



Research article

Revaluing the Invisible Economy: Feminist Reinterpretations of Unpaid and Care Labour in Contemporary India

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Abstract

This article analyses the invisibility and undervaluation of women's unpaid and caring labor within India's economic and legal frameworks. Employing a feminist doctrinal and analytical framework, it examines the perpetuation of gendered labor divides and the exacerbation of structural inequalities by patriarchal behaviours and neoliberal policies. Utilising feminist economic theory, national surveys, and legal research, the study demonstrates that unpaid care work, essential for economic production, is consistently excluded from national accounting and policy development. The research argues that care must be redefined as a shared social responsibility and a communal resource. It finds that recognizing, reducing, and redistributing unpaid work through targeted policy measures is crucial for achieving gender equality and promoting inclusive, sustainable development in India.

Keywords: Unpaid Labour, Economy, India, feminism, gender equality, policy development.



Introduction

Unpaid labor is a vital component of economic activity and is essential to the welfare of people, households, and the economy as a whole. However, for a long time, economic analyses and policy formulations have failed to consider unpaid labor, whether it takes the form of services that others in the household enjoy or the economic production of goods for one's own consumption. However, in contrast,

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feminist economists have made efforts since the late 1960s to include and study women's domestic labour as an economic activity on par with paid employment (Turner et al., 2023). There are different goals behind these analyses. Some of them include giving women the credit they deserve for the housework they do and showing that women's lack of participation in the workforce is due to economic disadvantages and low opportunity costs rather than women's free will (Federici, 2004). The overarching goal of all of these is to acknowledge the non-monetary work that women do around the house and to highlight the worth of this work.

In the Indian setting, where female labor force participation has been steadily declining over the past decade, the argument over women's unpaid labor takes on further significance. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022–23 found that just 27.3% of Indian women are employed, which is much lower than the male average and much lower than the world average (Dey & Choudhury, 2025). The growing number of women being categorized as having "domestic duties"—the invisible, unpaid labor that goes on in most homes—is a major contributor to this reduction. Wages for women in India's informal economy are low or non-existent, and their work is often overlooked and covered by social security systems. This is even though nearly 70% of women work in these fields (International Labour Organization, 2018; Dey & Choudhury, 2025). Indian women put in an average of 297 minutes a day on unpaid care and household chores, while males put in only 31 minutes, according to data from the Government of India's Time Use Survey (National Statistical Office, 2019 & Gupta and Pattanaik, 2023). This glaring gender disparity exemplifies the persistence of long-established cultural norms that "naturally" divide labor by placing the burden of domestic duties on women. Economic accounting does not take into consideration the many hours that rural women in places like Odisha and Rajasthan spend every day doing mundane but necessary jobs such as collecting firewood, caring for children and the elderly, and getting water. These trends show that policies aimed at boosting India's economy frequently fail to consider the essential, unpaid work that keeps homes and the economy as a whole running, which in turn keeps women at a disadvantage in the workplace.

Understanding women's unpaid labor in a developing country like India requires analyzing the complex paid-unpaid scale at several interconnected levels. This study aims to clarify the crucial role that care and unpaid labor play in socioeconomic systems of India. It highlights the pervasive but often overlooked influence that these labor types have on the functioning of both the formal and informal economies, including household chores, elder care, and childrearing, which constitute the foundation of society. Although such labor is essential, it is frequently overlooked or undervalued by economic standards, which exacerbates structural inequality. Women are frequently unfairly burdened by gender inequality in unpaid care work, which is rooted in patriarchal norms. This paper will examine the intersectional aspects of this work and attempt to identify the ways that factors such as race, caste, class, and ethnicity intensify the injustices that oppressed people must endure. By using a feminist perspective and investigating how historical and modern discourses have

addressed these disparities, this study aims to reimagine frameworks for fair labor distribution.

Literature Review

In the article, "Who Pays for the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraint" (1994), Nancy Folbre analyzes the systemic disparities that render women's unpaid caregiving labor invisible in economic frameworks. The author emphasizes the reliance of the capitalist economy on women's domestic and caring labor, while simultaneously neglecting to acknowledge or compensate it. She contends that traditional economic models omit the value of domestic labor from production and national revenue statistics, leading to the economic invisibility of women. Folbre further underscores that failing to confront these structural biases will perpetuate the marginalization of women through policy. Her research establishes a robust basis for comprehending the gendered characteristics of unpaid labor and its essential function in supporting families and the economy.

In the UN Women Discussion Paper entitled "Recognize, Reduce, and Redistribute Unpaid Care Work: Policy Agenda for Gender Equality and Sustainable Development" (2017), Diane Elson emphasizes the policy aspect of unpaid caregiving labor. The author contends that unpaid care work, predominantly undertaken by women, is a significant contributor to gender inequality and restricts women's engagement in paid jobs. Elson advocates the "Three Rs" approach—Recognize, Reduce, and Redistribute—as a viable policy framework to address this issue. She asserts that governments must acknowledge unpaid care work as an economic component, alleviate women's caregiving responsibilities through public programs, and redistribute care duties between men and women. Her work offers a pragmatic, policy-focused viewpoint pertinent to emerging nations such as India, where women's unpaid labor is a significant obstacle to equality.

Bina Agarwal (1997) examines the impact of gender relations and societal structures on women's economic status within the household in her article, "Bargaining and Gender Relations: Within and Beyond the Household". The author elucidates that women's absence of property rights, restricted decision-making authority, and social reliance on men diminish their negotiating strength. Agarwal demonstrates, through evidence from rural India, that women frequently engage in unpaid household and agricultural labor that remains unacknowledged and unrecompensed. She contends that the allocation of resources and societal norms significantly influence women's capacity to negotiate within familial and communal contexts. This study emphasizes that tackling unpaid labor necessitates a transformation in economic policy and societal perceptions.

Despite extensive global study on unpaid and care labor, the prevailing literature predominantly emphasizes Western feminist and economic viewpoints, with insufficient attention to the socio-cultural intricacies of India. Although scholars like Bina Agarwal and Indira Hirway have investigated women's unpaid labor in India, their research predominantly focuses on measurement, economic valuation, or policy implications, henceforth neglecting the intersectional aspects of caste, class, religion,

and regional disparities that influence women's experiences of unpaid work. Moreover, there is little examination of the impact of neoliberal economic reforms and technological advancements on the acknowledgment and allocation of care work in modern India. This study aims to bridge these gaps by amalgamating feminist theoretical approaches with intersectional analysis to reconceptualize unpaid and care labor as an essential element of India's socio-economic system and to advocate for a more inclusive model for its acknowledgment and redistribution.

Research Methodology

Using a feminist epistemology-based qualitative, doctrinal, and analytical method, the study looks at unpaid and care work through the lens of gender-sensitive law and economics. It is based on feminist standpoint theory and sees women's real-life experiences as valid forms of knowledge. It also criticizes the male-centered assumptions that underlie mainstream economics and law. The study does both descriptive and analytical work. It does descriptive work by showing how feminist ideas about unpaid work have changed over time. It also does analytical work by looking at how legal, economic, and policy frameworks keep gendered labor systems in place. The Constitution of India, labor and welfare laws, and important court decisions are some of the main sources. International tools like CEDAW, the ILO Care Work Report (2018), and the UN Women's Progress Report (2019–2020) are also used. There are research papers, national surveys, and policy reports that are secondary sources. Some examples are the Time Use in India Survey (2019), the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2022–23), and studies by Oxfam and Indira Hirway. Through thematic and intersectional content analysis, the study finds instances of women's work being overlooked and unfairly valued because of structural bias. This combined approach lets us look at how patriarchy, the law, and neoliberal policy work together to keep India's unpaid care economy going.

Historical Perspectives on Unpaid and Care Labour

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels examined the significance of gender in their critique of capitalism in *The German Ideology*, composed in 1845–46 (Marx and Engels, 1932). Engels reiterated their discourse in his 1884 manuscript, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. The initial division of labor occurs between men and women for procreation. The earliest class opposition in history is brought into line with the appearance of the conflict between men and women within monogamous marriage, and the first instance of class oppression resembles the suppression of women by men (McGuffey, 2008). Engels, in *The German Ideology*, conceptualized marriage within capitalism as akin to wage labor: a "free" agreement between presumed equals, yet fundamentally a manifestation of coercion by the economically dominant class over the subordinate class. Early feminists recognized the historical existence of a gendered division of labor, contending that capitalism had redefined housework from a socially essential and publicly acknowledged task in pre-capitalist societies to a private service, akin to a concealed form of slavery (McGuffey, 2008).

However, this concept raises a more significant query: Can all reproductive labor be presumed to be a resource that should be valued in the context of commodity production?

The dispute over whether reproductive labor, such as housework and caring, adds value has been ongoing. Some argue, like Bryson (2003), that reproductive labor contributes to trade value by strengthening the labor power of workers (such as adult male workers) who go out and earn money. Without this behind-the-scenes job, wage labor would not have been possible. For instance, if one looks at the duties, such as cooking meals and preparing clothes is necessary for employees to arrive at work prepared to work. Others, such as Secombe (1974), argue that housewives are oppressed by patriarchy but not exploited in the same way as wage workers. They claim that exploitation occurs exclusively in a wage-capital relationship in which profits are derived from a worker's labor. Housewives are not considered part of this exploitative system because they are not compensated for their work.

This brings up the main point of debate of the time: Can housewives join the labor movement, or do they have to make a living first? Even though there was still a lot of talk about theory, trade unions did little to help women with their heavy household work. They also did not try to get housewives to join, even though their unpaid work helps the wage-earning system in a roundabout way.

The feminist movement has long spoken out against the fact that women's unpaid work at home and elsewhere is not valued. They say that cooking, cleaning, and taking care of other people are important parts of life, but people often ignore or forget about them. As a result, a number of feminist philosophers and theorists have used literary criticism to show how people in power have downplayed or ignored women's accomplishments. Silvia Federici's work revolutionized the comprehension of women's domestic duties within capitalist economies, making it a seminal contribution to feminist thought on unpaid labor. Federici (1974) contended that women's emancipation must encompass more than just access to waged employment; it must also encompass the acknowledgment and appreciation of reproductive labor, as influenced by Mariarosa Dalla Costa's *Women and the Subversion of the Community* (1972). In 1973, she co-founded the Wages for Housework campaign in New York, which advocated for the payment of domestic work as a means of economic justice and social visibility for the unpaid contributions of women. Her motivation was driven by these ideals (Federici, 1974). Her pamphlet, *Wages Against Housework*, was a forceful demand to recognize and value unpaid domestic labor, setting the framework for her activism. Silvia Federici examined how patriarchy permeated society and underestimated women's unpaid work. Federici studied real-life women targeted for their power in "*Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*" (2004). She wrote about Gostanza, a 16th-century Tuscan healer accused of witchcraft for her popularity and fortune-telling abilities. She also noted 17th-century Virginian young English settlers who were executed for joining Native tribes and defying colonial rule, like Caliban in *The Tempest*. Federici also studied feudal women's collaborative work in fields, residences, and gardens without clear inside and outdoor boundaries

(Spakes, 1996). Sharing labor helped women fight male dominance by building strong ties. Federici illustrated how unpaid labor has historically given women power and oppression, defining their battles under patriarchy and capitalism (Spakes, 1996).

Feminist Critique of Androcentric Bias in Neoclassical Economic Theory

Feminist economists have long criticized mainstream neoclassical economic theory for its androcentric dualism, which distinguishes between productive and reproductive domains, hence privileging market activity over unpaid care work. The neoclassical concept of homo oeconomicus—a rational, self-serving, and primarily male economic agent—has been recognized as an inherently patriarchal construct that neglects the social and relational aspects of economic behavior. Nancy Folbre notes that "economic man is underpinned by a shadow economy of care, predominantly maintained by women, which enables his rational self-interest" (Folbre, 2001). Diane Elson (2017) contends that "markets cannot function effectively without the unpaid labour that reproduces and maintains the labour force," highlighting that trust, reciprocity, and emotional labour are vital elements of actual economies (Elson, 2017). Feminist economists thus promote the reevaluation of economic analysis to incorporate care and reproductive labor as essential to both production and societal welfare. Acknowledging caregiving as an essential element of the economy challenges the gendered assumptions of traditional models and highlights the interconnection between market productivity and unpaid domestic labor.

Feminist economists have tried to use experiential methods that emphasize domestic dynamics and labor divisions to raise awareness about the important issue, the uneven distribution of unpaid care work (Camilletti, Zahrah, 2022). The reasons that were made are consistent with those that were found in the special edition of World Development titled "Gender Integration in Economics" (1995, Volume 23, edition 11). This issue underlined the necessity of including gender relations and unpaid work in economic research.

Well-known economists like Gary S. Becker (1991) [Becker, G.S. (1991)] came up with unitary household models that see the family as a single unit that makes decisions based on shared benefit and rational choice. Becker wrote in *A Treatise on the Family* (1991) that the way work is divided in families is due to "comparative advantage," which means that women do housework for free while men work for money. Becker says that this kind of specialization makes households more productive and happier generally. This plan uses rational decision-making in harmonious homes and says that women's unpaid housework improves the family's overall health by increasing their output. However, this view of Becker met with severe criticisms. Feminist economists like Diane Elson (1998) and Nancy Folbre (2006) argue that these assumptions naturalize patriarchal hierarchies and hide unequal power relations that impact family labor allocation. Becker's model "treats harmony as a given and conflict as an anomaly," ignoring institutional constraints and societal conventions that limit women's economic agency, according to Elson (1998). Folbre (2006) criticizes neoclassical household models for "masking exploitation within families under the

guise of altruism and efficiency.” These feminist critiques show that comparative advantage and specialization in household economics reinforce androcentric bias and undervalue women's unpaid labor, perpetuating the gender wage gap and systemic inequalities in paid and unpaid work.

Based on the considerations above, it is evident that neoliberal economic policies have slowly changed the meaning and structure of care labor, turning it from a moral and social duty into a service that is regulated by market rules. In India, this change is most clear in the increasing reliance on private domestic help, paid caregiving services, and workers in the informal sector who are still underpaid and unprotected. These changes have made it harder for women to find work, but they have also made the existing class, caste, and gender hierarchies stronger by moving care obligations from wealthy homes to poorer women. This commercialization has neither alleviated the stress of unpaid caregiving in households nor guaranteed dignity and equitable compensation for individuals involved in paid caregiving roles. Market pricing cannot adequately represent the essence of care, which is based on empathy, emotional connection, and social duty. Consequently, efforts to rectify gender imbalance in India must transcend economic metrics to recognize caregiving as a collective cultural responsibility. To achieve both social fairness and inclusive growth, it is important to recognize, redistribute, and value care labor not just as work but as a key part of human well-being.

Unpaid Labour by Oppressed Communities in India: A Historical and Intersectional Perspective

The invisibility of unpaid labor in India is not comprehensible without an examination of the historical marginalization, caste, class, and ethnicity that have shaped the work of women for generations. Scholarly research on care and labor has consistently demonstrated that the burden of unpaid work is not distributed equitably; it is disproportionately borne by women from Dalit, Adivasi, and other marginalized communities. They are economically invisible and socially devalued, even though their contributions support both the domestic and broader economic systems. According to Singh (Singh & Pattanaik, 2020), women from lower socio-economic backgrounds and oppressed castes spend significantly more time performing unpaid domestic and care tasks than upper-caste women. This disparity is a result of systemic deprivation and unequal access to infrastructure, including water, energy, and sanitation.

Throughout history, the interaction of caste and patriarchy has resulted in women from marginalized communities being relegated to kinds of labor that are subservient and undervalued. The colonial records and the literature on social reform explain how women of the Dalit and Adivasi communities fulfilled dual roles. These women contributed to the economics of the household and the agricultural sector by performing rigorous physical labor, while simultaneously offering unpaid services in the homes of upper-caste families. This legacy lives on in contemporary India, where caste-based occupational segregation continues to be a factor in determining patterns of both paid and unpaid labor. According to the Dalit Shadow Report (2017), Dalit

women continue to be overrepresented in manual scavenging, domestic work, and informal caregiving, all of which are forms of labor that are vital but are stigmatized and undervalued (NCDHR, 2017). Caste hierarchies and gendered norms have played a role in perpetuating economic exclusion throughout history, and these conditions are a reflection of that history.

Recent intersectional studies have enhanced this comprehension by clearly associating care inequity with social stratification. In her 2020 study of intersectional concerns in care labor, Krishnan contends that gender, class, and caste disparities are mutually constitutive, each strengthening the other within India's social and economic framework. She argues that the disadvantages associated with caregiving should not be viewed solely as a "women's issue," but rather as a symptom of fundamental caste-capitalist connections that devalue specific bodies and communities (Krishnan, 2020). Through the lens of this theoretical framework, it is possible to understand why marginalized women continue to be constrained to caring responsibilities that are invisible and low-status, while receiving minimal support from institutions. Empirical evidence supports these patterns. Janiso, Shukla, and Reddy (2021) utilized the Time Use Survey (Government of India, 2019) to analyse the gender gap in unpaid work. Their findings indicated that observable factors, including education and income, accounted for only a small portion of the disparity, with the majority attributed to deep-rooted gender and caste norms (National Statistical Office, 2020). The findings indicate that the unpaid care gap continues not due to economic rationality, but rather because of entrenched cultural hierarchies dictating the assignment of care work responsibilities. The "time poverty trap," as articulated by Diane Elson (2017), is especially pronounced for lower-caste women who balance unpaid domestic duties with irregular informal employment, thereby constraining their mobility and educational opportunities.

Case studies elucidate these intersections. Mishra (2025) examined women construction workers in informal urban sectors and found that unpaid care responsibilities significantly limited their capacity to pursue stable employment or training opportunities. A significant number of women from Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes indicated that they juggle extensive physical labor with unpaid domestic responsibilities, frequently without adequate rest or social protection. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this imbalance. It was found by Debnath and Chatterjee (2025) that women of the Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim communities were confronted with increased unpaid care needs because of school closures and shortages in healthcare. Additionally, these women were experiencing employment losses in the informal sectors. The National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (2023) also showed how manual scavenging and caring for family members became even more dangerous during the pandemic, showing how vulnerable disadvantaged women workers were already. An illustrative instance of these intersecting inequities is evident in the experiences of domestic workers in urban centers like Delhi and Bengaluru. The majority of these women are from Dalit and Adivasi communities, balancing paid domestic employment with significant unpaid home duties. The

National Domestic Workers' Movement (NDWM, 2021) indicates that they frequently labor in excess of 10 hours each day, without signed contracts, paid leave, or social security. Their contributions support both middle-class families and the urban care industry; nonetheless, they remain excluded from labor legislation and welfare benefits. This instance illustrates the intersection of caste, class, and gender systems that restrict marginalized women to unrecognized and devalued care labor, despite their essential economic contributions. (National Domestic Workers' Movement, 2021) Thus, caste, class, and religion are linked to gender inequity, as shown by India's downtrodden populations' unpaid labor. Dalit and Adivasi women have historically provided vital but undervalued labor for the official economy and home. Their contributions are excluded from national income accounting and policymaking. Rethinking India's care economy requires acknowledging this history. Addressing unpaid work must go beyond gender-neutral frameworks to address historical injustices and institutional structures that determine who does it and why. India can only recognize, redistribute, and value its invisible labour by incorporating intersectional and historical ideas into economic and social policies.

The historical and intersectional analysis of unpaid labor in India's marginalized communities shows that women's work is devalued socially and culturally. Marginalized women are barred from formal labor markets and overwhelmed at home due to caste-based structures, patriarchal norms, and neoliberal economic reforms. These trends show that unpaid labor must include moral and emotional care in addition to productivity indicators. Care labor must be redefined as an economic input and a social practice based on empathy, reciprocity, and community well-being as India modernizes and globalizes. The next part examines how acknowledging the emotional and social importance of caring can change policy frameworks and attitudes about unpaid labour.

Redefining Care Work: Bridging Economic Value with Emotional and Social Significance

The unseen backbone of any community and economy is caring work. Caregiving includes a broad variety of tasks, including but not limited to: preparing food, cleaning up afterward, carrying water and fuel, looking after the young and the old, and helping the ill and disabled. Because it is mostly unpaid and carried out by women, care labor is underestimated, despite its vital social and economic role. There is a clear gender disparity in the division of labor; the 2019 Time Use Survey in India found that women spent 299 minutes a day on unpaid caregiving and household duties, while men spent only 97 minutes. (National Statistical Office, 2020) Worldwide, women engage in 12.5 billion hours of unpaid care work every day, worth more than \$10.8 trillion, according to estimates from the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2018 and Oxfam 2020). Despite its importance for maintaining productivity, the "care economy" (a term used by feminist economists) is underreported in most national accounts.

Various Types of Care Work and Their Characteristics

Work in the care industry can be classified as either voluntary, unpaid, or compensated. The term "voluntary care work" refers to community-based caregiving that is conducted without remuneration. Activities that fall under this category include assisting old people, helping neighbours, and supporting local schools. Unpaid care work is a term that describes the domestic and caregiving responsibilities that are performed within households, primarily by women and girls, without receiving any form of monetary compensation. Some examples of paid care employment include domestic labor, childcare, healthcare, and social service occupations. These jobs are typically performed by women who come from groups that are marginalized and have lower socioeconomic status. There is a global phenomenon that reflects deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, that is, the feminization of care work, which includes both paid and unpaid care work. In India, caste and class have a significant role in determining who provides care. Households belonging to the upper and middle classes frequently rely on women belonging to lower castes for domestic and caregiving services, which perpetuates historical inequalities within contemporary economies. (Krishnan, Preethi, 2020)

Economic and Social Value of Care

Feminist economists contend that care work is fundamental to economic stability, as it sustains and reproduces the labor force; however, it largely remains unrecognized in policy and economic planning. Nancy Folbre (Folbre, 2002). notes that "the invisible heart of care sustains the visible hand of the market," highlighting the reliance of paid labor productivity on unpaid household work. Diane Elson (2017) contends that markets fundamentally depend on care work, which is primarily carried out by women, yet this work is regarded as a private duty rather than a shared economic responsibility. The Economic Survey of India (2022–23) recognizes the substantial contribution of unpaid care work to the economy, yet it remains "outside the boundaries of measurable production." Research conducted by UN Women (2019) indicates that investment in care infrastructure, including childcare centers, healthcare facilities, and eldercare services, generates 2.4 times more employment compared to investments in the construction or technology sectors (UN Women, 2019). Indira Hirway (2015) demonstrated that incorporating unpaid care work into India's national accounts could increase the country's GDP by an estimated 15–20%, highlighting its significant, yet unrecognized, economic contribution.

India's neoliberal policies, which include tight budgets, the privatization of public services, and the rise of informal work, continue to see care work as a family duty rather than a state or market role. India's government spends about 1.1% of its GDP on public health and about 4% of its GDP on social security (not including health). These are relatively low levels of investment compared to the rest of the world (ILO, India Country Profile, 2021). The presumption that women will compensate for these policy shortcomings through unpaid labor has intensified economic inequality, particularly

for Dalit, Adivasi, and low-income women who shoulder both productive and reproductive obligations. As a result, millions of women experience time scarcity, face barriers to education and formal employment, and remain ensnared in cycles of economic dependency. It is essential to acknowledge care work as an economic asset and a social right to foster an inclusive and gender-equitable economy in India.

The Ethical and Emotional Dimensions of Care

Caring for others is highly valued not only monetarily but also emotionally and morally. It represents the values of caring, accountability, and interconnectedness, which are crucial to people's and communities' happiness. If we boil care down to a monetary value, we run the risk of missing the relationship dimension. But realizing its monetary value doesn't take away its emotional component; on the contrary, it attracts attention to something that has been neglected for a long time. Recognizing care policies, according to Shahra Razavi (2007), should strike a balance between compensation, social respect, and institutional assistance to preserve care's human core.

Toward Recognition and Redistribution

It is necessary to acknowledge that care is not just a right but also a shared social responsibility in order to realize a more equitable and inclusive economic system. The "Three Rs" paradigm, which stands for "Recognize, Reduce, and Redistribute," is a framework that feminist economists advocate for (Elson, 2017). The recognition of unpaid care as productive work, the reduction of unnecessary burdens through infrastructure and technology, and the redistribution of obligations between men, women, the state, and the market are all necessary steps in this process. Several efforts in India, such as the Kudumbashree Mission in Kerala and the women's collectives in Tamil Nadu, have demonstrated that community-based care networks have the potential to generate decent employment opportunities while simultaneously supporting social welfare. An exemplary instance of institutional acknowledgment of care work is evident in Kerala's Kudumbashree Mission, a very successful community-based effort for women's empowerment in India. Founded in 1998, it incorporates women into local governing frameworks and offers structured platforms for compensated care services, including childcare, elder care, and nutritional programs. Kudumbashree facilitates women's income generation through micro-enterprises and self-help organizations, alleviating the stress of unpaid home responsibilities. It exemplifies a reproducible type of redistributive policy, demonstrating how public investment in care infrastructure can both enhance the value and professionalize women's labor. The program emphasizes that acknowledging care as a public responsibility, instead of a private duty, has the potential to alter the social and economic dynamics of gender relations in India. (Government of Kerala, Kudumbashree Mission, 2022).

Assigning a monetary value to care is obviously not the only thing that is involved in redefining care. It entails rethinking it as a fundamental component of social justice, which is necessary for achieving gender equality and sustainable development.

Policymakers can develop frameworks that value human interconnectedness as much as market efficiency when they acknowledge the emotional, social, and economic elements of care.

Deconstructing Patriarchal Notions of “Natural” Caregiving Roles Assigned to Women

The essential nature of unpaid care work, which was essentially performed by women, is vital for the sustenance of families, communities, and economies. However, even if society progresses, this domain is often overlooked and undervalued in the context of the neoliberal economic framework. Care work is often seen as unproductive and lacking the necessary skills because it is deeply rooted in traditional social structures. This ignores the fact that it is essential for keeping society running and making the workforce more efficient. Women, especially those from marginalized communities, encounter systemic discrimination that perpetuates their subordination to these roles. Individuals are structured in a way that they can take care of unpaid household tasks while also handling the demands of paid work and caring for others. This disparity not only diminishes their opportunities for rest and leisure but also reinforces gender inequality. Even with the rise in women's involvement in paid employment, there has not been a corresponding increase in men's participation in unpaid care work, largely due to enduring social beliefs and stigma.

Care work is undervalued because it is kept out of the public, formal economy, where "real" work happens, according to feminists like Nancy Fraser in *Justice Interruptus* (1997). This approach not only diminishes the value of caregiving but also neglects to emphasize its significant economic impact. *Wages Against Housework* (1975) by Silvia Federici offers a critical examination of the patriarchal and economic structures that exploit women through domestic labor. She highlights that the system exploits women by failing to recognize caregiving as a valid profession, thereby rendering their work invisible and uncompensated (Spakes, 1996).

Caregiving and other gender roles are socially constructed and shaped by power dynamics that dictate what is considered appropriate for women, according to authors like Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Caregiving is often visualized as a symbol of weakness or a break from the dominant ideals of masculinity, which are based on these socially built standards that limit women to caring responsibilities. This ongoing division of work based on gender has hurt both genders. Women do most of the caregiving work, and men often have to deal with the stigma that comes with doing care work.

The feminist movement has constantly encouraged the exclusion of patriarchal ideals to establish a more equitable society in which care work is acknowledged as significant and supported by all people, regardless of their gender. Those who embrace this perspective frequently stress the importance of rethinking the concept of caregiving. They believe that caregiving should not be seen just as a responsibility that is determined by gender, but rather as a duty that is shared by everyone in society. This perspective calls for backing through public policy, social infrastructure, and fair

economic systems. The contributions of authors such as Arlie Hochschild, particularly in *The Second Shift* (1989), offer a compelling examination of the challenges women encounter with the “second shift” of unpaid domestic labor, even after joining the workforce (Spakes, 1996). This underscores the urgent necessity for systemic reforms to tackle gendered caregiving disparities.

Scholars in this field advocate a future in which caregiving is acknowledged as a collective human responsibility, deserving of appropriate recognition and compensation, and separated from gendered norms that have traditionally limited women's freedom and autonomy by means of the analysis of strongly rooted patriarchal beliefs (Peggie, 1999). Worldwide, women and underprivileged groups, including ethnic minorities and migrants, have dominated the care workforce. Women have historically provided both paid and unpaid care, frequently in insecure employment situations. Recent technological advances, particularly digital platforms, have created new potential to reduce these pressures and change care job dynamics. Digital platforms link caregivers and receivers, which makes care easier to get and more effective. These platforms use government money, business resources, or public funds to give patients more choices when it comes to providers. On these networks, caregivers can find jobs that work with their schedules and personal responsibilities. Being flexible often means giving up steady pay and benefits like paid time off, social security, and the right to bargain collectively. Technology can help unpaid caregivers save time and emotional energy, but it also keeps social and economic inequality going. Caregivers often work as independent contractors, which limits the benefits and protections they get at work. Surge pricing and other incentive systems could also keep women who have to take care of children or do housework from taking advantage of the best earning opportunities. Technological platforms make care less personal by focusing on speed and cost instead of relationships. This task-based approach could break up care and make it harder for caregivers to stay, which would hurt consistency and quality. Even with these problems, digital platforms can help women find paid work and balance caring for others with other jobs.

To fully use technology to cut down on unpaid work, we need to deal with the systemic issues that make caring for others more difficult. This means pushing for fair wages, fair labor policies, and a change in society toward shared caregiving. By getting more men and non-binary people involved in caregiving, technology can help break down gender stereotypes and make the care system fairer and welcoming for everyone.

Conclusion

Traditional economic frameworks often ignore and undervalue unpaid and care work, which is mostly done by women, even though it is important to society and the economy. The long-standing patriarchal ideas that say care work is useless and has no economic value have a direct effect on this ongoing lack of respect. The neoliberal economic model makes things worse by focusing on market-driven activities, which makes care work even more isolated from both public recognition and economic value.

Feminist discourses have fought against these biases and called for equal pay and recognition for caregiving throughout history. Feminists and queer theorists have called for changes to the way society and the economy work so that patriarchal norms are no longer present. They have also brought attention to the unfair systems that keep women's work hidden. Their research shows that we need to include care work in economic measures so that we can see how it really affects society and the economy. Race, class, caste, and ethnicity all make the problems with unpaid care work worse for people who are already at a disadvantage. Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may be stuck in a "time poverty trap" if they must care for others all the time. This makes it hard for them to go to school or find a good job. The result is a vicious cycle of economic instability that only makes the gaps bigger. It is important to recognize and deal with these intersectional factors to create fair labor frameworks that give a voice to those who do not have one. Because of the way our culture and economy divide work by gender, caregiving duties are not evenly shared. Even though more women are working for pay, redistributing unpaid care work has not made much progress. This difference keeps gender inequality going and limits women's economic potential. To get gender equality, we need policies that support shared caregiving and a strong social infrastructure.

According to the findings of the current study, unpaid and care work constitute the unseen foundation upon which India's economy and society are assembled. Women, particularly those who belong to marginalized and lower socio-economic groups, continue to perform a disproportionate percentage of such labor without being recognized or compensated for their efforts. In this study, a feminist doctrinal and analytical approach was utilized to investigate how deeply ingrained patriarchal ideals and neoliberal economic institutions contribute to the perpetuation of the invisibility of care labor and the maintenance of gendered hierarchies within both the household and public spheres. In addition, the investigation indicated that the lack of institutional recognition in national accounting and legal frameworks has contributed to the increasing marginalization of women in the economic sphere, as well as restricted their access to social security and public resources.

To move forward, we need to think of care as a shared social duty instead of a private or female duty. Time Use Survey data needs to be used in national planning, public investments in child care and elder care need to be increased, and care credits and other social safety systems for unpaid workers need to be put in place. Care should be seen as a public good for everyone, and this is not only fair for women, but also necessary for growth that lasts and benefits everyone. This study supports the idea that unpaid care work needs to be valued and redistributed in order to achieve real equality and change the way the economy works. It does this by combining feminist theory with law and economic analysis.

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