

# The present and future of unpaid work

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Work has dominated my life. Nothing unusual in that. Most people have to work to ensure that they and their whanau are able to survive and prosper. In my case, and in the case of many men like me, it has been different.

I have chosen to pursue work which is demanding and has, mainly, been financially rewarding along with a range of other social benefits. You might call it a career, if a messy one. It has certainly involved long hours, travel and focus of mind, which has meant that I have played quite small roles in the many aspects of unpaid work which genuinely sustain families and communities.

I have been and continue to be rewarded for my work in a much more generous manner than most others, in particular, those doing the work of family and community sustenance. Not much value in beating up myself or others like me at this point, But equally no value in pretending that this is a desirable or sustainable way of living in today's world. We have the opportunity, and I would say the duty, to organise our lives in better ways. In the main, this is about allowing people to choose how they contribute with those contributions being rewarded according to more flexible and inclusive views on value.

Rigid gender roles have been a part of many societies. This continues in our society, though less than has been the case in the past. Technology and economic advance, education and social awareness have made most of us more aware of options in how we live and work and the social value in allowing people to choose those options. We all gain in a society when people are enabled to make such choices and to pursue their non-harming goals without restriction. Like other forms of freedom, such as economic freedom, we may feel we are better off protecting what we have, but in reality, we create more value by openness. Economically, socially, individually.

I don't have any great foresight or ability to predict. But when I think about our society in a few decades and what it might be like there are both dystopian and attractive options. If we continue with our present path and maintain the economic and social behaviours we have, then it is not hard to see negative outcomes. But it does not have to be this way and the answers do not lie in turning backwards or limiting what might be done. They lie in the enablement of fair choice. Given fair choice



people will make, on balance, the decisions which will be best for their future. The bad options are taken when individuals or groups impose choice on others.

Fair choice has a number of elements. One of these is access to information. Another is social freedom to express oneself. Another and very important element is economic power.

In our society economic power is most strongly exercised by those who control our commercial and government activities. In large part, the employment relationships within the government part reflect commercial structures. These are influenced in various ways more directly by political influence, which is not simply allocated on a one-dollar/one-vote basis. So things like equal pay and gender diversity at management level are commonly led from the government sector, but this is far from absolute.

Gradually political and wider social pressure is breaking down some of the gender and other power imbalances in the commercial world. But there is a long way to go.

In my view, one of the great next steps towards fair choice will be recognition of the value created by work which occurs outside of these sectors – in the community and whānau.

Measurement is important and I see no reason why, as a natural development from the “wellness” approach now being adopted to government policies, we will see rigour equivalent to that currently applied to GDP applied to the value of community and whānau work. It is less than a century since GDP metrics were developed at the time there was and remains plenty of methodological issues to accuracy and efficacy of the metrics. We can and will resolve these for community and whānau work.

The next step will be how we support such work. Currently, the great majority of such work would appear to be unpaid but in disability, health and childcare there are emergent transactions. This also occurs in housework and other home services such as meal preparation, clothing and other maintenance. Much of the “gig economy” is domestic services related. I’m not sure how far the “atomisation” and casualisation of such work will go but present signs are that not long after such tasks become paid work then formalisation and regulations follow (taxation too!). A significant part of community work is paid if favouring the bureaucratic and management level rather than delivery of service.

For the rest of family work, we already have various social transfer and related transactions in place, including transfers through the tax and welfare systems. So the principle and the mechanisms are in place. The only issues would seem to be the adequacy in terms of scope and value of the transfers.

Of course, some will say “how will we pay for this?” The answer is that the 'unpaid' services we currently get in community and whānau are being paid for – but paid for in the living standards of the providers.

To my mind, we can see a future in which this is no longer the case. That we do see fair choice being available to all of our benefit. It will not all happen in one big bang. It will not happen without currently privileged people under the old model making some sacrifices. But it will happen.