

## **FEMINIST ECONOMICS: HOW WOMEN'S LABOUR GOES UNPAID IN INDIA**

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### **Introduction**

675 million Indian women. Each of them either already has a family to care for or is expected to eventually have one. India went from 'underdeveloped' to 'developing' but the masses chose to live in the oblivion of the years of the past. Indians, as a society, have always failed to cherish women and their efforts. The failure to do so has, presently, manifested itself in the form of unpaid women's labour with nobody stopping to glance a second longer on the issue. This paper seeks to understand, evaluate and give solutions to mitigate the dangers of women's unpaid labour in India with a particular emphasis on 'Feminist Economics'.

### **Recognising the Problem:**

In most mainstream ideas of the understanding of a country's economic welfare, we often find ourselves looking at the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employment rates for statistical answers.

While a high GDP and low unemployment rates are universally accepted as an indicator of the welfare and well-being of citizens, these figures can be very misleading. Indicators like these often conceal as much as they reveal and good employment rates and steady growth figures in a country are no assurance to the welfare of the citizens.

While this is an issue all around the world, Indian women fall prey to it more often and in more intensity than most women around the world. Gender inequality in India does not just remain a social issue anymore- it has now become a very prevalent economic issue. India has one of the largest pay gaps in the world with Indian women earning as much as 25% less than men as of 2016. The fact remains, that women tend to be consistently marginalised unless they prove worthy in a male-dominated field of work, and they get paid less there too. The United Nations Report on the World Social Situation (2016) shows that 51% of the work done by women around

the world is unpaid and does not make up a part of the nation's GDP and other such reports and statistics.

Not only do women suffer from unpaid work, but they suffer the most. A significant portion of their job, including domestic and caregiving tasks as well as work on the family farm or company, is stigmatised as being the domain of women and not "genuine" work. For example, while males 'help out' when they can, maintaining the home and raising children is still seen as the woman's responsibility. Therefore, a sizable portion of women's labour is still not valued in society.

### **What is 'Unpaid Domestic Labour'?**

Unpaid domestic labour is any work that a woman is required to do to maintain her household- be it grocery shopping or caring for a sick family member, raising a child or getting food on the table every day. It does not end here, as women in rural parts of India are expected to carry pots full of water and huge bundles of firewood, every day, over long distances. The fact is, that this 'domestic labour' does not just finish with physical work, it also demands lots of mental and emotional resilience. Yet, it is not counted as real work and is demeaned by men, who reap its benefits and women, who have been brainwashed into believing that this is their 'duty' and they should not demand money for it.

Furthermore, women are often discouraged from entering the professional workforce due to this 'unpaid domestic labour'. When a woman goes out and begins to work to earn for herself, it does not rid her of this additional domestic labour. In joint families, one woman working a professional job equals more unpaid work for the women at home. The situation in nuclear families is even worse. With both the male and the female adult of the house working professional jobs, the additional work of household chores falls on women again. What happens is that while the men and women of the house are both working, the woman is also responsible for these additional "duties" that she is given no remuneration for. This leads to women working for significantly longer hours every day, none of which is recognised. Research has shown that women spend twice as much time as men on domestic work. The inherent flaw here is that while a household, elderlies of the home and children are as much a responsibility of the male member of a house, society makes it 'optional' for men to involve themselves in such work. It is only occasionally that most households see the involvement of men in such chores that is then labelled as 'a helping hand'.

Women are often told to be thankful for husbands who are willing to 'help' them with household responsibilities. While most urban, modern households are now pushing their daughters to become independent working women, the pertinent question that hangs in the thick, humid air is

who will do the work that these women are liberated from? Can we consider this 'domestic household work' optional for girls? Can it be forsaken by these women without having an alternative in place? Can we liberate women from these shackles without first questioning the fundamental division of labour that drives modern-day patriarchy? The answer to all of these is no, which makes us see just how essential this unawarded domestic work is in today's society.

### **Unaccounted For:**

None of this domestic work is accounted for in the calculation of the nation's Gross Domestic Product, but in reality, it is central to sustaining the nation's Gross Domestic Product and over everything else, its workforce. In quantitative terms, the unpaid care work given by women is huge. It is estimated that 75% of the care work globally is provided by women. In India, women perform 10 to 12 times more unpaid care work than men. In a paper by Ferrant, Pesando and Nowacka, it is estimated that 63% of the value of India's GDP could be covered by unpaid care work that the people of the nation perform, most of which is done by women.

The issue of women falling prey to unpaid domestic labour is a vicious cycle. Women are severely limited in taking up paid professions because they are under the burden of unpaid domestic labour which also leads them to never break the chain of falling prey to unpaid domestic labour and they are unable to escape it. Even when these women find work, it is usually temporary, precarious or underpaid. What is more, is that this paid work does not liberate women either, it burdens them with even more work as now, they have to take care of both their paid work and their unpaid labour which increases the burden on these women.

The role of women does not stop here, as they keep the planet alive by performing subsistence work. Largely unknown to the world, is the fact that women are huge contributors to the agricultural sector. In developing countries, women make up 50% of the agricultural force, with Asia and Africa's agricultural force being 60% women. Despite these facts and figures, women are owners of less than 20% of agricultural land worldwide.

According to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization, there would have been 150 million fewer people going without food if women farmers had access to the same resources as men. Moreover, women play a critical role in the fight against hunger and malnutrition. Empowering women is essential to advancing human growth throughout society, as researchers like Amartya Sen have established.

These are only a few of the parameters which serve as proof to what extent women contribute to the GDP of the country and how none of it is acknowledged.

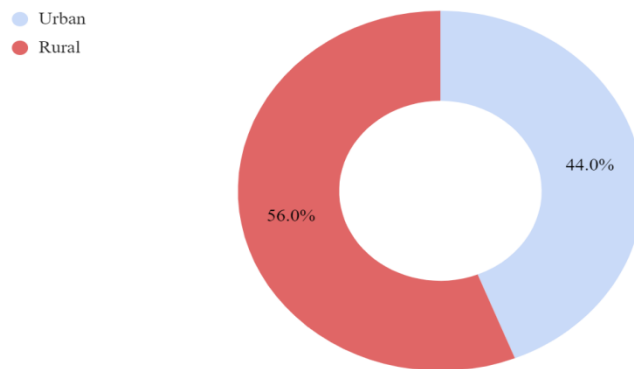
**Some Facts and Figures from Around Me:**

While there was a lot to find in books, on the web and in me, I realised that perhaps, even more, could be found around me, in my immediate environment.

The following are some facts and figures relating to the topic of women’s unpaid domestic labour and what role the background of women plays in the issue.

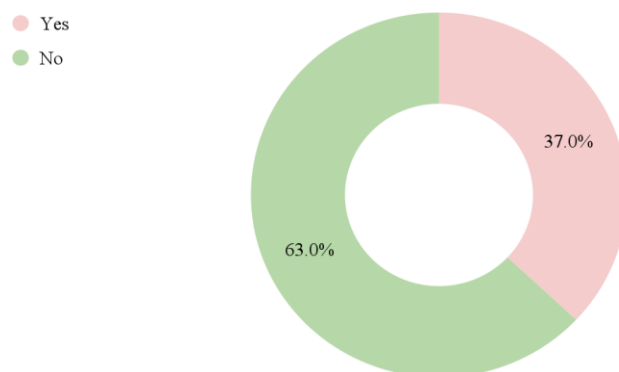
*\*All data has been collected from women living back in my hometown and from my boarding school helps (baijis). A total of 16 women were interviewed.*

Percentage of Urban and Rural Women Interviewed



I interviewed a total of 16 women from diverse backgrounds. 7 of them came from urban families and environments. The other 9 came from rural families and environments. Throughout the rest of the study, it can be seen that the background of these women makes a difference in some fields, and in the others, they face very similar situations.

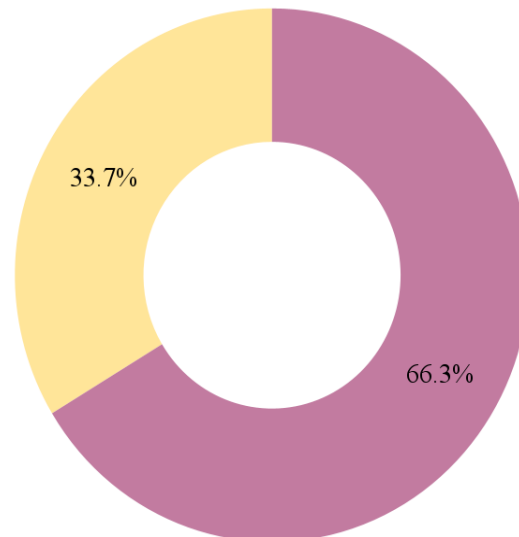
Do you feel you get enough recognition and respect for your daily work?



This was an instrumental question in the study. The women that come from urban areas all have ‘white-collar’ jobs. Almost all of these women answered with a ‘Yes’ when asked if they felt respected and recognised for their daily work. However, the situation was very different with the rural women. These women are *baijis* at my boarding school. Hence, they are responsible for care work such as looking after the girls, cleaning houses and other daily maintenance jobs. These women all answered with a ‘No’ when asked the same question. They all had a common statement to justify their answer- they felt they were treated badly because their job was considered menial and lowly.

Do you feel pressured with both your personal house work and professional work?

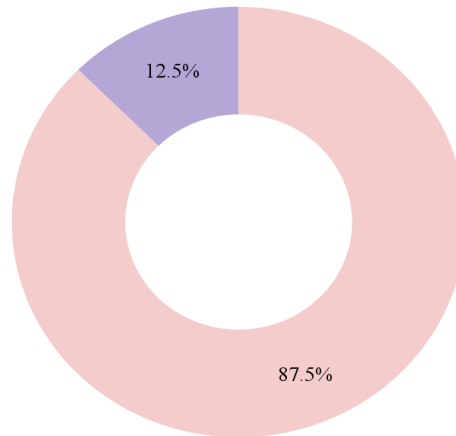
- Yes
- No



This was a crucial question relating to the psychology of these women. The environments they grew up in have major implications for what they think of as ‘pressurizing’. 10 women out of 16 said that they did feel pressurised with managing work both in their homes and their professional lives. On the other hand, 5 of the remaining answered with a ‘No’ and 1 of the women said that her answer would be subjective depending on the situation. What came out in this study was that all of the women who answered with a ‘No’, were from rural backgrounds. I further asked these women if they did not get tired from the day’s work considering all of it was physically and mentally taxing. The common answer was that household is their “duty”, and hence, tired or not, they were *bound* to do it.

Do you consider this household work your duty?

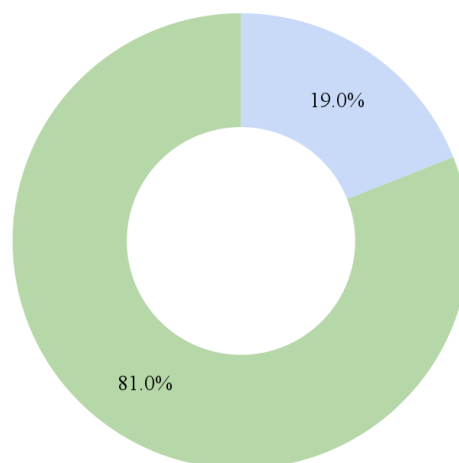
- Yes
- No



This question had a very surprising response. Only 2 of the 16 women said that they did not consider household chores as their duty. On the other hand, a whopping combination of 14 urban and rural women said that they did consider this work as their duty. Not all of these women felt pressurised by these household chores, however, most of them had grown up in environments where they were told that as women, taking care of their own homes was their *duty*. The two women who did not consider this work their duty stated that they had not been bound by anybody to do this work, they had chosen to do it.

Do your male partners/relatives help you in your daily chores?

- Yes
- No



The 3 responses that said yes to the question mentioned above all came from urban, higher-class societies. The remaining women denied having had any help from their male

counterparts/relatives in doing household chores. This showed how women have been unofficially assigned to household chores by society's warped notions and are now forced to bear the burden of this unpaid domestic labour.

The questions above showed how different backgrounds, cultures, upbringing, socioeconomic status and ideologies make so much difference in women's economic situation today. These questions sought to prove a variety of statements made in the paper. From recognition and undue pressure to *duties* and help received in daily examples of domestic labour, this interview gave new meaning to the Research Paper and helped achieve the purpose of proving the problem at hand as a *real* global problem.

### **The Marginalisation of Women's Domestic Labour in India:**

It is almost presumed that only women should handle certain household tasks in the traditional Indian household. A broader definition would also include the countless hours of emotional labour required to maintain families and put up with patriarchal notions of what women are expected to endure and deserve. These chores can include household maintenance, cooking, cleaning, and childcare.

However, regardless of the number of hours spent in a day, that women devote to this domestic labour, the work is sometimes brushed off as a series of daily errands and is not taken into account in either the GDP or the employment statistics. Since the work done at home doesn't always materialize in goods and services for the market, economists frequently exclude it from their calculations, which has the effect of treating a significant percentage of the work performed by women in India as a duty rather than as labour.

The following has been said by the World Economic Forum (WEF):

"While much of this imbalance is explained by the discrepancy in caregiving and unpaid work, institutional and policy inertia, outdated organisational structures and discrimination, one additional explanatory factor is the skills differentials in the types of degrees women and men seek out in their education."

This trend is most apparent in India, where women devote 352 minutes a day to domestic duties while men devote only 51.8. Even though this might not seem like an issue to the average person, the fact that 49% of women in a nation with 1.3 billion people don't have their labour counted in the annual GDP raises several issues.

The WEF has also noted that the proportion of "unpaid work per day is far higher for women than men globally, while in the case of India on average 66 per cent of women's work is unpaid."

Even though 159.9 million women reported that "household work" was their primary occupation, according to the 2011 Census, those who perform household tasks have been classified as non-workers. The International Monetary Fund also stated in a report that India's GDP could increase by 27% if women's economic engagement was increased to mirror that of men.

These facts show just how important this unpaid domestic labour is. It can add an unthinkable amount of value to India's GDP is included in it.

### **The Benefits of Recognising Unpaid Labour:**

Recognizing domestic and other unpaid work as real work has an obvious economic benefit. According to estimates, women perform unpaid domestic and caregiving work worth 13% of the global GDP. However, the value of this work in India is a staggering 39% of its current GDP. This implies that a significant portion of India's economic capacity is not even taken into account when calculating its GDP. However, there are advantages to recognising unpaid labour that goes beyond just financial gain. It has many social implications too.

It is undeniable that India has taken steps toward recognising women's labour with schemes such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), 2005. This proved to be the first step in combating the issue of unpaid and underpaid agricultural employment and empowering rural women. We are still a long way from considering domestic work to be legitimate employment, though.

What is to be remembered is that just shrugging off the idea of unpaid domestic labour does not equal the empowerment of women shouldering this work. When women step out of the house to work professional, **paid** jobs, the question of "who will shoulder household work" arises. Domestic labour is still gendered at the end of the day, and women end up shouldering all of its responsibility again. If they refuse to do so, ideas such as these women being irresponsible, incompetent or having 'different' priorities are pinned on them.

The fact is that equal opportunity in work cannot be just about increasing wages for women or providing them with increased opportunities to make part of the workforce. The answer lies in redefining the very roots of the current patriarchal definition of *work*. Domestic labour needs to be un-gendered and recognised and the GDP and other such parameters need to become mindful and inclusive of this work. Not only will this make such statistics more accurate, but it will also get women their due share of respect, rights and better living conditions.

One of the most important steps toward empowerment is recognition. For more than 150 million women in the nation, the recognition of their primary occupation as real work—work that



benefits both the family and the nation as a whole—gives them a claim to equality within the patriarchal Indian household, which only acknowledges the work done by men.

Second, it helps us develop a more comprehensive understanding of labour that isn't just focused on the price at which a good or service is sold on the open market and it acknowledges a particularly close-knit type of labour that has proven crucial to maintaining the health and well-being of families as a whole.

Third, this unpaid domestic work sector, which is almost entirely dominated by women, can be one where women can demand some level of equity in terms of the time and energy invested in it once it is recognised as employment. The foundation of this argument is lost without the acceptance of unpaid women's labour as legitimate work, and acceptance becomes essential to the demand for gender equity.

Unpaid domestic labour must be recognised as legitimate to achieve true equality. Then and only then can we anticipate equitable representation of women in the household and the workforce.

### **Conclusion**

This paper was aimed at proving the advantages and immediate *need* of legitimizing women's unpaid domestic labour. Furthermore, this paper explores various notions of gender disparity, this time, not just in the field of unequal wages but in a much wider sense. Including research from interviews conducted personally has helped give the paper a new shape and has given a backbone to the various claims made in this paper. Finally, the paper looks at the need for the inclusion of women's unpaid domestic labour and care work in the nation's GDP, while emphasising the need for the un-gendering of such work. It is up to us to rethink women's *duties* in society, reform them, and then consequently, bring true empowerment to women. An equal wage may look like empowerment and equality on the social level, but it makes very little difference in the personal lives of women. Recognition and inclusion are needed, and they are needed *now*.

Focusing on economics with a view of empowering the women of India, this paper sought to bring together the varied, yet immensely collaborative disciplines of *feminism and economics* into a branch of economics that focuses solely on the issues of women. The title of the paper resulted from this collaboration, '*Feminist Economics*', a branch I hope the world would take forward in the near future.

The simple yet significant fact at the end of this paper is that women's unpaid domestic labour cannot go unrecognised in India any longer. It needs to be given a place on parameters such as

the GDP and other significant statistics, for the benefit of the Indian society at large and most importantly, for the benefit and much-needed empowerment of women.