

Need for Embracing Change: Addressing the Plight of Unpaid Women Domestic Workers in India for the True Equality of Labour

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Abstract

This research paper is navigating through a contentious issue of unpaid women domestic workers who are hidden and concealed in the Indian economy. Two kinds of unpaid women domestic workers are elucidated here. The first is the so-called “housewife,” and the second one is the “housemaid.” While the housewife is not getting any economic returns for their domestic work and not even calculated for the estimation of national income, the housemaids are either not getting any remuneration for their domestic work or being quite neglected and underpaid. The study goes on to examine the socio-economic impact of unpaid female domestic work, its existing legal support system, and mitigation measures. The study finds that a strong legal system and cultural transformation should evolve for mitigating the unpaid domestic work by women and to ensure labour participation from women. This would help in empowering the status of women and result in overall economic development and well-being in society.

Keywords: Unpaid Domestic Workers, Patriarchy, Domestic Work, Women at Work

Introduction

The unpaid domestic work can be viewed in two dimensions. On the one side, the so-called “housewives,” who do all the household chores from dawn to dusk without any remuneration and are not even considered for national income estimation. On the other hand, the hired “housemaids” do household work with very low monetary payments or no monetary payments at all. Both these classes of women workers are being exploited by various patriarchal sections of society and not given space for economic activities. By keeping the womenfolk out of economic activities, we are reducing the work participation rate of women and their contribution to the national income cake. (Desai & Joshi, 2019). There are mainly three main reasons for the existence and flourishing of unpaid domestic work by women in India. The first and second reasons are social and religious constraints, which do not allow Indian housewives to enter economic activities but force them to confine themselves to the four walls of the kitchen. The patriarchal setup has restricted women to unpaid domestic work, even though they may be much more efficient than their male

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counterparts in engaging in economic activities outside their homes. The third reason for the unpaid domestic work by women in India is the failure of the system to provide an alternative solution to women for choosing their own career pathways (Singh & Pattanaik, 2020), which is adding to the isolation and confinement of women to unpaid domestic work. Unfortunately, with the rising number of unpaid domestic duties by women out of compulsion, work participation by women is on a very heavy downfall in India. Another tragedy with the unpaid work by the housewives already mentioned earlier is that their work is not being considered for the estimation of national income in the country. This has accentuated the age-old patriarchal sidelining of the women's workforce deployed in domestic duties, leading to further weakening of their claim for remuneration.

The feminist economists have time and again reiterated their requirement of including unpaid domestic work also into the national income estimates since it has an opportunity cost and contributes significantly to the division of work, and unpaid domestic work cannot be divorced from economic activity (Vyas, 2022). They further argue that the unpaid domestic work done by women is not effectively distributed among their men in the family, and there is a requirement for the enactment of triple R, which means recognition of the domestic work, reduction of the intensity of the domestic work, and redistribution of the domestic work. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also recognize equitable distribution of domestic work since unpaid domestic work is just a matter of the unwelcome choice of the women, which has been enforced upon them by tradition, custom, and patriarchal norms. The unpaid domestic work is acting as a severe detriment to the attainment of education and reinforces the already rampant gender disparity. The failure of the authorities to plan and provide alternative domestic care to their households is snowballing the existing burden of unpaid domestic women workers. The Indian customs and traditions are forcing the women to prioritize the unpaid domestic work over other possible economic activities to support their family, accentuated by their early marriages, caste system, and social class.

Another angle from which unpaid women domestic workers can be viewed is from the unpaid, nearly unpaid, and underpaid domestic "housemaids" employed for various domestic works in India. These housemaids are paid significantly lower wages in rural areas and semi-urban centres where awareness about labour rights is scanty. They are forced to work long hours, very well exceeding 12 hours in a day, without any overtime allowances and cushioning breaks. They are only given a marginalized status in society and are subject to perpetual physical, verbal, and sexual abuse from their employers (Karunakaran Prasanna et al., 2024). The unpaid work of domestic women housemaids is characterized by hidden work without any recognition, gender inequality, and low status due to social stigma, lack of legal protection from the authorities, economic disparity, and cultural marginalization.

Objectives of the Study

The study about the unpaid and underpaid domestic women workers revolves around four main objectives listed below.

- The first objective is to understand the meaning, nature, and scope of the unpaid domestic work performed by the women workers in India.
- The second objective is to examine the socio-economic impact of unpaid and underpaid women domestic workers in India.
- The third objective of the study is to analyse the existing legal and policy framework to tackle the problem of unpaid domestic work by Indian women, with some suggestions.
- The final objective is to identify the strategies for the empowerment of such unpaid women workers in India.

Based on the core objectives of the study, the issue of unpaid women domestic workers is discussed below under various segments.

Understanding the meaning of unpaid domestic work performed by women

One must understand the meaning of unpaid women domestic workers before delving into the problems faced by them. The term unpaid women domestic workers in this research paper refers to the unpaid “housewives” who are devoid of any monetary emoluments or opportunities for education or work and social recognition (Singh & Pattanaik, 2020) and the unpaid/underpaid “housemaid” workers in India performing domestic work on similar lines. The unpaid or underpaid domestic work done by women includes cleaning of houses and premises, laundry of dirty clothes, washing kitchen utensils and dishes, cooking of meals, shopping at various markets for groceries, child care, elder care, and other tasks like gardening at house premises, pet care, and security surveillance at home. The majority of the unpaid and underpaid domestic workers are women from marginalized communities and generally belong to economically disadvantaged backgrounds with very limited access to traditional or modern education. Many of them are migrants from rural areas to urban centers for domestic work and are historically known to suffer from various kinds of social and economic discrimination. The unpaid and underpaid domestic women workers are observed to be young adults, mostly in their early 20s and 30s (Agarwala & Saha, 2018). Some of them are also older women from disadvantaged families, mostly divorced, widowed, or single mothers. The majority of such women have only a limited education, with either dropouts or very little access to educational institutions. The percentage of women unpaid domestic workers can be estimated from the formula given below.

Percentage of women unpaid domestic workers = No: of women in domestic duties x 100 / Total women population

Conceptualization of Unpaid Domestic Women Workers

A diagrammatic representation of the conceptualization of the unpaid domestic women workers is shown in the Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Concept Framework of Unpaid Domestic Women Workers

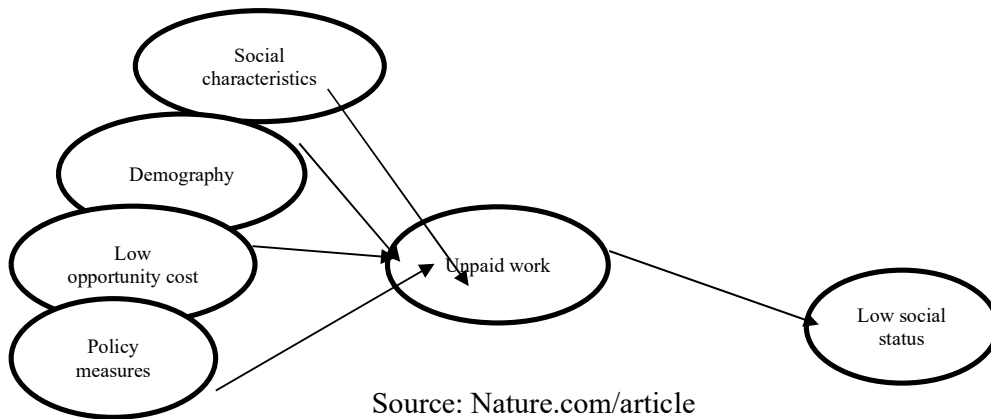


Figure 1 shows that the unpaid work of women stems from adverse social characteristics of women, demography, low opportunity cost, and inadequate policy measures leading to low social status of women in the society.

Categorization of Domestic Workers

Understanding the categorization of domestic workers is essential for delving more into the problem of unpaid domestic women workers in India. Therefore, a broad categorization of the domestic workers is given in the table 1 below.

Table 1 Categorization domestic workers

Category	Definition
Part-time worker	Works for more than one employer for a specified number of daily working hours or performs specific tasks for each of the multiple employers every day.
Full-time worker	Works for a single employer every day for a specified number of hours, and returns to her home every day after work.
Live-in worker	Works fulltime for a single employer and stays in the premises of the employer or in a dwelling provided by the employer and does not return to her home every day after work.

Source: WIEGO.N.D, https://vvnli.gov.in/sites/default/files/137-2019-Kingshuk_Sarkar.pdf, <https://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/>

The table categorizes the domestic workers into three, viz. Part-time worker, full-time worker, and live-in worker. Part-time workers work for multiple employers; full-time workers work for a certain employer and return to home after work; and live-in worker work full time and stay with the employer.

Growth of Domestic Workers in India by Category

A category-wise statistics of the domestic workers in India from the year 1999-2000 to 2004-2005 is shown in the table 2 below.

Table 2 Growth of Domestic Workers in India by Category

Domestic work	1999-2000			2004-2005		
	Number of workers	Percentage of total female employment	Female Share	Number of workers	Percentage of total female employment	Female share
Housemaid/servant	438200	0.4	80.4	2381100	1.6	87.4
Cook	6400	0.0	72.6	96600	0.1	73.9
Governess/babysitter	2600	0.0	76.4	69600	0.0	74.2
Total domestic workers	447100	0.4	63.4	2547400	1.8	71.6

Source: Rajini Pariwala and Neethan N “Paid Care Workers in India: Domestic

Workers and Anganwadi Workers” (Geneva Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), 2009), UNRISD. In the data given in Table 2, the domestic workers are categorized into housemaids/servants, cooks, governesses/babysitters. Lion’s share of the domestic workers is females, with housemaids topping the chart. There has been growth in all three categories of women domestic workers from 1999-2000 to 2004-2005. In 1999-2000, the total domestic workers were 4,47,100, and it has grown leaps and bounds to 25,47,400 in 2004-2005.

Females outside Regular Labor Force: Underpaid and Unpaid in Percentages

The categorization of the domestic work done by the underpaid and the unpaid workers are given below in table 3.

Table 3 Females outside Regular Labour Force: Underpaid and Unpaid in Percentages

Type of work	Rural		Urban	
	2017-18	2021-22	2017-18	2021-22
Domestic duties only	40.8	28.3	54.9	50.3
Attended domestic duties also engaged in collection, sewing, tailoring etc.	17.0	17.4	4.5	6.2
Attended educational institutions	10.3	10.9	12.9	12.2
Rentiers, pensioners, remittance	4.4	4.6	4.8	5.5

recipients etc.				
Not able to work owing to disability	1.1	1.0	1.0	0.9
Others (including beggars, prostitutes etc.)	1.8	1.3	1.5	1.0

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Report, MoSPI

Table 3 shows that a wide variety of the domestic duties are performed by the women domestic workers as per the PLFS report, MoSPI. The data shows that there is a sharp increase in the domestic work done by women workers outside the regular workforce from 2017-18 to 2021-22. There is a decline in the allied work done by the women domestic workers for the same period, a marginal increase in the attending of educational institutions for work, and a decline in the women workers who are not able to work due to physical disabilities and other works, including begging and prostitution.

Case Studies

Two case studies that elaborate on the plight of unpaid women domestic workers, one each of a “housewife” and “housemaid,” are given below. The first one is the story of Asha, a housewife, and the second one is of Radha, a housemaid.

Case Study of Asha¹

Asha is a 45-year-old woman hailing from a village in Uttar Pradesh. She is a housewife and is engaging in unpaid domestic work in her own house. Her day starts at 4 AM early in the morning with the preparation of breakfast and meals for her family, cleaning the house, and looking after the family-owned livestock. This work continues till the evening with the serving of breakfast and meals and engaging in the works associated with livestock rearing. In the afternoon she has to travel by foot for a long distance to fetch many pots of water for drinking and other activities. In the meantime, she also has to fetch firewood for burning in her kitchen fireplace. In the evening, she has to dedicate her time to childcare and assist her husband in agricultural work. Due to her hectic schedule associated with household chores, Asha has no time to engage in her personal pursuits, has no income of her own, and cannot engage in any other economic activity as well. The labor of Asha has been treated by her male-dominated patriarchal family as given, and she is not at all paid any monetary compensation for her restless job.

Case Study of Radha²

Radha is a middle-aged woman who was forced to leave her studies at 19 years of age for the pursuit of domestic work due to the indebtedness of her family. In a certain house, she was promised to get a sum of Rs 1500 per month and never received it from the owner. She is compelled to work for longer hours without any

kind of break in between. She is not even allowed to take food till the ordered work is finished. She is also not allowed to leave the house premises and is not permitted to talk to anyone outside. She is continually being exploited, abused, and treated as a slave and not given any kind of medical facilities or insurance.

Socio Economic Impact of Unpaid Domestic Work

The unpaid domestic work has a huge opportunity cost in terms of time dedicated by the women to rendering domestic unpaid work. This time could have been used for many other productive activities that might have earned income for them and their family. The unpaid work radiates an unmatched strain on the physical and mental health of the women engaged in the work, like cooking food, cleaning the house, child care, and elder care. Childcare is a huge unpaid burden on the productivity of women by binding them to the household and limiting their income-earning potential (Chopra et al., 2020). The unpaid domestic work performed by women is also indirectly affecting society by perpetuating the already existing gender inequality, increasing poverty, limiting the potential of economic growth, and impacting the health and well-being of women, their educational attainment, and career opportunities. The unpaid domestic work performed by women is also influencing their social and cultural status in society. The unpaid domestic work is mostly done by women, and there is considerable gender discrimination and exploitation. Due to this unpaid compulsory work, the women are getting only a limited portion of the resources like education, health care, and financial services, leading to a zero contribution to the gross domestic product. The unpaid domestic work is further adding to the woes of women due to a lack of legal protection for their labor rights and other social and cultural restrictions based on caste, class, and gender (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). The unpaid domestic work is leading to poverty and economic vulnerability among women, along with physical, mental, and medical complications resulting from their excess work. Since domestic work has a down-to-desk time schedule, it is further leading to women's social exclusion and isolation and provides only limited opportunities for personal or professional development.

Legal Impact and Policy Framework

A close examination of the existing legal framework and its various enactments shows that the existing labour laws in India are quite inadequate to protect the rights of unpaid domestic workers (Gupta, 2019), since it has seldom identified such a "labor class." Therefore, at the outset, the unpaid domestic work done by the housewives and housemaids is to be identified, classified, and articulated as an economic activity to move towards further enactment of the law. The number of women engaged in such unpaid domestic work should be properly identified and discussed with the stakeholders, and provision must be made within the household and at the government level to provide these domestic workers with monetary payments for their valuable work. The policymakers and academics should prioritize

their attention to the problems faced by unpaid women domestic workers and identify the gaps and challenges faced by them for the framing and implementation of effective laws and policies starting from the grassroots level. They must also explore further ways and means to develop and renew policies on a regular basis to address the plight of unpaid women domestic workers. This would be a major boost to the five trillion Indian economies being discussed by political leaders and academics.

Strategies for Empowerment and Recognition of Unpaid Women Domestic Workers

Various strategies and programs initiated by the government and civil society are discussed below to address the problem of unpaid domestic labor performed by women in India. Even though there are no specific policies to address the issue upfront, the undermentioned policies can benefit the women unpaid domestic workers indirectly.

The Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act³ (UWSSA), 2008, is a broad enactment that aims to provide benefits and support to unorganized workers in India. This program addresses the plight of unpaid domestic women workers to a certain extent. It has been fruitful in spreading awareness among the people about the rights and benefits of unorganized labourers, which includes unpaid domestic women workers. The Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana⁴ (RSBY) aims to provide health insurance coverage to domestic workers also. However, this scheme has only limited coverage and fails to assess the quality of health care being provided to the insurant. The Skill Development Program⁵ (SDP) launched by the Government of India is also covering the domestic unpaid women workers by providing enough skills to increase their bargaining power in the labor market. But its reach is limited, and the quality of the training is also an area of concern. Various civil society organizations are also initiating advocacy and awareness programs to spread consciousness about the rights and issues of unpaid/underpaid women domestic workers. But these initiatives are also not getting the traction that is expected since the NGOs involved in them are facing shortages of various resources, including manpower and finance.

There can be many ways in which public recognition and appreciation of the glorious work done by unpaid domestic women workers in India can be highlighted. There can be media campaigns through TV, radio, and social media highlighting the roles and importance of unpaid/underpaid women domestic workers, caretakers, and housekeepers. The plight of these workers can be inculcated in the curricula of schoolchildren (Shahiwala, 2023). Public events like workshops, seminars, and conferences can be conducted to draw the attention of policymakers and employers to the deplorable condition and importance of domestic women workers and their existing wage system. Skill development and support systems should be initiated from the part of the government to uplift these unpaid/underpaid women domestic workers. Public recognition days, awards, honors, appreciation initiatives, community engagements, and volunteer programs can play a pivotal role in the recognition of the

contribution of unpaid domestic women workers in India.

Recommendations for Social Action

For the empowerment and raising the status of unpaid women domestic workers, the government has to initially recognize the domestic work done by housewives as an economic activity. This may include adding the domestic work done by housewives to the national income accounts and official statistics (George & Shaji, 2024). The launching of public awareness campaigns also needs to be arranged across various parts of the country, urging citizens for an equitable distribution of domestic work (Luthra, 2021). Policy enactment alone will not solve the unpaid and underpaid women domestic workers in India; therefore, some of the social infrastructures like schools, colleges, universities, community centers, etc., must be streamlined with added responsibility for achieving this goal. The government can also think of establishing an affordable childcare system and elder care system so that women can actively participate in economic activities without any pressure from their families to look after them. Investing in public services like tap water supply, sanitation facilities, and public transport would reduce the time dedicated by women to household chores. The *Shakti Scheme*⁶ initiative by the Karnataka government to provide free transportation to women in the public transport system can be viewed positively from this point. Creating chances for women through flagship programs like gender equality initiatives, education dissemination, and awareness campaigns can significantly lessen gender prejudice that pushes women into unpaid domestic work (Jose & Sivaraman, 2023).

A sustainable awareness campaign is the need of the hour that would help the unpaid women domestic workers from a long-term perspective. It can be done through local leaders, self-help groups, legal aid programs, and platforms of networking with support systems to target specific vulnerable communities. Inculcating solidarity among the women domestic workers would enhance their collective bargaining power to negotiate better wage packages, working conditions, and other benefits, thereby protecting themselves against exploitation by their employers. Mutual sharing, caring, building networks, and supporting to address issues collectively will empower them by instilling confidence and a sense of belongingness to overcome isolation, susceptibility, and vulnerability. Media has a tremendous role to play in increasing awareness of the true conditions of unpaid/underpaid women domestic workers by exposing the exploitation and unfair labor practices through public discourse and by providing a voice to the voiceless (Astagini & Sarwono, 2021). The media can also take up the issue to bring the matter of unpaid/underpaid domestic work to the public domain. It can also humanize the struggles of unpaid women domestic workers to galvanize public empathy, thereby advocating change and putting pressure on labor reforms to ensure fair treatment of women domestic workers by promoting legal awareness to mobilize public opinion

and to urge policy changes. The responsibility at both in-house and workplace needs to be shared equally, and there has to be a tectonic shift in the cultural paradigm to provide equal economic opportunity for women along with men. Together with this, an assessment of various empowerment programs at regular intervals through data collection, research, and analysis is to be undertaken to fill the possible gaps over time.

Conclusion

The study reveals a novel idea that there exists a class of unpaid women workers concealed and secured in the four walls of their own houses and others' houses, forcing them to lead a secluded life. One category is the "housewives," and the second is the "housemaids." Housewives are being glorified to be deceived and exploited while the housemaids are either unpaid or underpaid with heavy exploitation and harassment. The mitigation measures must start from the grassroots level by the government by recognizing their economic contribution, enforcing the law for gender equality and economic freedom, and reducing the domestic burden of women to enable them to contribute to the national product to move towards the national goal of a \$5 trillion economy and a world economic superpower. Social and cultural frameworks should be revamped to strengthen the rights of women. There has to be well-directed research, and academic, and media attention to the problem faced by the unpaid and underpaid domestic women workers in India on a regular basis.

End Note

¹ceda.ashoka.edu.in

²www.indiaspend.com

³<https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/Chapter%20-%208.pdf>

⁴<https://www.india.gov.in/spotlight/rashtriya-swasthya-bima-yojana>

⁵www.msde.gov.in/skill development

⁶<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/26/ticket-to-freedom-free-bus-rides-for-women-spark-joy-for-millions-in-karnataka>

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