



Work Is Work: Theorising Unpaid Care Work To Bridge The Gender-Gap

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Abstract: This article aims to theorize the concept of unpaid care work along with the supporting statistics. It seeks to establish the relationship between unpaid care work and women empowerment, and provides policy recommendations for the same.

Index Terms – Unpaid care work, time poverty, recognize, reduce, redistribute.

I. INTRODUCTION

Women belong in all places where decisions are made. It shouldn't be that women are the exception.

-Ruth Bader Ginsburg (2nd female Justice of the US Supreme Court)

Historically, women have fought for spaces in homes, rooms, and on important tables. There is no silver bullet that could end this discrimination within a twinkling of an eye. It is a multi-disciplinary problem that requires an all-armed solution. There are several fronts to be battled. One of the crucial aspects of this is the sexual division of labor, which jeopardizes women's contribution and engagement in paid work. Traditionally, staying at home and taking care of the family, i.e., unpaid care work, is, quintessentially a woman's encumbrance. Unpaid care work entails all the work undertaken in homes, across all communities and societies, involving catering to the needs of families, their direct care, and other household work like cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, etc. Being tethered to this work, women have to suffer from something termed time poverty. Time poverty conceptualizes the fact that women are so engrossed in unpaid care work that there are some inevitable time constraints, and they are compelled to make certain trade-offs between the unpaid work and other paid work and social activities. This trade-off does not necessarily act in their favor and further distances them from mainstream workplaces, hence fueling the continued discrimination. When most of their time is consumed by unpaid care work, a small fraction of time is left to be devoted to paid work. This implies reduced working hours for women, further cementing the wage gap between men and women.

Statistics presage a moment of epiphany in this context, where the difference between the proportion of time spent by men and women in unpaid care work is huge. The figures calculated by the OECD reveal that men spend a mere 51.8 minutes per day in unpaid work, while women spend 315.9 minutes per day doing the same work. In contrast with this, men spend 390.6 minutes per day doing paid work, and women put in only 184.7 minutes per day doing the same. However, it is flabbergasting to note that the total time spent by women in any sort of work is 536.6 minutes per day compared to 442.3 minutes per day for men. Thus, men and women are light years away from each other when it comes to engaging in unpaid work. But what is

more terrifying is that overall, it is women who invest more time in work, but that work is not monetized or accounted for. Therefore, despite putting in more efforts, women still suffer from low incomes and dependency. This implies that accounting for unpaid work would succor the correction of the scales of equality between men and women and their wage gap.

II. THREE RS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment made several suggestions in its working paper on the economic empowerment of women. One of the key suggestions was to “recognize, reduce, and redistribute care work”. It identified care as a universal right and one of the fundamental essentials of empowering women. The three Rs strategy, i.e., to recognize, reduce, and redistribute care work, functions on the premise that in order to attain equality in paid work, there is a need to focus on equality in unpaid work. The first step in the process is to, ‘recognise’ unpaid care work. Feminists across the world have argued for actually paying a wage for this work. However, this is not a plausible solution since quantifying and monetizing such work done domestically is a herculean task. Recognition, in the Indian context, would imply taking it into account while measuring the pay gap. Most of the unpaid care work is not even regarded as ‘work’, and hence women are chastised for not actually working. The next step is to reduce this work. The mission of reduction places the onus on the state mostly to develop the infrastructure in such a way that eliminates the extra unpaid care work. A major chunk of women's time in rural areas goes into fetching water, cleaning, hygiene, etc. Identifying and targeting these areas will help formulate the requisite policies and schemes to reduce unpaid work. Thus, governments should focus on providing access to clean water, sanitation, electricity and clean fuel among others. Offering efficient anganwadi services for the care of children at an early age, crèche facilities and affordable care services to the elderly will significantly assist in reducing the burden of providing care work on the women. The final and most crucial step is to redistribute the care work, i.e. increase male participation. This could be achieved by devising policies that provide access to parental leave for both parents, along with flexible working hours and promoting working cultures that normalize the sharing of caregiving responsibilities between both the genders.

The key here is not to make the lives of working women the same as those of men but to align the lives of working men with that of women because caregiving responsibilities cannot be dispensed with and are crucial for the social development of a community. There is also a correlation recognized between the wealth of a country and gender inequality in unpaid care work. Data analysis by the OECD reveals that the distribution of care responsibilities is found to be most equal in the high-income countries. It is reasonable to conclude that with high income invested in the right policies that help in redistributing the care work, a nation can achieve gender parity in unpaid care work, thus elevating the status of women.

In a report titled “Invisible Work Invisible Workers”, the UN Women Asia and Pacific outlined five major institutions that affect women's unpaid work. These are the households, community and caste structures, non-governmental actors, markets, and the state. Out of these, the state is the focal point, wielding the most power with its resources and influence over other institutions.

American philosopher Nancy Fraser devised a unique perspective on the state's welfare policies. She has talked about three models, primarily based on which state discharges its responsibility of accounting for unpaid care work and bringing respite to women. The first model, i.e. the “breadwinner model” is based on the premise that families provide for the care work themselves, and there is hardly a need to avail of the same in the market. Thus, the focus of all the state policies is on the breadwinners, who are actually engaged in paid work. The second model is the “caregiver parity model”. This model also places the responsibility of caregiving to women, but it promotes state support in the form of allowances and benefits. However, Nancy Fraser has criticized both on the grounds that neither of these seeks to bring about change. They merely reinforce the prevailing notions, albeit with state support. Thus, she proposes an enhanced combination of both models in the form of the “Universal Caregiver Model”. This model undertakes a gender-neutral approach and proposes a policy regime that favors working caregivers. These policies can take the form of shorter working weeks, funding state institutions like local authorities to provide affordable care services and working environments that deconstruct gender, and promote equal distribution of responsibilities.

India is on the path of the universal caregiver model with several policies like the National Water Policy, clean energy plans, maternity benefits, Early Childhood Care and Education, National Crèche Scheme, Integrated Child Development Scheme, etc. However, discussing the efficiency of the implementation of these policies and evaluating their performance is beyond the scope of our present discussion.

III. CONCLUSION

The involvement of women in paid work has not shown some very promising figures. On top of this, the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this already existing gender inequality. World Bank data shows that the percentage of women in the workforce has plummeted. It was 32% in 2005 and was reduced to 21% in 2019. Since everything was shut down completely and paid care services could not be availed of, the increased burden again fell on the shoulders of women. This is also a testament to the fact that people's mentality of rigid conventional gender roles is a major bottleneck in effectively implementing caregiving policies. Women earning more than men are considered to not be socially acceptable. Thus, when women are making more money than their male counterparts, they indulge themselves more in household work to make up for the transgression from normative gender roles. Thus, when they earn more, they also take up more of the unpaid household work, thus cementing the sexual division of labor.¹ Also, less involvement by women in paid work discourages investment in their education, thus further distancing them from equality and empowerment.² All of this affects her education, financial status, skill development, and hence her social status.

The various canons of international law guaranteeing human rights, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights embody the spirit of non-discrimination and provide equal opportunities to all. Women shouldering the responsibility of unpaid care work solitarily, is a violation of these principles, and this misbalance needs to be corrected by the right policies and a shift in societal expectations.

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