

# Women's Economic Contribution through Their Unpaid Household Work: The Case of India

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## Summary

While some research has been conducted on the issue of the unpaid work performed by women, no study has yet been conducted to attempt to arrive at a reasonable estimate of the approximate monetary value of the work done by women without pay in India. Such a figure could help address the problem of undervaluing women and contribute to discussions on the actual role of women in the society and thus the importance of rectifying the discrimination which women face from before their birth until their death.

This research is thus intended to address a major research gap and to respond to the consequences of treating millions of hard-working Indian women as economically unproductive and no more valuable than beggars and prisoners.

This study found that a typical woman's day starts at about 5 a.m. and ends after 10 p.m. In addition to their unpaid household activities, women often spend six to eight hours per day on paid activities. This double burden left such women with little time for themselves.

Women in both rural and urban areas are far more involved in a range of domestic activities than men, regularly carrying out approximately 33 tasks. While half of the husbands helped their spouses in domestic tasks, that assistance seems to be very limited in its nature and extent, with most men and women feeling that household work is the responsibility of women.

Although each method of estimating the economic value of women's work that was considered has its problems, an estimate was arrived at using the cost of paying someone to perform the 33 tasks typically performed by women. Assigning even a very low wage rate for those tasks yielded an annual figure for the value of women's unpaid household work of US\$612.8 billion or 61% of GDP.



While society recognizes their role in the conventional economy, women stand hidden and unacknowledged in what is termed by Elson (1995) as the '**Economy of Care**'.

## Background

India is a vast country, rich in culture and traditions. The Indian constitution grants women equal rights with men, but a strong patriarchal system persists which shapes the lives of women with traditions that are millennia old. In most Indian families, daughters are viewed as liabilities and girls are conditioned to believe that they are inferior and subordinate to men. Sons, meanwhile, are idolized and celebrated. The origin of what is considered appropriate behaviour for an Indian female can be traced to the rules laid by Manu in 200 B.C.: in childhood, a female is subject to her father, in her youth to her husband, and when her “lord” is dead then to her sons.

Given this strong patriarchal tradition, addressing gender disparities is no easy task. Traditionalists argue that India has survived for millennia with this patriarchal system, so what is the need for changes which are counter to Indian culture? Others would point to the problems of sex-selective abortions, millions of missing girls, dowry murder, low educational status and high illiteracy in girls and women, and gender disparities in employment opportunities and wages to suggest that India cannot enter the modern age without learning to respect the rights of women and girls and addressing the destructive aspects of traditional culture. One may also observe that those defending traditional patriarchal culture have no trouble embracing other non-traditional, vast, and sweeping cultural changes such as the adoption of use of cars, mobile phones and computers.

In addition to the patriarchal culture, common in different degrees throughout the world, is the equally common problem that while women typically carry out most of the work involved in caring for the home and its residents, such work is

given little or no social or economic importance, and as a result, women are perceived with little importance. While the work done by men is widely acknowledged and most men are considered as economically productive, women who are engaged in full-time household work are classified by the Government of India as economically unproductive. Yet the same tasks performed by these housewives, if done at another house, become a paid job and therefore valued.

The Census of India (2001) contains a chapter titled “Non-workers”, comprising the following categories:

- ❖ Students of all kinds and levels
- ❖ Household workers — all those attending to household chores like cooking, cleaning of utensils, looking after children, fetching water, and collecting firewood
- ❖ Dependents, disabled, children not going to school, the elderly
- ❖ Pensioners, widows not receiving pension
- ❖ Beggars, prostitutes, and others not engaged in economically productive work
- ❖ Others, including convicts in jail and inmates of mental or charitable institutions

As a result, over 367 million women in India – or 32% of the entire population and 65% of all females – have been classified by the Census of India as non-workers, placed in the same category as beggars, prostitutes, and prisoners. Of the total of those listed as non-workers in India, 74.3% are women. Such a categorization of the majority of women cannot fail to have consequences in policies and programs aimed at women.

## Methodology

The overall aim of this study was to quantify women's unpaid household work in India and attempt to assess an approximate economic value for it. Specifically, the research objectives were to:

- Obtain data on the average daily time spent by both men and women on paid and unpaid work;
- Identify gender differences in terms of leisure time, days off/vacation, and decision-making;
- Assess gender discrimination in carrying out unpaid work;
- Evaluate the attitudes of married women and men towards the unpaid work of women in the community;
- Discover any difference in unpaid work performed by women by rural versus urban residence;
- Quantify and assign an approximate economic value to the unpaid work performed by women throughout India.

The research involved a cross-sectional study using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. An interview schedule was used. The sample consisted of 25 urban men (3 single and 22 married) and 25 rural men (all married); and 75 urban women (5 single, 62 married, 6 widowed, and 2 divorcees) and 75 rural women (all married), for a total of 50 men and 200 women. The participants were not married pairs.

Nagpur City in the state of Maharashtra in Central India was chosen for the urban component of the study while Jhalap, a village in the State of Chhattisgarh in South Eastern India, was selected as the rural study site. While using only two sites was

insufficient for a representative sample in a country as vast and diverse as India, that very vastness and diversity made a representative study a near impossibility. Pragmatism and limited budget and time determined the choice of the two sites. Further, research in India and elsewhere suggests that while the specific tasks performed by women varies within and across countries, the amount of time women spend on household work and the wide variety of such tasks are nearly universal; therefore, the overall results of the study should be broadly applicable throughout India.

Since the population did not consist of a homogenous group, the study adopted both purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Snowball sampling is a technique for developing a research sample whereby existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances, i.e.; one can ask the interviewed person to nominate another individual who could be asked to give information or an opinion on the topic.

Data collection was carried out in the month of May 2008. SPSS software was used for data analysis.

### **Case Study: Life of a rural woman**

*Sanjukta (not her real name) is a 45-year-old housewife living in a rural village of Chhattisgarh. She hails from a lower middle-class family. She was educated up to 5th grade and then got married while she was 15 years old. Her husband has a small goods shop at Raipur, and stays in the city 100 km away from home. They have three sons.*

*Sanjukta's day is always busy. Her daily routine involves getting up at five in the morning. After sweeping the house and straightening up, she sweeps the yard to keep out the dust. Early in the morning, Sanjukta milks the family's cows and sends the milk to the co-operative. She takes her bath and starts preparing the morning breakfast. After preparing breakfast, she washes the dishes, cleans the*

*kitchen, prepares food for the cattle, and then cleans the cattle shed.*

*By this time it is almost late morning. She starts preparing for lunch by cleaning, cutting, and washing vegetables, then prepares the meal. Sanjukta has to ensure that her family gets lunch at the right time, as her son needs to get back to his work in the field. Sanjukta also works on the farm.*

*Sanjukta is fortunate that the family has a bore well, which makes it easier for her to collect water. Previously, they did not have one and she had to queue for hours in order to get water.*

*Sanjukta alone takes care of the family kitchen garden. She is responsible for the planting, weeding, and watering. Her garden has potato, banana, and green vegetables, all of which are used to feed her family. In the afternoons, she takes the cows out, sometimes with the help of her two sons. She also prepares cow dung cakes for fuel, which is used during the winter. Before evening, she finishes her cooking.*

*The family eats and goes to bed early as their day starts before sunrise. Sanjukta does the cooking and serves the family herself, though sometimes her second son helps her. She says that she very rarely has any free time; all day she is occupied with work. She prefers to rest or sleep whenever she has some time off from her work. Sometimes she visits her husband in the city.*

## Results

### *General profile of respondents*

Basic information was collected from the respondents in terms of their socio-economic characteristics, age, family size, marital status, educational level, occupation, monthly income, and perceived head of the family.

The respondents were fairly young, with 40% aged 26 to 33

years and 35% aged 34 to 41 years. While overall the respondents had low levels of education, in rural areas more women than male respondents were educated: 44% of men in rural areas were illiterate compared to 19% of women, and women had higher level of school enrolment until high school. The reason for this is explained in the Discussion section.

Most of the families (73% in urban and 68% in rural areas) had fewer than five members. About a fourth (24% in urban and 28% in rural areas) had 6-8 members, and a small percentage had 9-11 members.

Most (76%) of the families participating in the study were headed by a male, while 5% of the families had in-laws<sup>1</sup> or parents as the head of the family. Only 10% of the families were headed by the wife. The breakdown reflects the traditional patriarchal household that is common throughout most of India.

In both rural and urban areas, far fewer women than men had paid jobs. Interestingly, less than half of women in rural (35%) and urban (17%) areas described themselves as (full-time) housewives<sup>2</sup>. Among those women with paid employment, about one-fifth (19%) of the women respondents from the rural area were daily wage workers, while 39% were unpaid agriculture labourers.

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<sup>1</sup> In India, “in-laws” refer to the wife’s parents and “parents” to the husband’s.

<sup>2</sup> As it would be difficult to find a woman who engages in absolutely no housework the term “full-time” housewife is used to distinguish those who do not have an additional job from those who engage in other work besides all the work related to maintaining the home, its surroundings (which can include fields and livestock) and its residents.

About one-fifth of urban female respondents and very few rural female respondents were engaged in some type of household business; for those that were engaged in such business, this work was unlikely to include any payment.

Up to a quarter (15% of urban and 25% of rural areas) of the female respondents said that they had no income because they were (full-time) housewives. They stayed at home to carry out their responsibilities as mothers, managing the day-to-day activities of the family: feeding children, cooking, cleaning and so on.

For the men, the most common occupations were daily wage work and agricultural work, while a significant portion of urban men were involved in private or government service. Female respondents were occupied in a wider variety of activities for their livelihood than their male counterparts. Ironically, this was due not to a greater variety of job opportunities but to limited opportunities which required more creativity to make ends meet.

In both urban and rural areas, women earned far less than men. For urban women who earned an income, most (40%) received less than 1,000 rupees (US\$20) per month. The fairly high levels of education of urban females mentioned above appeared to have little or no impact on their income.

Rural families had more dependents than urban ones, with 47% of urban and 38% of rural families having one or two dependents, while 40% of urban and 51% of rural families had 3-5 dependents. The dependents were mostly children and aged parents or in-laws. In both urban and rural areas, 91% of families had one or two people who earned income.

Most (86%) of the respondents owned their own house and 13% stayed in rental houses. The remaining 1% includes

respondents who lived with in-laws and other relatives. Most (72%) of the respondents had access to drinking water while the remaining 28% did not; that is, they did not have individual water connection; rather they get water from a pond or well, or collected water from a public tap.

### *Time spent on paid and unpaid work*

The study found that a typical woman's day starts at about 5 a.m. and ends after 10 p.m. Women often spend six to eight hours per day on paid activities: 60% of women in this study were involved in paid activities after which they carried out their household activities. This double burden left these women with only a negligible amount of time for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Half the female respondents got up between 4:30 and 5:30 a.m., and 85% of female respondents were up by 6:30 a.m., as compared to 70% of men who were up by this time. Among those not engaged in paid work, many were full-time housewives and most worked in their own fields (not for pay).

Male respondents generally went to bed later than females: 63% of the female respondents went to sleep before 10 p.m. in comparison to 58% of male respondents. This may have been a reflection of the time that they got up in the morning.

Two-thirds (68%) of the male respondents worked for pay for 6 to 8 hours a day and 24% for more than 8 hours. Among the female respondents, 41% worked for pay for 6 to 8 hours a day, while only 12% worked more than 8 hours a day for pay; 17% of women reported working for fewer than five hours a day for

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<sup>3</sup> In addition, many women were involved in "extended paid work" which involves overtime or a secondary paid job which one does along with the primary job and unpaid work.

pay, with most being agricultural contract workers.

### Housework

Table 1 shows the reported involvement of men and women in various domestic tasks. As the table makes clear, women are far more involved in domestic activities than men. That said, men do contribute to domestic work despite prevalent attitudes that such work is the responsibility of women. Such participation, however, was far less common than for women. For instance, 26% of men participate in housecleaning on a daily basis as compared to 90% of women. Only 6% of men ever wash the dishes, 28% cook and 24% carry water. While it is encouraging to see that men do play some role in domestic tasks, it is clear that such tasks continue to be considered as mainly the domain of women, with men “helping” their wives, rather than husbands and wives sharing the responsibility — even in cases where women, like men, work a considerable number of hours per day for pay.

**Table 1: Respondents' participation in domestic work**

Task		Male	Female
Cleaning the house	Yes/Daily	26	90
	No/Occasionally	74	10
Cleaning around the home	Yes/Daily	20	81
	No/Occasionally	80	19
Tending mud floors	Yes/Daily	0	41
	No/Occasionally	100	59
Making beds, hanging and taking down mosquito nets	Yes/Daily	14	55
	No/Occasionally	86	45
Washing dishes	Yes/Daily	6	87
	No/Occasionally	94	14
Sorting, washing and drying	Yes/Daily	20	85

clothes	No/Occasionally	80	14
Ironing, folding clothes and putting them away	Yes/Daily	12	19
	No/Occasionally	88	81
Preparing food items for cooking <sup>4</sup>	Yes/Daily	16	87
	No/Occasionally	84	13
Cooking and serving food	Yes/Daily	28	86
	No/Occasionally	72	14
Tending to and lighting lamps	Yes/Daily	18	39
	No/Occasionally	82	61
Collecting firewood or other materials for fuel	Yes/Daily	14	29
	No/Occasionally	86	71
Making fuel from cow dung	Yes/Daily	2	11
	No/Occasionally	98	89
Carrying water	Yes/Daily	24	55
	No/Occasionally	76	45
Supervising household work	Yes/Daily	34	35
	No/Occasionally	66	65
Helping in family business	Yes/Daily	34	35
	No	66	65
Preparing food items for sale	Yes/Daily	18	18
	No/Occasionally	82	82

<sup>4</sup> For those not accustomed to South Asian food preparation, it is important to point out that this is a highly time-consuming activity, involving such tasks as carefully checking rice and dal (lentils) for dirt and stones; painstakingly cleaning leafy vegetables; scraping the scales off of and cleaning fish; removing the feathers from, cleaning, and cutting chickens; chopping vegetables into small pieces on a knife held in place by the foot, and so on. The food preparation usually takes far more time than the cooking; in the case of tiny fish, it can actually take many hours.

Both men and women were involved in a range of agricultural tasks. For instance, 60% of male and 74% of female respondents engaged in preparing soil, planting seedlings, and weeding, while only 24% of male and 22% of female respondents did not engage in such tasks. A third (32%) of male and most (65%) females engaged in preparing plots for vegetable planting, while most (60%) males and a third (32%) of females did not. About half of male (56%) and female (49%) respondents managed daily workers.

Three-quarters (76%) of both male and female respondents engaged in harvesting, and most men (68%) and women (62%) engaged in food processing. Close to three-quarters (72%) of male and female respondents collected and dried seeds, and 72% of both sexes also engaged in storage activities. While the proportions were similar, the results suggest that tasks which require more physical work were more likely performed by women while managerial tasks are more the domain of men.

Urban respondents were not involved in agriculture.

Only a minority of respondents, male and female, were involved with animal husbandry. Most men (64%) and women (65%) were not engaged in caring (cleaning, feeding etc.) for chickens and ducks, and only 28% of men and 33% of women were regularly involved in this task. Similarly, over two-thirds of men and women were not involved in medical care for small animals or in caring for larger animals. Given their lack of participation in animal husbandry, it is unsurprising that most men (80%) and women (66%) were also not involved in activities such as milking of cows or — for 96% of men and 88% of women — in selling the products in the market.

None of the male respondents and only a small proportion of the female respondents were involved in making baskets, mats,

holders, pots etc. Only 2% of men and 10% or less of women did embroidery or were involved in making and/or mending clothes. The results indicate that making handicrafts is not a means of livelihood.

**Table 2: Respondent's involvement in caring for family members**

Caring for family members	Male		Female
	Yes	No	
Caring for children	Yes	24	60
	No	76	40
Caring for the sick	Yes	4	7
	No	96	93
Caring for husband/wife	Yes	0	52
	No	100	48
Teaching children/helping with homework	Yes	20	25
	No	80	75
Taking children to and from school	Yes	20	21
	No	80	79
Feeding, looking after guests	Yes	4	5
	No	96	95
Paying bills, managing household accounts	Yes	52	17
	No	48	83
Shopping for food	Yes	80	65
	No	20	35
Shopping for clothes and other household items	Yes	76	56
	No	24	44
Managing the household (organizing activities, expenses, etc.)	Yes	40	27
	No	60	73
Taking the sick to the doctor	Yes	12	7
	No	88	93

Table 2 shows the self-reported frequency of participation by men and women in caring for family members. As shown, 60% of the female respondents reporting taking care of their young children (bathing, feeding, tending), whereas 40% of the women had children who were independent and could care for

themselves. Only 24% of the male respondents reported engaging in those activities. More than one-third (36%) of women guided their children in doing their homework, while one-fifth (22%) of men helped their children in their studies. Half of the women reported providing daily care for their husbands, while no men indicated that they looked after their wives. While the figures are very low, both men and women reported equal involvement in caring for sick family members and in looking after guests.

Virtually none of the respondents performed voluntary work for the welfare of their community, i.e. by engaging in organizing religious programmes on festive days or conducting recreational activities for the people residing in the community. While 6% of men participated in voluntary work, only 1% of women reported doing so. The even lower figure for female participation could be due to restrictions on female mobility as well as women's heavy workload.

### *Gender and unpaid work*

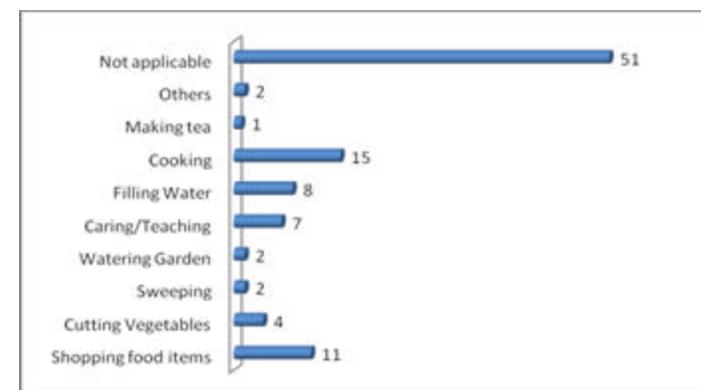
In most of the respondents' families, it was women who got up first, especially wives or daughters-in-law. In only 15% of the families was it the male respondent who got up first. Both male and female respondents said that it was mainly the duty of women to get up first in order to ensure that her family members received breakfast on time, to clean the home and its surroundings, prepare lunch, and so on. The woman's employment status did not affect these results; the woman was in charge of all these early morning domestic tasks even if she also worked outside the home.

More women (57%) than men (38%) strongly agreed that cooking and taking care of children and the elderly should be the job of women. Almost twice as many men (30%) as women

(15%) disagreed and only 3% of women strongly disagreed. None of the male respondents strongly disagreed that cooking and caring for children and the elderly was a woman's job.

Half of the husbands helped their spouses in domestic tasks. The extent of that contribution, however, may have been very limited, and as seen in Table 2 above, most men were not involved in domestic work on a daily basis. This question was asked to both men and women; women reported that their husbands do contribute but the contribution is limited to certain activities, whereas men said that they do contribute in domestic work but again not on a daily basis and only in limited fashion.

As Figure 1 illustrates, both the male and female respondents said that men are involved in various domestic tasks, the most common being cooking (15%) and shopping for food items (11%). A fairly small percentage helped to gather water (8%), care for and teach children (7%), and cut vegetables (4%). However, a full half (51%) were not involved in any domestic work. Male involvement in cooking was limited to washing the vegetables or grinding spices.



**Figure 1: Husband's contribution to domestic work (%)**

The most common reason given by men for their lack of involvement in domestic work is lack of time (27%). Other reasons included no need for them to do household work (7%), reluctance to help (6%), and that it is a woman's job (6%). Many wives reported that they did not allow their husbands to be involved in domestic work that they considered degrading — or in some cases, any household work at all. For instance, prevailing traditions and cultures do not allow men to wash clothes and dishes. Thus, even where men play some role, that role is limited by beliefs about which tasks are acceptable for men to perform.

Among both men and women, two-thirds (64%) agreed that men should not be involved in any domestic work. In addition, most men and women agreed that domestic work, when carried out by female family members, should not be paid; interestingly, almost three times as many men (14%) as women (5%) disagreed.<sup>5</sup>

However, more men (38%) than women (18%) disagreed with the statement that domestic work has no monetary value. There could be two main explanations. First, the low status of women may encourage them to undervalue domestic work even more than men do, considering it part of their duty and something they take for granted. Second, they may be less clear than men about the meaning of the idea of the work having a monetary value. As HealthBridge-supported research in other countries has shown, many people object to the idea of placing a monetary value on household work, yet when asked if such work has importance, will strongly agree that the work is vital. The problem, then, may be more in the concept of placing

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<sup>5</sup> The researchers and study authors did not promote the idea that domestic work should be paid; the question was merely rhetorical.

monetary terms on the work rather than a devaluation of the work itself.

Since most respondents did not understand the concept of GDP, the majority (85%) did not know whether counting of women's unpaid work would change the GDP, and another 8% said that they were not sure. Only 6% were of the view that counting of women's unpaid contribution would help in changing the GDP. The fact that anyone at all expressed this opinion may in itself be surprising, given how few Indian policymakers are aware of the issue, much less Indian society at large.

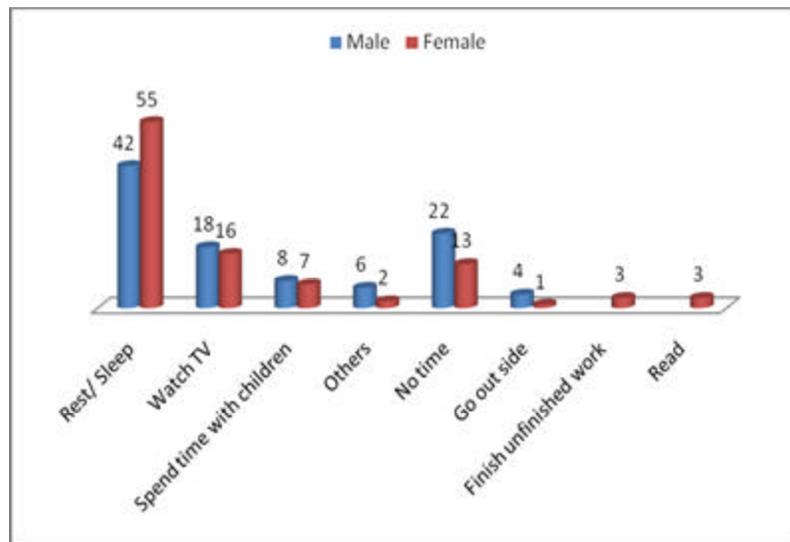
### *Gender differences in leisure and decision making*

Most women reported that they had free time and most men that they did not. More women had free time in rural than urban areas. The response to the question is however contradicted by the exploration of people's daily schedules, which made clear that respondents actually had little if any free time. The contradiction is explained in that most respondents do not consider many of their tasks as work. For instance, many respondents consider it leisure rather than work to labour in their own fields or cattle sheds or to take care of their children.

In order to get a better sense of what people consider to be free time, respondents were asked how they spend that time. Here the lack of leisure of the respondents becomes more evident. By far the most common use of free time, as shown in Figure 2, is to rest or sleep.

When women were asked what their husbands did during free time, they responded that they looked after the children, helped them with their studies, or took the family for outings.

Many women said that their husbands would cook food occasionally, shop for vegetables, or visit relatives and friends. But overall, very few respondents reported all these activities. The majority said that their husbands would rest, sleep, and watch TV.



**Figure 2: How free time is spent**

It is interesting to note that results of the qualitative research showed that women spent their “leisure” time ironing and folding clothes, helping children with their homework, sewing, and in other activities that would seem to pass for work. Even watching TV may not be a fully leisure-time activity, as many women take their work in front of the TV set.

It has already been noted that virtually all housework is performed by women. Many women said that they do not get the time to go out for family outings or vacations. Another reason for not going for outings is that many of the respondents are unable to afford the extra expenditure. Overall, the fact that the most common response to the use of

free time is to rest or sleep suggests difficult and exhausting schedules, rather than the sort of leisure that is suggested in Figure 2 above.

Most men and women said that they often or occasionally got time off from their regular routine, but such time off did not mean a day of leisure. However, about a third of men and women in urban areas said that such time off was rare. Even the executive women respondents said that, during an off day, they would be busy with all the housework that had piled up.

Most male (72%) and female (52%) respondents from rural areas reported that they often or occasionally took vacations, while the figures for urban respondents were 64% and 52%, respectively. Despite the figures, the mobility of rural women is likely more restricted than that of urban women. Upon probing, the urban women said that they mostly went to the nearby park with their family members, to a shopping centre, or for a walk with friends.

Rural women, meanwhile, expressed with great disappointment that they seldom had an opportunity to go out and enjoy themselves. The two main problems they faced were the lack of recreational facilities and the numerous societal restrictions placed on the mobility of rural women. As a result, vacations for rural women mainly consisted of visiting their maternal village or their relatives in another village once or twice a year.

In urban areas, women had a relative amount of freedom to move around. Whereas almost a third of urban women went out as a family for dinner or picnic weekly (28%) or once a month (11%), rural women had this luxury only once (49%) or twice (15%) each year. However, while 45% of urban women said that they never went out as a family, only 35% of rural

women said so, indicating that the urban privilege is far from universal.

Most of both male (84%) and female (81%) respondents strongly agreed that the women's opinion is important in the family. While no male respondents disagreed with this, 4% of the female respondents did. Meanwhile, 44% of the male and 40% of the female respondents strongly agreed that men were the primary decision makers in the family. Only 28% of men and 33% of women disagreed with this statement.

## Quantification of the unpaid activities performed by women

A substantial amount of women's time is devoted to unpaid labour. The productive contribution of women towards household maintenance, provision of the family needs, and bearing and rearing of the next generation is ignored, and much of women's work is invisible. As a result, inadequate attention is paid to the conditions of women, women's work, and its economic value. The importance of this research, however, is attended by significant methodological difficulties in performing it.

When looking for an appropriate way to assign economic value to the work performed by women, many questions arose in terms of what price to assign to different tasks, whether to assign wages based on the number of hours women work (and in that case how to address multiple tasking), and what wages to use in such calculations.

The following are different ways of assigning an economic value to the unpaid activities performed by women:

- i. **Replacement value:** Calculated on the basis of how much

it would cost to replace unpaid with paid workers based on current hourly wages for comparable work.

- ii. **Opportunity value:** Counted as the amount women could be earning if they were in the paid labour market instead of doing unpaid work.
- iii. **Labour input:** The average of the wages plus benefits of the lowest paid and highest paid tasks, multiplied by the hours spent on each task.
- iv. **Output method:** The household would be seen as a producer. Its production would be counted by pieces of work done. For example, the number of rooms cleaned, the clothes washed, and children cared for would be counted and priced. This would include the informal market, such as cottage industries.
- v. **Pay equity:** Jobs would be evaluated in terms of skill, responsibility, effort, and working conditions. This would allow for inclusion of the management and counselling aspects of a homemaker. This focuses on the work done rather than the person doing it. The hardest job is to evaluate care giving. What is the value of a hug?

It should be noted that each of the above-mentioned methods of assigning an economic value to the unpaid work performed by women has its own advantages and disadvantages. No one method is perfect; no method can provide an accurate answer of something that is by its very nature uncountable. (Most workers would agree that to a large extent, wages do not reflect the actual value of the work performed. Consider that farmers, who provide an absolutely essential service, are paid very little, while advertisers, who perform an essentially unnecessary and often socially negative job, are paid quite well. Far more examples could be given of the gross disparity

between the social value of much work and the payment received — consider athletes, models, tobacco industry executives, child care workers, social workers, teachers, etc.)

For the purpose of this study, a method of calculating economic value based on replacement value was adopted. In this method, the cost of unpaid workers is calculated by the cost of paying someone else based on current wages for comparable work. If a maid were to perform the same task, a value would be assigned to it, so this same value is assigned to the task performed by unpaid workers. This allows for the calculation of a reasonable (under)estimate of the contribution women make through their unpaid work. (As maids are notoriously underpaid because household work is under-valued, the error is likely an under-estimation of value.)

In order to calculate a wage for the unpaid work performed by women, first urban and rural women were separated and then a list of the various tasks performed by both was prepared, and a market wage was assigned for the individual tasks performed. Various tasks such as paying of bills and managing of household finances were excluded from the list for both urban and rural women due to difficulties in assigning a suitable value to it.

More than 98% of the respondents in both rural and urban areas found it impossible to estimate the economic value of women’s unpaid household work. While a few said that such a value could be assigned, none could come up with a figure. Rather, they responded by saying that ultimately the work performed by women is for their own family needs and since it is done within the house it is not considered as work, and thus there need not be an economic value attached to it. (Unfortunately women — the usual performers of these important tasks — do not enjoy the respect and good treatment

that tend to come with pay.)

Virtually none of the families — only 2% of those in both urban and rural areas — had a maid servant. Although the situation varied from family to family, generally tasks given to the maid servants were limited. In urban areas, the task of a maid servant was usually limited to washing the dishes, washing the clothes, and sweeping and mopping the house. A few also cooked. The maid servants were paid between 150 to 250 rupees per task per month; the amount varies between urban and rural areas. Women who employed maid servants reported that they were often unsatisfied with the quality of the work performed. Usually only families who had women working outside the home and where there were elderly or sick people present employed maid servants.

**Table 3: Payment for work done by maid servants**

Work done by the maid servant	Payment per task/month	
	Rural	Urban
Washing clothes	100	200
Washing dishes	150	250
Cleaning the house	100	200
Food preparation and cooking	300	500
Cleaning around the house	100	100
Feeding children	N/A	500
Taking children to and from school	300	500
Tending children	N/A	500
Collecting fuel	300	N/A

If the tasks women do for themselves (such as bathing and praying) and leisure time are excluded, women still engage in

roughly 33 tasks each day.<sup>6</sup> It is both difficult and complicated to calculate a wage for each individual task, though doing so would have raised the average wage, as some tasks (such as caring for the sick or teaching children) incur a far higher wage than such tasks as cleaning or collecting fuel. In any case, for the sake of simplicity, only nine tasks were chosen from the list of 33, and the average wage paid to a maid to perform them, in urban and rural areas, is given above in Table 3.

It is important to keep in mind that women perform not only those nine tasks, but a total of 33. The average cost for each of those nine tasks was then applied across all 33 tasks to arrive at an estimate of the value of women’s unpaid household work. The average value of one task for rural women is US\$3.0 per month and for urban women is \$6.1. Multiplying those figures by 33 tasks yields a monthly figure of \$99 for rural women and \$201.3 for urban women. The average of those values is \$150 per month, or \$1,800 per year.

According to the Census Survey 2001, the population of India stood at over one billion people consisting of over 531 million males and over 495 million females. The total female population aged 15 to 64 is over 340 million. The wage figures

<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to determine which are separate tasks and which are sub-tasks; cooking, for instance, involves many tasks including extensive food preparation, cooking and serving. Women generally serve men and children before they eat. While “caring for children” is noted as one task, it of course involves a wide range including bathing, dressing, feeding, comforting, training/educating in values and household tasks (school work is separate) and so on. The figure of 33 tasks is thus given as a reasonable estimate; more in-depth studies of household work and its various components and how much time goes into each, preferably through observation as women are unlikely to provide realistic estimates of how much they spend on each task, would be helpful for depicting a more precise figure.

shown above can then be multiplied by the female population aged 15-64, yielding a total of US\$612.8 billion (Table 4).

India has the 12<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world with a GDP of more than one trillion US dollars in the year 2008. Unpaid work by women in India is estimated as being equivalent to 61% of GDP.

**Table 4: Calculation of women’s wage**

Total pop'n India	Female Pop'n age d 15-64	Value of unpaid work by women/ month for 33 tasks (US\$)		Average value	Total unpaid contribution of women/year
1.027 billion	340.4 million	Rural	\$3*33 = \$ 99 Rs.4950	150*12= \$1,800 Rs.90,000	US\$612.8 billion OR 29.5346797 trillion Indian Rupees
		Urban	\$6.1*33= \$ 201.3 Rs.10,065		

*The ramifications of underestimating women and their contributions to the economy are reflected in the life of Surekha and her children. Surekha is a 30-year-old married woman who lives in an urban slum of Bhuj Gujarat. She has never been to school and got married at the age of 16. She is completely ignorant about childbirth, child care, vaccinations, reproductive health issues, and contraceptives. She has no say in decision-making, even for issues like pregnancy. As a result, at the age of 30, Surekha has seven malnourished children, not one of whom goes to school. None of her children are vaccinated, apart from the polio campaign. If this is a common scenario among the lower socio-economic sector of India, is making India a developed country by 2020 a realistic vision?*

## Discussion

In urban Indian areas, both men and women have access to higher education. The study confirmed the typical mindset of many families in rural India wherein it is not considered beneficial to continue girls' education beyond a basic level as girls would be unlikely to find a decent job. Further, high educational status of women is unlikely to benefit the girl's natal family, as she will live with her husband's family after marriage. A similar explanation, combined with fewer job opportunities for women, would explain why most women in rural areas get little education beyond the basic level. A further reason is the common practice of early marriage of girl children in rural areas.

At the same time, however, the opportunity cost of girls attending school is seen to be lower than for boys, as boys can engage in paid labour even from a young age; as a result, school attendance at all levels is higher for girls than it is for boys. As girls become older and play a more important role in housework, their school attendance may be seen as more of a detriment to the family.

The higher literacy rate for men in urban areas may be due to a perception that if a boy acquires higher education he will be able to find a good job and income, so that the early investment in school pays off in the higher salary later on – a scenario which does not play out in rural areas, thus leading to the ironic situation in which the lower perceived value of girls leads to higher literacy rates, particularly in rural areas, as their time is insufficiently valuable to create a disincentive for sending young girls to school.

The educational level of the respondents is not reflected in their involvement in paid work, particularly for urban women.

Women's generally low employment rates are part of a larger cycle in which families fail to send girls beyond a certain age to school as few job opportunities are available, while men and women's low educational attainments make it difficult for them to qualify for whatever jobs do exist.

Even for girls with higher levels of education, it is very difficult to find a decent job. Many of the respondents told the researchers that they were forced to be full-time housewives as it was difficult to find any other job. Meanwhile, many urban female respondents work as domestic servants due to the lack of other job opportunities.

It is of course important to distinguish between educational achievements and skill levels. International experience has clearly demonstrated that education is critical for girls, for their own sakes and for that of their families, as educated women are more likely to get their children vaccinated, practice contraception, and engage in a range of other behaviours leading to familial health and well-being. However, to say that women are uneducated is not to say that they are unskilled or untrained. From a very young age, they are closely tutored by their mothers and other female relations in all the diverse tasks that are considered the responsibility of women, including food preparation, cleaning, child care, and management of household accounts.

There are many potential reasons for women's lower incomes. Even in the United States and Canada, which while still not fully providing gender equality are certainly more equitable than India, men tend to earn more than women for similar work, and traditionally male jobs pay more than traditionally female ones. Thus one reason for the pay differential is simply the tendency to pay women less than men, even if the work they perform is similar. In addition, women may be blocked

from better-paying jobs through discrimination, stereotypes about what jobs are “appropriate” for women, and the inability to put in the same hours as men to advance on the career ladder due to family responsibilities.

The issue of part-time work is an important one, worthy of discussion. Given that women traditionally are responsible for household work and caring for others, when women enter the paid workforce in large numbers and engage in full-time jobs, some negative consequences may arise. These include the heavier burden placed on women, who often must continue to shoulder the entire responsibility for home and family in addition to their outside job.

Men, meanwhile, may justify their reluctance to help out at home even when their wives work full-time outside the home in terms of the lower wages for women — or simply that such work is women’s duty, regardless of what other responsibilities women take on. Further, women may encounter the inability to take care of the family in the same way when working a paid job as if she were a full-time housewife. This is not to belittle the importance of greater financial independence, stimulation, social opportunities, and feelings of self-worth that paid employment can bring women, but to acknowledge that the benefits may be reduced due to other issues.

It thus may come as little surprise that many women among the survey respondents expressed a preference — even among the executive women — to work part-time, so as to continue to have time for their family commitments. With a part-time (as opposed to full-time) job, women are better able to look after their children and other family members, while still making a financial contribution to the family budget. Where such a situation is possible, it may be the optimal solution for women

and their families.

European social policy would seem to side with this position, focused as it is on encouraging women *and* men to spend less time at work and more time with their families, including generous paternal and maternal leave, shorter work weeks, and longer vacations. Such policies (detailed in depth in Heymann and Beem 2005) indicate a profound understanding that family is at least as important as income, and that individuals, society, and the nation do not prosper when people neglect the family for the sake of longer working hours in pursuit of a living. Working fewer hours could also ease unemployment as well as improving quality of life, and it has been suggested that as full employment is impossible to achieve, accepting part-time work as a normal and even optimal pattern could do much to alleviate the problems associated with unemployment (Ekins 1986).

Though many female respondents said that they longed for financial independence, they also understood that working for pay would reduce their ability to provide the kind of care they alone could give to their children and spouses. Thus many of the women expressed that the greatest reward they could aspire to was that sense of satisfaction, rather than any monetary benefit from paid work.

Difficulties in finding a suitable job were another hindrance the women shared in their struggle to become financially independent. This problem was faced mainly by the middle class families. Because of social stigma and societal expectations, even if women were willing to engage in such jobs as domestic helpers, middle class women were not allowed to perform such “demeaning” work. The picture was different in rural areas. As there was little difference between the lower class and lower middle class, most women were able

to engage in paid labour, most often as agriculture workers. Irrespective of their occupational or financial status, household work remained the domain of women. Further, women who assisted in their family business or by working on the family farm or land did not consider it as a paid job, but rather as yet another aspect of a woman's responsibility.<sup>7</sup>

Despite all the housework that women perform, they feel that they do not contribute economically towards the family. They often do not have the authority, confidence, and power to make major decisions relating to the family. And the status of women in India remains very low.

Women in both urban and rural areas start their day early in the morning, between 4:30-5:30 a.m., and do not go to bed until 10:00 p.m. While maintaining responsibility for most household work, two-thirds of both urban and rural women are also involved in paid work in order to supplement limited family income. Women on average (admittedly from a very small sample) spend a minimum of eight hours a day on paid work, after which they are solely responsible for the activities of their own household, including cooking, cleaning, washing, and taking care of children. While husbands offer women occasional help, the main burden of domestic tasks falls on women, even when they are also engaged in paid labour.

Women often engaged in more than one activity at a time, for

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<sup>7</sup> The irony of this is clear when women are asked whether they work. The typical answer would be "no". When asked what they do all day, the number of tasks — for which it would be necessary to pay someone if the women did not do them — is lengthy. Yet since such tasks are considered the responsibility of women, and since they are not paid, women did not consider them as work. Such attitudes are, of course, not unique to India.

instance, holding or feeding a baby while cooking, comforting a crying baby while helping another child with housework, or tending to the sick while engaged in other activities. If each separate activity were taken into account then women's working hours would expand considerably. Given that women get little or no leisure time, it would seem that most women work about 16 hours a day in a combination of paid and unpaid work. Even those who have full-time paid employment (on average 8 hours a day) still must work about 8 hours a day at housework to complete all the household tasks, and are likely to put more hours in during the weekly holiday to catch up on the work neglected during the week. Working in the family fields or garden, caring for domestic animals (feeding, cleaning, and other care), and participating in any household business is also the responsibility of women.

Meanwhile, in Indian society, as elsewhere, culture, attitudes, and day-to-day activities are inseparably intertwined. Some interesting issues that emerged during the study, which may be worth exploring in future behavioural or psychological studies, include the following:

**Non-monetary rewards:** Many of the female respondents, irrespective of their locality, said that they were paid for their contribution. They considered the satisfactions of rearing a child and looking after the well-being of the family as the greatest rewards. The existence and value of non-monetary rewards is of vital importance, as the monetization of society is in fact a cheapening of many of people's deepest values.

The lives of Indian women revolve about their families. From the earliest age, girls are culturally conditioned to believe that they have no right to free time, leisure, or entertainment independent of their families. Women in Indian society feel that ultimately the unpaid work that they perform is for the

betterment of their own family. The love and respect that they receive from their husband and children are themselves a reward considered more important than money. Women in Indian society live for the wellbeing of their family.

The perspective of any individual woman, however, should not be confounded with societal issues at large. Extreme gender imbalances in India have dire consequences for the female population, and efforts to address them have been hampered by the strong cultural traditions and the nearly universal perception that women who are not engaged in paid work do not contribute anything to the nation. In order to improve women's lives, the perceived value of women must change. Economic decisions are made on the basis of GDP, and the relative worth or value of different segments of society are reflected in economic figures. When full-time housewives are categorized as economically unproductive, putting them in the same category as beggars and prisoners, it is easy to avoid enacting or enforcing any serious policy meant to improve their condition.

**Societal gender role expectations:** Many of the female respondents' attitudes towards their husband's involvement in domestic work were formed from societal role expectations. Thus while many women complained that their husbands were not supportive, they simultaneously did not want their husbands to do such work as washing clothes, sweeping or mopping. Such tasks are considered by an average Indian to be undignified for men, and if a woman were to allow her husband to engage in them, society would judge her as not being a good wife. It would be interesting to explore which aspects of household work would be acceptable for men to undertake, and how to encourage such involvement by men. There may also be a related issue of the self-perception of full-

time housewives, whose feelings of self-esteem may depend in part on feeling that their husbands are helpless in the home and that all domestic tasks are dependent on them alone.

Given the importance of active male involvement in childrearing as a source of wellbeing not only for the child but also for the parents, that may be a good area in which to start encouraging men to play a greater role in the home. While difficult, such a cultural change is by no means impossible. The qualitative aspects of this research indicated a strong interplay between the individual's background and attitudes. If a woman grew up in a male-dominated community, she did not expect her husband to be involved in domestic work. Similarly, a man who grew up in an egalitarian family naturally would be more involved in household activities.

### *The monetary value of women's unpaid household work*

This research is not meant to demand a fair wage for women's household work, but rather to point out the value of the work already done by women. That work, carried out without pay, represents an essential contribution by women to society. If women did not give freely of their labour, it would have to be paid for or managed without — neither of which are imaginable scenarios.

When women work for free, they essentially subsidise everyone else, including businesses to government, which would not function without the "invisible" labour of women. As the figures show, this contribution is substantial, even if likely a gross underestimate given that it is based on some of the lowest-paid workers in society. Significantly higher rates for the value of women's work would emerge if the figures were based not on actual payment to maid servants but on equivalent pay in better-paying positions for the same work

(such as restaurants or tutoring services) or by asking people which jobs are the most critical to their daily survival and comfort and calculating wages accordingly — by which farmers and housewives would earn far more than most businessmen, lawyers, or executives.

Regardless of the details, one issue is clear: women throughout India work hard, and that work has tremendous value to society and the nation, a value of at least US\$612.8 billion. The magnitude of the figure and of that contribution suggests that women should be accorded far more value and importance in society than currently, and that a number of policies and programmes should be considered to acknowledge and award this essential contribution.

**Case study: Radhika's endless struggle**

*Radhika is a 32-year-old working woman who resides in Nagpur city in Maharashtra. She is illiterate and earns her living by making papad (thin wafers made out of pulses and grains) at home. Her husband works as a labourer. The family struggles to make ends meet. Even though Radhika would prefer to be a full-time housewife, she is forced to work because her husband's job is not permanent. Meanwhile, she has two small children, one of four years old and the other six months old, so she must take on extra work in order to supplement her family's income.*

*Radhika faces many problems, as her husband does not like her additional work, even though it brings in additional income. She must struggle constantly to maintain a balance, and feels that she is unable to fulfil her role as a mother and a wife.*

*Radhika's day starts at 4:30 in the morning. She cleans, cooks breakfast and lunch, washes clothes and dishes, gathers water, and bathes early to ensure that a portion of her work is over before her six-month-old baby wakes up.*

*After the other family members get up, she serves breakfast to her husband, bathes, dresses, and feeds the children, and packs lunches for her husband and older child. Then she begins with her business of papad making.*

*Radhika says that her husband is occasionally at home, but rarely helps her with household work. Rather, she manages both the home and the business by herself. Even if she asks her husband for support or help, he refuses - though on occasion he looks after their children. Radhika feels that her work, including both managing the home and holding a formal paid job, is difficult but necessary to ensure that her family members can eat each day. She feels that husbands should be supportive, especially when wives work extra jobs and children are small<sup>8</sup>. This busy routine of Radhika continues day after day, month after month, and year after year, with no end in sight.*



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<sup>8</sup> In popular parlance, full-time housewives are not working women, but the busy lives they lead caring for home and family make clear that being a housewife is indeed a full-time job. We attempt to make this point clear throughout the report by distinguishing between women working additional jobs — that is, additional to housework — and full-time housewives, who work full-time in the home. But as the story of Radhika makes clear, women themselves often feel they are entitled to help from their husbands only if they take on work beyond the expected domain of women — that is, beyond cleaning, cooking, caring for children and other family members, managing the household, and so on.

## Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations have been made:

- Education is an essential tool for change. Educated women are better able to care for their families and family finances, experience more opportunities in decision-making, and make better home managers. The Government of India should continue to increase efforts to educate the girl child.
- The educational curriculum should be restructured in order to emphasize gender equality rather than reinforcing gender stereotypes.
- Adequate recognition should be made of the unpaid contributions of women to increase their self-esteem and to improve their image in the family and society at large.
- Access to and control over production and market resources (access to training, credit, employment, technical skills, entrepreneurship, etc.) by women should be increased while recognizing that the goal is not to burden women with two full-time jobs.
- Full participation of women in the policy-making process should be enabled and ensured.
- The minimum wage should be set at a level sufficient to allow workers to escape from the poverty trap. Companies should be forced to pay into nationalized systems of education, health care and pensions, so that they return some portion of what they have gained to the workforce and those who enable others to work outside the home.

- Affordable and adequate childcare and family-friendly employment policies should be ensured which allow parents to reconcile caring and work.
- A benefits system which recognizes women's diverse roles in society and offers adequate support for families and children should be established.
- The gender-related problems of unemployment (allocation of financial resources, entrepreneurship, legality of various types of informal work, etc.) should be addressed in order to liberate women from their financial dependence on men, particularly for widows, women in abusive relationships, and other particularly vulnerable women.
- Strategies should be developed that address women's access to resources in the agriculture, fisheries, and environment sectors.



## Conclusion

This study suggests that the value of unpaid work performed by women both from rural and urban areas of India amounts to approximately US\$612 billion per year. Despite the magnitude of this figure, the financial value of the domestic work done by women without pay continues to go unnoticed, and women continue to be treated as if they contribute nothing of value to society or the nation.

Women themselves contribute to their own under-valuation, as women are at least as captive to social forces as men — and likely more so — given their far lesser exposure to other influences. Such facts make it challenging, to say the least, to address the gender component of the MDGs. The problem is further complicated by the fact that most educated women prefer to work outside the home and thus may undervalue the work performed by women in the home.

In some ways and for some groups, women's lives have changed dramatically over time. Social, economic, and legislative improvements and scientific advances have allowed women to gain greater control over their lives. Women are much more valued and respected in the family than before. Women seem to have a more active role in family decision-making, and even to enjoy the freedom of leisure time and vacation that were previously only experienced by men. But sadly, this promising picture is far from universal across different strata of Indian society. Various studies have revealed that this changing trend among Indian families is mostly limited to the upper and upper middle classes, which form only a miniscule portion of the Indian population.

Unless these trends reach the bottom strata of society, attaining

the MDG of gender equality remains an impossible vision. Furthering the difficulty is the fact that gender equality appears to be misunderstood by many to refer to foreign feminist ideologies transplanted onto Indian soil. As a result, many are not able to assimilate the concept of gender equality with development. Gender indicators such as poverty, health, education, and reproductive and legislative rights, and their implications on women's lives and the country's development, have yet to reach common men and women.

As the present study shows, most Indian women are reluctant to change their attitudes about themselves, as such attitudes are deeply rooted in culturally-determined gender roles. Change in women's roles would necessitate change in women's psychology and in women's ability to assert themselves in a male-dominated society. But such change is difficult given the nearly universally-accepted gender constructs and the persistence of traditional gender roles. Perceived threats to male dominance make many in Indian society, as elsewhere, highly resistant to change.

However, poverty cannot be reduced or eliminated without the involvement of women. Overall, women remain the largest group that experiences poverty, despite the fact that women constitute 50% of the work force. But growth in women's jobs has mainly been in low-paid, part-time, temporary work that does little to improve women's desperate poverty, much less offer them a way out ("Women, Family and Poverty" 1998). Women's vulnerability to poverty and their low positions in the labour market are a result of a combination of economic, social and cultural factors, including their continued role as homemakers and primary caregivers. A division of labour by gender within both paid and unpaid work exists in almost all societies, although the nature of the specialized work done by

women and men differs substantially by place, time, and in some cases over the life cycle.

Whatever the cultural, economic, caste-based, religious, social, and other differences, a few factors are universal: women are seen as being responsible for the home and family, and the image of women earning as much as or more than men would threaten many men. The economic dependence of women on men harms many, but is absolutely devastating for women such as widows or wives of abusive partners, for whom there is no steady and safe support available from male relatives.

Meanwhile, the belief that women perform a mainly negligible function in society, living off the hard work of males while contributing little of value, clearly contributes to the undervaluing of women and their subsequent poor treatment.

It is difficult to raise the status of women without raising their perceived value. Since virtually all women spend a significant amount of their time engaged in some of the most critical tasks in society — those of cleaning, preparing food, and caring for others — the importance of those tasks must be emphasized as well as the valuable contribution of those who carry out such work without hope or expectation of economic return.

Unpaid work performed by women in and around their homes should be valued to improve the conditions of these unpaid workers and to support policy creation and implementation. If the amount and value of unpaid work were known, the impact of governmental policy changes such as cutbacks in health care and welfare could be better measured. As such, the valuation of unpaid labour should be done keeping in mind the aim to increase access to social benefits for all, while also increasing and ensuring women's full participation in the policy-making process. A benefit system should be created which recognizes

women's diverse roles in society, accepts that housewives are workers, and offers adequate support for families and children. At the same time, the government and employers should adopt family-friendly initiatives based on international models such as European pro-family social policies.

To achieve these changes, education can be used as an effective tool. If education is to promote gender equality, it must make a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to replace harmful traditional values by inculcating new gender equality and social justice values. Those new values can be built on existing positive values that emphasize the importance of family, caring, and nurturing.

*"But the one [objection to including household work in the System of National Accounts] that, as far as I am concerned, takes the cake is that including own-account household services in GDP will mean that all persons engaged in such activities would become self-employed, 'making unemployment virtually impossible by definition'." --Phillippines Economics Professor Solita Collas-Monsod*

All societies depend on the family to fulfil many essential functions, including care for the young, the old, and the sick. Despite the existence of a welfare state in Britain, for example, the family remains a major provider of welfare services, and the same can be seen throughout the world. Attempting to turn over all the social services provided for free by women to the private realm would be wasteful, unaffordable, and harmful to the family.

Proper importance must be accorded to issues of welfare and social provision in order to work towards a system that is inclusive of all in society. Such a system should recognize the value of women's unpaid labour in ensuring that people's most

basic needs are met. The importance of caring in addition to earning must be recognized, as well as of activities that have no price tag attached. In particular, the value of the people who ensure that the house is a home must be widely acknowledged. Through such actions it is hoped that the status of women will finally improve, not just for the wealthy but for all women.



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