

Estimation of Unpaid Labor and Care Economy in India: Exploring Gender Roles, Economic Contributions, and Policy Implications

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Abstract

Unpaid labor and the care economy form a critical yet undervalued segment of India's economic and social structure, predominantly shouldered by women due to entrenched gender norms. This research seeks to estimate the scale, economic value, and gendered distribution of unpaid labor—encompassing domestic work, childcare, eldercare, and community services—in India, using a mixed-methods approach that integrates time-use data, econometric modeling, and qualitative insights. Drawing on the 2019 Time Use Survey (TUS) by the National Statistical Organisation and supplementing it with primary data from rural and urban households, the study aims to quantify the contribution of unpaid work to India's GDP, assess its impact on women's labor force participation, and explore the socioeconomic and cultural determinants of its gendered allocation. Recent literature underscores that women spend significantly more time (up to 7-8 times) on unpaid care than men, contributing an estimated 7-32% to GDP, yet this work remains invisible in national accounts. This proposal builds on such findings to address gaps in valuation methods, regional disparities, and policy frameworks, proposing strategies for recognition, reduction, and redistribution of unpaid labor to enhance gender equity and economic growth. By combining quantitative estimates with narratives from caregivers, the study aims to offer a holistic understanding of the care economy's role in perpetuating gender inequality and its potential as a lever for sustainable development.

Keywords: Unpaid Labor, Care Economy, Gender Roles, Unpaid Care Work, Domestic Work, Time Use Survey, Economic Valuation, Gender Inequality, Women's Economic Contribution, Invisible Labor, Social Reproduction, Female Labor Force Participation, Care Infrastructure, Gender-Responsive Policies, India.

Introduction

Unpaid labor, particularly within the care economy, sustains households and economies but is excluded from traditional economic metrics like GDP. In India, women perform most of this work, spending an average of 297-352 minutes daily on domestic and caregiving tasks compared to 31-51 minutes for men, as per recent studies. This gendered division restricts women's economic participation, with India's female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) stagnating at 22-25%. The economic value of unpaid work, if recognized, could rival major sectors like manufacturing, yet its invisibility perpetuates gender disparities. This research proposes to estimate this contribution, analyze its gender dynamics, and recommend policy interventions, aligning with Sustainable

Development Goal 5.4 (recognizing unpaid care work).

Research Objectives

1. **Quantify Unpaid Labor:** Estimate the time spent and economic value of unpaid domestic and care work in India, disaggregated by gender, region, and socioeconomic status.
2. **Assess Gender Roles:** Investigate the sociocultural and economic factors driving the gendered distribution of unpaid labor.
3. **Evaluate Economic Impact:** Measure the contribution of unpaid work to India's GDP and its influence on women's paid employment opportunities.

4. **Policy Recommendations:** Propose strategies to recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid labor for gender equity and economic benefits.

Below is a set of research gaps and corresponding research questions tailored to the study of unpaid labor, the care economy, and gender roles in India. These gaps are derived from the literature review in the research proposal and reflect areas where current scholarship is limited or inconclusive, providing a foundation for the proposed study. The research questions are designed to address these gaps, offering clear, actionable inquiries to guide the research.

Research Gaps

1. **Limited Regional and Intersectional Analysis**

- Existing studies, such as the 2019 Time Use Survey (TUS) and works by Nikore (2022) and Janiso et al. (2021), provide national-level estimates of unpaid labor but lack detailed disaggregation by region, caste, class, and rural-urban divides. The heterogeneity of India's socio-economic landscape is underexplored, limiting the understanding of how unpaid work varies across diverse contexts.

2. **Inconsistent Valuation Methodologies**

- While studies like Hirway (2015) estimate unpaid work's economic value (7-32% of GDP), they employ varying methods (e.g., opportunity cost vs. replacement cost) without consensus on standardization. This inconsistency hampers comparability and policy applicability.

3. **Longitudinal Data Deficiency**

- Post-2019 TUS, there is a lack of longitudinal data tracking changes in unpaid labor patterns, especially after significant events like the COVID-19 pandemic, which Ghosh (2020) suggests increased women's care burdens. This gap limits insights into temporal trends and resilience of gender norms.

4. **Understudied Male Participation**

- Research predominantly focuses on women's unpaid labor (e.g., Neetha, 2019; Mishra & Tripathi, 2022), with little attention to men's roles or barriers to their participation in care work. This one-sided focus restricts strategies for redistribution.

5. **Impact on Labor Market Dynamics**

- While Oxfam (2019) and UN Women (2021) link unpaid work to low female labor force participation (FLFPR), the causal mechanisms—beyond time poverty—and their interplay with sectoral employment (e.g., agriculture vs. services) remain underexplored.

6. **Policy Implementation Gaps**

- Proposals for recognizing, reducing, and redistributing unpaid work (ILO, 2018; IMF, 2019) lack empirical evidence on effective implementation in India's context, where public spending on care infrastructure is below 1% of GDP (Chakraborty, 2020).

7. **Cultural and Normative Influences**

- Although gender norms are acknowledged as drivers of unpaid work (Chakravarti, 1993; Kabeer, 2021), their specific mechanisms—e.g., intergenerational transmission or regional cultural variations—are not well-documented, limiting targeted interventions.

8. **Intersection with Technology and Infrastructure**

- The role of technology (e.g., household appliances) and infrastructure (e.g., water access, childcare facilities) in reducing unpaid labor is hypothesized (Ferrant et al., 2014), but empirical studies in India are sparse, especially post-2020.

Research Questions

Addressing Gap 1: Regional and Intersectional Analysis

1. How does the volume and nature of unpaid labor vary across rural and urban India, and by caste, class, and regional cultural contexts?

2. To what extent do intersectional factors (e.g., caste, income, education) influence the gendered distribution of unpaid care work in different states?

Addressing Gap 2: Inconsistent Valuation Methodologies

3. Which valuation method (opportunity cost, replacement cost, or hybrid) most accurately reflects the economic contribution of unpaid labor in India, and how do these estimates differ by gender and region?
4. How can standardized valuation approaches be developed to integrate unpaid work into India's national accounts?

Addressing Gap 3: Longitudinal Data Deficiency

5. How have patterns of unpaid labor and care work evolved in India from 2019 to 2022 particularly in response to economic shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic?
6. What are the long-term trends in time allocation to unpaid work across generations of Indian women and men?

Addressing Gap 4: Understudied Male Participation

7. What are the social, cultural, and economic barriers preventing men from participating in unpaid care work in Indian households?
8. How do men perceive their role in unpaid labor, and what incentives could encourage greater involvement?

Addressing Gap 5: Impact on Labor Market Dynamics

9. How does the burden of unpaid work influence women's transitions between informal and formal employment sectors in India?
10. What is the quantitative relationship between time spent on unpaid care and women's labor force participation rates across different occupational categories?

Addressing Gap 6: Policy Implementation Gaps

11. What are the key barriers to implementing policies that recognize and reduce unpaid labor in India, and how can they be overcome?
12. How effective are existing care infrastructure investments (e.g., anganwadis, water supply) in reducing women's unpaid work burden, and what gaps remain?

Addressing Gap 7: Cultural and Normative Influences

13. How do specific cultural norms and traditions in different Indian regions shape the allocation of unpaid care responsibilities between genders?
14. What role does intergenerational transmission of gender roles play in perpetuating the unequal distribution of unpaid work?

Addressing Gap 8: Intersection with Technology and Infrastructure

15. To what extent do technological interventions (e.g., cooking appliances, washing machines) reduce the time spent on unpaid domestic work in Indian households?
16. How does access to public infrastructure (e.g., piped water, childcare centers) impact the gender distribution and total volume of unpaid labor in rural versus urban settings?

Rationale and Alignment

- **Comprehensive Scope:** These gaps and questions span quantitative (valuation, labor market impacts), qualitative (cultural norms, male participation), and policy-oriented (implementation, infrastructure) dimensions, ensuring a holistic approach.
- **India-Specific Focus:** The questions are contextualized to India's diverse socio-economic and cultural landscape, addressing gaps in national-level generalizations.
- **Actionable Insights:** Each question aims to generate evidence for policy (e.g., Q11-12), equity (e.g., Q7-8), and economic recognition (e.g., Q3-4), aligning with the proposal's objectives.

These research gaps and questions provide a robust framework for advancing knowledge on unpaid labor and the care economy, offering a clear path for empirical investigation and policy development. Let me know if you'd like further refinement or additional questions!

Research Questions

- What is the scale and economic value of unpaid labor in India, and how does it vary by gender and region?
- How do gender norms and socioeconomic factors shape the allocation of unpaid care work?
- What is the relationship between unpaid labor and women's participation in the formal labor market?
- How can policy interventions effectively address the burden of unpaid work?

Below is a set of hypotheses crafted to align with the research gaps and questions outlined earlier for the study of unpaid labor, the care economy, and gender roles in India. These hypotheses are designed to be testable, grounded in existing literature, and reflective of the proposed mixed-methods approach (quantitative and qualitative). They address the key dimensions of the research—scale and valuation, gender dynamics, economic impacts, cultural influences, and policy interventions—while offering clear predictions to guide empirical analysis.

Hypotheses

H1: Scale and Regional Variation

- **H1a:** Women in rural India spend significantly more time on unpaid labor (e.g., domestic chores, caregiving) than women in urban areas due to limited access to infrastructure and technology.
- *Rationale:* Studies like Rao (2020) suggest rural women face higher unpaid work burdens due to agrarian responsibilities and poor infrastructure.

- **H1b:** The economic value of unpaid labor, when estimated using replacement cost, is higher in northern India (e.g., Uttar Pradesh) compared to southern India (e.g., Tamil Nadu) due to differences in wage rates and care demands.
- *Rationale:* Regional wage disparities and household size variations (Hirway, 2015) may amplify valuation differences.

H2: Intersectionality and Gender Disparities

- **H2a:** Lower-caste and economically disadvantaged women perform a greater share of unpaid care work compared to higher-caste and wealthier women, reflecting intersecting inequalities.
- *Rationale:* Desai & Banerji (2021) hint at caste and class influencing labor allocation, but data is limited.
- **H2b:** Women with higher education levels spend less time on unpaid work than those with lower education, mediated by greater bargaining power within households.
- *Rationale:* Ferrant et al. (2014) link education to reduced care burdens through empowerment.

H3: Valuation Methodologies

- **H3a:** The opportunity cost method underestimates the economic contribution of unpaid labor compared to the replacement cost method, particularly for women outside the formal labor force.
- *Rationale:* The opportunity cost method tends to underestimate the economic contribution of unpaid labor because it values unpaid work according to the income the person could have earned in the labor market. This approach can undervalue the work of women who are outside the formal labor force, such as homemaking, childcare, eldercare, and other household responsibilities, because they may have limited or no recorded market earnings. In contrast, the replacement cost method estimates the value of unpaid labor based on

what it would cost to hire someone to perform the same services. Therefore, it more fully captures the economic value of unpaid household and care work, particularly when such work is performed by people who are not formally employed.

- **H3b:** Including indirect care activities (e.g., community volunteering) in valuation increases the estimated GDP contribution of unpaid work by at least 5%.
- *Rationale:* Budlender (2018) suggests broader definitions elevate estimates.

H4: Temporal Trends

- **H4a:** The time spent on unpaid care work by women increased significantly during and post-COVID-19 (2020-2022) compared to pre-2019 levels, with a slower return to baseline by 2025.
- *Rationale:* Ghosh (2020) documents a pandemic-driven spike in care demands.
- **H4b:** Younger generations of men (aged 18-35) in 2025 participate more in unpaid work than older generations (aged 36+), reflecting shifting gender norms.
- *Rationale:* Kabeer (2021) suggests gradual norm evolution among youth.

H5: Male Participation

- **H5a:** Men's participation in unpaid care work is positively correlated with exposure to gender equity campaigns and higher female employment in the household.
- *Rationale:* UN Women (2021) posits awareness and economic necessity as drivers.
- **H5b:** Patriarchal attitudes and lack of role models are the primary barriers to men's involvement in unpaid domestic tasks in India.
- *Rationale:* Chakravarti (1993) ties norms to male disengagement.

H6: Labor Market Dynamics

- **H6a:** A 10% increase in time spent on unpaid work reduces women's likelihood of formal

employment by at least 15%, with stronger effects in urban areas.

- *Rationale:* Oxfam (2019) links time poverty to low FLFPR.
- **H6b:** Women in agricultural households are more likely to exit the labor force due to unpaid care demands compared to those in service-sector households.
- *Rationale:* Mehrotra & Sinha (2017) highlight sectoral differences in labor withdrawal.

H7: Cultural and Normative Influences

- **H7a:** Households with stronger adherence to traditional gender norms exhibit a wider gender gap in unpaid work hours compared to those with egalitarian attitudes.
- *Rationale:* Neetha (2019) connects norms to labor division.
- **H7b:** Intergenerational transmission of caregiving roles increases the unpaid work burden on women by reinforcing expectations across family members.
- *Rationale:* Palriwala & Neetha (2016) suggest familial socialization as a key factor.

H8: Technology and Infrastructure

- **H8a:** Access to time-saving technologies (e.g., washing machines, LPG stoves) reduces women's unpaid work hours by at least 20% in urban households but has a smaller effect in rural areas.
- *Rationale:* Ferrant et al. (2014) hypothesize technology's role, tempered by rural access constraints.
- **H8b:** Improved public infrastructure (e.g., piped water, childcare centers) decreases the gender gap in unpaid work by redistributing care responsibilities to the state.
- *Rationale:* ILO (2018) links infrastructure to burden reduction.

H9: Policy Effectiveness

- **H9a:** Public investment in care services (e.g., anganwadis) reduces women's unpaid work time by a greater margin in states with higher implementation capacity (e.g., Tamil Nadu vs. Uttar Pradesh).
- **Rationale:** Chakraborty (2020) notes regional policy disparities.
- **H9b:** Awareness campaigns promoting shared care responsibilities increase men's participation in unpaid work by at least 10% in targeted communities.
- **Rationale:** IMF (2019) advocates norm-shifting interventions.

Here is the complete analysis arranged in a **clear tabular form**, with the statistical results and conclusions standardized at the **5% significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$)**.

Hypothesis	Test Used	Test Statistic	P-value	Decision	Interpretation / Conclusion
H1a: Rural women spend significantly less time on unpaid domestic work than urban women.	Independent t-test	$t = -1.901$	0.058	Fail to reject H_0	No statistically significant difference in unpaid domestic work between rural and urban women at the 5% level.
H1b: Household income differs significantly across regions.	One-way ANOVA	$F = 1.704$	0.146	Fail to reject H_0	No statistically significant difference in household income across regions.
H2a: Women's unpaid domestic work differs significantly across caste groups.	One-way ANOVA	$F = 3.593$	0.013	Reject H_0	There is a statistically significant difference in women's unpaid domestic work across caste groups.
H2a: Women's unpaid domestic work differs significantly across class groups.	One-way ANOVA	$F = 0.856$	0.425	Fail to reject H_0	No statistically significant difference in women's unpaid domestic work across class groups.
H2b: Women's unpaid domestic work differs significantly across education levels.	One-way ANOVA	$F = 1.947$	0.120	Fail to reject H_0	No statistically significant difference in women's unpaid domestic work across education levels.
H4a: Unpaid work differs between the pre-COVID and during-COVID periods.	Paired t-test	$t = -130.051$	<0.001	Reject H_0	There is a statistically significant difference in unpaid work between the pre-COVID and during-COVID periods.
H4a: Unpaid work differs between the during-COVID and post-COVID periods.	Paired t-test	$t = 123.272$	<0.001	Reject H_0	There is a statistically significant difference in unpaid work between the during-COVID and post-COVID periods.
H4b: Younger men spend significantly more time on unpaid domestic work than older men.	Independent t-test	$t = 2.175$	0.030	Reject H_0	Younger and older men differ significantly in their unpaid domestic work, with younger men spending more time according to the stated hypothesis.
H5a: Men's unpaid work is positively associated with women's paid work.	OLS Regression	$\beta = 0.0092$; $t = 1.689$	0.091	Fail to reject H_0	The relationship is positive but not statistically significant at the 5% level. Women's paid work does not significantly predict men's unpaid domestic work.
H6a: Women's paid work is negatively	OLS Regression	$\beta = 0.0588$; t	0.104	Fail to reject H_0	The coefficient is positive rather than negative and is not

associated with women's unpaid work.		= 1.628			statistically significant. Thus, the hypothesized negative relationship is not supported.
H8a: Women's unpaid domestic work differs significantly by access to technology.	One-way ANOVA	F = 2.835	0.059	Fail to reject H_0	No statistically significant difference at the 5% level, although the result is relatively close to the 0.05 threshold.
H8b: The gender gap in unpaid domestic work differs significantly by access to infrastructure.	One-way ANOVA	F = 2.146	0.117	Fail to reject H_0	No statistically significant difference in the gender gap in unpaid domestic work across infrastructure-access levels.

Overall Summary

Result Category	Hypotheses	Finding
Hypotheses Supported / Null Rejected	H2a (Caste), H4a (Pre-COVID vs. During-COVID), H4a (During-COVID vs. Post-COVID), H4b	Significant differences were observed across caste groups, COVID periods, and age groups among men.
Hypotheses Not Supported / Null Not Rejected	H1a, H1b, H2a (Class), H2b, H5a, H6a, H8a, H8b	The available evidence does not show statistically significant relationships or differences at the 5% level.

Note: For the regression hypotheses, the coefficient sign should be considered together with the p-value. In H5a, the coefficient is positive (0.0092), but $p = 0.091 > 0.05$, so the hypothesized positive relationship is **not statistically significant**. In H6a, the coefficient is actually positive (0.0588), whereas the hypothesis expected a negative relationship, and $p = 0.104 > 0.05$; therefore, the hypothesis is not supported.

Characteristics and Utility

- **Testability:** Each hypothesis is measurable using time-use data (e.g., H1a, H6a), surveys (e.g., H5b, H7a), or econometric models (e.g., H3a, H9a), aligning with the proposed methodology.
- **Specificity:** Hypotheses target distinct aspects—scale (H1-H3), gender roles (H4-H7), economic/policy outcomes (H6, H8-H9)—ensuring comprehensive coverage.
- **Grounding:** Predictions build on prior findings (e.g., Ghosh, 2020; Oxfam, 2019) while addressing gaps (e.g., male roles, regional variation).
- **Policy Relevance:** Results can inform strategies for recognition (H3), reduction (H8), and redistribution (H5, H9) of unpaid work.

These hypotheses provide a structured framework for empirical investigation, enabling the research to test key assumptions about unpaid labor and the care economy in India. Let me know if you'd like adjustments or additional hypotheses!

Literature Review

Recent research highlights the centrality of unpaid labor and the care economy in India, drawing from about 40 studies published between 2015 and 2022. Key findings include:

- **Scale and Gender Disparity:** The 2019 TUS reveals women spend 297 minutes daily on unpaid work versus 31 minutes for men, a gap consistent across education and employment status (Nikore, 2022; Janiso et al., 2021). Globally, unpaid work is valued at 9-60% of GDP, with India's contribution estimated at 7-32% (Hirway, 2015;).
- **Economic Valuation:** Studies employ opportunity cost and replacement cost methods, estimating unpaid work's value at Rs 49.5-65.1 lakh crore in 2019-20 (24-32% of GDP) Bridgman et al. (2018) emphasize time-use surveys as critical for such valuations.
- **Impact on Women:** The burden of unpaid work reduces women's FLFPR, with 53% of women outside the labor force citing care responsibilities versus 1.1% of men (Oxfam,

2019; UN Women, 2021). Time poverty limits education and skill development (Elson, 2017; Ferrant et al., 2014).

- **Cultural Norms:** Patriarchal norms frame caregiving as women's "natural" role, reinforced by inadequate public infrastructure (Chakravarti, 1993; Hensman, 2011; Dong & An, 2015).
- **Policy Insights:** Investments in care infrastructure (e.g., childcare, water access) could create 11 million jobs and boost GDP by 2% (ILO, 2018; ITUC, 2016). Redistribution requires shifting norms and state support (Razavi, 2007; IMF, 2019).

Gaps remain in regional analyses, intersectional perspectives (e.g., caste, class), and longitudinal data post-2019, which this study aims to address.

Methodology

Data Sources:

- **Secondary Data:** 2019 TUS, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), and National Sample Survey (NSS) data.
- **Primary Data:** Time-use surveys and interviews with 500 households (250 rural, 250 urban) across four states (e.g., Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Assam) to capture regional diversity.

Quantitative Methods:

- **Time-Use Analysis:** Calculate hours spent on unpaid tasks by gender, using TUS data and primary surveys.
- **Economic Valuation:** Apply opportunity cost (forgone wages) and replacement cost (market wage equivalents) methods to estimate monetary value.
- **Econometric Modeling:** Use regression analysis to assess determinants of unpaid work (e.g., education, income, household size) and its impact on FLFPR.

Qualitative Methods:

- **Interviews:** Conduct semi-structured interviews with women and men to explore perceptions of unpaid work and gender roles.
- **Focus Groups:** Engage community stakeholders to understand cultural barriers and policy needs.
- **Sampling:** Stratified random sampling to ensure representation across income levels, castes, and urban-rural divides.
- **Tools:** STATA for quantitative analysis; NVivo for qualitative coding.

Expected Outcomes

- A comprehensive estimate of unpaid labor's volume and value, disaggregated by gender and region.
- Insights into how gender norms and structural factors perpetuate unpaid work disparities.
- Evidence-based policy recommendations to integrate unpaid work into national accounts, reduce women's burden through infrastructure, and redistribute tasks via awareness campaigns and incentives.

Significance

This study will contribute to academic discourse on the care economy, inform India's gender and economic policies, and support global efforts toward SDG 5. It addresses a critical gap in recognizing women's economic contributions, offering a pathway to enhance equity and growth.

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