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## The Need to Pay women for Care work at Home: Indian Perspective

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*For years, women have had to fight for their rights and they are still going. The world they dream of is still a distant dream. Women have been subjected to stay at home and take care of their kids and their home while their husbands had the delight to go out, working for fixed hours, and coming back home with the money they earned. The work put in by women is conveniently ignored by society. They have no fixed hours; no payment is awarded to them and they have no holidays. Why is it that we assume that the woman must look after the household without asking for any reward or pay? Women have to face many obstacles if they want to work outside and if they decide to stay at home, take care of their children and do the household chores their work accounts for nought. If the women are absent for even a day the family members will not be able to function as usual. Women contribute to the money earned by men by working outside. They should have a fair and fixed income for the work done. They should not be idolised as goddesses who are there just to care for others endlessly. They are humans and should be treated as such. If the existing problems weren't enough the COVID 19 pandemic made it even harder for women with all the family members at home. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that it is time we recognize the need to pay women for the care and work they do at home. This paper will focus on what is considered unpaid work, the current status of Indian women at home, why is there a need to pay women for their work as homemakers, and attempts at national and international levels to formulate policies relating to the payment of wages for the unpaid work, analysis of the Time Use data and policy recommendations concerning the issue.*

**Keywords:** *women, unpaid work, care work, gender equality, gender disparity.*

## INTRODUCTION

*“I hope she'll be a fool -- that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.” This is a quote from F. Scott Fitzgerald's book The Great Gatsby. Perhaps, it is easier to be ignorant in this world if a woman wants to live a mirage of a happy and fulfilled life. However, even a fool should have decent human rights.*

The COVID- 19 pandemic has brought the care economy into light, which although doesn't get much attention in terms of its contribution to the economy, forms an important part of our medical support system. This led to a cascading effect where our attention was also brought to the women's role in the household, particularly during the pandemic, and the unpaid labour done by them. In the 2021 Tamil Nadu assembly elections, talks were going around to introduce wages for unpaid care work done by women.<sup>1</sup> Although there hasn't been any action taken in this direction, it started a debate relating to unpaid care work done by women at home. There is gender inequality in formal and informal jobs, but that is nothing compared to the gender inequality in unpaid domestic work. In most cases, especially in India, the unpaid care work is done by females. This unpaid care work consumes more time than a normal job whether it is in the formal or informal sector, which means that women have to work more than men for doing work that does not pay. The contribution of women to the GDP of India at present is just about 17%.<sup>2</sup> This is the statistic that shows the number of women being paid for their work since the care work done by women at home is completely ignored. Their contribution to the GDP is not considered even though they enable the other members' contribution to the GDP. Women's presence at home and their work make it possible for the other members to go out and work without any worries. Some women have to manage both paid and unpaid work simultaneously.

Unpaid work has adverse effects on women's health and well-being. Since their work is not given any recognition and is forced upon them by society it reinforces gender roles as well as

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<sup>1</sup> Arundhati Chakravarti, 'Explained: How to measure unpaid care work and address its inequalities' (*The Indian Express*, 2 May 2021) <<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-how-to-measure-unpaid-care-work-and-address-its-inequalities-7297857/>> accessed 04 May 2022

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

hierarchies in the family and society. It affects the self-esteem of women and makes them financially dependent on men. With no time left for themselves and their hobbies, unpaid care work also affects their physical and mental health, which also affects their relationships. This in extreme cases also leads to domestic violence being perpetrated on women and they are forced to endure all this. This becomes a vicious cycle that breaks these women from within. With no property and security to protect themselves, they often do not even consider the option of divorce for the sake of their survival. With nothing to defend themselves with and no self-esteem, they also stay away from the labour market. This treatment that is meted out to the women of the house affects the children and impedes their growth and affects their mental health. This cycle also tends to continue with their children when they grow up.

In the case of women doing both paid and unpaid labour, they have to work for ridiculous hours both at their workplaces and at their homes. Their choice of work also gets restricted due to their work at home so they may not be able to live up to their potential. Most women, especially after the birth of a child, either is not able to get promoted or have to leave their jobs. This situation has been exacerbated by the COVID- 19 pandemic. About half of those women who had jobs lost them during this period. There was added burden of housework with all the members of the family staying home. This situation isn't likely to get better if we don't realise the unfair treatment that is being meted out to women. Love and affection can only do so much. There is a need to properly remunerate women for the work that they do and recognise their contribution to the economy.

### **WHAT IS CONSIDERED AS UNPAID CARE WORK**

Care work is a very necessary component of an economy. It involves a variety of different things such as taking care of children, the elderly, ill persons, taking care of the household, etc. Care work has been defined by ILO as "activities and relations involved in meeting the physical, psychological and emotional needs of adults and children, old and young, frail and able-bodied". It is a severely underrated work, which supports all the members of a family and helps them contribute to the economy of the country. Care work can be of two types- unpaid and paid. The difference between paid care work and unpaid care work is quite evident in that of payment. They do the same work for the same people, but the former gets paid for it and

the latter does not. It is a point to be noted that unpaid care workers are predominantly females working in their households. Although the work done by both is the same but as soon as it becomes the work of the woman of the family it loses its monetary value according to society. Care work, more often than not, gets categorized by economists as a leisure activity, which leads to exclusion of women's contribution to the economy. The categorization of unpaid care work as leisure reinforces the belief that women do nothing at home.

Care work can also be divided into face-to-face care work and indirect care work. The first one includes activities such as taking care of sick persons, the elderly, and babies, and the latter includes doing household chores such as cooking, washing clothes and dishes, etc. An unpaid care worker has to do all these activities without any monetary gain. In simple words, unpaid care work can be understood to mean care work for which no consideration in return is given. One of the earlier ways of measuring economic activity was the UN System of National Accounts (SNA) which was universally recognized.<sup>3</sup> However, this system categorized unpaid care work by women as non-SNA or extended SNA, highlighting the ignorance of economists at that time. Similarly, in India, the National Sample Survey Organisation placed the unpaid care work done by women under "engaged in domestic duties and allied activities" which was again not counted towards the contribution of the GDP. However, this was changed through the Time Use Surveys. In 2019, the first nationwide 'NSS Report -Time Use in India 2019' survey was released by the National Statistical Office.

### **ANALYSIS OF TIME USE DATA**

A Time Use Survey analyses the time devoted by people to different types of work or activities whether they are paid or unpaid. It also seeks to point out the gender disparity in these activities. This report pointed out the nationwide gender disparity in time consumption in different activities. The information was collected from households all over the country from members who were aged above 6 years. "Worker Population Ratio is defined as the percentage

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<sup>3</sup> 'Invisible Work Invisible Workers' (*UN Women*)

<<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2019/04/in-Invisible-Work-and-Invisible-Workers-compressed.pdf>> accessed 28 April 2022

of employed persons in the population".<sup>4</sup> According to the time use data, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Tripura, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh are ranked the lowest among all states in women's Worker Population Ratio amounting to only about 10%. With respect to employment-related activities done by men and women, the disparity is quite big. 56.1% of men are involved in employment-related activities as opposed to 19.2% of women in rural households. The disparity surprisingly increases slightly in the case of urban households, with 59.8% of men and 16.7% of women participating in employment-related activities. In the case of unpaid domestic services for household members, 27.7% of men and 82.1% of women participate in rural households. In the case of urban households, 22.6% of men and 79.2% of women participate in unpaid domestic services for households. There is not much difference in this case in rural and urban households. In both cases, it is found that women do a disproportionately huge amount of domestic work for no pay.

In the case of unpaid caregiving services for household members, 14.4% of men and 28.2% of women participate in rural areas. In urban areas, 13.2% of men and 26.3% of women participate in unpaid caregiving services for household members. Therefore, it is evident that there is a disproportionately huge number of women doing unpaid domestic services and care work as compared to men. These statistics also indicate that the women, whether in rural or urban households, work more as compared to men as even in employment-related activities there were only about 56.1% of men in rural households and 59.8% in urban households doing employment-related activities. The average time (in minutes) spent by a person on different activities is calculated by counting all those who participated in the given activities.<sup>5</sup> In this case, we will be considering the combined statistic of rural and urban areas. For employment-related activities, 459 minutes are spent by men as opposed to 333 minutes by women, which means that there is a difference of 126 minutes. If the activity of unpaid domestic services is considered, then men contribute an average of 97 minutes whereas women contribute an average of 299 minutes. There is a difference of 202 minutes which is bigger compared to the employment-related activities. If we take into account the working women their burden of

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<sup>4</sup> 'Periodic Labour Force Survey' (Press Information Bureau)

<<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1629366>> accessed 28 April 2022

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

work is significantly higher than that of an average male who doesn't spend much time working whether he is employed or not. Similarly, in the case of unpaid caregiving services for household members, 97 minutes are spent by men and 299 minutes by women on this activity. This also gives the difference of 202 minutes which is again big compared to the difference in time devoted to employment-related activities. This again shows that men spend much less time working as compared to women when we consider both paid and unpaid work done by them. This unpaid work done by women at home is not paid for and accounts for most of the women's time and she ends up working way for than an average man.

It can be observed from the statistics that men predominantly work paid jobs and spend more time on such jobs as compared to women while women do the unpaid job and spend disproportionately more time on them as compared to men. Since women are involved in both paid and unpaid work, they have significantly more burden of work and less time for leisure than men. This is especially true for India which has been found to have the highest gender gap in time spent on unpaid care activities among 28 other countries in OECD.<sup>6</sup>

#### **ATTEMPTS AT THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS TO FORMULATE POLICIES RELATING TO THE PAYMENT OF WAGES FOR THE UNPAID WORK**

There is no clear evidence of any policy related to the incentives for unpaid labour work done by women in the international arena or national arena. However, some steps have been taken in this direction by the governments. In 1972, a movement was started in Italy called the "International Wages for Housework Campaign" which sought to bring recognition to the work done by women at home and their contribution to the GDP.<sup>7</sup> This movement spread to other parts of the world as well. In a bid to boost jobs in domestic sectors and reduce the load of housework, the Belgian government introduced vouchers to hire help from registered agencies in the year 2004.<sup>8</sup> There were tax concessions allowed in Sweden, Finland, and

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<sup>6</sup> Invisible Work Invisible Workers (n 3)

<sup>7</sup> Arundhati Chakravarti (n 1)

<sup>8</sup> Shreya Khaitan, 'Should governments provide cash incentives to women for their unpaid work?' (*Scroll*, 11 April 2021) <<https://scroll.in/article/991618/should-governments-provide-cash-incentives-to-women-for-their-unpaid-domestic-work>> accessed 28 April 2022

Denmark for hiring domestic help.<sup>9</sup> This was done to formalise the domestic work. The work done by women is recognised in the Constitution of Bolivia, as work that has economic value.

In India, a group by the name of the National Housewives Associationsoughtto register themselves as a trade union in 2010 but their application was rejected. In 2012, there was a proposal floating around of making the husbands pay their wives for the housework but it never came to fruition. In 2013, a petition by a women’s organisation reached the Kerala High Court demanding wages for the wives working at home, but it was rejected by the High Court stating that an amount cannot be put on the labour done by a woman at home as it was “an insult to womanhood”.<sup>10</sup> Some cash transfer schemes have been introduced for women but these are not in the form of payment for the housework. Some examples include Goa’s GrihaAadhar Scheme and Assam’s Orunodoi Scheme.<sup>11</sup> The GrihaAadhar Scheme provides financial support to women homemakers in poor households. An amount of Rs. 3000 per month is paid to such homemakers. TheOrunodoi Scheme seeks to transfer an amount of Rs. 830 per month into the bank account of the nominated female head of a household.

There have been many research reports and studies put out by various international organisations. UN Women had released a report titled, “Invisible Work, Invisible Workers” which is research on women’s unpaid labour with special reference to India. Another research report has been released by the ILO titled, “Care Work and Care Jobs for The Future of Decent Work” which discusses the various aspects of care work, care economy, and unpaid care work. OECD has also released a document in this respect titled, “Unpaid Care Work: the missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes”.

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

We now know that it is important to recognise the unpaid care work done by women at home and pay them for their work. However, there are certain complexities that we should keep in mind while advocating for such payment or making policies in this regard. The most opted for solution to this problem, which was also advocated for during the Tamil Nadu Assembly

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Arundhati Chakravarti (n 1)

elections, is giving cash incentives to women. However, the critics believe that this would further lead to reinforcing the gender stereotypes in society. They believe that this would encourage the families to not let women work outside of their homes when they are getting paid for the work they do at home. This would further reduce the labour force participation of women.<sup>12</sup> It is suggested that instead of paying women for their work at home, the focus should be on encouraging the equal distribution of housework between men and women. The policies aimed towards women should also focus on providing a healthy environment for women in the workplace, creches, etc.<sup>13</sup>

Another problem with this issue is how to measure women's work done at home and what should be the criteria for payment. Whether a program or policy like this is sustainable in the long run for the governments. Most people in families believe that there is no need to pay women for the work that they do at home. Here, there is a need to educate such families, otherwise, the cash from such policies may end up being used for something else leaving the women without anything. This would also lead to the failure of the policy.

During the COVID pandemic, the government under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana transferred some cash into the bank accounts of women to help them push through the difficult time.<sup>14</sup> This led many women to open their bank accounts. So, if cash incentives were to be implemented this would be the right way to start. A starting amount of Rs. 3000 a month was suggested in the case of *Lata Wadhwa v State of Bihar*<sup>15</sup> and has been used as a reference in other cases as well. Although this would allow women to have a fixed amount every month, it is not feasible in the long run for the government to pay every woman, every month a number of Rs. 3000. Ideally, the scheme should aim at paying both men and women for their work done at home but that is also not possible. In such a case, it is better to look at other policies that could be more helpful.

Instead of paying women for their work, the policies could focus on reducing the burden of her work. For example, UjjwalaYojana provides gas cylinders to households which reduces the

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<sup>12</sup> Shreya Khaitan (n 8)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>15</sup> *Lata Wadhwa v State of Bihar* (2001) Writ Petition (Civil) No. 232/1991

time and effort of women in bringing firewood, burning them, and cooking food.<sup>16</sup> It is also better for their health. Childcare centres should be established to ease the burden on women to care for children. There can be mandatory training of men for the work done in households and they should be encouraged to help in household work by providing them with incentives through government policies.<sup>17</sup> To raise awareness about the value of women's work the government can give recognition to unpaid care work in their surveys, studies, and policies.

## CONCLUSION

We know that it is important to recognize women's contribution to the economic development of the country and the need to pay them for their services. However, we have also noted that it is not as simple as just providing cash incentives. The problem has to be struck at the grassroots level to enable the proper implementation of policies aimed at recognizing the care work done by women at home. There is a need to study the Time Use data and conduct more such studies to properly understand the problem at hand. Therefore, instead of looking into the problem at the surface level and dismissing it with temporary or short-term solutions, we need to think about the long-term solution to this issue to break this vicious cycle that passes on from generation to generation.

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<sup>16</sup> Shreya Khaitan (n 8)

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*