

Women's Unpaid Care Work - Calls for Better Data

September 25, 2025 • vajiramandravi.com



Unpaid Care Work Latest News

- Experts have urged the government to refine the Time Use Survey to capture whether women's rising unpaid care work is a matter of choice or obligation.

Introduction

- Unpaid care work forms the invisible backbone of economies worldwide, yet it remains undercounted and undervalued.
- In India, women disproportionately shoulder this burden, spending hours daily on household chores, caregiving, and community work that go unrecognised in formal economic indicators like GDP.
- While India conducts a **Time Use Survey** (TUS) to map these patterns, experts argue that it does not fully capture the reasons behind women's engagement in unpaid labour.
- The need for more granular data has become crucial as **female labour force participation rates** (FLFPR) in India remain among the lowest in the world, raising concerns over gender inequality in economic and social outcomes.

Women's Unpaid Care Work in India

- Globally, women spend three times more hours than men on unpaid care work. In India, the gender gap is even more striking.
- According to the 2019 TUS, Indian women spend **4.5 hours daily** on unpaid household and caregiving tasks, compared to just **1.5 hours for men**. Activities include:
 - Cooking, cleaning, and household maintenance.
 - Caring for children, elderly, and sick family members.
 - Community-related unpaid services, such as water collection.
 - While vital, these activities are excluded from GDP accounting, thereby undervaluing women's economic contributions.
- This unpaid work also constrains women's access to education, skill development, and formal employment, creating a vicious cycle of economic dependency.
- **Impact on Female Labour Force Participation**
 - India's female labour force participation rate hovers around **23% (PLFS 2022-23)**, far lower than global averages and peers like China (61%) and Bangladesh (38%).
 - A significant factor behind this gap is the disproportionate unpaid care burden on women.
 - The absence of institutional support, such as affordable childcare, elderly care infrastructure, and flexible work arrangements, worsens the problem.

Limitations of the Time Use Survey

- The **National Sample Survey Office (NSSO)** conducted India's first TUS in 1998-99, followed by the second in 2019.
- While the survey captures the number of hours men and women spend on paid and unpaid activities, experts argue it falls short in answering critical questions:
 - **Choice vs. Compulsion:** Are women engaging in unpaid care work voluntarily, or because societal and economic pressures leave them with no option?
 - **Quality of Work:** Does unpaid care work affect women's health, aspirations, and capacity to enter paid employment?
 - **Policy Integration:** How can the findings be used to design childcare schemes, flexible employment policies, and social security?
- Without capturing these nuances, the TUS risks portraying unpaid labour as an accepted "choice" rather than an economic compulsion rooted in gender norms.

Expert Recommendations for Improvement

- Several labour economists, gender experts, and social researchers have called for reforms in how India measures unpaid care work:
- **Refined Survey Methodology**
 - Introduce qualitative questions on whether women see unpaid care work as a duty or a choice.

- Capture intergenerational differences, as younger women may perceive unpaid labour differently than older cohorts.
- **Integration with Labour Statistics**
 - Link TUS data with the **Periodic Labour Force Survey** (PLFS) to better understand how unpaid care work affects employment trends.
- **Policy-Oriented Use of Data**
 - Use findings to strengthen schemes like the **Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY)** and **Anganwadi services**, ensuring women get institutional support for care responsibilities.
- **Recognition in GDP Accounting**
 - Explore satellite accounts or alternative GDP frameworks that assign economic value to unpaid care work.

Source: IE

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/womens-unpaid-care-work/>

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