



## Unpaid Work

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This article is based on “**How to treat unpaid work**” which was published in The Hindu on 22/03/2021. It talks about the issues related to the high burden of unpaid domestic work and care work in India.

Women bear a disproportionately high burden of unpaid domestic work and care work in India. They carry a disproportionately higher burden of unpaid work, namely, unpaid domestic services as well as unpaid care of children, the old, and the disabled for their respective households.

Women do this job not necessarily because they like it or are efficient in it, but because it is imposed on them by patriarchal norms, which are the roots of all-pervasive gender inequalities.

Though this work contributes to overall well-being at the household level and collectively at the national level, it is invisible in the national database and particularly in national policies. By excluding this work from the economy, macroeconomics shows a clear male bias.

Therefore, in order to adhere to the principle of gender equality and justice, it is imperative to recognize this unpaid work and make provisions to rectify this problem.

### Need to Recognise Unpaid Work

- **Restricting Opportunities:** The invisible labor that a woman puts into household work is a 24-hour job without remuneration, promotions, or retirement benefits. Further, it restricts opportunities for women in the economy and in life.

It is due to this **female labor force participation rate** in India is around 25%.

- **Linkage with Economy:** The household produces goods and services for its members, and if GDP is a measure of the total production and consumption of the economy, it has to incorporate this work by accepting the household as a sector of the economy.

Unpaid work is a privately produced public good that is critical for the sustenance of the mainstream economy.

- **Subsidizes Private Sector:** At the macro level, unpaid work subsidizes the private sector by providing it a generation of workers (human capital) and takes care of the wear and tear of labor who are family members.
- **Subsidizes Government:** Similarly, unpaid work also subsidizes the government by taking care of the old, sick, and disabled. The state would have spent huge amounts in the absence of unpaid work.

## Challenges in Compensating Unpaid Work

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- **Implementation Issue:** The Economic Survey 2019 recognizes this unpaid work, is a positive development. However, its implementation may create problems such as the affordability of the government and calculation of the amounts.
- **Endorsing Norm of Women's Work:** Paying monetary benefits carries with it the possible danger of formally endorsing the social norm that domestic and care work is 'women's work', for which they are being paid.
- **Master-Servant Relationship:** The term salary, wage, or compensation is indeed problematic as it indicates an employer-employee relationship, i.e., a relationship of subordination with the employer having disciplinary control over the employee.

## Way Forward

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Public policy should aim at closing the huge gender gap in unpaid domestic and care work through 'recognition, reduction, and redistribution.

- **Recognition:** Paying a wage is a formal recognition of the fact that unpaid domestic and care work is no less important than paid market work, as the latter is parasitic on the former.
  - What governments could do is recognize this unpaid work in the national database by a sound time-use survey and use the data in national policies.
- **Reduction:** Women's burden of unpaid work can be reduced by:
  - Improving technology (e.g. better fuel for cooking),
  - Better infrastructure (e.g. water at the doorstep),
  - Shifting some unpaid work to the mainstream economy (e.g. childcare, care of the disabled, and care of the chronically sick),
  - Making basic services (e.g. health and transportation) accessible to women.
- **Redistribution:** Policy measures should also envisage redistributing the work between men and women by providing different incentives and disincentives to men (e.g. mandatory training of men in housework, childcare, etc.) and financial incentives for sharing housework.
  - These measures will give free time to women and open up new opportunities to them.
  - Further, payment of pension to old women (60+ years) may be a better idea to compensate them for their unpaid work.

## **Conclusion**

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In order to reduce women's burden of unpaid work and tap their potential in development, there is an urgent need to expand the purview of economics not only for gender justice but mainly for moving towards realistic economics.

### ***Drishti Mains Question***

Unpaid work is a privately produced public good that is critical for the sustenance of the mainstream economy. Discuss.

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