



Women and Unpaid Work

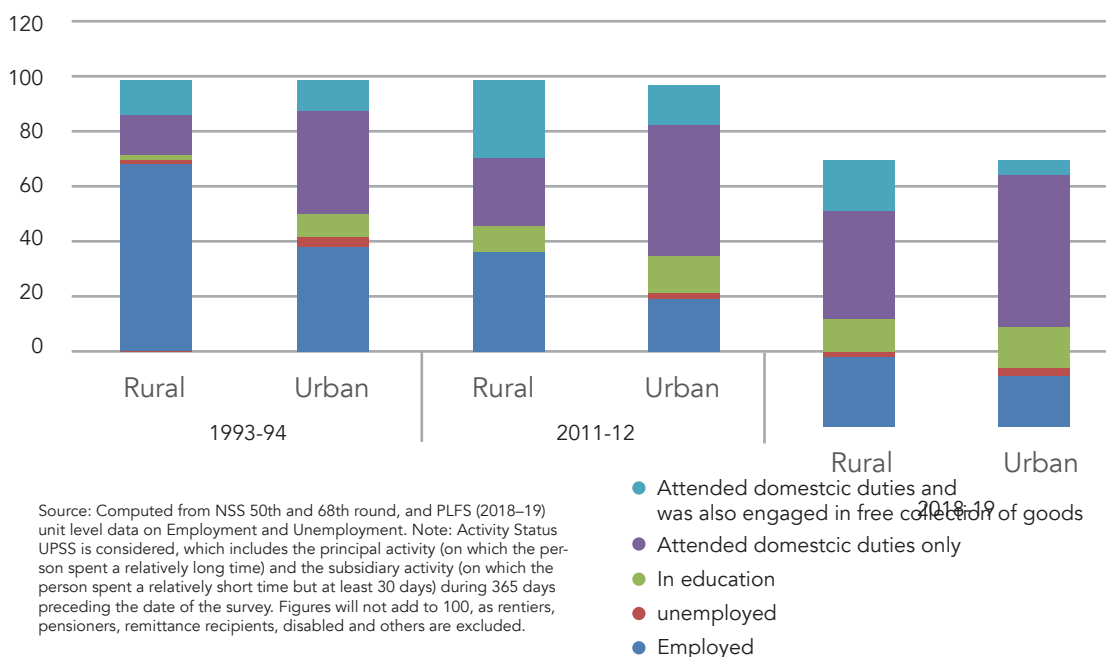
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I. Introduction

Women’s workforce participation rates (WPR) in India, as measured by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), have been low and consistently declining over the last 15 years or so.ⁱ An important part of the reason

for this is women’s unpaid and unaccounted work. Time is spent on activities which remain excluded from the radar of large sample surveys on employment, carried out previously by the NSSO and now the Periodic Labour

Figure 1:
Percentage Distribution of Women (age 15–59 years) by Activity Status, 1993–94 to 2018–19



Force Survey (PLFS). Feminist scholars have been arguing for recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid activities to be able to move towards gender equality. If the definition of work is broadened to give more recognition to activities done by women, it will be evident

that many more women work than is accounted for by these surveys. Data, however, continues to invisibilise women’s work and fails to take into account their multiple contributions to the economy.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ According to the official employment and unemployment survey of the NSSO, WPR for women in the productive age group (15–59 years) was 32 per cent in 2011–12, and declined to 25 per cent in 2018–19.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Devaki Jain (1996). ‘Valuing Work: Time as a Measure’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 October, Volume 31, Issue no. 43; Mehta, Aasha Kapur and Sanjay Pratap (2017). ‘Exploring the Possibility of Estimating Women’s Contribution to GDP’. National Commission for Women; Ghosh, J. (2016). ‘Capturing Work—The Journey of the NSSO’, Sarvekshana, 100th Issue, Journal of National Sample Survey Office, pp. 12–21. http://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/sarvekshana_100.pdf.

Women's Work

Women's work includes paid and unpaid work. Paid work consists of remunerated market activities. It is accounted for in the labour force statistics (Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)),

Unpaid economic activities: These are of two types.

a) A large number of women who are reported by NSSO as not working even in the subsidiary status are actually producing goods for household consumption, such as produce from a family garden, milk from family-owned cows, or firewood or water collected for family consumption. Even though these are considered within the production boundary of the System of National Accounts (SNA), they are not included in GDP, and the women producing them are not counted as workers by official employment and unemployment surveys.

b) There are many instances of women's contributions being unrecorded: 'Where men and women work jointly, the work done by women gets subsumed into household activity and their contribution as workers gets invisibilised'.^{iv} This could include work in agriculture, animal husbandry or home-based work; to take an example, a man selling golgappas will be recorded as a golgappa producer and seller, but the fact that his wife is also a worker as she made the tamarind water, puris, etc. at home goes unnoticed and unrecorded.^v

Domestic duties/care work (indirect): These activities include cooking, cleaning and laundry, sometimes referred to as 'indirect care' with less personal engagement or less person specific, and often involves participating in indirect ways of looking after the household members (mostly children). Such household work is excluded from the production boundary of SNA.

National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) or Census. Unpaid work can be distinguished into three types:ⁱⁱⁱ

Care work (direct): This includes provision of face-to-face or hands-on personal care to children or elderly which has a potential impact on the well-being of the care recipient. It is referred to as 'direct care' and is excluded from the production boundary of SNA.

Time Use Surveys (TUS) offer a way of capturing the above, as they are conducted to capture all activities performed by each individual and the amount of time spent on each activity. Information is collected on the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of particular members in the household and also context variables. Context variables indicate the situation within which an activity is carried out (where, for whom and with whom), the activity (paid or unpaid), production organisation (household unit, government, etc.) and so on.^{vi} For example, cooking for one's own family does not figure in the measurement of work that contributes to GDP, but cooking at a restaurant does. Till date, three TUS have been conducted in India.^{vii} All the three surveys show that women spend more time in unpaid work than men, and consequently spend much less time on paid activities.

According to the latest TUS (2019), while only 21 per cent women were doing paid work in contrast to 69 per cent men, almost all women (94 per cent) were involved in unpaid caregiving and domestic activities in India during 2019. Further, women spend six and a half hours in these activities each day compared with two and a half hours contributed by men. This gap is wider in urban areas than in rural areas.^{viii}

ⁱⁱⁱ Drawing on Folbre, Nancy (2018). 'Developing Care: Recent Research on the Care Economy and Economic Development', International Development Research Centre (IDRC); Hirway, Indira (2010). 'Understanding Poverty: Insights Emerging from Time Use of the Poor', in Antonopoulos, R., Hirway, I. (Eds.), Unpaid Work and the Economy, pp. 22–57. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Hirway, Indira (2009). 'Mainstreaming Time Use Surveys in National Statistical System in India', Economic and Political Weekly, Volume 44, Issue no 49, December 5, 56–65; Mehta and Pratap, op. cit.

^{iv} Mehta and Pratap, op. cit., p. 103.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Hirway, op. cit.; Hirway, Indira and Jacques Charnes. (2006). 'Estimating and Understanding Informal Employment through Time Use Studies'. In Meeting of the Delhi Group on Informal Economy, Central Statistical Organization, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, New Delhi.

^{vii} The first was conducted by Devaki Jain and Malini Chand (1976–77) with the cooperation of the NSS in six villages of Rajasthan and West Bengal. The second TUS was an official pilot survey conducted by the Central Statistical Organization (CSO) in 1998–99, covering a total of 18,591 households in six states of Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Orissa and Meghalaya. The third TUS was conducted by the CSO in 2019 at the pan-India level.

^{viii} Chakraborty, Shiney (2020a). 'Are Women Really Working Less in India?' News Click. Retrieved from <https://www.newsclick.in/Are-Women-Really-Working-Less-India>

Unpaid Work and Support Structures

There are different ways of explaining women's dominant engagement in unpaid work. Patriarchal social norms lead to a sexual division of labour that places primary responsibility of care work on women, largely performed in private spaces.^{ix} Some Marxist feminists have specifically argued that women's housework is a part of the social reproduction of capitalism: that women's unpaid work is a necessary condition for reproducing labour which is needed for capitalist production.^x The lack of necessary infrastructure and public amenities further adds to the burden of unpaid work responsibilities on women.^{xi}

Time needs to be spent on household provisioning (water, fuel) which is directly linked to the quality of infrastructure provision. There is a lack of support structures for child or elder care. A recent survey of 441 women respondents with at least one child below 6 years of age, and working in any one of the sectors of domestic

work, street vending, construction work, waste picking and sex work in Delhi, showed that 39 per cent domestic workers, 50 per cent street vendors, 89 per cent waste pickers and 65 per cent construction workers surveyed did not use ICDS centres for their children as they remain open only for a couple of hours. While domestic workers and waste pickers (working in godowns) stated that they either left their child alone in the house or in the care of a sibling as their employer did not allow them to bring children to work, 60 per cent construction workers and 65 per cent street vendors stated that they took their child along to their workplace.^{xii} The study highlighted that whether the mother kept the child at home or took her to the workplace, in both situations she remained anxious about the child's well-being and found it difficult to focus on her paid work. It also demonstrates the overlapping performance of paid and unpaid work activities.

Implications of Unpaid Work

Unpaid and unaccounted work done by women is understood as being 'women's work', and women tend to internalise and accept this to be their main role in the household and in society. It is therefore seen that for most women, their home and their children remain the centre of all work-related decisions that they make.^{xiii} This is particularly true for women from low income strata who, unlike the middle class, are not in a position to outsource their unpaid work responsibilities to domestic helpers. Women therefore mostly choose to work near their home or from within their homes, part-time, and in work that is often low paid with negligible social security benefits. One study noted that 55 per cent of respondents took on work which required less than 15 minutes commuting time;^{xiv} another similarly observed that women take on work very close to home and hence end up either doing farming or arduous work which also pays them negligibly.^{xv}

According to the NSS 68th round, more than 60 per cent women were unavailable for paid jobs because of the non-availability of another member

to take up the household work in both rural and urban areas during 2011–12. Smaller household size in urban areas also acted as a disincentive for urban women to take up paid jobs. However, over the period 1993–94 to 2011–12, it appeared that the proportion of women engaged in domestic duty and not willing to accept work declined in both rural and urban areas, implying women's increasing willingness to join the labour market. But among the women who expressed their willingness to work, the majority (more than 70 per cent) wanted to work on a regular part-time basis within the household so that they could also attend to their domestic duties. Over the same period, their preference for regular part-time jobs within the household premises increased. In rural areas, an increasing percentage of women reported their preference for dairy and tailoring, whereas in urban areas, tailoring was the most preferred. So, the inclination to self-employment increased, and also suggested that women preferred those types of jobs that could be managed easily along with their existing domestic duties.^{xvi}

^{ix} See the seminal contribution of Goldman, Emma (1911). 'Marriage and Love', re-printed in Goldman E, *The Traffic in Women and Other Essays on Feminism*, p.40 (Times Change Press, New York, 1970).

^x Federici, Silvia (2020). *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. PM Press; Ferguson, Ann, Rosemary Hennessy, and Mechthild Nagel (2004), "Feminist Perspectives on Class and Work", retrieved from *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/feminism-class/>>; Hartmann, Heidi I. (1979). 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union', *Capital & Class*, 3(2):1–33.

^{xi} Ghosh J. (September 2018). 'Women's Work in India'. Retrieved from <https://www.networkideas.org/featured-articles/2018/09/womens-work-in-india/>; Banerjee M. (June 2019). 'What Work Choices are Indian Women Making and Why? The Wire. Retrieved from <https://thewire.in/women/indian-women-work-care-informal-sector/>; Chakraborty S. (April 2019). 'Where are Indian Women if not in the Workforce? The Wire. Retrieved from <https://thewire.in/women/women-india-workforce-unpaid-labour>

This unpaid–paid continuum tends to devalue the work that women do. Therefore, even when they enter the labour market, the tendency is for employers to pay them much lower wages than are paid to men, assuming that the opportunity cost of their time is nil.^{xvii}

With no help at home and inadequate publicly funded support systems in place, women often suffer from ‘time poverty’. Studies have noted that stress and over-work often lead to grave health issues.^{xviii} Women believed that they could stretch time and would stay up late or wake up early to ensure that they finished all their tasks. This led to lack of sleep, mental stress, frustration and anger, as well as cases of uterine collapse caused by carrying heavy loads on their backs. Women are

unable to rest, and tend to do multiple unpaid/ care activities even when they are supposedly resting.

Unpaid work also has a deep impact on young boys and girls as they often share the burden of their mother’s unpaid work. This reduces their participation in opportunities for education and skill development. One study showed that older daughters assisted their mothers with household chores like cooking and cleaning (5 per cent), care of younger siblings (15 per cent) and fetching water (11 per cent). The study highlighted that in terms of sibling care, where there was more than one older child, they would take turns to miss school and stay at home to take on care work.^{xix}



Image: nevil zaveri, Flickr

^{xvii} Institute of Social Studies Trust–Mobile Creche (ISST–MC) (2020). ‘Mapping Vulnerabilities of Children of Informal Women Workers in Delhi: Reimagining Childcare and Protection for All’. Conducted for DCPCR, New Delhi.

^{xviii} Das, Maitreyi Bordia and Ieva Žumbytė (2017). *The Motherhood Penalty and Female Employment in Urban India*. The World Bank; Banerjee, op. cit.

^{xix} Banerjee, Monika (2020). ‘Women and their Childcare Needs: Assessing Childcare Provisioning in India through a Gendered Lens’. Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), http://www.isstindia.org/publications/1595487848_pub_WOMEN_AND_THEIR_CHILDCARE_NEEDS_3_-_final.pdf

^{xviii} ISST–MC, op. cit.; Zaidi M., S. Chigateri, D. Chopra and K. Roelen (2017). ‘My Work Never End’: Women’s Experiences of Balancing Unpaid Care Work and Paid Work through WEE Programming in India’. IDS Working Paper Volume 2017, No. 494, September 2017.

^{xix} Chakraborty, Shiney (2018). ‘Gender Wage Discrimination in the Indian Labour Market, 1993–94 to 2011–12’. Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2018.

^{xviii} Ghosh, op. cit.

^{xviii} Zaidi et al., op. cit.; Banerjee (2020), op. cit.

^{xix} ISST–MC, op. cit.

II.

COVID Pandemic and its Impact on Unpaid Work

With the transformation of the household into the site of work and livelihood due to the COVID-19 pandemic, power relations are seen manifesting both within and outside the household, forcing women to spend hours in backbreaking work, often not even recognised as work in surveys or discourses.^{xx}

In a Rapid Assessment Survey conducted by the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) in April–May 2020 to assess the impact of the pandemic and the consequent lockdown on women workers in five urban informal sectors (street vending, construction work, domestic work, home-based work, waste picking) in Delhi, more than half the

respondents stated that even though other family members (specifically the spouse) were at home, they did not receive any help with domestic activities. While 66 per cent stated increase in unpaid work and 36 per cent highlighted increase in care responsibilities in relation to young children and elderly, one-third of the respondents also highlighted increase in the additional burden of arranging food as women stood in long queues for hours to bring food home. Women stated that they took this work upon themselves as they feared that if their spouses stepped out, they may have to face harassment at the hands of the police.^{xxi}

Recommendations

1. Identity and attitudes: The gendered division of labour and the hierarchies attached to it are so embedded in our social structure that in a number of ways it defines how a man and a woman 'should' be. It is therefore not wrong to say that the unpaid care work a woman does is an integral part of her identity.^{xxii} Thus, advocacy alone for redistribution of unpaid work between men and women may remain an aspirational call if it is not backed with gender sensitising programmes at schools and colleges which may help in bringing about attitudinal changes towards gendered roles and care work activities. This adds a nuance to the 5Rs of recognition, reduction, redistribution, reward and representation which shape strategy towards unpaid work.^{xxiii}

2. Strengthening household infrastructure: Policies need to recognise that women have to spend a large chunk of their time in managing domestic chores and care work because of a lack of basic amenities. Adequate provisioning of these could go a long way in easing the burden of unpaid work that women bear. This includes arduous work in relation to collecting water, fuel, fodder, and caring for young children and the elderly. It is essential to provide quality full-day child care centres,^{xiv} after-school care facilities^{xxv}

and elderly care facilities.^{xxvi} This, along with easy access to basic household amenities, will help give more visibility and realisation to women's right to rest, leisure and participation in the labour market. It will also ensure that young children, especially girls, who often have to share the care work burden with their mothers, are able to concentrate on their education and play activities and to enjoy their childhood and adolescent years. It is also important to note here that women, for whom earning is a must, would go out to work irrespective of the fact that they may have very young children at home, or sick and elderly who need to be looked after.

3. Conditions of work: Creation of decent work opportunities which take on board women's unpaid care responsibilities and provide support systems along with decent wages, right to take leave, and also recognises her right to social security, may bring more women into the workforce.

4. Definition and measurement of work: Last, but most important, it is crucial that the production boundary and definition of 'work' is broadened so as to take on board the multiple economic activities done by women, whether these are paid or unpaid.^{xxvii}

^{xx} Deshpande, Ashwini (2020). The Covid-19 Pandemic and Lockdown: First Order Effects on Gender Gaps in Employment and Domestic Time Use in India. GLO Discussion Paper No. 607.

^{xxi} Chakraborty, Shiney (2020b). 'Impact of COVID-19 National Lockdown on Women Informal Workers in Delhi'. Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST). Retrieved from www.isstindia.org/publications/1591186006_pub_compressed_ISST_-_Final_Impact_of_Covid_19_Lockdown_on_Women_Informal_Workers_Delhi.pdf, May 2020.

^{xxii} Nandy, Amrita and Divya Dutta (2020). On Women's Back: India Inequality Report. Oxfam India.

^{xxiii} Addati L, Cattaneo U, Esquivel V and Valarino I (2018). 'Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work'. ILO Geneva. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_633135.pdf

^{xxiv} Banerjee (2020), op. cit.

^{xxv} Murthy, Ranjani (2020). 'After-school Care, Child Development & Women's Economic Empowerment: Rationale, Progress and Challenges'. Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST). Retrieved from http://www.isstindia.org/publications/1603795480_pub_ISST_Report_-_Ranjani_Murthy_final_compress_for_isst_site.pdf

^{xxvi} Chandrasekhar, C. P. and J. Ghosh (2016). 'Care Work: The Future of Work', The Hindu Business Line, 17 January. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/columns/c-p-chandrasekhar/care-work-the-future-of-work/article8991300.ece>

^{xxvii} Mehta and Pratap, op. cit.

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