

**The Economic Contribution of Women in  
Bangladesh  
Through their Unpaid Labor**

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## **Summary**

This report presents background information and research results from a study on the economic contribution of women through their unpaid work. The purpose of the research was to obtain an approximate figure of the economic value of the daily work performed by women in Bangladesh, work consisting of household tasks, farming, etc. for which they receive no pay. The research included a survey and in-depth interviews with women and men, which aimed to understand more about women's unpaid work and the daily regimen of their lives.

Some key findings include that women typically work 16 hours a day; that most women have no leisure time; and that they bear most responsibility for household chores, including many tasks related to income generation. Most women, even if they have a servant, do their own cooking, and women generally assume full responsibility for tutoring and helping children with school work. Rural women perform a wider variety of tasks compared to urban women. While both men and women recognize that women's household activities constitute important work, they do not grasp the extent of its economic value. Yet the value of unpaid household work performed by housewives is approximately US\$69.8 to \$91 billion per year, depending on the economic value assigned to the tasks women perform daily.

## **Introduction**

In Bangladesh, as elsewhere, men are considered to be the head of the family and its most important member, since it is most often men who earn the income that houses, feeds, and clothes the family. Men also have a far easier time than women in seeking paid employment. Work is typically divided along gender lines, with men being responsible for "outside" work and women for housework and child care.

In Bangladeshi families, income earning is usually the responsibility of males, while the remaining family members - usually women and children - are economically dependent. Women have no choice but to live in this dependent

condition, due to their relatively lower educational levels and fewer marketable skills, the resultant lack of available employment opportunities, and a lack of social acceptance of women earning a living. This problem is, perhaps surprisingly, particularly acute for middle-class women. The poorest often have no choice but to allow the women to find paid work, while in the upper classes, women are usually educated and can find other ways to spend their time. Middle class women, however, face the greatest social obstacles in engaging in work outside the home, leaving them few choices but to be full-time housewives. Meanwhile, even those women who have paid jobs must continue bearing responsibility for household work, with its many time-consuming tasks. As a result, many women spend most of their time on housework.

Women also perform paid labor within their homes, such as taking in piece work or assisting in family productive activities, such as farm work, running a family business, etc. Typically, however, any work that receives little pay is considered unimportant and labeled as "women's work", despite the fact that such work actually bring tangible economic benefits to the family. Since housework and childcare are unpaid<sup>1</sup> and are carried out almost exclusively by women, they are considered to be without monetary value. Further, there exists the perception that women innately

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<sup>1</sup> We are not suggesting that these activities *should* be paid; rather, that their value should be recognized and acknowledged.

“know” how to cook, clean, raise children and manage a household, these are not considered skills or talents that women *work hard to acquire* from their mothers as young girls, but are rather considered trivial, unskilled tasks. This attitude towards women’s unpaid work belittles women’s status in the family, society, and the nation.

This paper addresses these issues, and offers suggestions for remedying some of the problems caused by the lack of importance given to the contributions women make to the family and to society through their unpaid work.

## **Background and rationale<sup>2</sup>**

Many important decisions about resource allocations are made based on economic calculations. Thus if there are significant problems with those calculations, the basis for the decision-making may also be called into question. Yet, there is a deep and generally ignored problem\* with all national economic calculations of GDP, the most widely-used measure of national well-being. The guidelines used internationally to

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<sup>2</sup> This section draws heavily on Marilyn Waring’s book *If Women Counted*. All references are to her book unless otherwise noted.

\* There are actually *several* problems with calculations of GDP, such as the fact that it also ignores the environment and natural resources, and since it is measured per capita, does not distinguish between countries with fairly equal divisions of income and those with strong disparities. Amartya Sen (as cited in Farmer 2005) has repeatedly pointed out to his fellow economists that income is a means to an end, not an end in itself, and it is livelihood, not income, that should be of paramount importance. This paper, however, focuses on women’s issues, rather than on a broader critique of GDP.

calculate GDP—the United Nations System of National Accounts (UNSNA)—contains many biases that, whether or not deliberately, result in the exclusion of most work done by women around the world (Waring 1998).

Under the UNSNA guidelines, women’s labor is generally only counted in national accounts if it takes place in the paid workforce, be it in a factory, on a farm, or in an office. If a woman works, but is not paid, then her labor does not count for anything in terms of national measurements of wealth. According to the 1953 UNSNA definition, production totals include “all primary production, whether exchanged or not” (Waring 1998). If a man grows vegetables as his primary occupation, then those vegetables are registered as part of national wealth, even those that are consumed at his home rather than sold on the market. But if a woman grows vegetables for home consumption, they do not count unless she is growing them as her primary occupation. As Waring explains, this means that the creators of the UNSNA feel that the “*primary production and the consumption of their produce by non-primary producers is of little or no importance.*” In other words, women’s work is of little or no importance.

It is very difficult for most women to explain exactly *which* of their many occupations (raising children, taking care of the house, doing farm work, helping their husband with other income-generating work, and so on) is their primary occupation. Once a woman becomes a mother, and in fact usually prior to this, she has so many occupations that it is

impossible to label any one as 'primary.' But national statistics are arranged so as to ignore 'non-primary' occupations, thus essentially eliminating consideration of the contributions of women. If a woman states that her primary occupation is housework, then she is considered as not contributing anything to the economy.

Most types of agricultural work are included in the UNSNA. Some activities, however, are specifically excluded, including carrying water, weeding, collecting firewood, subsistence crop production, and housework. Is it coincidence, asks Waring, that these are specifically the activities most likely to be carried out by women?

The fact that housework is specifically excluded from the UNSNA suggests that housewives are not considered as doing anything of economic value. Yet housewives' activities include food processing, food preparation, care of family members, care of clothing, shopping, household management, and maintenance of accounts.

"It is likely that our failure to assign a price for the services of the homemaker has tended to convey the impression that they are valueless rather than priceless."  
--economists Marianne Ferber and Bonnie Birnbaum (Waring 1998)

Yet the tasks commonly performed by women are not entirely lacking in importance. Certainly clean clothes, a clean home, and meals are essential to those earning an income, as well as to everyone else in society. Little as it may receive financial recognition, it is also obviously important to have someone

who takes care of children, the elderly, and the sick. Women's contributions are undoubtedly essential to the home and thus to society, yet they are assigned no economic value. Meanwhile, a man sitting behind a desk pushing papers, or selling a harmful product, or pedaling war, is considered to be making an economic contribution that must be counted. According to the current system, Waring observes, drug dealers, pimps, and arms dealers make an economic contribution to society; a woman staying home to take care of her children and elderly relatives does not.

Imagine the kind of society we create when prioritizing useless or harmful economic activity over social activity; perhaps this goes a long way towards explaining current crises in terms of the heavy burdens placed on working families to meet their needs to earn an income *and* take care of family members. After all, with only income earning valued by society, society will offer no assistance to carry out other duties, and the difficulties faced by families which receive little or no support from employers or the State to balance work and family responsibilities is well-documented.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, when it comes to who controls land, it is informative to look at the definition of a "holder," used by the

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Heymann and Beem (2005). While the book is about the US, many of the issues addressed are universal. Farmer (2005) refers to the global obsession with generation of wealth rather than with meeting one's basic needs (that is, ensuring human rights for all) as "structural violence", and graphically shows the way such biases generate unbelievable suffering for the poor around the world.

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) which is in reference to the person who exercises control over land and is responsible for utilization of existing resources. According to the FAO, the holder is not the person who does the work on the land, but rather the person who makes the decisions, even if s/he never sets foot on the land. It is the holder who will be interviewed in each census. As the FAO explains,

*“For example, if the wife of the head of the household omits to weed the maize on a piece of land for which she appears to be taking operational responsibility, the head may instruct her to do so. In such a case it is the head of the household who is the holder”* (Waring 1998).

Simply put, the UNSNA virtually guarantees, through mandating that most interviews be with men and by excluding most work done by women, that women will be excluded from national measures of wealth. Although the UNSNA was modified in 1993, women’s work was still virtually excluded (Waring 2003).

Bangladesh is not free from this negative influence. Under the 1961 census, women’s work was defined as “productive economic activity”. By the 1974 census, that had all changed: women’s work was defined as “housewife”. This was clearly not because Bangladeshi women suddenly changed their activities, but rather due to a change in definition. In Bangladesh, while crop storage counts as economic activity, food processing does not, despite the lack of any justification

for this difference. When men were interviewed in Bangladesh about the work carried out by the women in their households, they responded that “they cook and sew quilts”. When women were asked, their answers included raising chickens, growing vegetables, processing rice, and so on. That is, when only men are interviewed in the census—as is normally the case—they are likely to understate the extent and value of women’s economic contributions (Waring 1998).

Islam (2006) cites an estimate of the Bangladesh Home Workers Women Association (BHWA) that the annual contribution of home-based workers to the GDP is about Tk 150 billion (US\$2.59 billion\*). “But unfortunately, this contribution is not reflected in the government statistics. The BBS [Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics] data shows that the contribution of the industrial sector in GDP in FY 2002-03 was Tk 462.37 billion (US\$7.99 billion). Of the amount, the contribution of large-scale industry was Tk 325.58 billion (US\$5.62 billion), while small scale contributed Tk 136.80 billion (US\$2.36 billion). The statistics show that the contribution of home-based workers is larger than that of the small-scale industry” (Islam 2006).

In Canada, the US, New Zealand, and other countries, the issue of women’s economic contribution through their unpaid

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\* Using an approximate exchange rate for 2002-03 of 57.90 taka to the US\$ (fluctuations in the exchange rate make accuracy difficult).

work has been raised by scholars, activists, and others<sup>4</sup>. As a result, researchers have devoted some attention to the issue, and investigated the scale and estimated value for women's unpaid work, particularly in the domestic sphere. The United Nations' International Labor Organization (ILO) has also recommended that such research and estimations be carried out, a recommendation corroborated by the Government of Bangladesh in its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) (see Appendix 1). Yet little effort has yet been made to put these recommendations into practice. UNPAC (UN Platform for Action Committee Manitoba) estimates that the total value of unpaid work, most of which is performed by women, in the global economy is **US\$11 trillion**.

Some research has been done on this issue in Bangladesh, particularly by Shamim Hamid (Hamid 1996). Hamid found that the average woman in Bangladesh contributes 4,765 taka (US\$133.14\*) annually to the economy through her unpaid work, of which 3% is from subsistence production and the remaining 95% [sic] from housework. For men, the figure is 219 taka (US\$6.12), 29% from own-account subsistence production and 71% from housework. Nationally, Hamid calculated that annually over 188 billion taka (US\$5.25 billion) worth of work, uncounted in national statistics, is contributed

through annual subsistence production, of which 95% is contributed by women and the remaining 5% by men. Hamid further calculated that Bangladesh's GDP in 1989/90, calculated at 638 billion taka (US\$17.83 billion), would increase by 29% to 825 billion taka (US\$23.05 billion) if unpaid work were included.

Similarly, Hamid calculated that the percentage of national production attributed to women would increase significantly, from 25% to 41%, if unpaid work were included in the national economy. Meanwhile, the proportion contributed by men would fall from 75% to 59%. Further findings of Hamid included:

- Conventional GDP estimates capture 98% of men's production but only 47% of women's production.
- Under the present UNSNA production boundary definitions, 95% of non-market production is excluded.
- Of the total time spent on work in rural areas, women contribute 53% and men 47%.
- Of the total time spent on non-market work, women contribute 89% and men 11%.

An online survey conducted by Salary.com (a Massachusetts, USA-based firm) found that mothers' unpaid work, if paid at the rate of similar work conducted for pay, would give the average mother an annual salary of US\$134,121—the

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Gender & Work Data Base (<http://www.genderwork.ca>) and Mothers are Women (<http://www.mothersarewomen.com>); Waring is herself an economist and former Member of Parliament in New Zealand.

\* Using an approximate exchange rate at the time of 35.79 taka to the US\$.

equivalent of the salary of a top ad executive, marketing director, or judge. Women working outside the home would earn a further US\$85,876 on top of her actual wages for her housework. The calculations were made based on the ten key household-related jobs that women perform, and their equivalent market wages if carried out by someone hired from outside the family. The study also found that employed mothers work on average 44 hours a week at their outside job, and a further 49.8 hours at home, while stay-at-home mothers work 91.6 hours a week (Salary.com).

According to the *2004 Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh*, there are a total of 123.85 million inhabitants of Bangladesh, consisting of 63.9 million men and 59.9 million women. According to these government statistics, 53.2 million people are engaged in housework full-time, consisting of 0.9 million men and 43.3 million women (Table 1). In addition to full-time housework, the 9.8 million employed women are likely to spend a significant amount of their time on housework as well.

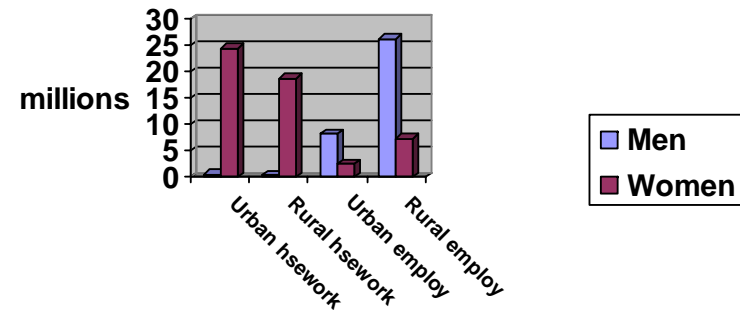
Prior to this study, there was no existing research that we are aware of that calculated an economic value for the time spent on housework by full-time and part-time housewives in Bangladesh. While it would also be interesting to know more about the almost one million men estimated to be engaged in full-time housework, that was beyond the scope of this study, and the figure represents only 2% of the number of women engaged in housework full-time.

**Table 1. Population in millions of women and men engaged in full-time household work or paid employment**

Employment category	Women	Men
Urban housewives/household work	24.5	0.5
Rural housewives/household work	18.8	0.4
<b>Total housewives/household work</b>	<b>43.3</b>	<b>0.9</b>
Urban employed	2.5	8.2
Rural employed	7.3	26.3
<b>Total employed</b>	<b>9.8</b>	<b>34.5</b>

Source: BBS 2005

**Figure 1. Millions of Bangladeshis engaged in full-time housework and in employment**



Research in Bangladesh (Efroymsen et al. 2006) on causes of violence against women has found that “since women usually did not hold a paying job and inherited little or no land, they were considered weak and worthless. Men felt that since they earned a living, women should always be subservient to them.” Calculating and acknowledging the economic value of



women's unpaid work could thus contribute to efforts to prevent violence against women.

## **Purpose**

This research attempted to fill the gap in this area, and to contribute directly to further advocacy work on the important role played by women in Bangladesh's society and economy. In this regard, it is important both to raise the attention of policymakers to women's contribution and to increase the knowledge of male and female members of the general public on the economic contributions that women make through their unpaid work.

The purpose of this research is thus to attempt to quantify what work women do and the amount of time they spend working, estimate the economic value of that work, and thereby assess the contributions women make to the country's social development through their unpaid work. It is hoped that such research will contribute to increasing the understanding of policymakers and the general public of the economic contribution of women through their unpaid work, and to increase women's self-esteem by demonstrating the extent of their work and contribution to society.

Why is it important to understand the value of women's unpaid work? Among other reasons, because:

- When men feel that women make no contributions to their household—that women are, essentially, useless

creatures who are a net loss in terms of the money that is needed to feed, clothe, and shelter them—then it is easier for men to mistreat women. That is, in the same way that people generally will kick a dog but not a cow, because the former has no economic value while the latter does, so the perception that women make no economic contribution may be an underlying factor in men's violence against women. This assumption is further supported by the research mentioned above (Efroymson et al. 2006).

- As described above, governments tend to underestimate the value of women's unpaid work, excluding most of women's work from GDP and other measures of national wealth. As a result, women appear to be a net drain to the economy, rather than serving as an important contributor to other economic activities. Smaller salaries are paid to men than would be possible if men in turn had to pay women for all the domestic work they do. In that sense, women could thus be seen as *subsidizing* salaries throughout the workforce, by contributing their domestic work for free rather than demanding a wage.
- If women's work is given an economic value, then women themselves would be likely to gain self-esteem and to have a more positive attitude towards their work and their role in society.

- In terms of both society and government, if women's work was given value, men would have a better understanding of women's value and importance, and would be likely to treat them with more respect. It would thus be easier to create happier, mutually respectful, violence-free families.

## **Methodology**

This research utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods, consisting of in-depth interviews (IDIs) and surveys (see Appendix 3 for the survey form and IDI questions). The surveys were conducted through purposive sampling to include people of different classes, occupations, and age. A total of 315 women 315 men, all of whom were married, were interviewed. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 55 married women and 55 married men. The research was conducted by trained researchers working for eleven NGOs, coordinated by WBB Trust, in ten areas of the country. In order to gain an understanding of the nature of women's work in both rural and urban areas, given expected large differences between them, both rural and urban areas were included, with five NGOs collecting data in urban and six in rural areas.

All research was conducted from 10 February to 25 February 2006. SPSS software was used for data analysis.

Limitations of the research include the fact that, given the enormous issue being studied, the research should have taken

place over a longer time and involved a larger sample. Due to various financial and time constraints, we were not able to conduct a more comprehensive study. Further, although we trained the researchers, we were not able to go to the field, and thus were not able to monitor the quality of the research.

Finally, there are also some activities that women engage in that are not suitable for economic analysis, such as mother's affection, love, breastfeeding, the feelings that accompany care of the sick, etc. It is by nature impossible to assign an economic value to such activities, and any attempt to do so would undervalue the genuine contribution women make through them. Furthermore, we do not believe that it is only those activities that come with a price tag that have value; in some senses, assigning an economic value to work can belittle it. However, as mentioned above, by assigning no value, women's work is seen to be valueless rather than infinitely valuable. Thus while avoiding the absurd exercise of assigning an economic value to women's love and care, we attempted to calculate fair market rates for other tasks performed by women in order to gain approximate figures of women's economic contribution to their families, to society, and to the country.

## **Results**

### Survey results

In most families interviewed, there are one to five members (husband, wife, and children), indicating that most people

live in nuclear families. In nuclear families, the load on women is greater, whereas in extended families, there are more women to help out so that the load on each single woman is less. This is particularly true where families cannot afford to hire household help.

Not all men and women interviewed were husband-wife pairs. Nevertheless, the difference in age seen between the male and female respondents is likely due to the fact that women in Bangladesh typically marry at a younger age than men. Thus while 47% of female respondents are 26-35 years old, 40% of men are 36-45 years, for a difference in average age of about ten years (Table 2).

**Table 2. Age of the respondents**

Age	Women		Men	
	No.	%	No.	%
16-25	83	26.5%	11	3.5%
26-35	147	46.7%	109	34.6%
36-45	69	21.9%	126	40.0%
46-55	15	4.8%	50	15.9%
56-75	1	0.3%	19	6.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>

Women reported having few chances to gain paid employment. The paternal nature of Bangladeshi society means that men dominate the working world, and often resist the idea of women entering the paid labor force, perhaps also because of expectations that women will assume the full burden of housework and childcare. As shown in Table 3,

most women (77%) earned only 0-500 taka (US\$0-7.14\*) per month, while most men (28%) earned 3,000-5,000 taka (US\$42.86-71.43) per month. No woman earned more than 15,000 taka (US\$214.29) a month in our study, but men earned up to 25,000 taka/month (US\$357.14). That is, men's highest earnings were far higher than women's highest earnings, presumably due to the lower educational level of women and women's lower job skills.

**Table 3. Income of the respondents**

Income in taka	Women		Men	
	No.	%	No.	%
0-500	243	77.1%	10	3.2%
500-1,000	23	7.3%	6	1.9%
1,000-1,500	11	3.5%	10	3.2%
1,500-2,000	5	1.6%	39	12.4%
2,000-2,500	2	0.6%	21	6.7%
2,500-3,000	7	2.2%	58	18.4%
3,000-5,000	13	4.1%	87	27.6%
5,000-7,000	6	1.9%	27	8.6%
7,000-9,000	2	0.6%	28	8.9%
9,000-11,000	1	0.3%	10	3.2%
11,000-13,000	1	0.3%	4	1.3%
13,000-15,000	1	0.3%	5	1.6%
15,000-20,000	0	0.0%	7	2.2%
20,000-25,000	0	0.0%	3	1.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>

In terms of school enrolment, interestingly, more girls than boys had enrolled in primary school (Table 4), and more men (14.3%) than women (7.3%) were illiterate. Women had higher

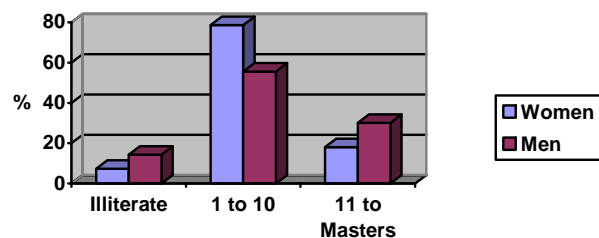
\* Based on an approximate exchange rate at the time of the research of 70 Bangladesh taka to the US\$.

school enrolment levels through high school, but after class 11, women’s enrolment was lower than men: 78.6% of women and 55.6% finished Level 10, but 18.1% of women and 30.2% of men finished higher-level education.

**Table 4. Educational level of the respondents**

Education	Women		Men	
	No.	%	No.	%
Illiterate	23	7.3	45	14.3
1 to 10	235	78.6	175	55.6
11 to Masters	57	18.1	95	30.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100</b>

**Figure 2. Educational level of respondents**



Families may have seen little benefit to continuing girls’ education, as girls would be unlikely to find a decent job, and were likely simply to marry so that their earnings would not be perceived as a benefit to their parents. As soon as girls ceased going to school, their families often arranged their marriages. Even for girls with high ambitions, it is very

difficult to find a decent job, so they are forced to accept household work as their sole or main occupation.

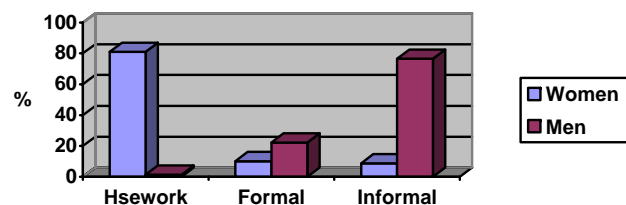
The reason for higher illiteracy rates among men may be that from a far earlier age, they are seen as an economic asset by their families, and are sent to work rather than to school. Meanwhile, for those boys who did stay in school, families perceived a benefit of keeping them in school for longer because the longer they stayed in school, the greater the likelihood that they would find higher-paying employment when they graduated.

Since women have only low levels of education, they are not qualified for higher-level jobs. They are restricted both by family and society expectations that prevent them from reaching a higher level in education or employment. As shown in Table 5, while 81% of women were involved only in housework (no paid employment), only 1.3% of men were unemployed. While 10% of women had formal paid employment, 22% of men did. The rest of men were involved in various forms of work, such as business (24%), rickshaw or rickshaw van pulling (9%), and farming (8%).

**Table 5. Occupation/profession of the respondents**

Profession	Female		Male	
	No.	%	No.	%
Household	255	81.0%	4	1.3%
Formal employment	32	10.2%	70	22.2%
Informal employment	13	8.8%	241	76.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Figure 3. Involvement of men and women in housework and employment**



As shown in Table 6, almost all men (95%) and women (93%) said that the head of their household was male. That is, men, whether by earning an income or simply being male, are the *de facto* household heads. (In this sample, 96.2% of the 315 women, and 98.8% of the men, were married. Among the remaining women, 2.9% widows, 0.6% separated, and 0.3% divorced.)

**Table 6. Stated head of the family**

Head	Female		Male	
	No.	%	No.	%
Own	12	3.8%	298	94.6%
Spouse	292	92.7%	5	1.6%
Others	11	3.5%	12	3.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>

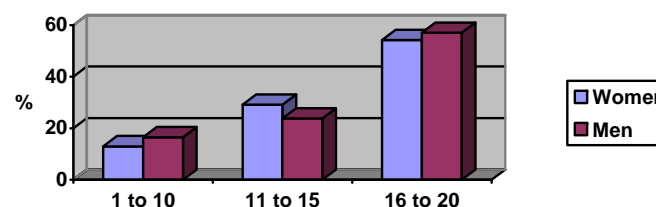
Women work a very long day. In Table 7, we see that most women (54%) and men (57%) said that women work 16-20 hours a day, suggesting—given at least an hour a day for

personal care and activities (praying, bathing, etc.)—that they only sleep 6 hours or less a night. From waking up in the morning to going to sleep at night, women are involved in a wide range of activities, which are listed in Appendix 2. Given that there are 43.3 million full-time housewives in Bangladesh (BBS 2005), working about 16 hours a day on average, full-time housewives throughout the country work a total of 692.8 million hours each day. Employed women, if they spend on average 8 hours a day on housework, contribute a further 78.4 million hours each day, for a total of 771.2 million hours.

**Table 7. Time the respondents say that women spend each day in household work**

Hours	Female		Male	
	No.	%	No.	%
1-10	41	13.0%	52	16.5%
11-15	92	29.2%	75	23.8%
16-20	171	54.3%	180	57.1%
No comment	11	3.5%	8	2.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Figure 4. Time (hours per day) women and men say that women spend daily in household work**



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

It is interesting to note that there was very little difference in the time spent on household work, or the exact activities constituting 'housework', in different parts of the country. The main difference in terms of specific tasks carried out was between urban and rural areas, with rural women being engaged in a wider variety of tasks than urban women (see list of tasks in Appendix 2). However, urban women in different cities, and rural women in different parts of the country, engaged in similar tasks, and women everywhere spent a large amount of time on housework, regardless of whether they also had a paying job.

Finally, the fact that men's opinions of the hours worked by women are similar to women's responses is significant. The research suggests that men are at least aware that women work a long day.

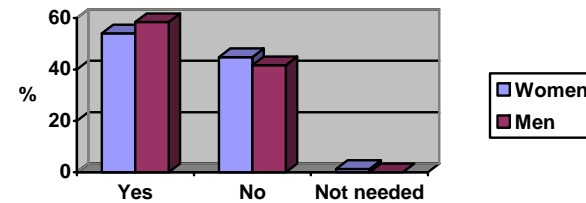
As shown in Table 8, just over half of women (54%) and slightly more men (58.4%) report that men help women with housework; 44.8% of women and 41.6% of men report that men do not help with housework. Given the heavy daily burden of household work, the fact that almost half of women

and men say that men do not help at all suggests strongly unequal divisions of labor.

**Table 8. Whether men help women with housework**

Help with housework	Women		Men	
	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	170	54.0%	184	58.4%
No	141	44.8%	131	41.6%
Not needed	4	1.3%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Figure 5. Whether men help women with household work**



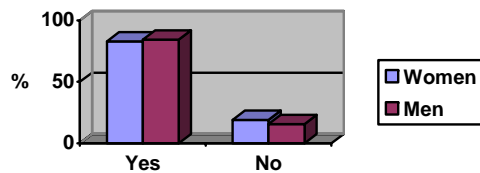
Despite the apparently low worth given to women, when asked whether women's work is important, most women (82.9%) as well as men (84.4%) responded that it is important (Table 9). It is interesting to note that slightly more men than women felt that women's work is important. It is, however, important to note a major caveat about this result: the importance of women's work was the last question asked, after a long set of questions about the many jobs performed by women. Findings of other research (Efroymsen et al. 2006) suggest that men undervalue women's work.

**Table 9. Perceived importance of women's work (yes/no)**

Women's work is important	Women		Men	
	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	261	82.9%	266	84.4%
No	54	19.1%	49	15.6%
Total	315	100%	315	100%



**Figure 6. Whether women and men believe women's work is important**



### Results of in-depth interviews

During the in-depth interviews, women talked about their use of leisure time, the tasks they and their maids performed (see Appendix 1 for a full list of tasks performed by women and their maids and of women's use of leisure time) and what they might be worth, and other issues. For some questions, responses were also measured quantitatively, though of course with a smaller sample size than for the survey.

As shown in Table 10, most women (74.6%) reported getting up very early in the morning—between 4:30 and 6:30 a.m.



**Table 10. Time respondents get up in the morning**

Time	No.	%
3:31-4:30	4	7.3
4:31-5:30	22	40.0
5:31-6:30	19	34.6
6:31-7:30	5	9.1
7:31-8:30	2	3.6
8:30-9:30	3	5.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100</b>

Most women, as shown in Table 11, report going to bed between 9 and 11 p.m., though almost 13% report going to bed between 11 p.m. and 12 a.m., and a further 7% between 12 and 1 a.m.

**Table 11. Time respondents go to bed at night**

Time	No.	%
9:01-10:00	17	30.9
10:01-11:00	17	30.9
11:01-12:00	7	12.7
12:01-1:00	10	18.1
1:01-2:00	4	7.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100</b>

From discussions with women and men, we found that while men usually do the food shopping in the rural areas, in the city the responsibility tends to fall on women who either go to the bazaar or buy from itinerant vendors who pass through their neighborhood. (Shopping in itself could be considered several tasks: deciding what to buy, choosing quality foods, and often bargaining over the price.)

Women bear essentially full responsibility for cooking. In both rural and urban areas, women cook twice a day. In the

cities, women cook in the morning and at noon (heating up the lunch leftovers for dinner), while in the rural areas, women cook in the morning and afternoon (eating the food cooked in the morning for lunch also). Women also tend to prepare a snack in the afternoon for children and husbands. The preparation of these three meals takes up about six hours on average per day. Meanwhile, as women prepare the meals, they keep in mind what each family member prefers, or other dietary requirements. That is, in addition to cooking, women act as managers and dieticians.

**Case Study: Rehana's Busy Day**

Rehana (not her real name) is a 35-year-old housewife living in the Jigatola area of Dhaka. She has a bachelor's degree, but no salary. Rehana's day begins at 6 a.m., and she goes to sleep between 12:30 and 1 a.m. Every day she puts in 18-19 hours on family-related work; the work she doesn't finish one day, she leaves for the next.

Early mornings, between 6 and 8 a.m., are very busy times for Rehana. She must prepare breakfast, wake up her son, wash his face, get him ready to go to school (feed and clothe him), and take him to school. She prepares her husband's breakfast, and feeds it to him when she returns from leaving her son at school. She also prepares necessary items for her husband to take to his office, and packs him a lunch.

Once Rehana's husband has left for the office, she has her own breakfast. Her husband usually does the food shopping, but she also sometimes buys vegetables from the vendors who come door-to-door. At this time, her maid also arrives. She explains to the maid what she needs her to do that day, and then Rehana herself begins cleaning the home (making the beds, putting clothes away, etc.).



Rehena again leaves the home at 11 a.m. to fetch her son home from school. At this time, the maid finishes her other work and begins preparing for lunch by cleaning fish and vegetables, etc. Rehena returns home with her son, bathes and feeds him. While she helps him with his homework, she also prepares lunch and dinner. She first serves everyone lunch, then bathes, prays, and finally sits down to eat.

When her husband returns home from work, she serves everyone a late afternoon snack. If she finds some free time, she does some sewing. While the maid washes most of the clothes and takes the remaining items to a commercial laundry, Rehena herself also irons some of the clothes.

At the moment, there are no elderly people in the home. Not long before, her mother-in-law was unwell and was living with them. At the time, her family had to pay a nurse 500 taka a day to look after her. Three months previously, another sick relative came to live with them. It was Rehena's responsibility to look after the patient.

Rehena also looks after any guests who come. Sometimes she goes shopping for household items. She pays the bills, such as her son's school fees, electricity, water, gas, and others. She must look after her son and husband, performing various small tasks such as serving them food, bringing them sandals, etc. Rehena explains that females have no free time. Whenever she might think of relaxing, there is always more work to do, or as she explains, "When I'm done helping my son study, the time is up." She either goes to bed or does some sewing late at night. While she had previously been in the habit of studying, this is no longer possible for her.

Rehena says that all housework has economic value. But she feels that it is neither possible nor right to put an economic value on the work. For instance, it is not possible to put a price on the affection she gives

her husband and son. She says that what is most important to her is not a price, but her husband's appreciation.

In 42.9% of households, there is a servant, but the household help is temporary, not permanent. The tasks assigned to servants generally include dish washing, cleaning the home, washing clothes, grinding spices once a week, and preparation for cooking (cleaning and cutting of vegetables, etc.). The household help receives 100-200 taka per task per month—that is, 100-200 taka each month for washing clothes, a further 100-200 taka per month for cleaning the home, etc., with the amount fluctuating by area (urban/rural and from one part of the country to another). Yet women tend to be unhappy with the quality of the service they receive from paid servants, who they say do not put their heart into the job, and thus do not perform the work well. It is also for this reason that most housewives will not allow their servants to cook. In the words of one housewife, "*She doesn't remember what to do; I have to keep reminding her.*"

Meanwhile, the women who perform housework for pay in another woman's house are also themselves housewives, performing the same work in their own home for their own family members, but this time without pay. That is, the woman performing the same work in two places is paid for a certain task in one home, and not paid for performing the exactly same task in her own home. Further, women with any paid employment still are responsible for most housework, meaning that they must essentially work two full-time jobs: a

paid one which at least grants them some recognition, and a heavy load of housework in the home. Since most women work about a 16-hour day, we can estimate that women with full-time paid employment (8 hours a day) still work about 8 hours a day at housework, likely also putting more hours in during the weekly holiday.

Women also take the main responsibility for helping children with their school work, including taking their children to and from school, arranging outside tutors, etc. Women are the ones who ensure that children do their school work properly and are usually the ones helping children with it. Women also prepare their children in the morning to go to school, prepare their snacks, and take their children to school. In some cases, women sit outside the school and wait for their children to finish, in order to reduce the rickshaw or bus fare that would be required to go back and forth to their homes. If a teacher tutors a child, s/he will receive 2,000-3,000 taka/month or more for teaching that child one to two hours a day, while mothers of course receive no payment for the time they invest each day in their child's education. It also goes without saying that nobody would or could provide for pay the affection that mothers freely give their children.

Women are also responsible for keeping track of every family member's needs, from the smallest baby to the elderly relatives who live with them. Who needs what at what time of day is all the responsibility of women. When there is a small baby, the load is even greater, as babies require almost

constant attention; even when asleep, women are listening for the crying of their children, and frequently must get up in the night to clean, feed, and comfort them.

Caring for domestic animals (feeding, cleaning, and other care) is also the responsibility of women, in both urban and rural areas. (Some of the specific activities connected to caring for livestock/animals are listed in Appendix 2.) Despite having taken full responsibility for taking care of the chickens, goat, cow, etc., when women sell livestock, they give the money to their husbands for the family's use; as noted above, this also usually means that the income earned is counted as part of the husband's contribution to the family, rather than the woman's.

#### **Case Study: The life of a rural housewife**

Shiuli (not her real name) is a 40-year-old housewife living in the countryside in Khulna. She studied through class 7, and then got married. Her husband Shamol (not his real name) is a farmer. They have one son and two daughters. After finishing SSC, her son stopped studying. Her older daughter is preparing for the SSC exams, and her younger daughter has just started school.

Shiuli gets up very early every morning, as the morning is a very busy time. After sweeping the home, she goes out to prepare food for the ducks. Afterwards she continues sweeping and mopping\* the floors.

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\* "Mop" is a bit of a misnomer; people get on their hands and knees on the ground and use a wet cloth to clean the floor (if it is tile or cement). Dirt floors are cleaned by smoothing them with wet dirt, again while on hands and knees.

She is fortunate that they have a pond and a well near the home, so she does not have to travel far to get water.

Shamol does the farmwork himself. He gets up very early to go to the fields. Ever afternoon he prepares food for the cows. Shiuli feeds this to the cows every morning, then begins cooking lunch. In breaks in the work, she tutors her little daughter. She straightens up the home (makes the beds, puts clothes away, etc.). When the food is ready, she feeds her children. After her daughters eat, they go to school.

In the mornings, after everyone else has eaten, Shiuli takes the cows out and cleans their shed; sometimes her husband comes home and takes the cows out himself. She uses the cow dung to prepare fuel, which she stores for use in the winter, and sometimes she sells it. Sometimes Shamol comes home for lunch, other days Shiuli sends her son with his lunch, and other days she goes herself.

She also takes the chickens and ducks out to feed. There is always work to do on a farm, with some land always under cultivation and many other tasks to tend to, and she and Shamol are always busy.

Before evening, she finishes her cooking, in order to save on lamp fuel. They eat early. She does the cooking and serves the family herself, though sometimes her older daughter helps her. Before she can cook, she must first carry in water, and prepare the vegetables and other items. While there is a machine in the village to process rice, people must carry the rice there themselves to do so, which takes time. The husks from the rice are brought home to feed to the cows and ducks.

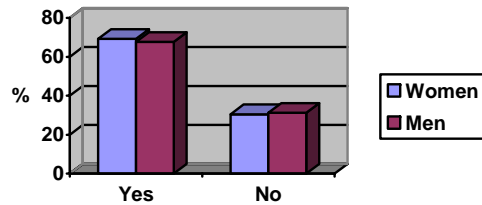
Shiuli's elderly mother-in-law lives with them. Shiuli also must take time to give affection to her husband and children. She says that women have no free time; all time is occupied with work. But if she does find a free moment, she sleeps or sews. She also feels that all housework has an economic value, but like Rehana, she believes that it is neither possible nor right to try to put a monetary value on it.

In sum, virtually all housework is performed by women. As a result, many women said they had no free time; *"We get no vacation; even when we're sick we have to work,"* said one woman when explaining her lack of free time. While 69.2% of women and 67.6% of men said that women have free time, a full 30.5% of women and 31.2% of men said that their wives do not have free time (Table 12). For those who said they did have leisure time, their explanations of how they spend it make it clear what leisure time means to women. For instance, women said they spend their free time helping children with homework, taking them for coaching, ironing clothes, putting clothes away, visiting sick friends and relatives, sewing clothes, making cushions or wall hangings, and doing whatever other tasks they were not able to complete during the day. A few women also said that when they had some free time after lunch, they took a nap.

**Table 12. Whether women have free time**

	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
Yes	69.2%	67.6%
No	30.5%	31.2%
No comment	0.3%	1.2%
Total	100%	100%

**Figure 7. Respondents opinion as to whether women have free time**



This is not to suggest that men are lazy or unoccupied. Like women, they have many important activities that occupy their time; like women, they often spend their free time in activities that more resemble work than rest. When asked what their husbands do with their free time, the responses included working in the vegetable garden, watering trees, weeding, going to market, watching TV at a tea shop, sleeping, taking everyone in the home out for fun, helping with family work,

fishing, preparing feed for cattle, collecting the rent from the pullers to whom they rent rickshaws, chatting, playing cards, and tutoring students for pay.

Despite all the work that women do, they find no change in the family power structure. In most cases, men are considered the head of the household. The reasons for male-dominated households relate to the patriarchal family structure, with men earning the money and making major household decisions. The only women who said they were the head of the household are divorced, widowed, or otherwise living without a husband.

Most women (69.8%) and even more men (77.1%) say that husbands and wives have a discussion before making an important decision (Table 13). Still, a significant percentage of both say that they do not discuss decisions; almost no one said that it was not necessary to do so. The types of issues they mentioned discussing together before making a decision include whether to plant a vegetable garden, schooling for their children, selling of land, taking a job, the raising of ducks and chickens, whether to join credit and savings groups, and their daughter's marriage\*.

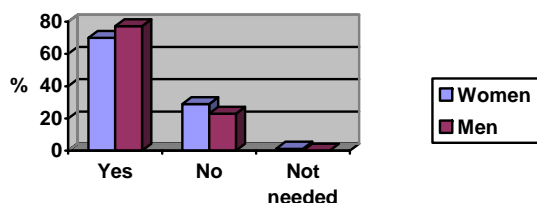
**Table 13. Whether spouses discuss important decisions**

Discussion	Women		Men	
	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	220	69.8%	243	77.1%

\* Although this is changing, most marriages, especially in rural areas, are arranged by the parents.

No	91	28.9%	72	22.9%
Not necessary	4	1.3%	0	0%
Total	315	100%	315	100%

**Figure 8. Whether spouses discuss important decisions**



## Analysis

As we see from our research, women perform a large number of tasks each day, and most men and women—at least after being walked through the considerable number of tasks

women perform—recognize that the work performed by women is important. When looking for an appropriate way to assign economic value, many questions arise in terms of what price to assign to different tasks, how to deal with tasks that women engage in simultaneously, or whether to assign women a wage based on the number of hours they work, and in that case, using which wage as a baseline.

Some ways of addressing this issue include:

- Examining opportunity costs—what women could earn if they performed paid work during the time they spend on housework;
- The cost of paying household help to do the tasks otherwise performed by housewives;
- The cost of attaining the services performed by housewives on the market, that is, of washing clothes at a laundry, eating in a restaurant, hiring a tutor for one’s children, etc.;
- The salary received by men for a fairly standard job, prorated according to the number of hours full-time housewives typically work each year.

Each of the methods has its advantages and drawbacks. In this report, we look only at three calculations: using market prices for various tasks; a shortcut method based on the value of one task and the number of tasks women perform; and comparing women’s work to government salaries. While

other calculations could be performed, as there is no “correct” figure to arrive at, endless calculations are beside the point, which is simply to arrive at a reasonable estimate, or range, of the contribution women make through their unpaid work.

### Calculating the value of women’s work using market prices: payment by task

In order to calculate a fair “wage” for women’s work, we first separated urban and rural women, listed some of the major tasks they perform and the amount of time spent on each, and assigned wages for those tasks. For rural women, we took the shortcut of using the wage of a day laborer for most tasks, but for ones where more specific calculations were available, for instance what one pays a nurse or a tutor, or how much one can earn sewing clothes, we used those figures instead. It is important to note that many tasks were excluded from the list—for both rural and urban women—due to difficulties in assigning both time and value, such as managing the household finances and accounts, and paying bills.

As shown in Table 14, the value per hour for tasks for rural women ranges from a very low 2.5 taka an hour for sewing and mending clothes (given what women actually earn by doing so), to 75-81 taka for nursing the sick and tutoring children. From the research, we found that women spend on average from 30 minutes to 6 hours a day on different tasks, adding up to the average workday for a full-time housewife of 16 hours. (Again, this ignores simultaneous tasks, such as childcare while also engaged in other work.) Given the estimated value per hour for each task and the average

amount of time spent on each task, we can calculate an average daily wage of 213 taka, or 6,483 taka per month, or 77,791 taka/year. Multiplying that figure by the 18.8 million full-time rural housewives, we arrive at a figure of 1,462,464 million taka, or US\$20.89 billion per year.

In addition to the full-time rural housewives, there are 7.3 million rural women who engage in paid labor as well as look after their households. Assuming that these women work half the hours at unpaid work as full-time housewives, and using the same figures for the value of their work, we arrive at a total figure for part-time housewives of 283,936 million taka, or US\$4.06 billion.





**Table 14. Estimate of value of women's work (rural women, full-time housework)**

Work done by rural women	Hrs./day	Value/hr	Value/day
Cooking (3 times/day, including preparation)	6	10	60
Clothes washing and ironing (2 days/week)	1	10	10
Animal nursing	1	10	10
Raising chickens, etc.	0.5	10	5
Educating children (help in homework, etc.)	0.5	75	37.5
Sewing, mending clothes	2	2.5	5
Vegetable gardening	1	10	10
Washing dishes	0.5	10	5
Cleaning house and yard	0.5	10	5
Nursing the sick	0.5	81.3	40.6
Child care	0.5	10	5
Fuel collection	0.5	10	5
Water collection	0.5	10	5
Working in the field	1	10	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>268.75</b>	<b>213.13</b>

We then performed a similar calculation for full-time urban housewives (Table 15). It is no easy task to assign values for the various jobs that women carry out. When considering clothes washing, for instance, if a servant in a family only washes clothes and performs no other tasks, s/he receives 200 taka/month. However, at a commercial laundry, the cost is 12-30 taka per washed item (the price varying by the item washed and the venue). A separate, additional charge is incurred for ironing. If a woman washes and irons 20 items of

clothing per week, then at the rate paid in a laundry, the work would be worth approximately 420 taka/week, or 1,680 taka/month.

Women also bear chief responsibility for caring for the sick. If a family were to hire a trained nurse, they would have to pay 500-800 taka/day for the service. While a nurse obviously has additional training, she will not perform her tasks with the same affection and loving care as will a relative.

Rates for cooking vary widely, but a cook in a small restaurant might earn 20-30 taka a day, working approximately 6 days a week (closures for holidays), for about 8 hours a day. This amounts to about the same amount of time over a month as a woman cooking 6 hours a day every day (no holidays), or 24 days/month  $\times$  25 taka a day = 600 taka/month.

Daycare centers for the care of young children are extremely rare in Bangladesh. As with other tasks, caring for children falls almost entirely on women. Many middle class and wealthy families hire young girls to look after their small children. In addition to providing housing, clothing, and food for her, the families generally pay the girl 1,000-2,000 taka/month. Once again, as with nursing, no paid servant will look after a child with the same love and care as will a mother. This is particularly true in terms of the many things a parent wishes to teach her or his child to prepare the child for the future.

Finally, in terms of educating children, school plays only a partial role in the process. Many parents also send their children to a private tutor for further education. Many mothers also spend time every evening helping their children with homework and ensuring that they finish their school assignments on time and properly. As mentioned above, a private tutor would receive 2,000-3,000 taka a month for tutoring a child for 1-2 hours a day. The work a mother does to help her child with his/her education often amounts to far more than two hours a day, suggesting that the value of that work is even higher than the amount paid to tutors.

Since most urban workers are paid on a monthly rather than daily basis, we used monthly wages for different tasks, which range from 200 taka/month for washing dishes and cleaning house, to almost 20,000 for taking care of the sick.

We then calculated the hours/year (hours/day x 365), value/hour (given the amount paid per month and the approximate number of hours per day), and value/year (value per month x 12), which yields a value/year, in this case, of 121,996 taka/year for a single woman, equivalent to a monthly wage of 10,166 taka. Multiplying that figure by the 24.5 million urban women who are full-time housewives, we arrive at 2,988,914 million taka, or US\$42.7 billion per year for all full-time urban housewives in Bangladesh.

For urban women with formal employment, as with rural women, we simply took the figure for a full-time housewife and halved it, since she is working half the hours. For the 2.5 million urban women with formal employment, at half the

“wage” of a rural full-time housewife, we calculated a contribution of 152,496 million taka or US\$2.18 billion each year.



**Table 15. Estimate of value of women’s work (urban women, full-time housework)**

Work done by urban women	Hrs./day	Value/month	Hrs./year	Value/hour	Value/year*
Cooking (3 times/day, including preparation)	6	600	2,190	3.13	6,844
Clothes washing and ironing	0.5	1,680	182.5	13.81	2,520
Taking children to and from school	1	600	365	15.00	5,475
Educating children (help in homework, etc.)	2	2,500	730	83.33	60,833
Child care	2	1,500	730	6.16	4,500
Sewing, mending clothes	1	250	365	8.22	3,000
Washing dishes (usually 3 times/day)	1	200	365	6.57	2,400
House cleaning	0.5	200	182.5	3.29	600
Nursing	0.5	19,773	182.5	81.25	14,828
Gardening, shopping	1.5	3,500	547.5	38.35	20,998
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>30,403</b>	<b>5840</b>	<b>259.11</b>	<b>121,996</b>

\* Numbers are rounded, so total does not entirely match.



Adding all these figures together, as shown in Table 16, we arrive at a total of **US\$69.8 billion**. Again, this figure is likely an underestimate, given the very low rate at which traditionally “women’s” work is currently valued and the many tasks which were excluded from the analysis.

**Table 16. Total calculation of women’s contribution through unpaid work, by tasks completed, all women, in millions of taka/US\$**

Category	Value of work in taka	Value of work in US\$
Full-time rural housewives	1,462,463.8	20,892.34
Full-time urban housewives	2,988,913.8	42,698.77
Formally employed rural women	283,935.8	4,056.23
Formally employed urban women	152,495.6	2,178.51
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,887,808.9</b>	<b>69,825.84</b>

#### Calculating the value of women’s work using market prices: shortcut method

Various shortcut methods can be used to calculate the value of women’s work. For instance, consider that women on average spend six hours a day cooking. The rate of payment for cooking for bachelors in a joint living arrangement is 200 taka per person per month for one meal a day. Of course, when someone (usually male) cooks for pay in a restaurant, he will receive an even higher salary.

If we exclude the tasks women do for themselves (such as bathing and praying) and leisure time, we find that women

still engage in about 45 different tasks each day (see Appendix 2). If we count each task at the rate women receive for cooking, that is, 200 taka/month, then for the 45 tasks women perform, they would receive 9,000 taka/month. (Although women spend more time cooking than on most other activities, the rate of 200 taka/month is for cooking only one meal a day for one person, whereas women generally cook for far more people and 3-4 times a day, so the time difference between cooking and other tasks should not be so great.) Since all women perform virtually all housework, this figure could be applied across part- and full-time housewives. For the total of 53.1 million women engaged in housework for 12 months a year at 9,000 taka/month, this yields 5,734,800 million taka or about **US\$81.93 billion** per year.

#### Calculating the value of women’s work using government salary

It might be appropriate to use a government salary to calculate women’s work if one assumed that, given the vital nature of housework and childcare for the functioning of society, it should be paid not at the low rates currently paid for most work done by women, but at a rate for work that is considered more valuable. Of course, this ignores the fact that most women work far more hours per day, and more days per year, than government workers. This would balance considerations about an exaggeration of wage for skilled government workers versus “unskilled” housewives. With 53.1 million women in Bangladesh doing housework, at a

mid-range government wage of 10,000 taka per month, this adds up to 6,372,000 million taka or **US\$91.0 billion**.

## Discussion

*“If women’s work has no value, then why do we pay maids?”* responded one woman when asked whether women’s household work has value. Yet it is unlikely that either men or women are aware of the magnitude of the contributions women make through their unpaid work.

Each method of calculation used above has its advantages and disadvantages. In the end, a couple of issues become obvious: it is impossible to generate a precise, accurate value of women’s unpaid work. For instance, if we look at market wages, which wages do we consider: cooking in a cheap versus expensive restaurant, cleaning clothes per item at a dry cleaner’s versus by the kilo; etc. Further, typical wages paid for a job do not necessarily reveal the actual worth of the work. Considering the United States as a point of contrast, we find that some of the highest-paid people include fashion models and sports stars, and the lowest-paid include social workers and child care workers. Throughout the world, farmers and women, who engage in the tasks most necessary to our survival, earn a fraction of that earned by soft drink company executives, arms dealers, and TV executives. Clearly somewhere along the line, the value of work to society, and the amount we pay for it, have widely diverged, making it

extremely difficult to place an *accurate* figure on the worth of work.

In addition, trying to gain an exact understanding of the time women spend on each task is thus in a sense useless, as the amount of time will not result in any accurate figure of their worth. Thus, the point of this research is not to arrive at the correct figure, but rather to give a sense of the magnitude of women’s contributions by presenting a reasonable range of estimates. That magnitude will vary considerably depending on whether we continue undervaluing work performed by women, or begin to assign it value based on its essential nature to the functioning of society.

As seen above, using a range of methods, we arrived at very different—yet similar—figures: US\$69.8, \$81.93, and \$91 billion. That is, even when undervalued, women’s unpaid work is worth *at least* US\$69.8 billion per year to the nation. Compare this figure (4,887,808.9 million, or 4,887.8 billion taka) to the comparatively paltry sum of 24.8 billion taka contributed by the tobacco industry from taxes and employment (WHO 2005). That is, women contribute at least 197 times more to the economy than does the tobacco industry—yet we hear much more about how tobacco is important to the economy, and how the tobacco industry pays huge sums in taxes, then we ever hear of women’s contribution.

The figures we have estimated are also quite substantial in relation to total GDP for the whole country, which was estimated by the International Monetary Fund at US\$60.8 billion for 2005 (Wikipedia). That is, our estimates are 1.1 to 1.5 times higher than GDP. While that might at first seem implausible, it is helpful to remember that, among other issues, a) GDP excludes most of women's work, so if women's work overall were valued at the same rate as men's, GDP would double; b) women on average work 16 hours a day, which is presumably more than the average figure for men, so their production could well greatly exceed that generated by men; and c) women are responsible for providing some of the most basic and essential goods and services, which should be valued at a higher rate than unnecessary or harmful activities. Although we do not consider GDP a particularly realistic or helpful measure of social or economic well-being, it is significant to note that in Bangladesh, according to our estimates, GDP would increase from US\$60.8 billion to US\$130.6, US\$142.7, or US\$151.8 billion, depending on the calculation used to calculate the value of women's work.

The reasonableness of our estimates may be a source of debate, but a few facts cannot be denied. Women work many hours a day, and rarely if ever get a vacation, even when sick. Women perform multiple tasks simultaneously. While our calculations are based on a 16-hour workday for full-time housewives, many women, particularly those with a young baby, work far more hours than that. Many of the jobs women

perform cannot be given an economic valuation, such as breastfeeding, and others were left out of the calculations due to complications, yet are jobs worth a high pay. Finally, no family or society could function without the work that women perform—something that cannot be said of many of the jobs that receive a far higher salary on the market.

In the end, the question is not how to arrive at an accurate figure, but to understand the incredible magnitude of women's contribution to families, society, and the nation's economy through their unrelenting hard work and invaluable contributions.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

There is no question that women are involved in a tremendous amount of work that has significant value to family, society, and the nation. If women were ever to go on strike, we would understand more fully the full worth and importance of their work. In fact, families would cease to function if women did not work, which is the precise reason why women cannot go on strike. Men are able to engage in paid labor because of all the work that women do in the home: cleaning the home, washing clothes, preparing food, washing dishes, and engaging in all the tasks involved in bearing and raising children.

The above figures make it clear that women make an enormous contribution to the economy. Yet the work women do has no visible return; it is considered their responsibility,

unskilled work for which women deserve no credit. However, when looked at differently, women's unpaid work represents a subsidy to the entire economy. Without this work, companies and other employers would have to pay a far higher salary to men to allow them to hire someone to do the domestic work without which they could not go to work, and families—and hence society and the nation—would not function. The invisibility of women's work, not its actual lack of importance, means that it is considered valueless.

The Government of Bangladesh has acknowledged in its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) that the contribution of women through their unpaid work should be calculated and properly credited (see Appendix 1), yet nowhere in the PRSP is there any mention of *how* such a calculation could occur. The calculation of the economic value of women's work is complicated and difficult, as demonstrated above. We tried, in this research, to make a calculation of the amount that women's work may be worth in economic terms. This first attempt, however, need not necessarily be considered sufficient or adequate. Further research and analysis would help to arrive at a better figure and to understand more thoroughly the various issues involved in considering how women contribute to the economic wellbeing of the nation through their unpaid work. For instance, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) could elaborate a list of the different tasks that women perform, by

location, age, class, and other variables; that list could then be used to calculate the economic value of women's work.

Some additional research and advocacy activities that could be conducted include:

- Raise people's and policymakers' awareness of the importance of women's contribution, and that spending money on women is an investment in the economic wellbeing of the country rather than an expense;
- Convince government officials to include women's work in economic measurements of the nation (such as GDP), and to incorporate an understanding of women's value when looking at programs to assist women (such programs representing a tiny return on women's contribution to society, rather than a net cost);
- Work to involve men in domestic tasks in order to reduce the burden on women;
- Replicate this research study in other countries, to broaden international understanding of the issue in different contexts.

Calculating the economic value of the unpaid work performed by women, and adding that value to measures of national wealth such as GDP, would not only significantly increase the sum represented by GDP (in this case, GDP

would more than double), but would increase the *value* or meaning of the figure, by including a long-neglected element, the unpaid work of women. It would also contribute to making visible the currently invisible work performed by millions of women throughout the country. As a result, the status of women would increase, and the treatment of women by their family members, as well as officials, would be likely to improve, contributing to a more gender-equal society as well as a wealthier nation. It would also help people to understand that government's expenditures on women are not an expense but in fact an *investment*, resulting in significant financial as well as other yields to individuals, families, society and the nation.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)

The importance of women's unpaid work is mentioned in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) of many countries. In Bangladesh, under the Policy Matrix "Women's Advancement and Rights (Mainstreaming economic activities)", the following appears:

- Strategic goal: "Improve women's efficiency (reduce time use) in household & reproductive roles"
- Key Targets: "Raise awareness to improve men's contribution in household activities; ... Attempt to calculate women's household contribution in National Income Accounting by 2007."
- Actions Taken/Underway: "Social auditing initiatives"
- PRSP Policy Agenda: "...Include women's contribution in the National Income Accounting by developing mechanism of shadow price/opportunity cost analysis; Promote equal sharing of household and productive works..."

That is, government policy may state directly, as in Bangladesh, that it is necessary to include women's contribution through household work in national income estimates. Goals of increasing men's contribution to household activities can also be addressed through highlighting the large number of tasks which women

undertake, to suggest specific areas in which further sharing could occur. Here again, the greater enjoyment of leisure time by men than women highlights the need, as already stated in government policy, for men to assume more household tasks, thereby reducing the burden on women.

### Appendix 2. List of tasks regularly performed by women

*Note: Although we mention 45 tasks, the figure is somewhat arbitrary, as various tasks can be further sub-divided. Naturally, not all women engage in all tasks, and tasks involving childcare of course vary by the age of the child. It is mostly rural women who engage in agriculture-related tasks and animal husbandry, and some of the handicrafts are performed more commonly by rural than urban women. Some tasks are seasonal or occasional, including certain agriculture work and taking care of the sick; some tasks take far longer than others, e.g. cooking is one of the longest. The figure of 45 tasks is thus a rough estimate.*

#### Agriculture-related

1. Preparing soil, planting seedlings, weeding, etc. for rice paddy
2. Managing daily workers for rice paddy
3. Preparing plot, etc. for vegetable gardening
4. Growing vegetables (watering, weeding, etc.)
5. Managing daily workers for gardening
6. Harvesting
7. Food processing

8. Collecting and drying seeds

#### Animal husbandry

9. Caring for ducks and chickens (cleaning, feeding, etc.)

10. Medical care of small animals

11. Collecting and selling eggs

12. Caring for larger animals (cows, goats): cleaning, feeding, etc.

13. Milking cows

14. Taking milk to market

#### Handicrafts

15. Making baskets, mats, nets, holders to hang pots, pottery

16. Embroidery

17. Making clothes

18. Mending clothes

#### Housework

19. Cleaning the home (sweeping, washing the floors, dusting, putting things away)

20. Cleaning around the home

21. Tending mud floors to keep out dust

22. Making beds, hanging and taking down mosquito nets

23. Washing dishes (3-4 times/day)

24. Hand-washing clothes; hanging clothes out to dry

25. Ironing, folding, and putting clothes away

26. Preparing food for cooking: cleaning rice, preparing and washing vegetables, grinding spices, cleaning fish, etc.\*

27. Cooking, making bread (3-4 times/day)

28. Tending to and lighting lamps

29. Collecting firewood or other materials for fuel

30. Making fuel from cow dung

31. Carrying water

32. Supervising household help

33. Helping with family business, piecemeal work

34. Preparing various foods for sale (puffed rice, pounded rice, etc.)

#### Caring for family members

35. Caring for children (bathing, dressing, tending, feeding, putting to bed, etc.)

36. Caring for the sick

37. Caring for husband

38. Teaching children, helping with homework

39. Taking children to and from school

40. Feeding, looking after guests

41. Paying bills

42. Shopping for food

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\* These activities are very labor-intensive. Cleaning the rice involves sifting it for small stones, then washing it. Many green leafy vegetables require painstakingly peeling strings off the stalks and pulling off the leaves, sorting through for leaves that are spoiled. Chickens and fish generally begin in the whole state; chickens must be killed, plucked, etc., and fish must be scaled. All spices are ground in the home, and everyday this involves cleaning and smashing garlic and ginger as well as grinding spices with a mortar and pestle or a board and sort of rolling pin.

43. Shopping for clothes and other household items
44. Managing the household (organizing activities and expenses)
45. Taking the ill to the doctor

#### Leisure time activities

1. Gossiping
2. Watching TV
3. Listening to the radio
4. Visiting friends or family
5. Resting
6. Taking care of children
7. Sewing
8. Finishing unfinished work
9. Personal tasks: bathing, dressing, personal care, praying, study, self-development
10. Attending community events (weddings, funerals, etc.), participating in community activities (microcredit groups, other women's groups, etc.)

#### Tasks of maids

1. Washing clothes
2. Washing dishes
3. Cleaning the home
4. Helping with food preparation and cooking
5. Cleaning around the house
6. Feeding children
7. Taking children to and from school

8. Tending to children
9. Collecting fuel

### **Appendix 3. Questionnaires**

#### In-depth interviews checklist

##### **Women**

- Does anyone help you with your housework?
  - Who helps you?
  - Do you pay that person?
  - How much do you pay that person, and for what tasks?
  - What kinds of work does the person do? (List)
- What work do you do in the home? (List)
- Do you have any free time?
  - What do you do in your free time? (List)
- Does your husband help you with your work?
  - If so, what tasks does he help you with?
- Is there an economic value to the work you do for the family?
  - If yes, why? If no, why not?
- Do you and your husband discuss decisions? Give an example of a decision made jointly.
- How is it possible to measure the economic contribution you make to the family?

##### **Men**

- Does anyone help your wife with the housework?
  - Who helps?



- Do you pay that person?
- How much do you pay that person, and for what tasks?
- What kinds of work does the person do? (List)
- What work does your wife do in the home? (List)
- Does your wife have any free time?
  - What does your wife do in her free time? (List)
- Do you help your wife with her tasks?
  - With what tasks do you help her?
- Is there an economic value to the work your wife does for the family?
  - If yes, why? If no, why not?
- Do you and your wife discuss decisions? Give an example of a decision made jointly.
- How is it possible to measure the economic contribution your wife makes to the family?

d. Husband's monthly income:

e. Profession:

- Level of education: Illiterate, can only write name, can read and write, class 1-5, class 6-8, class 9-SSC, HSC, higher education, other
- Marital status: Married      Widowed      Separated  
Single
- Number of family members:
- Number of people earning an income:
- Number of dependents:
- Who is the head of the household?
- What is the profession of the head of the household?
- Is your house owned/rented/other?

Information on women's work

What work do you do in the family?

	What activities	How many minutes/hours	Economic value
Morning			
Noon			
Afternoon			
Evening/night			

- Do you have any free time? Yes/No
  - If yes, what do you do in your free time?

Survey form

**Questionnaire for married women**

Village:      Ward:      Union:      Sub-district:

District:

Researcher's name:

Date:

Basic information

- a. Age:
- b. Monthly income:
- c. Husband's age:

- What does your husband do in his free time?
- Is the work you do in the household important?  
Yes/No
  - Why/why not?
- How could one estimate the economic value of the work you do?
- Does anyone help you with your housework? Yes/No
  - If so, who? (maid, sister-in-law, mother-in-law, daughter, other)
- Does your husband help you with your work? Yes/No
  - If yes, with what work? (List)
- Do you and your husband discuss important decisions? Yes/No
  - If yes, give an example: