recognized or supported in their work. Ward’s (2022) study of Syrian refugees in Jordan shares examples of volunteers describing volunteering as “a fraud and exploitation by all the [non-governmental organizations] NGOs because it is requested from the volunteer to perform tasks assigned

originally to the staff.” Meanwhile, some community health workers in Uganda reported how they dislike that work sometimes interrupts them at inconvenient times (including at night), and at times their out-of-pocket expenses are not reimbursed (Kasteng et al. 2016). Care work can also be substantially undervalued, in part because women who are of lower status than men in most societies are seen to “do it naturally” (Chopra and Sweetman 2014, p.410). These challenges contribute to how unpaid work is experienced and the value it can bring.

## 2.6 Summary

- Women do more hours of unpaid care work than men in all country income groups, from low-income to high-income countries. There is a general trend that the gender gap shrinks as countries become wealthier. Note that there is considerable variation within country income groups, and just a small set of countries was analysed.
- Whether men or women do more volunteer work varies by country. In high-income countries, volunteering rates are relatively equal between genders. While female volunteering rates tend to be higher than those of men in upper-middle-income countries, the opposite trend emerges for lower-middle-income countries. Efforts to identify global volunteering patterns are frustrated by limited data availability, especially for lower-income countries. More data is needed to tease out the gendered patterns of volunteering, reaffirming the importance of the UNV-ILO partnership focusing on the measurement of volunteering.
- Volunteers are crucial to delivering a development agenda. Much volunteer work is about doing the tasks that need to be done where no other means of doing so presently exists. This may be due to the limited mandate, capacity and interest of some of key actors: the state, the private sector, the third sector, or families and households. Note that all these actors may engage volunteers. In delivering this work it is important for women and men to volunteer, in part to promote gender equality and in part as this can improve volunteers’ engagement with different demographic groups within the community. In some settings, some volunteer roles are preserved for one gender, such as the female community health volunteers in Nepal or particular volunteer leadership roles in Bangladesh that are dominated by men.
- Volunteer work can be intrinsically fulfilling for volunteers, as it can enable meaningful participation towards important causes, can offer another form of identity within the community, and is associated with personal development. The identity and value awarded to volunteering can differ according to the type of volunteering, the activities involved, and whether the volunteer is a national or an international volunteer. One study found that some Bangladeshi housewives appreciated that being a volunteer offers a new and additional social identity. More gender disaggregated research could expand on the nexus between the identities of volunteer and unpaid carer.
- There are economic benefits to certain forms of volunteering. While volunteering is categorized as unpaid work, in practice many volunteers receive some form of payment associated with volunteering. For some volunteers, such stipends become an important source of income. Where there are strong norms of having a male breadwinner, men might feel pressured to provide for their families with volunteer stipends. Volunteering can broaden future work opportunities, whereas unpaid care work done largely by women is often associated with a narrower set of opportunities. As labour market demand increases and people move more quickly into employment, it may become harder to recruit volunteers.

- Unpaid care work and volunteering have associated challenges. For instance, demand for unpaid work may exceed the number of available providers, leaving a care deficit with unpaid carers and volunteers sometimes feeling stretched, undersupported and underresourced. These forms of work also are susceptible to – and may even perpetuate – wider societal inequalities and result in favouring particular groups, such as men over women, and race- or language- based preferences. Still, there is scope to imagine volunteering as a space where more inclusive and equitable interactions can be forged.



## 3. A CASE STUDY OF UNPAID CARE AND VOLUNTEER WORK IN BANGLADESH

### 3.1 Case study data and context: Bangladesh

Digging deeper in the specific dynamics of volunteer work and its overlap with unpaid care work, this section presents a case study analysis of Bangladesh. The intention is to take a step towards redressing the dearth of analyses of volunteer work in low- and lower-middle-income countries compared to higher-income countries. Bangladesh was also selected due to the availability of recent, relevant datasets allowing us to explore volunteer work, unpaid care work, and their interaction.

Social norms that designate productive breadwinning activities to male household members and reproductive care work to women remain salient in Bangladesh, though a growing acceptance of women's employment accompanied the rapid growth of the garment industry reliant on female labour (Kabeer 2000; Solotaroff 2018). Despite increasing female labour force participation and rapid improvements in young women's educational attainment, household care work remains firmly in the female domain, with 87.9 per cent of all time spent on unpaid household domestic and care work carried out by women (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UN Women 2023). Strong gendered expectations of roles are compounded with norms of female seclusion that have tempered women's mobility and activities outside of their own households (Amin 1997; Ali and Syed 2018).

Reflecting these gender norms, compared to other countries considered in section 2.1, Bangladesh has the highest female-to-male ratio of time spent in unpaid care work, but also one of the lowest female-to-male ratios of volunteer rates. In Bangladesh, women spend a much greater proportion of their time in unpaid care work than do men, while men participate in volunteering at a much higher rate than women. Two datasets enable us to explore these characteristics here. The first dataset, the Bangladesh LFS 2022, contains a module on volunteer work that enables us to identify whether, and how much, volunteer work individuals have done in the four weeks preceding the survey. As volunteering is not necessarily a daily, or indeed weekly, activity, the four-week reference period used to identify volunteering activities in the LFS data gives an important indication of the population's volunteering habits. Even this longer reference period may not capture how Bangladeshi volunteering patterns change in exceptional circumstances, such as during periods of emergency disaster response (Tanjeela and Rutherford 2018).

The second dataset, the Bangladesh TUS 2021, is the first and only national TUS carried out in Bangladesh. The survey was conducted with financial and technical support from UN Women, within the framework of their Making Every Woman and Girl Count programme (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UN Women 2023). TUS data is a valuable resource for understanding forms of work that are traditionally overlooked in an LFS, either because they are unpaid or too intermittent to be captured (Hirway and Jose 2011). In doing so, time-use statistics provide an essential and detailed insight into unpaid care work, as well as volunteer work. Investment into regular TUS data collection is a crucial means to meeting SDG Target 5.4, which aims to "recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work". However, as the global trends in section 2.1 highlight, many countries, especially lower-income countries, still lack national TUS data.

The Bangladesh TUS uses a diary recall method, with a reference period of 24 hours, recording the specific activities individuals carry out during the day. This shorter reference period means that TUS data, while more detailed, only captures a snapshot of activities in a specific shorter period. However, when used alongside data from an LFS with a module on volunteer work, the combination of the two datasets offers valuable insight into the specific dynamics of unpaid volunteer work and care work – and the blurred lines between the two – in the lower-middle-income country context of Bangladesh.

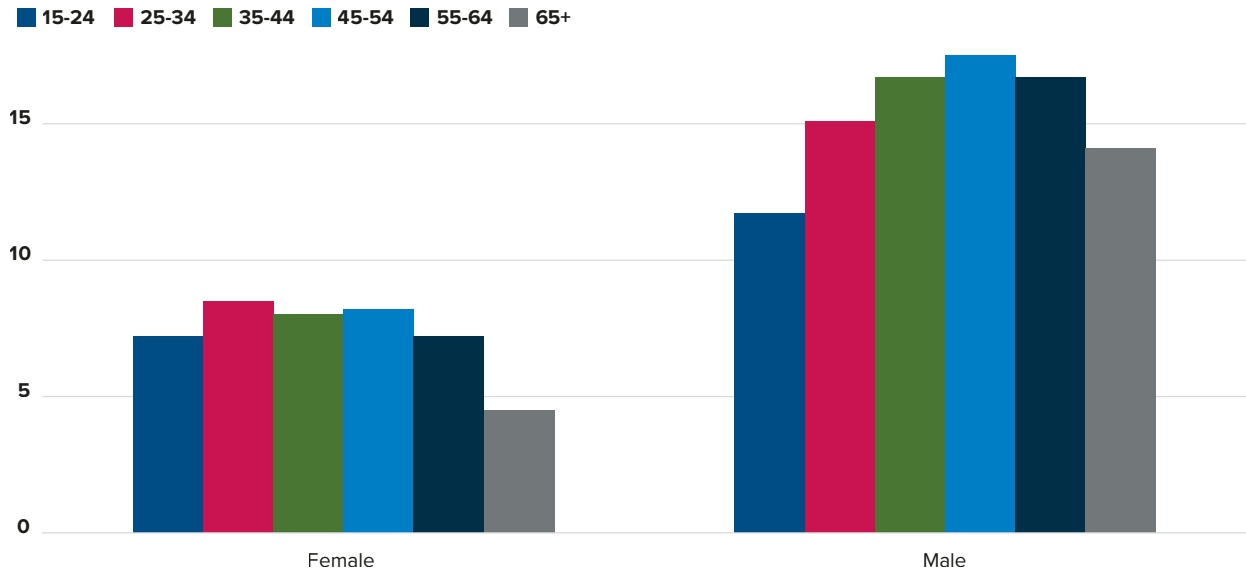
## 3.2 Analysis of volunteering and care work in Bangladesh using the LFS

The descriptive statistics on volunteering and unpaid care work show the volunteer rate (the proportion of the total population who engaged in at least an hour of activities voluntarily and without pay for persons outside their household and family in the previous four weeks); the statistics also show the average time in hours spent volunteering during the month among just those who volunteered, based on LFS data (appendix A). Taken together, these statistics give a broad overview of the characteristics among both women and men associated with spending more time volunteering. The statistics on household care work are derived from questions that ask whether and for how long during the previous week respondents produced services for use by their household or family. The services include cooking, cleaning and laundry, shopping, caring for dependent children and adults, and other activities. The statistics presented here show the participation rate, as well as the average hours per week participating individuals spend on unpaid care work.

As shown in the earlier analysis, men in Bangladesh volunteer at nearly twice the rate of women, with 15.1 per cent of men carrying out voluntary work in the four-week reference period compared to 7.7 per cent of women (appendix B). Despite the higher male volunteer rates, the average monthly time spent volunteering is very consistent between men and women on average, with female volunteers carrying out an average of 4.5 hours of voluntary work per month compared to male volunteers' 4.6 hours. Though men volunteer at a much higher rate, the mean time spent by those who do volunteer is similar among women and men, at around 4 hours and 30 minutes. The TUS data explored later will elaborate on how the specific types of volunteering carried out by these men and women differ substantially by gender, and how they are accompanied by differing time commitments to other forms of unpaid work.

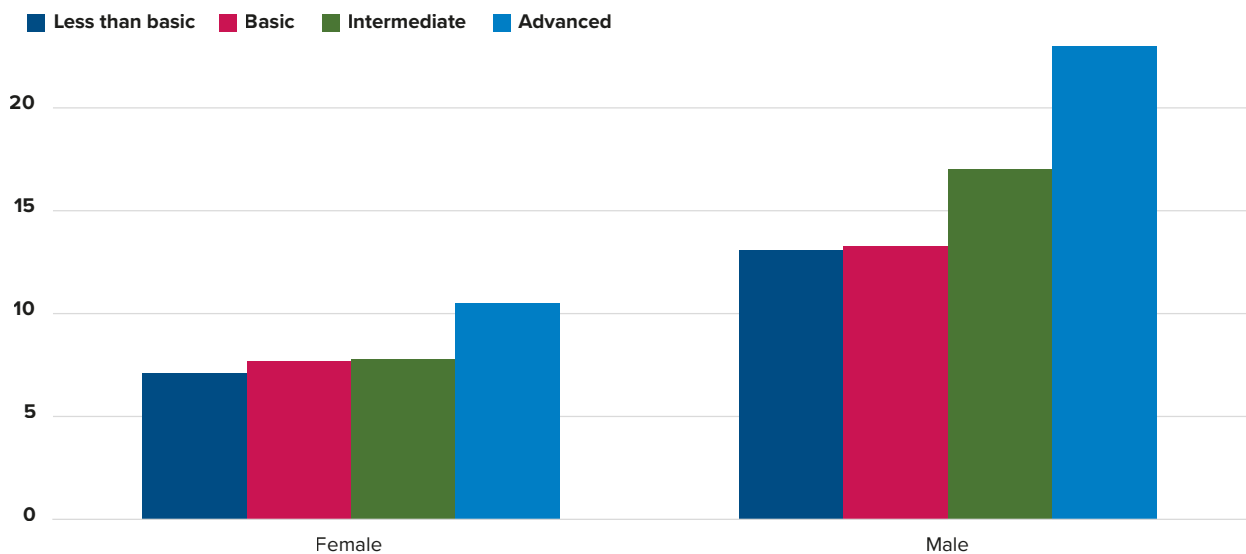
Among both men and women, age group has an inverse U-shaped relationship with volunteer rates (figure 8). This aligns with international age patterns that show young people 15- to 24-years-old are less likely than older age cohorts to engage in volunteering (O'Higgins 2020). For women, the 25- to 34-year-old age group has the highest volunteer rate at 8.5 per cent, while the oldest cohort of 65+ has the lowest, at 4.5 per cent.

Among men, volunteering is least prevalent among the youth who are 15- to 24-years-old, with a volunteer rate of 11.7. Volunteering is most prevalent among those 45- to 54-years-old at 17.5 per cent. Interestingly, volunteers in the age groups with lower volunteer rates across the total population tend to spend more time, on average, volunteering each month compared to other age groups. Time spent volunteering is higher, for both men and women, for the youngest and oldest age groups. While volunteer rates are lower among women aged 65+, they spend an average of 5.4 hours each month volunteering. Men in this age group dedicate an average of 5.6 hours per month to volunteer work. A similar inverse U-shaped relationship exists between participation in, and time spent doing, unpaid care work for both men and women.

**FIGURE 8.** Volunteer rate of women and men in Bangladesh by age group

Source: Based on microdata from the Bangladesh LFS 2022.

Increasing educational attainment is positively related both to volunteering rates and time spent volunteering for women and men, though the variation is greater for men (figure 9). The volunteering rate is 10.5 per cent for women who have attained an advanced education compared to 7.1 per cent for women with a less than basic level of education. Among men, 23.0 per cent of those with advanced education volunteered, compared to 13.1 per cent of their counterparts with a less than basic level of education. Female and male volunteers with advanced education spend an average of 5.6 hours and 6.2 hours volunteering each month, compared to 3.9 and 3.4 hours respectively for those with less than basic education.

**FIGURE 9.** Volunteer rate of women and men in Bangladesh by education level

Source: Based on microdata from the Bangladesh LFS 2022.

Regarding activity status among women, those who are unemployed have higher volunteer rates – at 11.3 per cent – than those who are employed – at 10.1 per cent. Time spent volunteering among female volunteers is highest for those in education and in unemployment, at an average of 5.7 hours per month. Interestingly, these women outside the labour force have a lower engagement with volunteering, both in terms of a lower volunteer rate of 6.7 per cent and a lower average time, at 4.2 hours per month, spent in volunteering. In contrast, men who are in employment volunteer at a higher rate, at 16.5 per cent, but dedicate 4.2 hours on average to these voluntary activities each month. While men outside the labour force volunteer at a lower rate, at 9.0 per cent, these individuals dedicate more time to volunteering, totalling an average of 7.1 hours each month.

For women, increasing household wealth has a negative relationship with the volunteer rate; just 6.2 per cent of those from the highest household wealth quintile volunteered compared to 9.2 per cent of those from the lowest household wealth quintile. In contrast, men from the highest household wealth quintile have the highest volunteer rate across the wealth spectrum, at 16.6 per cent, and within this group dedicate an average of 5.1 hours to volunteering.

Turning to marital status, the descriptive statistics show that single women both volunteer at a higher rate and spend more time volunteering than their married and divorced/separated/widowed counterparts. Of single women, 8.2 per cent volunteer, compared to 7.7 per cent of married women; these groups dedicate 5.7 hours and 4.3 hours to volunteering respectively. For men, the volunteer rate among married men is higher, at 16.2 per cent, compared to 12.2 per cent for single men. However, unmarried male volunteers still spend more time each month in voluntary activities, at 5.2 hours compared to 4.5 hours. Both men and women who are separated, divorced or widowed volunteer at lower rates than their married and single counterparts.

Looking at the presence of young children 3 years old or below in the household, women with no young children volunteer at a slightly higher rate, at 8.0 per cent, compared to the 6.8 per cent of women with young children who volunteer. For men, the opposite trend emerges, with men from households with a child present volunteering at 15.7 per cent compared to 14.9 per cent for those without young children. For both men and women, volunteers without young children dedicate slightly more time to volunteering activities compared to those who do have young children.

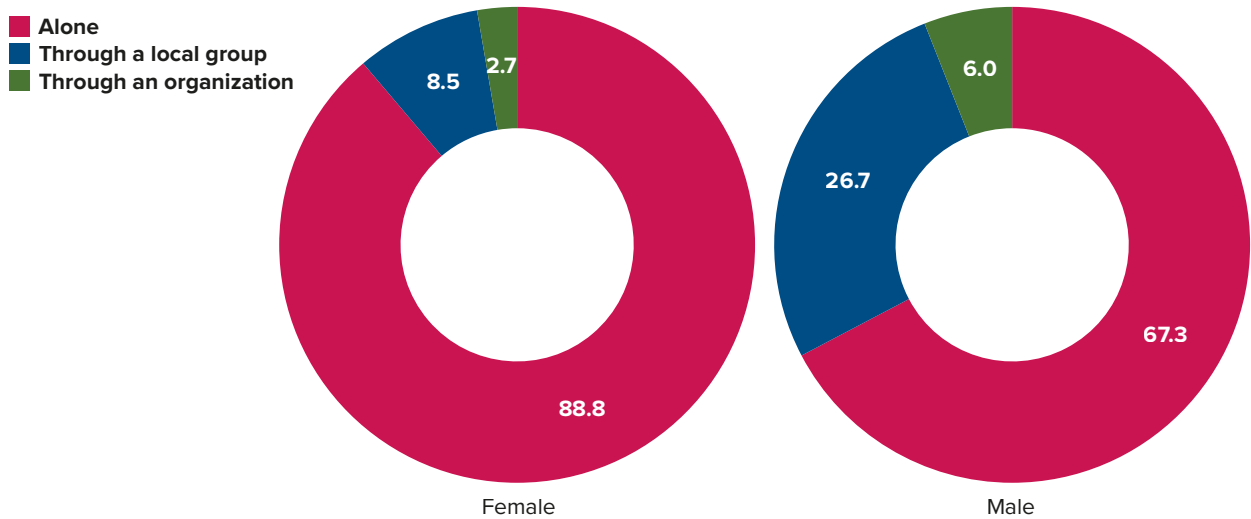
Finally, looking at the relation with the household head, both men and women who are the household head have the highest volunteer rates, at 16.7 per cent and 10.2 per cent respectively. Meanwhile, volunteer rates are much lower for those who are living with a non-relative. Turning to time spent volunteering, female volunteers who are the child of the household head spend considerably more time in voluntary activities compared to others, at 5.6 hours.

We can better understand the nature of volunteering by looking at two aspects of participation: the mode of volunteer work, which shows us the extent to which volunteer activities are formalized; and the type of volunteer work, which more specifically shows us the activities carried out by volunteers. This analysis is conducted with a sensitivity to gender, highlighting how the volunteering experiences of men and women differ.

Looking at the statistics the dominant mode of doing volunteer work, for both women and men, is direct volunteering without the support of a local group or organization (figure 10). We also see that the degree to which volunteering is formalized differs between women and men; for women, 88.8 per cent of voluntary work is direct, as opposed to being carried out through a local group or organization. By contrast for men, 67.3 per cent of volunteering is carried out alone, with a much higher proportion of the volunteer work carried out through a local group (26.7 per cent) or an organization (6.0 per cent). The gender gap in the nature of volunteer work carried out by men and women in Bangladesh is substantial; over 20 percentage points more of the volunteer work carried out by men is formalized through a local group or organization.

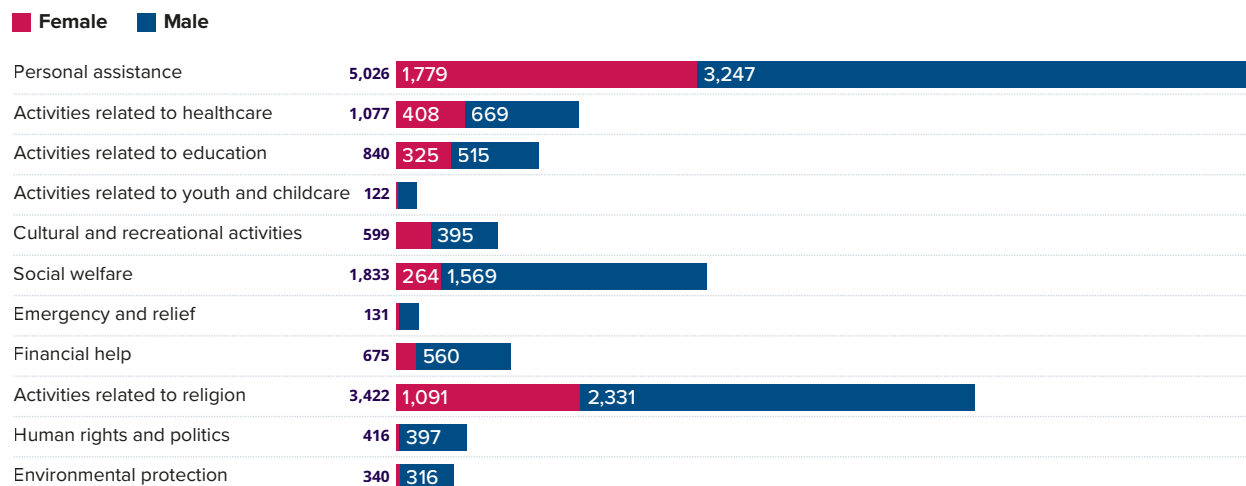
Male volunteers are engaging at a much higher rate in formal volunteering, which is more likely to offer opportunities for remuneration, social networking development, and the development of skills that are in demand in the labour market.

**FIGURE 10.** Mode of volunteer work, percentage of volunteers by sex



Source: Based on microdata from the Bangladesh LFS 2022.

**FIGURE 11.** Type of volunteer work, estimates of population participation by sex (thousands)

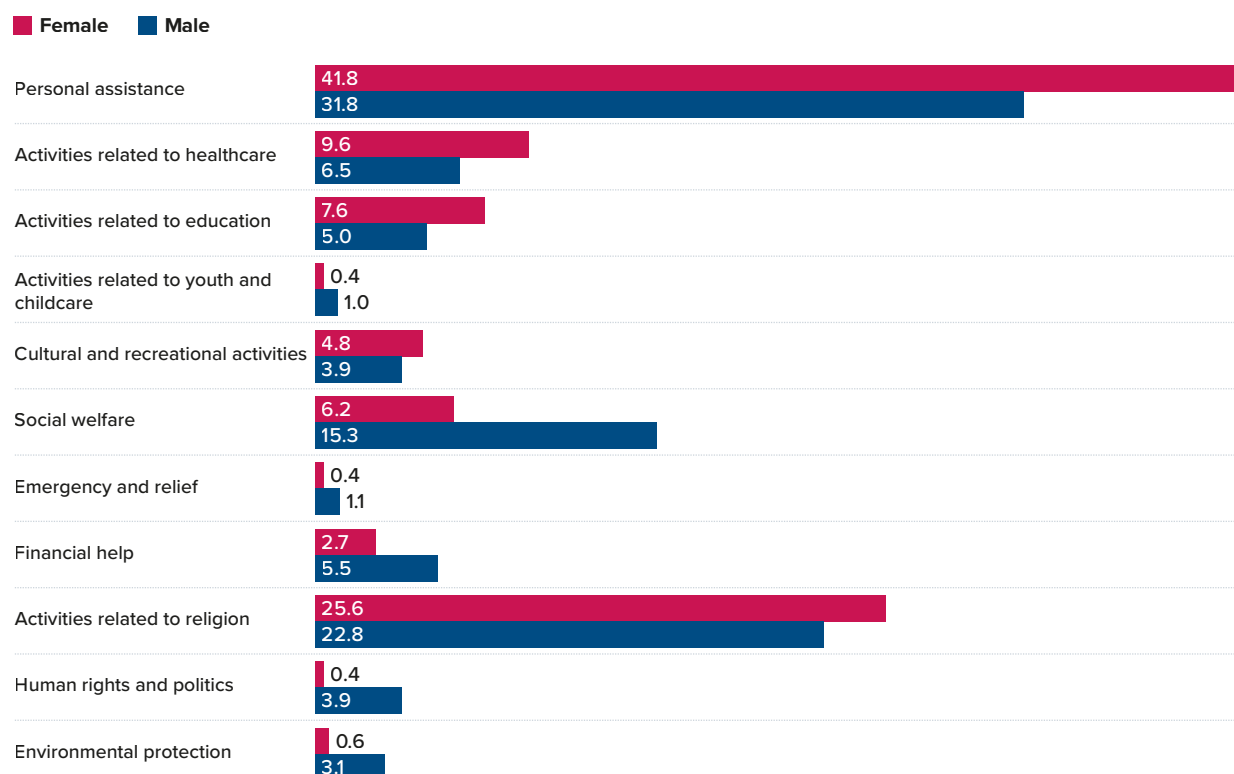


Source: Based on microdata from the Bangladesh LFS 2022.

Figure 11 shows the estimates of the number of women and men participating in different voluntary activities each month, reporting the estimated number of people who have carried out at least one hour in each of these activities over the last month. For example, 5.0 million people performed at least one hour of voluntary work giving personal assistance to someone outside their household and family, of which 3.2 million (64.6 per cent) were men and 1.8 million (35.4 per cent) were women. The figure shows that the most prevalent type of volunteer work is personal assistance. This is followed by activities related to religion, in which 3.4 million people carried out volunteer work, and social welfare volunteering, accounting for volunteer work from 1.8 million people.

The figure shows not only the variation across different types of volunteer work, but also how the proportion of volunteers engaging in different activities is gendered. With men accounting for 65.9 per cent of total volunteers in Bangladesh, the remaining 34.1 per cent of volunteers who are female engage in certain activities at much higher rates than others. Women are slightly overrepresented in activities related to education (38.7 per cent) and activities related to healthcare (37.9 per cent), as well as personal assistance. Meanwhile, male participation in human rights and politics (95.5 per cent) and environmental protection (92.8 per cent) is much more prevalent than female participation.

**FIGURE 12.** Type of volunteer work, participation as a percentage of total volunteering by sex



Source: Based on microdata from the Bangladesh LFS 2022.

Female volunteers are more concentrated in voluntary activities that overlap with care work. Looking at the distribution of male and female volunteers across different activities, 41.8 per cent of women's voluntary activities fall into the personal assistance category (figure 12).

Higher proportions of female volunteers are also found in activities related to healthcare and education. While personal assistance still accounts for the largest proportion of male volunteering activities (31.8 per cent), male volunteering is more diverse, with much larger shares of male volunteers engaging in social welfare (15.3 per cent) and financial help (5.5 per cent) activities compared to female volunteers. These statistics only indicate participation for at least one hour in voluntary activities and do not reflect differing amounts of time spent across them. This can be better explored using TUS data, as elaborated in section 3.3.

The descriptive trends of the population's participation in volunteering can be explored in more detail with econometric models, which demonstrate the association between different factors and time spent volunteering, while holding the effect of other variables constant. Two models are used to explore factors associated with volunteering in general across the total population, and factors associated with spending more time volunteering among those who are volunteers.

The descriptive statistics, summarized in appendix B, suggest that different factors may be driving whether someone volunteers at all and how much time they spend volunteering. The two separate models allow us to interrogate these factors in turn.

A binary probit model is employed here to take the analysis a little further. This model examines how likely people are to volunteer based on the various characteristics included in the descriptive analysis above as well as an additional continuous variable looking at household size. The model looks at the overall population 15 years old and above and then separately at women and men. The results are reported as marginal effects (appendix C), that show how much the likelihood of volunteering changes (in percentage points) with respect to a change in a specific characteristic, while keeping all the other characteristics included in the model constant. For instance, the estimated marginal effect associated with gender of  $-0.028$  implies that women are 2.8 percentage points less likely to volunteer than men, controlling for other differences in characteristics.

The results confirm that men are more likely to be volunteers than women, perhaps reflecting cultural norms that restrict women's roles in the public sphere and privilege responsibilities in the household and family. Accounting for all other factors including education and income, the gap between men and women (2.8 percentage points) is smaller than might be expected based on the descriptive trends. This suggests that higher male volunteering rates are related to other social and cultural characteristics predominantly found in the male population that are not captured by the model.

For men, age is positively associated with the probability of volunteering. Men 65 years old and above are 4.6 percentage points more likely to volunteer than young men who are 15 to 24 years old. For women, the change in the likelihood of volunteering associated with advancing age is much smaller and, indeed, those 15 to 24 years old and 65 years old and above are actually less likely to volunteer than individuals in the middle-age range.

Increasing levels of educational attainment are also associated with a greater probability of being a volunteer for both women and men, especially the latter. Men with advanced levels of education are 12.0 percentage points more likely to volunteer than men with less than basic education. Women with advanced education are 4.2 percentage points more likely to volunteer than those with less than basic education.

Regarding labour force status, people (both women and men) who are outside the labour force (not employed or unemployed) and also not in education or training are the least likely to volunteer. Men who are in employment are the most likely to volunteer, compared to those in education, or who are unemployed or outside of the labour force. For women, those who are in employment or in unemployment are more likely to volunteer.

The association between household wealth and the likelihood of volunteering is stronger for women than men. Women living in wealthier households are less likely to volunteer than are their poorer counterparts. The difference between the probability of volunteering of women from households in the highest wealth quintile compared to those from the lowest wealth quintile is 3.9 percentage points, holding all other variables constant. A similar pattern is found for men, although the difference associated with household wealth is less marked.

Regarding the variables related to household composition, women and men show similar patterns as regards the association between marital status and volunteering. Single women and men are slightly more likely (1.2 and 1.1 percentage points respectively) to volunteer than their married counterparts. Individuals who are separated, divorced or widowed are the least likely to engage in volunteer work. The presence of small children in the household also has a smaller, negative relationship with the likelihood of volunteering for women and men. For both genders, the head of the household is the most likely to volunteer. However, household size has a different relationship with volunteering for women and men. With each additional household member, the likelihood of volunteering increases by 0.7 percentage points for men but decreases by 0.1 percentage points for women. The second econometric model employed here is a linear regression model, which is used to explore the determinants of the amount of time spent volunteering among those who volunteered at least once during the survey's four-week reference period. The coefficients summarized in appendix D can be interpreted as the change in the time spent volunteering (in hours per month) associated with the independent variable, holding constant all other factors included in the model. For example, the coefficient of -0.159 for females in the first model suggests that, holding all other factors constant, women spend 0.16 fewer hours (that is, around ten minutes less per day on average) volunteering than do men.

Contrasting slightly with the age trends in the probability of volunteering, the amount of time spent volunteering by both women and men who do volunteer generally increases with age. The effect of age is more pronounced for women; despite being the least likely to volunteer, when they do volunteer, those 65 years old and above spend on average 2.6 hours more on voluntary work each month compared to the 15- to 24-year-old age group.

For education level, the probit model reflects similar trends in time spent volunteering, whereby women and men with higher levels of education, especially the latter, dedicate more time to volunteer work each month, holding all other factors constant. Female volunteers with advanced levels of education spend 2.5 hours more each month on volunteer work and similarly educated men spend 3.4 hours more each month volunteering, compared to women and men, respectively, with less than basic education.

Interesting trends also emerge in relation to the activity status of volunteers. Female volunteers who are in education or unemployed spend more time volunteering than those in employment or outside the labour force. For male volunteers, those in employment spend substantially less time volunteering compared to those in other activities, which is opposite to the patterns found with the probit model in relation to probability of volunteering. It is worth stressing that employment for Bangladeshi workers is often characterized by high degrees of informality, low wages and long hours (World Bank 2024, p.31), perhaps leaving little capacity to engage in volunteer work. As seen across lower-income country contexts, those in employment are often forced to hustle or engage in several parallel income-generating activities to make ends meet from the limited available economic opportunities (Barford and Coombe 2019; Barford et al. 2023, 2024). Among male volunteers, those who are either outside the labour force or in education spend 2.5 hours more volunteering each month than those in employment.

For both female and male volunteers, and similar to the findings of the probit model, increasing household wealth is associated with less time spent volunteering each month. Female volunteers in the highest household wealth quintile spend 1.6 fewer hours volunteering each month compared to those in the lowest



household wealth quintile, holding all else constant. Similarly, male volunteers from the highest household wealth quintile spend 1.1 fewer hours volunteering each month compared to the lowest quintile.

Turning to marital status, single female and male volunteers spend more time volunteering compared to married or separated/divorced/widowed volunteers, though the impact of marital status is greater for women than men. Married female volunteers spend 1.0 fewer hours volunteering each month compared to single volunteers, holding all else constant.

Variations in time spent volunteering associated with other household composition variables are relatively small. Having young children is associated with less time spent volunteering for both female and male volunteers, more so for women than men. For male volunteers, increasing household size is associated with more time spent volunteering, meanwhile for female volunteers the opposite is true.

### 3.3 Time-use analysis of volunteer and care work in Bangladesh

TUS data is particularly useful in allowing us to understand the amount of time individuals dedicate to specific unpaid activities. The Bangladesh TUS 2021 records all the activities that a respondent carries out during a 24-hour period, capturing specific information on the types of activities that are completed in line with the ICATUS 2016 (United Nations 2021).

**TABLE 5.** ICATUS Major Division 5, three-digit codes

5			Unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work
	<b>51</b>		Unpaid direct volunteering for other households
		<b>511</b>	Unpaid volunteer household maintenance, management, construction, renovation and repair
		<b>512</b>	Unpaid volunteer shopping/purchasing goods and services
		<b>513</b>	Unpaid volunteer childcare and instruction
		<b>514</b>	Unpaid volunteer care for adults
		<b>515</b>	Unpaid volunteer help in enterprises owned by other households
		<b>519</b>	Other activities related to direct unpaid volunteering for other households
	<b>52</b>		Unpaid community- and organization-based volunteering
		<b>521</b>	Unpaid volunteer work on road/building repair, clearing and preparing land, cleaning (streets, markets, etc.) and construction
		<b>522</b>	Unpaid volunteer preparing/serving meals, cleaning up
		<b>523</b>	Unpaid volunteer cultural activities, recreation and sports activities
		<b>524</b>	Unpaid volunteer office/administrative work
		<b>529</b>	Other activities related to community- and organization-based unpaid volunteering

**TABLE 5.** ICATUS Major Division 5, three-digit codes, cont.

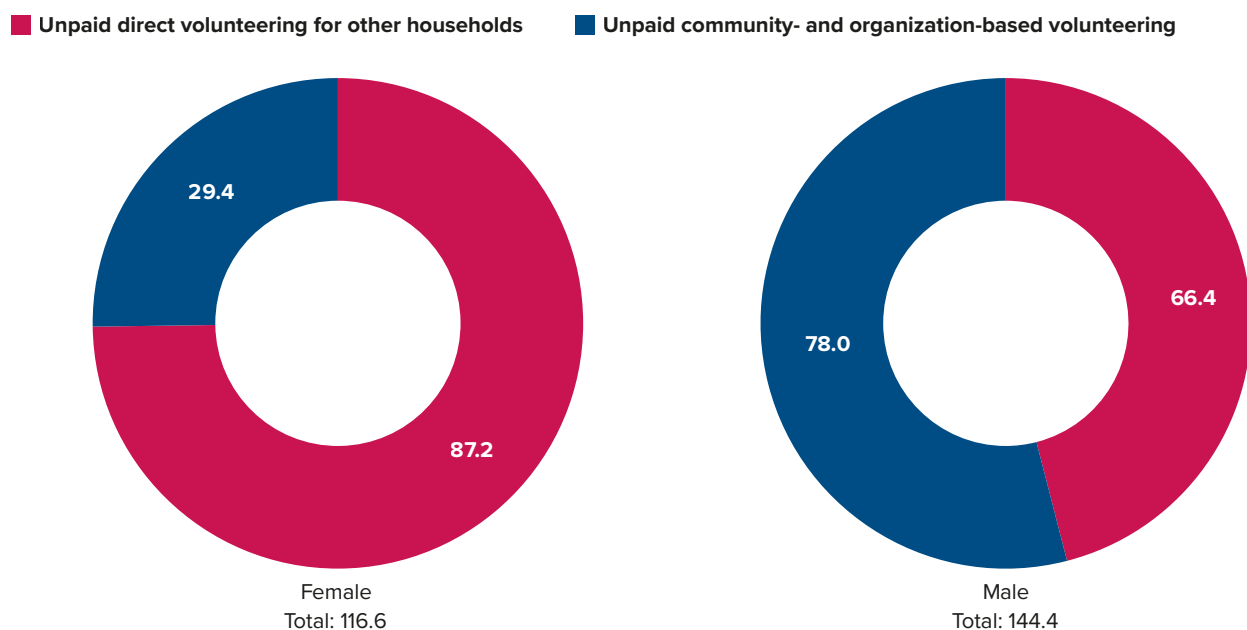
5			Unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work
	53		Unpaid trainee work and related activities
		530	Unpaid trainee work and related activities
	54		Travelling time related to unpaid volunteer, trainee an other unpaid work
		540	Travelling time related to unpaid volunteer, trainee an other unpaid work
	59		Other unpaid work activities
		590	Other unpaid work activities

Source: United Nations, 2021, p. 23.

ICATUS puts forward a three-level classification that breaks down the types of activities an individual carries out into major divisions, divisions and minor divisions. Three of the nine major divisions are particularly relevant to this work including: major division 3 (unpaid domestic services for household and family members); major division 4 (unpaid caregiving services for household and family members); and major division 5 (unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work). Activities in major divisions 3 and 4 constitute what is broadly understood as “unpaid care work”. Activities in major division 5 consist, among other forms of unpaid work, of volunteering activities for other households. The breakdown of these activities into smaller categories at the division and minor division levels are shown in table 5.

Time-use data gives us an insight into the specific forms of volunteer work women and men in Bangladesh undertake during a day, the total time dedicated to this work, alongside the additional time spent on other forms of unpaid work for household and family members. The drawback of TUS data is that the short reference period of 24 hours means that more intermittent unpaid activities, like much voluntary work, are not captured so well. However, alongside the LFS data, which gives a broader overview of volunteer work over the period of four weeks, the TUS data can be used to uncover the activities of a cross-section of volunteers. This analysis is restricted to focus on only those respondents who recorded any volunteer activities during the reference day, which consists of 3.9 per cent of the male population and 5.3 per cent of the female population. As expected, these volunteer rates are much lower than those reported in the LFS data where the reference period of four weeks will capture much more voluntary activity that is not necessarily a daily occurrence.

As a proportion of total volunteering, women spend much more time in unpaid direct (informal) volunteering for other households, accounting for three-quarters of their volunteer time and an average of 87.2 minutes during the day (figure 13).

**FIGURE 13.** Minutes per day spent by volunteers in different types of voluntary activities, by sex

Source: Based on microdata from the Bangladesh TUS 2021.

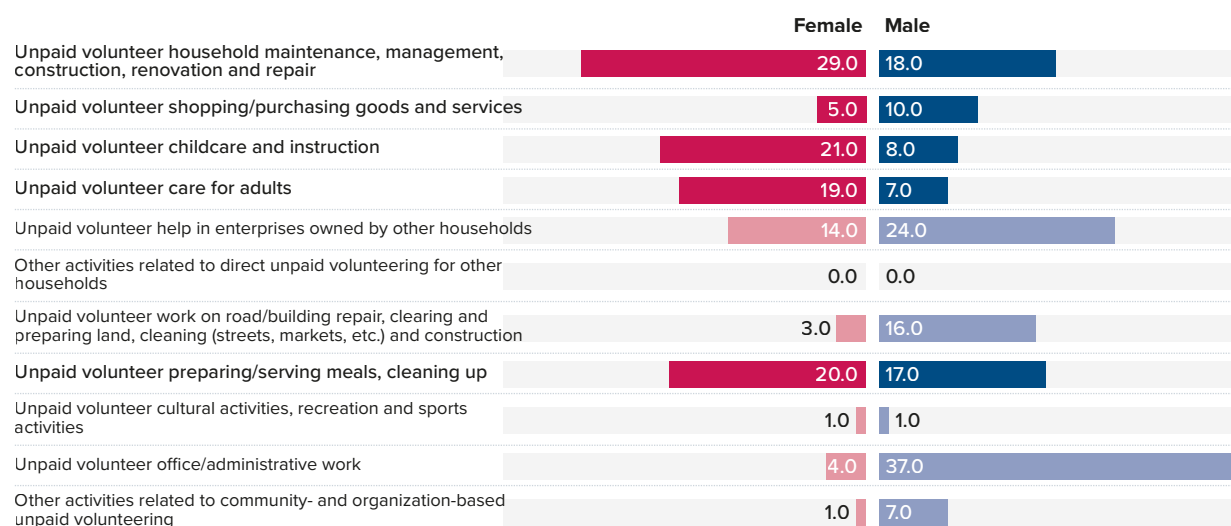
Meanwhile, an average of 29.4 minutes each day is spent by volunteers doing community- and organization-based volunteering. More than half of male volunteering time, on the other hand, is accounted for by unpaid community- and organization-based volunteering, consisting of an average of 78.0 minutes per day. Male volunteers spend a sizeable amount of time – 66.4 minutes per day – doing unpaid direct volunteering for other households. This confirms that the findings of O’Higgins (2022, p.9) relating to greater female involvement in direct volunteering are matched by a similar trend in Bangladesh. While Bangladesh is distinctive inasmuch as men carry out more volunteer work than women, the distribution of volunteer work is highly gendered so that women engage more in direct volunteering while men demonstrate greater involvement in community- and organization-based volunteering.

We can further examine the gendered division in volunteering activities by looking at the average time spent by volunteers in time-use activity at the ICATUS minor division level. The distinction used above, referring to the mode of volunteering, is one useful way of classifying different forms of volunteer activity. However, looking more specifically at the activities and the beneficiaries of volunteering also enables us to draw interesting conclusions about the gendered nature of volunteer work. In particular, we can understand the types of volunteer work that also count as care work, and the types of volunteer work that generate other public goods or contribute to enterprises operating in the market. Table 6 lists the minor division activities that, if carried out for members of the household or family, would be considered care work. The conceptual distinction between the unpaid provision of care services for household and family members (unpaid care work) and for those outside the household or family (care work that is also volunteer work) can be helpful for producing statistics. However, voluntary work that provides social reproductive services for individuals, families and communities is often overlooked, especially if it is direct.

**TABLE 6.** Volunteering tasks overlapping with care work

ICATUS minor division	Activity
<b>511</b>	Unpaid volunteer household maintenance, management, construction, renovation and repair
<b>512</b>	Unpaid volunteer shopping/purchasing goods and services
<b>513</b>	Unpaid volunteer childcare and instruction
<b>514</b>	Unpaid volunteer care for adults
<b>522</b>	Unpaid volunteer preparing/serving meals, cleaning up

Female volunteers spend a much larger proportion of their volunteering time in care work-related activities (figure 14), the most popular include: unpaid household maintenance (29.0 minutes per day); unpaid volunteer childcare (21.0 minutes per day); and unpaid preparation of meals (20.0 minutes per day). In contrast, the dominant forms of volunteer work carried out by men entail organization-based office or administrative work, at 37.0 minutes per day, and unpaid help in other household-owned enterprises (24.0 minutes per day). Across specific activities encompassed by volunteer work, there is a clear gendered division of labour that mirrors the gendered division of labour across other household- and market-based activities.

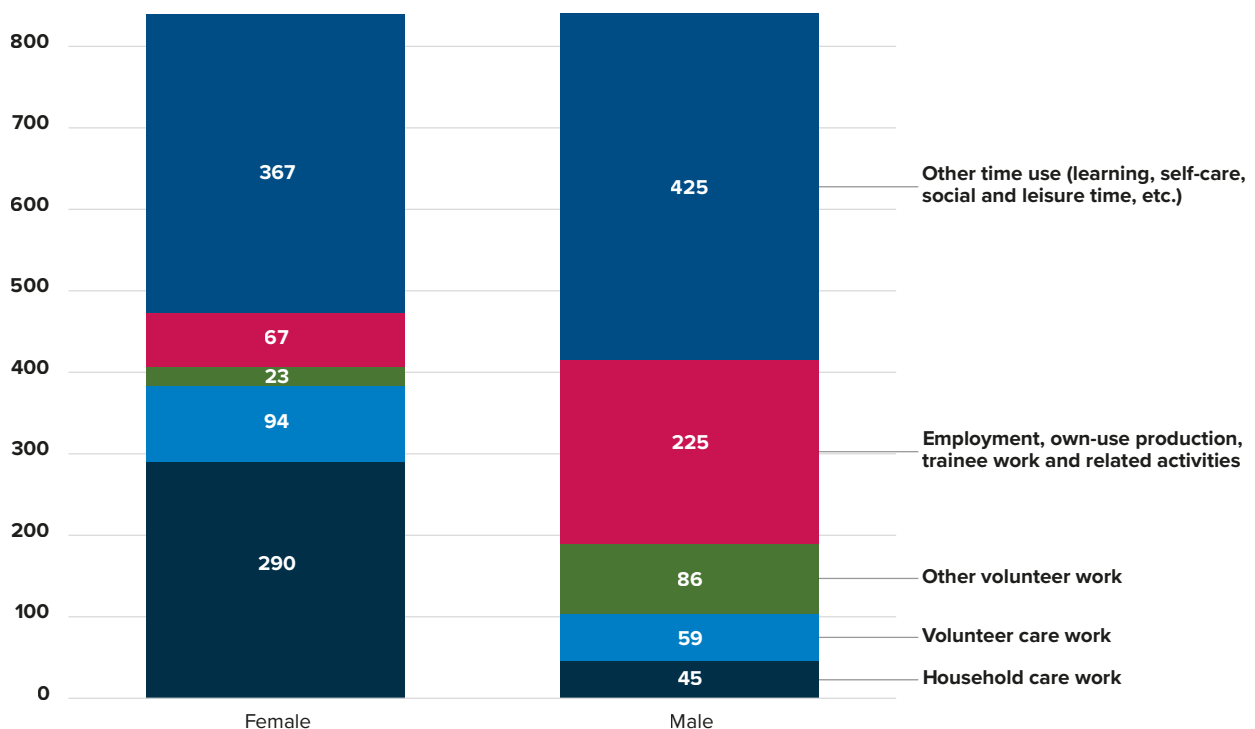
**FIGURE 14.** Average time spent across unpaid volunteering activities by volunteers (minutes)

Note: The forms of volunteer work that overlap with care work are highlighted in bold.

Source: Based on microdata from the Bangladesh TUS 2021.

The gendered division of labour across the different forms of work is pronounced (figure 15). Male volunteers spend an average of 225 minutes per day in employment, own-use production, trainee work and related activities that fall within the SNA production boundary. Female volunteers, by contrast, spend on average only 67 minutes in these activities. Female volunteers' time-use is dominated by time spent in care work activities. Household care work activities take up 290 minutes of these women's time on average, and a further 94 minutes per day is allocated to volunteer care work for those outside the household, as defined above. Volunteer care work carried out by female volunteers represents a substantial use of time, on top of a large workload of household care.

**FIGURE 15.** Time use of female and male volunteers (minutes)



*Note:* The visualization omits ten hours from the "other time-use" category.

*Source:* Based on microdata from the Bangladesh TUS 2021.

Exploring the relationship between these different forms of volunteer work and other individual and household factors, another binary probit model is used to estimate the determinants of volunteers engaging in forms of volunteer care work (appendix E). The model's dependent variable is a binary variable for any engagement in volunteer care work as defined above, where 0 is equal to no time spent in volunteer care work and 1 is equal to any engagement in volunteer care work. The output is again reported as marginal effects. Unsurprisingly, the impact of gender on the probability of volunteers engaging in volunteer care work is substantial and significant. Female volunteers are 43.9 percentage points more likely to engage in volunteer care work as opposed to just other forms of care work compared to male volunteers, holding all other factors constant.

Among all volunteers, controlling for gender and other factors included in the model, an increasing level of education is associated with a lower likelihood of engaging in volunteer care work. Those with advanced and intermediate levels of education are 13.8 percentage points less likely to do any volunteer care work compared to those with less than basic levels of education. Looking at the models for female and male volunteers separately, the impact of education is more pronounced for male volunteers. In other words, the level of education has little impact on the likelihood that female volunteers carry out voluntary care work.

Interestingly, while male volunteers still in education are the most likely to do volunteer care work (6.1 percentage points more likely compared to those in employment), female volunteers in education are the least likely (16.4 percentage points less likely compared to those in employment). While increasing household wealth is broadly associated with female volunteers being more likely to carry out voluntary care work, there is less of a clear pattern among male volunteers.

While married male volunteers are 10.0 percentage points more likely to do voluntary care work compared to single male volunteers, the presence of small children has a surprisingly large negative effect (-22.9 percentage points). For female volunteers, being married has a smaller but still positive relationship with voluntary care work, as does the presence of young children in the household. Increasing household size also has a small, positive effect on probability of doing voluntary care work for both female and male volunteers.

### 3.4 Summary

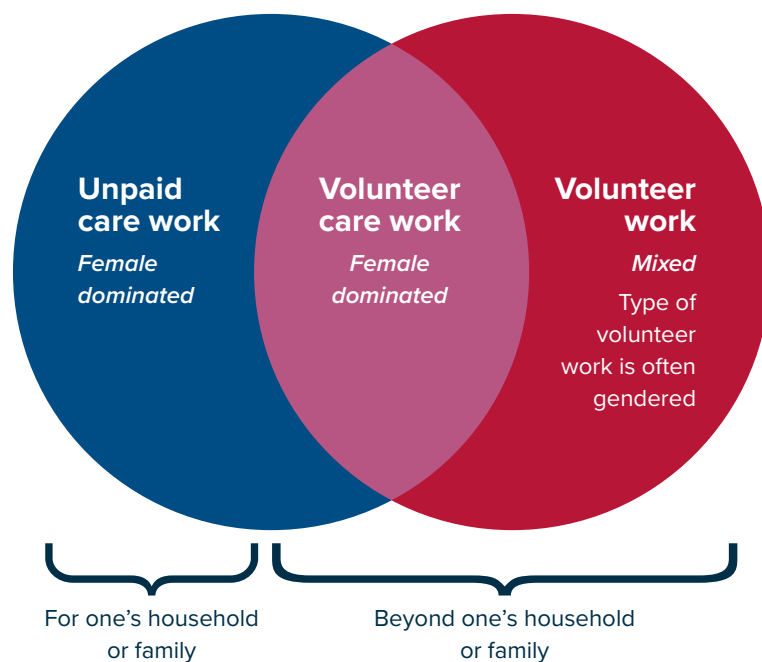
- The availability of both LFS and TUS data for Bangladesh enables a rich analysis of the gendered dynamics of forms of volunteer work, and the overlap between unpaid care work and volunteering. The availability of these data sources is a crucial step towards developing evidence-based understandings of valuable unpaid care and volunteer work across diverse contexts.
- Analysis of LFS data highlights that the types of volunteering that are most prevalent among the Bangladeshi population are direct, unorganized forms of volunteering, most commonly offering personal assistance to other individuals and households in the community.
- Direct volunteering is often overlooked in research (Einolf et al. 2016). It does not necessarily result in the same marketable skills and opportunities associated with formal “organization-based” volunteering activities to “get on”, but nevertheless can represent a vital means through which communities help each other “get by” through reciprocal support (Dean 2022). The motivations and experiences of volunteers offering direct assistance, especially in lower-income settings, are an important focus for future research on volunteering.
- Analysis of TUS data shows that men and women do different types of volunteering activities. Among those who volunteer on a given day, time spent volunteering by women is concentrated (74.8 per cent) in direct assistance for other households. The vast majority of female volunteers’ time is also spent in volunteer activities that could be classified as care work; of all time spent in voluntary work, women spend 80.4 per cent on volunteer care work, while for male volunteers this volunteer care work accounts for only 40.6 per cent of their volunteering time. More than half of the volunteering time (54.0 per cent) spent by male volunteers is carried out within local groups or organizations, and the significant forms of volunteering take place as office/administrative work or work for household enterprises.
- The gendered characteristics of volunteering in Bangladesh reflect existing divisions of labour between the productive and reproductive spheres, with implications for how this volunteer work is recognized and valued within societies and labour markets.

- The case study of Bangladesh raises an important question of how care work that is carried out as volunteering, for individuals outside of the volunteer's household, should be considered and counted. Currently, international statistics for unpaid care and domestic work refer to those services provided for other household members, encompassing ICATUS major divisions 3 (unpaid household domestic work) and 4 (unpaid household care work). Activities carried out to provide similar care services for those outside the family or household fall under ICATUS major division 5, and outside the purview of the current international statistics on care work compiled by UNSD. Recognizing the value that these activities offer to sustaining communities, ensuring it is captured in statistics rather than lost between classifications of intermittent care work and direct volunteering is essential.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Volunteer work and unpaid care work can significantly contribute to societal well-being and economic development. Despite this, research into the relationship between volunteer work, unpaid care work and gender, especially in lower-income countries, is somewhat sparse. This report seeks to address this gap by combining a literature review with a gender-sensitive statistical analysis of patterns of volunteering and unpaid care work in Bangladesh. The key findings are that there are gendered patterns of volunteering and unpaid care; importantly, there is considerable overlap whereby women's voluntary work often takes the form of unpaid care work for those outside their household or family (figure 16). Male volunteering is more often through formal, organized channels that are associated with greater recognition and subsequent labour market opportunities.

**FIGURE 16.** Gendered patterns of unpaid care and volunteer work



These gendered divisions in volunteer work reflect the broader societal feminization of care (ILO 2024), and the lesser degree of recognition and lower levels of reward for female dominated activities. For certain forms of organized volunteering, women and other groups were sometimes excluded from participating. This was observed in programmes for refugees in Uganda, where men and boys had many more opportunities to volunteer than their female counterparts (Okech et al. 2024). For other volunteer activities, such as community health work, these roles are sometimes exclusively female, as reflected in the designation *mahila swoyemsewika* which specifies the gender of Nepal's female community health volunteers (Kandel and Lamichhane 2019). Gendered patterns of volunteering matter, in part because volunteering can support young people to find decent work (O'Higgins 2020). Leaving aside whether the subsequent employment opportunities created by similar forms of volunteering are the same for women and men, gender differences in access to specific forms of volunteering may themselves translate into gender differences in labour market outcomes.



The status and reward (including financial) for volunteering vary according to whether this work is organization-based or direct, and according to what type of activity is being undertaken. A major distinction appears to be between organization-based and direct volunteering (which is often care work). Building upon Dean's (2022) discussion, for many in lower-income countries, organized volunteering is a means to “get on”, which connotes building networks, gaining experience and very often earning an income. Meanwhile, unpaid care and direct volunteering seem more to do with “getting by” through reciprocal support systems (Barford and Coombe 2019). It is worth noting that direct volunteering makes up about 70 per cent of all volunteering work globally (UNV 2018).

Meaningful progress has been made towards capturing statistics on unpaid household care work. Improvements in the statistical measurement of volunteer work have also been achieved, in part driven by the ILO-UNV partnership. However, lower-income countries remain underrepresented in the global databases on care and volunteering, and future work in this area should seek to address this data gap. Further, unpaid care work provided for those outside the household or family, as volunteer work, is often omitted from unpaid care work statistics. The ILO is in the process of developing a framework to measure care work, which will contribute to the quality of future care work statistics. This programme of work might usefully consider how best to count the care work carried out by volunteers.

Looking ahead, key actors might consider engaging in the following activities to deepen understanding and address inequalities related to gendered patterns of unpaid care and volunteering:

- **National statistical offices** could increase their collection and analysis of volunteer work in LFSs, including detailed data on the diverse types of unpaid care work and volunteering which exist. The ILO's [Volunteer work measurement guide](#) provides examples of such questions, which could be included in an add-on module to LFSs in order to identify voluntary work and its different forms – including voluntary care work (ILO 2021, appendix III). This is in line with the United Nations 2024 Declaration on Future Generations' action on leveraging “science, data, statistics and strategic foresight to ensure long-term thinking and planning ... to ensure evidence-based decision-making, while making governance more anticipatory, adaptive and responsive to future opportunities, risks and challenges” (para. 24). Data collection and making data publicly available for analysis will help to “embed the needs and interests of future generations and long-term thinking in policymaking processes” (para. 30).
- **Policymakers at all levels of government** (national, regional and local) could promote the recognition and provision of the support needed to enable volunteers and people providing care, and to remove barriers to accessing volunteer opportunities. This proper support should include universal social protection, in line with the ILO's Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102) and [Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 \(No. 202\)](#). Universal social protection is particularly relevant for two reasons. Firstly, it can provide social protection floors for those who are not in paid employment including the overlapping categories of volunteers and unpaid carers. Secondly, stronger social protection systems can mediate the sometimes-acute demand placed on those providing unpaid care by providing other sources of direct and indirect care for family members and the wider community.
- **Ministries of education, training and work** might focus on making unpaid care work (both within and beyond the home) more instrumental for people's careers. This could take the form of developing or enhancing skills recognition and skills certification programmes in order to support carers' favourable entry or re-entry into the labour market. The 2024 ILO resolution concerning decent work and the care economy, calls on governments, employers and workers to “promote active labour market policies, education and training, upskilling and reskilling, skills recognition and skills certification” (30d). The primary concern in this resolution is the development and retention of a skilled (paid) care workforce, whose work can reduce the demand on unpaid care providers.

Given that people often move in and out of unpaid care during their lives, skills recognition and certification could also enable them to move more easily into diverse occupations and enter at a higher pay grade. This has the potential to reduce the motherhood wage gap (ILO 2022).

- Steps should be taken to ensure that a lack of skills does not curtail access to volunteering activities (RYVU no date).
- **Researchers**, including academics, might build upon existing studies in the nascent research area concerned with gendered patterns of voluntary and unpaid care work, especially in lower-income countries. It could be particularly fruitful to direct attention to less visible, direct or informal forms of volunteer care work. Paying close attention to gender, other bases of discrimination, and their intersections will likely offer further insights into who undertakes this crucial care work – and the benefits and costs of this to individuals and society more widely. Researchers could helpfully unpack the diverse forms of volunteering and the varied conditions in which this occurs; an important part of this intellectual project will be the collaborative qualitative research needed to develop appropriate conceptualizations of unpaid care and volunteering practices, which reflect the varied meanings and experiences attached to these activities (for co-research see Proefke and Barford 2023). More broadly, such research could consider both how the distribution of voluntary care work translates into unequal labour market and income opportunities for women and men, and the cultural explanations and personal experiences associated with this.
- **UN entities** might follow the ILO in embracing the 5R Framework for Decent Care Work which can promote gender equality and social justice. The 5Rs comprise the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care; and the reward and representation of (paid) care workers (ILO 2024a, c). This framework is rooted in the recognition of the interactions between unpaid care work, paid care work and other paid work. Embracing this broad framework could entail UN entities supporting Member States which, especially in low-income settings, face particular challenges relating to volunteer and care work. In particular, state services are not always sufficiently funded and do not always have good coverage. UN entities can support states to expand and enhance care services through programming and technical assistance. Improved care services can reduce care deficits and the related acute overreliance on unpaid care (which is disproportionately provided by women (ILO 2018)).
- **UN entities** could consider whether to include unpaid care work outside of the family within the definition and statistical measurement of care work. This consideration could feature in the ILO's current programme of work to set standards for work statistics, as initiated by the 2023 ILO resolution to amend the 19<sup>th</sup> ICLS resolution concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization (2023b).
- **Volunteer organizations** could build awareness of existing distributions of unpaid care work, including that performed by volunteers, as well as the gender, race, language, nationality and educational dimensions of volunteering. This awareness could inform proactive efforts to promote equitable access to opportunities, positioning volunteer work as a way to build more equal interactions among people. More equal access to – and experiences of – volunteering opportunities matters, given volunteers' importance in shaping the roles and expectations in the present and future. Particular areas to consider include the type of work, the power associated with particular roles, levels of remuneration awarded for volunteering, and whether these are allocated in inequitable ways.

These actions can enable those who carry out vital volunteering and unpaid care work to continue to make valuable contributions to economies and societies – while importantly understanding and meeting their needs and future aspirations.

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## APPENDIX A: Methods

Analysis of the Bangladesh LFS 2022 gives insight into the individual- and household-level characteristics associated with volunteering and care work in Bangladesh. The individual- and household-level variables include gender, age group (divided into ten-year intervals) and educational attainment, which is categorized according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels into Less than Basic (ISCED 0), Basic (ISCED 1-2), Intermediate (ISCED 3-4) and Advanced (ISCED 5-8). An individual's activity status was categorized into four groups: those in employment, as defined by at least one hour of paid work in the previous two weeks, those in education, those in unemployment who are actively seeking and available for work, and those outside of the labour force who are not in employment, unemployment or education.

As a proxy for household wealth, an asset-based wealth index was developed using principal component analysis and a set of standardized binary variables relating to stable household features, access to infrastructure and utilities, and asset ownership. In low-income settings, asset-based proxies for household wealth can be more reliable than consumption data, where consumption fluctuates substantially with seasonality (Filmer and Pritchett 2001). Using this wealth index, households were sorted into wealth quintiles as a proxy for the household economic status included in the analysis.

A categorical variable for marital status separately identifies individuals who are single, those who are currently married, and a third category including those individuals who are either widowed, divorced or separated. As an indicator for potential childcare responsibilities, a binary variable also identifies households where there is at least one child 3 years old or below from households with no young children 3 years old or below. Finally, a categorical variable for relationship with the household head identifies an individual's household position.

## APPENDIX B: Descriptive statistics of volunteering and unpaid household care work in Bangladesh

	Volunteering				Unpaid household care work			
	Volunteer rate (volunteers as percentage of total population)		Average time volunteering (mean monthly hours spent volunteering by volunteers)		Participation in household unpaid care work (as a percentage of total population)		Average time in household unpaid care work (mean weekly hours by participating individuals)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
	7.7	15.1	4.5	4.6	93.7	78.1	31.9	7.4
<b>Age group</b>								
15-24	7.2	11.7	4.7	5.1	92.4	62.1	27.1	6.6
25-34	8.5	15.1	4.4	4.0	97	82.1	36.3	7.7
35-44	8.0	16.7	4.2	4.3	97.5	87.9	35.5	8.0
45-54	8.2	17.5	4.5	4.8	96.9	87.3	32.4	7.6
55-64	7.2	16.7	4.4	4.7	92.5	83.5	28.1	7.4
65+	4.5	14.1	5.4	5.6	66.6	66.3	22.5	6.9
<b>Education level</b>								
Less than basic	7.1	13.1	3.9	3.4	89.8	79.4	30.2	7.2
Basic	7.7	13.3	4.3	4.1	94.9	76.8	31.5	7.4
Intermediate	7.8	17.0	5.1	5.4	96.4	78.4	34.4	7.7
Advanced	10.5	23.0	5.6	6.2	95.5	81.1	33.2	7.9
<b>Activity status</b>								
Employed	10.1	16.5	4.5	4.2	98.5	85.5	31.4	7.4
In education	7.9	11.6	5.7	6.4	86.9	56.9	18.1	6.3
Unemployed	11.3	11.0	5.7	6.3	96.6	72.6	31.6	7.5
Outside labour force/ education	6.7	9.0	4.2	7.1	93.1	47.8	34.1	9.1

	Volunteering				Unpaid household care work			
	Volunteer rate (volunteers as percentage of total population)		Average time volunteering (mean monthly hours spent volunteering by volunteers)		Participation in household unpaid care work (as a percentage of total population)		Average time in household unpaid care work (mean weekly hours by participating individuals)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
<b>Household wealth quintile</b>								
1 (poorest)	9.2	14.8	4.9	4.9	90.9	73.5	30.7	6.7
2	7.9	15.1	5.0	4.6	92.9	77.2	31.6	7.3
3	7.6	14.5	4.2	4.3	94.1	80.5	32.0	7.7
4	7.3	14.5	3.9	4.3	95.8	80.3	32.4	7.7
5 (wealthiest)	6.2	16.6	4.2	5.1	95.1	79.2	32.8	7.9
<b>Marital status</b>								
Single	8.2	12.2	5.7	5.2	85.6	60.7	16.6	6.7
Married	7.7	16.2	4.3	4.5	96.9	84.4	34.8	7.5
Separated/divorced/ widowed	6.5	11.0	4.5	5.1	80.6	63.4	25.3	13.5
<b>Child aged 3 or below in household</b>								
No children aged 3 or below	8.0	14.9	4.6	4.7	93.5	77.2	31.0	7.4
Child(ren) aged 3 or below	6.8	15.7	4.1	4.4	94.4	80.6	34.2	7.5
<b>Relation to household head</b>								
Household head	10.2	16.7	4.4	4.5	96.1	86.5	31.8	7.7
Spouse	7.8	14.7	4.2	4.8	97.3	78.2	35.5	8.7
Son/daughter of head	7.9	12.5	5.6	4.9	86.8	64.8	18.1	6.7
Parent/parent-in-law of head	5.6	10.3	4.7	5.1	76.5	50.0	23.8	7.1
Other relative	6.2	12.9	4.2	4.8	94.7	65.3	32.0	7.3
Not a relative	4.3	6.0	4.5	4.5	95.3	67.6	39.4	9.9

Source: Calculated using microdata of the Bangladesh LFS 2022.

## APPENDIX C. Probit models of the probability of being a volunteer

	Total			Female			Male		
	dy/dx	p-value		dy/dx	p-value		dy/dx	p-value	
<b>Gender</b>									
Male	0 (base)								
Female	-0.028	0.000	***						
<b>Age group</b>									
15-24	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
25-34	0.007	0.000	***	0.010	0.000	***	0.003	0.000	***
35-44	0.010	0.000	***	0.004	0.000	***	0.015	0.000	***
45-54	0.020	0.000	***	0.010	0.000	***	0.026	0.000	***
55-64	0.023	0.000	***	0.006	0.000	***	0.038	0.000	***
65+	0.015	0.000	***	-0.017	0.000	***	0.046	0.000	***
<b>Education level</b>									
Less than basic	0 (base)		0 (base)	0 (base)					
Basic	0.015	0.000	***	0.007	0.000	***	0.021	0.000	***
Intermediate	0.039	0.000	***	0.016	0.000	***	0.059	0.000	***
Advanced	0.086	0.000	***	0.042	0.000	***	0.120	0.000	***
<b>Activity status</b>									
Employed	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
In education	-0.013	0.000	***	-0.010	0.000	***	-0.014	0.000	***
Unemployed	-0.025	0.000	***	0.007	0.000	***	-0.046	0.000	***
Outside labour force/ education	-0.046	0.000	***	-0.028	0.000	***	-0.077	0.000	***

	Total			Female			Male		
	dy/dx	p-value		dy/dx	p-value		dy/dx	p-value	
<b>Household wealth quintile</b>									
1 (poorest)	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
2	-0.009	0.000	***	-0.015	0.000	***	-0.002	0.000	***
3	-0.017	0.000	***	-0.020	0.000	***	-0.014	0.000	***
4	-0.020	0.000	***	-0.023	0.000	***	-0.017	0.000	***
5 (wealthiest)	-0.029	0.000	***	-0.039	0.000	***	-0.016	0.000	***
<b>Marital status</b>									
Single	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
Married	-0.007	0.000	***	-0.012	0.000	***	-0.011	0.000	***
Separated/divorced/ widowed	-0.021	0.000	***	-0.026	0.000	***	-0.024	0.000	***
<b>Child aged 3 or below in household</b>									
No children aged 3 or below	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
Child(ren) aged 3 or below	-0.005	0.000	***	-0.008	0.000	***	-0.001	0.000	***
<b>Relation to household head</b>									
Household head	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
Spouse	-0.024	0.000	***	-0.031	0.000	***	-0.011	0.000	***
Son/daughter of head	-0.037	0.000	***	-0.043	0.000	***	-0.043	0.000	***
Parent/parent-in-law of head	-0.032	0.000	***	-0.027	0.000	***	-0.034	0.000	***
Other relative	-0.046	0.000	***	-0.046	0.000	***	-0.044	0.000	***
Not a relative	-0.069	0.000	***	-0.059	0.000	***	-0.105	0.000	***
Household size	0.003	0.000	***	-0.001	0.000	***	0.007	0.000	***

Note: Statistical significance is indicated where \*\*\* denotes  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$  and \*  $p < 0.05$ .

Source: Based on microdata from the Bangladesh LFS 2022.

## APPENDIX D. Linear regression models of time spent volunteering by volunteers (hours)

	Total			Female			Male		
	Coefficient	p-value		Coefficient	p-value		Coefficient	p-value	
<b>Gender</b>									
Male	0 (base)								
Female	-0.159	0.000	***						
<b>Age group</b>									
15-24	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
25-34	0.009	0.343		0.608	0.000	***	-0.470	0.000	***
35-44	0.481	0.000	***	0.716	0.000	***	0.127	0.000	***
45-54	1.095	0.000	***	1.335	0.000	***	0.693	0.000	***
55-64	1.150	0.000	***	1.429	0.000	***	0.606	0.000	***
65+	1.959	0.000	***	2.587	0.000	***	0.987	0.000	***
<b>Education level</b>									
Less than basic	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
Basic	0.899	0.000	***	0.880	0.000	***	0.874	0.000	***
Intermediate	2.268	0.000	***	2.108	0.000	***	2.335	0.000	***
Advanced	3.235	0.000	***	2.542	0.000	***	3.365	0.000	***
<b>Activity status</b>									
Employed	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
In education	2.184	0.000	***	0.984	0.000	***	2.498	0.000	***
Unemployed	1.740	0.000	***	1.004	0.000	***	1.990	0.000	***
Outside labour force/ education	0.775	0.000	***	-0.122	0.000	***	2.455	0.000	***

	Total			Female			Male		
	Coefficient	p-value		Coefficient	p-value		Coefficient	p-value	
<b>Household wealth quintile</b>									
1 (poorest)	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
2	-0.251	0.000	***	0.078	0.000	***	-0.467	0.000	***
3	-0.859	0.000	***	-0.902	0.000	***	-0.890	0.000	***
4	-1.110	0.000	***	-1.348	0.000	***	-1.046	0.000	***
5 (wealthiest)	-1.211	0.000	***	-1.603	0.000	***	-1.122	0.000	***
<b>Marital status</b>									
Single	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
Married	-0.528	0.000	***	-0.966	0.000	***	-0.145	0.000	***
Separated/divorced/ widowed	-0.605	0.000	***	-1.401	0.000	***	-0.065	0.023	*
<b>Child aged 3 or below in household</b>									
No children aged 3 or below	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
Child(ren) aged 3 or below	-0.144	0.000	***	-0.267	0.000	***	-0.043	0.000	***
<b>Relation to household head</b>									
Household head	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
Spouse	-0.037	0.000	**	-0.099	0.000	***	0.461	0.000	***
Son/daughter of head	-0.181	0.000	***	0.222	0.000	***	-0.339	0.000	***
Parent/parent-in-law of head	0.241	0.000	***	0.478	0.000	***	-0.100	0.000	***
Other relative	-0.490	0.000	***	-0.387	0.000	***	-0.204	0.000	***
Not a relative	0.304	0.000	***	0.859	0.000	***	-0.413	0.009	**
Household size	-0.008	0.000	***	-0.056	0.000	***	0.015	0.000	***

Note: Statistical significance is indicated where \*\*\* denotes  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$  and \*  $p < 0.05$ .

Source: Based on microdata from the Bangladesh LFS 2022.



## APPENDIX E. Probit models of the probability of volunteers carrying out any voluntary care work

	Total			Female			Male		
	dy/dx	p-value		dy/dx	p-value		dy/dx	p-value	
<b>Gender</b>									
Male	0 (base)								
Female	0.439	0.000	***						
<b>Age group</b>									
15-24	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
25-34	-0.132	0.000	***	-0.091	0.000	***	-0.245	0.000	***
35-44	-0.097	0.000	***	-0.009	0.000	***	-0.338	0.000	***
45-54	-0.142	0.000	***	-0.055	0.000	***	-0.324	0.000	***
55-64	-0.133	0.000	***	0.029	0.000	***	-0.456	0.000	***
65+	-0.086	0.000	***	0.044	0.000	***	-0.362	0.000	***
<b>Education level</b>									
Less than basic	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
Basic	-0.062	0.000	***	0.022	0.000	***	-0.190	0.000	***
Intermediate	-0.138	0.000	***	0.003	0.000	***	-0.329	0.000	***
Advanced	-0.138	0.000	***	-0.017	0.000	***	-0.294	0.000	***
<b>Activity status</b>									
Employed	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
In education	-0.073	0.000	***	-0.164	0.000	***	0.061	0.000	***
Not in employment or education	-0.045	0.000	***	-0.098	0.000	***	-0.066	0.000	***

	Total			Female			Male		
	dy/dx	p-value		dy/dx	p-value		dy/dx	p-value	
<b>Household wealth quintile</b>									
1 (poorest)	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
2	0.024	0.000	***	0.015	0.000	***	0.046	0.000	***
3	-0.022	0.000	***	0.031	0.000	***	-0.145	0.000	***
4	0.070	0.000	***	0.102	0.000	***	-0.012	0.000	***
5 (wealthiest)	0.073	0.000	***	0.091	0.000	***	0.048	0.000	***
<b>Marital status</b>									
Single	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
Married	0.031	0.000	***	0.022	0.000	***	0.100	0.000	***
Separated/divorced/ widowed	-0.174	0.000	***	-0.136	0.000	***	0.489	0.000	***
<b>Child aged 3 or below in household</b>									
No children aged 3 or below	0 (base)			0 (base)			0 (base)		
Child(ren) aged 3 or below	-0.091	0.000	***	0.009	0.000	***	-0.229	0.000	***
<b>Relation to household head</b>									
Household head	0 (base)			0 (base)					
Spouse	-0.050	0.000	***	-0.020	0.000	***			
Child of head	-0.012	0.000	***	-0.062	0.000	***			
Son-in-law/daughter-in- law of head	-0.067	0.000	***	-0.077	0.000	***			
Other	0.083	0.000	***	0.035	0.000	***			
Household size	0.006	0.000	***	0.006	0.000	***	0.001	0.000	***

Note: Statistical significance is indicated where \*\*\* denotes  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$  and \*  $p < 0.05$ .

Source: Based on microdata from the Bangladesh TUS 2022.



