

Workload on Women, Home and Office in India and Domestic Environment

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Abstract:

Women in India face a systemic "double burden" of paid employment and unpaid domestic labor. Official time-use statistics reveal that women spend roughly 4.5 to 5.5 hours daily on unpaid chores and caregiving, which is over 300% to 800% more than men. This unequal domestic environment heavily restricts female workforce participation.

Keywords: women, workload, burden, employment, labor

Introduction

A detailed breakdown of the workload and the domestic environment in India highlights several critical factors:

1. The "Double Burden" (Home vs. Office)

- The "Second Shift": Working women in India effectively work a "second shift". After putting in 7 to 8 hours at an office, they return home to cook, clean, and care for children and the elderly. This pushes their combined daily working hours well beyond professional standards. [1, 2, 3]
- Time Poverty: Because domestic chores are deeply gendered, women are left with significantly less leisure time, sleep, and self-care, leading to high rates of corporate and personal burnout. [1, 2]

2. Time Use Survey (TUS) Findings

- The Data: The government's official Time Use Survey data shows that females aged 15--59 spend over 305 minutes a day on unpaid domestic services. In contrast, men spend a disproportionately low amount of time on these tasks. [1]
- Caregiving: When caregiving for children and the elderly is added, women spend upward of 430 minutes daily on unpaid duties. [1, 2, 3]

3. The Domestic Environment & Cultural Norms

- Patriarchal Expectations: Traditional gender roles dictate that household maintenance and care are primarily "women's work." Even in urban, dual-earner households, male participation typically peaks at outdoor chores (like grocery shopping) rather than core daily tasks. [1, 2]
- Family Structure: Women living in nuclear families experience a more severe domestic workload than those in multigenerational households, where child-rearing and domestic labor can be shared with older family members. [1]

- Lack of Institutional Support: The absence of affordable, public childcare and extended flexible work laws exacerbates the pressure on domestic life, forcing many highly educated women to drop out of the workforce entirely to manage household responsibilities. [1, 2]
4. Economic Impact
- Workforce Exclusion: The immense weight of domestic duties is the leading reason 60--70% of urban women remain out of the labor force. [1][1,2,3]
 - Informal Recognition: Because unpaid domestic work is invisible, women's immense contribution to the Indian economy remains economically uncounted, though courts have begun considering the value of unpaid housework in legal compensations. [1, 2]

Discussion

India's labour statistics come from a series of large, nationally representative household surveys on employment that the Indian government has been conducting for over 70 years, while international data comes from the International Labour Organization.[1] (For more on measuring employment, see this piece in our Measurement vertical.)

India has an estimated 520 million women and 540 million men[2] over the age of 14 who can legally work.[3] Not all adults who are of legal working age work - old age, disability and other factors typically keep some adults out of the labour force in most countries. But there is also a distinctly gendered dimension to who is in the labour force.

The labour force is made up of people who are either working (employed) or looking for work (unemployed). The rest are considered to be out of the labour force, meaning that they are of legal working age but do not participate in the paid workforce.[4,5,6]

India's most recent labour statistics[4] show that while eight in ten men are in the labour force, only four in ten women are. India's female labour force participation rate (people who are either working or looking for work as a share of the population) is lower than in many countries at comparable levels of income and development, although it has seen an improvement in recent years.[5]

Women who are not in the labour force are still working, but in a way that is different from how work is understood in economics.

In economics, "work" covers activities that produce an output which is either consumed by the household or is sold in the market for a price. In Indian and international labour statistics, activities that produce goods for self-use and sale are considered as work. So a farmer growing vegetables for the household to eat constitutes work, as does her selling those vegetables in the market.

But in terms of services, only those activities that produce an output which can be sold are considered work.[6] So transporting the harvested vegetables to the market for sale is work, but cooking those vegetables for the household members to eat, or the feeding of small children is not considered work.[7,8,9]

This unpaid care and domestic work is mostly performed by women. Whether this unpaid care work should be counted as productive work is a widely debated topic in labour economics both in India and globally.[7]

Of the estimated 120 million men out of the labour force, the majority are in higher studies, while of the 300 million women who are out of the labour force, most are attending to "child care and personal commitments in home-making".[8]

Results

Every society runs on two kinds of work.

The first is familiar. It has wages, uniforms, lunch breaks, performance reviews. It builds roads, writes code, teaches classes and treats patients. It shows up in GDP.

The second is harder to see but it what makes the first possible. Planning meals so everyone eats. Tracking what is running out at home. Caring for infants in the early hours of the morning. Supervising kid's homework. Supporting ageing parents through appointments. Organising routines so children learn and adults can work. Remembering birthdays, medicines, school deadlines, festivals and family obligations so life stays whole.[10,11,12]

This is care work.

It looks different in different homes. In some it means negotiating with domestic staff, in others doing everything oneself. Some women coordinate multiple caregivers. Others are the only caregiver. Across families, the expectation that women will manage the invisible architecture of family life remains remarkably consistent.

Care is not sentimental labour. It is the infrastructure that allows people to show up at jobs, in classrooms, and in public life. Yet most countries, including India, tend to treat it as private matter rather than a shared economic concern.

India has no shortage of ambition. A five-trillion-dollar economy. Women-led development. Digital transformation. But we often forget to ask a foundational question: who is ensuring that the home continues to function while the nation marches forward.

The answer is visible in the data. India's Time Use Survey shows women aged 15 to 59 spend more than seven hours each day on unpaid domestic and caregiving tasks. Men spend less than three. In urban India, the ratio is similar. On average, women do 2.6 times more unpaid care work than men — even when both are employed.

This gap shapes the labour market. India's female labour force participation rate stands at 31.7 percent - below global averages despite rising levels of education and skill attainment among women. Women are not opting out of jobs. They are – inevitably – pulled out by responsibilities that the economy does not count. [13,14,15]

Macroeconomically, this is a silent engine. Government estimates place the value of women's unpaid domestic and care work at 15–17 percent of GDP. A multi-trillion-rupee economic system depends on labour that receives neither pay nor protection.

This imbalance is not unique to India. The world has a long history of assuming that when care is needed, women will reorganise their lives to provide it. But India's demographic size means that the consequences are magnified: when millions of women absorb unpaid care, millions of aspirations shrink. The flip side is equally clear. Even modest public investment in care services can generate jobs and dramatically expand women's workforce participation. The care economy sits at the intersection of gender equality, labour markets and growth.

Care systems cannot outrun social norms

Childcare centres, creches and caregiving services are essential. Yet too many operate with the same underlying assumptions: that women will manage enrolment, coordinate schedules, respond to disruptions and make sacrifices when care systems fall short.

When this happens, care infrastructure reduces women's time burden without redistributing responsibility.[16,17,18]

This is where masculinities matter, as economic variables - not just social ideals.

The current social script casts men primarily as earners. Care becomes something they “help with” rather than something they own as part of adulthood. The difference is profound. Helping keeps the hierarchy intact. Sharing redistributes power. This framing keeps women tied to unpaid work, even in the presence of formal care services.

Global evidence consistently shows that when men participate in daily caregiving - knowing the school calendar, managing the bedtime chaos, giving medicines, supporting emotional needs - women's employment is more sustained, children's wellbeing rises, and households report better stability. Care becomes a partnership rather than a silent burden.

But these shifts do not happen by accident. They require deliberate work to challenge norms around caregiving and responsibility. Transforming masculinities is not about isolated attitude change. It is about reshaping expectations across households, communities and institutions so that care is recognised as a shared social function.

UNDP India's national campaign #GharSeShuru, launched during the 16 Days of Activism, builds on this insight. The campaign is grounded in a simple but often overlooked truth: progress on gender equality depends not only on laws and services, but on how responsibility is negotiated within households. Long before inequality shows up in employment data or economic indicators, it takes shape in everyday care arrangements at home.[17,18,19]

From “supporting women” to building family infrastructure

Care is still often sold as help for working women. It is. But it is more than that.

Research on early childhood development shows that quality childcare boosts children's cognitive growth, reduces long-term inequality and improves family wellbeing. Far from being a private favour to mothers, care services are public infrastructure, like transport or electricity - essential to functioning societies.

A care economy built on the assumption that women will permanently adapt around unpaid work is neither efficient nor resilient. Durable change requires households, employers and governments to expect men to engage in caregiving as a normal part of adult life.

When norms meet systems

This is where a comprehensive care-economy approach becomes critical, one that does not treat services, norms and policy as separate tracks.

UNDP India's work with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs on strengthening the urban care ecosystem reflects this integrated thinking. Rather than focusing solely on childcare provision, the approach looks at care as a system: expanding access to quality, affordable childcare for low-income urban households; professionalising the childcare workforce; building partnerships across government, employers and communities; and using communication and behavioural nudges to encourage shared caregiving.

The emphasis on behaviour change is deliberate. Childcare services cannot redistribute care if families continue to believe that caregiving is primarily women's responsibility. Simple design choices such as communicating with both parents, visibly engaging fathers in childcare centres, avoiding frames that present care as “helping women” can quietly shift expectations around who care is for.[18,19,20]

Framing childcare as an investment in families, cities and human capital also helps reposition men from bystanders to participants.

Care, masculinities and India's future

Every nation that has expanded women's opportunities has had to reorganise how care is valued and shared. Those that treated care as public infrastructure saw women's employment rise. Those that left it to households hit a ceiling.

India's aspirations for inclusive growth and "women-led development" depend on how care is organised and valued. As long as unpaid care work remains heavily feminised, gains in employment and productivity will remain uneven and fragile.

Conclusion

Transforming masculinities is not peripheral to the care economy agenda; it is foundational to it. Without shifts in how care is understood and shared within households, investments in care services will ease pressure without dismantling the structures that created it.

A care economy that works for India's future must rest on a simple premise: care is everyone's responsibility. And meaningful change, as both evidence and experience remind us, really does have to start at home. [20]

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