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Women's Economic Agency and Invisible Labour in Rural and Urban Spaces

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Abstract

Women make substantial contributions to both rural and urban economies, yet their work often goes unnoticed in policy frameworks, statistical systems, and social narratives. This paper investigates the ways in which women assert economic agency within rural agrarian systems and urban informal sectors, despite enduring structural barriers. Using insights from feminist economic theory, labor data, and field studies, the discussion examines unpaid care duties, domestic labor, informal employment, and migration. It identifies key obstacles—including inequitable land rights, wage disparities, and restrictive gender norms—while also emphasizing women's resilience and collective action through cooperatives and labor unions. The paper ultimately argues that acknowledging and valuing women's invisible labor is essential for fair and inclusive development. Effective policy must include legal safeguards, supportive social infrastructure, and improved measurement systems that fully capture women's economic participation.

Keywords

invisible labor, unpaid care, informal sector, rural workforce, urban domestic workers, gender inequality.

Introduction

Despite ongoing gender-equality initiatives, women's economic roles remain undervalued in both rural and urban contexts. In rural areas, women undertake a vast range of unpaid agricultural activities—including sowing, weeding, and harvesting—yet these tasks are rarely reflected in official labor statistics. Urban women working in informal roles such as domestic service or street vending similarly lack adequate legal protection and social benefits. This lack of visibility diminishes their economic agency and perpetuates gendered disparities.

Women's economic agency refers to their capacity to make choices, control resources, and engage meaningfully in economic life. However, patriarchal systems, limited property rights, and the burden of unpaid care responsibilities significantly restrict this agency. Data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) shows "women perform a disproportionately large share of unpaid care work, including childcare and household tasks."¹ Women in the informal economy also face insecure working conditions, lower earnings, and minimal recognition.

This paper analyzes the dynamics of women's invisible labor and economic agency across five themes: (1) unpaid care work and gendered labor division; (2) rural women's agricultural contributions; (3) women in urban informal work; (4) migration and the dual burden of labor; and (5) policy and collective action for empowerment.

1. Unpaid Care Work and Gendered Labor Inequality

Unpaid care work—childrearing, domestic chores, eldercare, and household management—is one of the largest sources of invisible labor carried out by women. Globally, women perform four times more unpaid care work than men, according to ILO estimates, "which significantly limits their access to paid employment and economic mobility."²

In India, time-use surveys consistently show that women devote far more hours to household tasks than men, regardless of education or employment status. Findings from the National Statistical Office indicate that even women engaged in paid work carry a disproportionately heavy domestic load. This entrenched gender imbalance restricts their participation in formal labor markets and reinforces the belief that domestic work is a natural female responsibility rather than an economic contribution.

The wider effects are profound: the lack of recognition and compensation for care work weakens women's bargaining power at home and at work, reducing their financial autonomy and long-term security.

2. Rural Women's Economic Agency: Agriculture, Land Rights, and Invisibility

In rural regions, women engage in essential agricultural tasks—seed selection, planting, weeding, harvesting, livestock tending, and post-harvest work. Despite this, "their labor often goes unacknowledged because definitions of "worker" frequently exclude unpaid family labor."³

Land ownership is a major determinant of economic power. Many rural women lack property rights, restricting their ability to access credit, farm inputs, and government programs. As economist Bina Agarwal notes, "although women make up a significant share of the agricultural workforce, their minimal control over land limits their economic leverage."⁴

Nevertheless, rural women build economic agency through self-help groups and cooperatives. Organizations like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) support them in securing better wages, financial services, and social protection. "Through such collectives, women strengthen market linkages and advocate for recognition of their labor."⁵

3. Urban Informal Employment: Domestic Work, Vending, and Vulnerability: In cities, women often work in unstable informal jobs such as domestic labor, vending, construction, and home-based production. "Domestic workers, who perform essential care functions, are among the least protected groups. Many work without contracts, regulation, or access to social security."⁶

ILO research indicates "domestic work—predominantly undertaken by women—is inherently vulnerable due to its private setting and regulatory gaps. Workers often face wage exploitation, long hours, and minimal organizational support."⁷ Similarly, women street vendors and home-based workers occupy the margins of urban economies. Their incomes fluctuate, and they rarely receive formal worker benefits. Balancing paid labor with heavy domestic responsibilities further deepens their economic insecurity and invisibility.

4. Migration, Precarity, and Women's Negotiated Agency: Migration—whether from villages to cities or within rural areas—often provides women with new economic opportunities. Yet migrant women commonly experience a "double burden": precarious informal employment combined with persistent unpaid care duties. Surveys of migrant workers show that women experience sharp income reductions during crises—"such as the COVID-19 pandemic—while also managing increased care responsibilities."⁸ Lack of safe housing, childcare options, and social protection adds to their vulnerability. Still, migration can enhance women's

agency by offering earnings, new social networks, and greater autonomy. Many women negotiate working conditions, manage urban challenges, and send remittances home, shifting their role from dependents to significant economic contributors.

5. Recognition, Policy, and Collective Empowerment: Realizing women's economic agency requires structural transformation in how societies measure, value, and protect labor. Improved statistical systems are essential to capture the scale of informal and unpaid work. The ILO's revised statistical standards, " include informal household production, mark progress toward greater visibility."⁹

Policy measures should support women through robust labor rights, social protection programs, safe working environments, and legal recognition of informal workers. Organizations such as SEWA and networks like WIEGO provide platforms for collective bargaining, training, and access to resources. Additionally, investing in care infrastructure—childcare centers, eldercare services, and efficient public transport—is crucial for redistributing unpaid work and enabling women's fuller workforce participation. Without addressing the care burden, women's economic agency will remain constrained.

Conclusion: Women's economic agency in both rural and urban settings is deeply influenced by invisible labor that is systematically undervalued. Whether sustaining farms, managing households, or participating in the urban informal economy, women contribute through unpaid care, precarious work, and entrepreneurial effort. Yet persistent barriers—unequal land rights, gendered labor norms, and weak social protections—limit their ability to translate work into security and empowerment. Nevertheless, women exercise agency through organizing, migration, and collective action, asserting their presence in economies that frequently overlook them. Achieving meaningful gender equity requires deliberate policies, social recognition of unpaid work, and shifts in cultural norms. Valuing women's invisible labor is not only a matter of fairness—it is essential for inclusive and sustainable economic development.

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