



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 21
Issue 2 *Articles from the 5th World Conference
on Women's Studies, Bangkok, Thailand*

Article 4

April 2020

Making Women's Unpaid Care Work Visible in India: Importance and Challenges

Gulfam Tasnim
Jawaharlal Nehru University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>

 Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tasnim, Gulfam (2020). Making Women's Unpaid Care Work Visible in India: Importance and Challenges. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(2), 28-35.
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss2/4>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Making Women's Unpaid Care Work Visible in India: Importance and Challenges

By Gulfam Tasnim¹

Abstract

From the 1970s onward, the work performed by women within the household was critically examined, and a feminist critique of Marx emerged. The critique was first developed in the Campaign for Wages for Housework, founded in 1972, by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James and other renowned feminists. A major contribution of this critique was to highlight women's domestic labor in the process of capital accumulation, an issue which Marx did not address. This movement therefore sought to make visible women's work which was naturalized into nonexistence by capitalism. This problem of visibility exists all over the world, and women continue to bear the brunt of unpaid care work; they are perceived as "natural" caregivers and shunned for seeking paid care services. Although this phenomenon is common all over the world, this paper will deal with the importance of making women's unpaid work visible in India, as India is a developing country and more people tend to engage in unpaid subsistence work (production for self-consumption, unpaid work in family enterprises and care related work) in developing countries compared to wealthier countries. Portraying the importance and challenges of making women's unpaid care work visible in India can trigger economic and social development of the country. This paper aims to put forward the value of women's unpaid care work in India, and to pinpoint the obstacles that stand in the way of exposing their unpaid contributions. Considering the context of India this paper will examine the following questions:

1. Why is it important to make unpaid care work visible?
2. What are the challenges of making unpaid care work visible?

The questions mentioned above will be answered by looking at suitable literature so that theoretical and methodological issues that have emerged can be brought forward and the problems and recommendations can be grasped to arrive at a conclusion.

Keywords: Unpaid Care Work, Value, Women's Work, Women's Care Work, Women in India, India, Marxist Feminism

Introduction

Women all over the world spend more time on unpaid care work than men. Unpaid care work is vital for the functioning of the economy. Despite this, it is still referred to as non-economic labor according to the classification provided by the United Nations System of National Accounts of 1993 (UN-SNA), and remains invisible in mainstream economics. According to the United Nations System of National Accounts of 1993 (UN-SNA), unpaid economic activities include creation of fixed assets for household utilization; production for subsistence; collection of everyday necessities (water, fuel etc.) from common or private lands; collection of raw materials

¹ Gulfam Tasnim has worked at several NGOs that focus on Women's Rights and Gender Equity. Currently she is pursuing a master's degree in Labour and Development Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). Email: gulfamtasnim@gmail.com

for income generating activities and activities such as unremunerated family work that yields products for the market. On the other hand, shopping, cooking, caring for children, volunteer work for community services etc. are classified by the System as non-economic. In developing countries more people engage in unpaid work than in developed ones (Antonopoulos and Hirway, 2010). Majority of women in developing countries have no option but to perform both unpaid economic work such as fetching water, fuel etc. as well as unpaid non-economic work including cooking, caring for the elderly, disabled etc., (here the definitions of unpaid economic and non-economic work are according to UN-SNA 1993 classification) as public infrastructure fails to provide for basic needs, and also because the poor do not have the ability to pay for privatized services such as child care, elder care, etc. Women in developing countries therefore, suffer from role strain and severe time constraints: they have to take on a number of roles which exert pressure on them and increase the probability of adverse mental health affects (Goode, 1960). They also have very limited to no time for self-development, which leads to chronic poverty. Since these women are burdened with unpaid work, which is not recognized, it is important to pay attention to their unpaid contributions and overcome challenges that stand in the way of making their unpaid work visible.

Select Literature Review

Nancy Fraser in the essay “Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproduction Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism” (Fraser, 2017) explains that capitalism globally underestimates social reproduction, leading to crisis of care which stems from the broader crisis of social reproduction. She explains the process by which the current form of capitalism (financialized capitalism)² has created a dualized system of social reproduction that affects women in Global South adversely. Shahra Razavi and Silke Staab in the introductory chapter of the book *Global Variations in the Political and Social Economy of Care* (Razavi and Staab, 2012), also describe the current care arrangement which is beneficial for the well-off but disadvantageous for the poor.

The chapters “Unpaid Work and the Economy” and “Understanding Poverty Insights Emerging from Time Use of the Poor” in the book *Unpaid Work and the Economy: Gender, Time Use and Poverty in Developing Countries* (Antonopoulos and Hirway, 2010) explain why women in developing countries bear an excessive burden of total work and how this issue can be addressed. The chapter by Solita Collas-Monsod titled “Removing the Cloak of Invisibility: Integrating Unpaid Household Services in National Economic Accounts – the Philippines Experience” in the same book highlights the role played by UN-SNA in hiding women’s economic contributions and explores the ways of integrating these contributions in national income accounts.

Indira Hirway in the article “Missing Labour Force: An Explanation” (Hirway, 2012) explains the limitations of NSSO surveys in India and suggests complementing NSSO survey data with Time Use (TU) data. Indira Hirway in another article titled “Mainstreaming statistical surveys in national statistical system in India” explains the usefulness of Time Use Surveys (TUS) in facilitating the design of gender equal policies.

Neetha N. in the article titled “Estimating Unpaid Care Work: Methodological Issues in Time Use Surveys” (Neetha, 2010) discusses the limitations in design, scope and methodology of

² Financialized capitalism of the present era promotes state and corporate disinvestment from social welfare, while recruiting women into the paid workforce, externalizing carework onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it.

TUS in the context of India and highlights the issues that are significant in capturing unpaid care work.

Jayati Ghosh in the book *Never Done and Poorly Paid* (Ghosh, 2009) points out the harsh realities that women in the Indian subcontinent face due to the interaction between structural and conjunctural forces which tend to strengthen patriarchy.

Therefore, much work has been done, which focuses on the importance of making unpaid care work visible and the challenges that stand in the way of achieving this goal. This paper will make use of existing literature to present the schools of thought regarding the importance of unpaid care work as well as connect and highlight the key problems and recommendations put forward by scholars in regard to making unpaid care work visible. The thoughts, problems and recommendations will be used to understand the situation of unpaid care work in India.

Problem Statement

It was not until the 1970s that the work performed by women within the household was critically examined and a feminist critique of Marx emerged (Federici, 2012). The critique was first developed in the Campaign for Wages for Housework by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Leopoldina Fortunati and others, initiated in 1972. A major contribution of this critique was to put forward that although Marx highlighted the role of labor power in capitalist production process, he did not address the issue of women's domestic labor in the process of capital accumulation. Marx identified value producing work with commodity production which meant that his work could not capture the full extent of capitalist exploitation of labor and the fact that wage created a divide between men and women (Federici, 2012).

Societies globally have long assigned women the role of caregiver. Value systems such as the cult of domesticity, which was prevalent in the US and the UK in the 19th century, and rituals such as Sati, practiced mainly among Hindu women in South Asia, to name a few have played a significant role in fixing the role of women. The cult of domesticity conjectured that women should stay at home, be pious, pure and submissive, Sati, which translates to 'good wife', is a ritual whereby the widow has selflessly to sacrifice her life by sitting atop her deceased husband's funeral pyre³. Well-known philosophers such as Kant and Aristotle have also depicted women as inferior to men and have indicated that women are best suited as homemakers. Patriarchy combined with capitalism has created the impression that the female physique and personality are suited for housework and has also devalued this housework by not recognizing it as work but as a natural attribute of women. The Wages for Housework movement was revolutionary as it attempted to revolt against capital's as well as patriarchy's plan for women. Demanding wages for housework was thus revolting against the plan for women. This movement therefore sought to make visible women's work which was naturalized into nonexistence. Federici wonderfully articulates that if women start demanding wages for the housework that they perform then the fact that housework is equivalent to money for capital will be revealed (Federici, 2012). The movement was not only a movement of white middle class women, Black women played an important part in initiating the first women's liberation movement in the United States. The first campaign for state-funded "wages for housework" was in the guise of Aid to Dependent Children (Aid to Dependent Children program was created by the Social Security Act, and was in effect from 1935 to 1996) and was led by Welfare Mothers Movement, the economic significance of women's reproductive labor was put forward in this movement and "welfare" was declared a women's right (Federici, 2012).

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sati> (see this link for a general summary of the practice of sati).

Therefore, feminists have clearly put forward the importance of making unpaid care work visible. Although the importance of making unpaid care work visible exists worldwide, this paper will focus only on India as the unpaid work that women in India perform without recognition has implications on the development of India. Women in developing countries such as India end up allocating most of their time in unpaid work, which is harmful to their well-being and leaves little or no time for them to develop their human capabilities by engaging in activities such as studying, skill training etc. which stagnates overall economic development. My paper addresses broadly how the United Nations has failed to realize the objective of the Wages for Housework movement and how this has become a major challenge in making women's unpaid care work visible especially in developing countries such as India. More specifically my paper deals with why it is important to make women's unpaid care work visible in India and what the obstacles are that stand in the way of exposing the unpaid contribution of women in India.

The Importance of Making Women's Unpaid Care Work Visible

Nancy Fraser (2017) points out that social reproduction is not receiving the importance that it deserves. She points out that capitalism has given rise to a general crisis and one branch of this crisis is social reproduction while the other branches are economic, ecological and political, all these branches intersect with each other. She points out that in recent times the focus has been on the economic and ecological branches leaving social reproduction in the background. This according to Fraser is problematic as the general crisis can only be solved if all the branches receive adequate attention.

The crisis of care according to Fraser stems from the broader crisis of social reproduction. Fraser points out that the current phase of capitalism is encouraging state and corporate disinvestment from social welfare while simultaneously employing women in paid workforce. Therefore, this form of capitalism has successfully externalized care work onto families and communities while reducing their ability to perform it. This has resulted in a dualized system of social reproduction that is commodified for those who can pay for it and privatized for those who cannot. The point that Nancy Fraser makes in this essay has implications for developing countries: this dualized system of social reproduction implies that women from poor regions migrate to sell their care work to privileged women, thereby transferring their familial and community responsibilities to other still poorer caregivers. Razavi and Staab (2012) also describe the trend, whereby care arrangements are influenced by broader processes of change in national and global political economies. This leads poor women to migrate so that they can sell their care work in private homes and public institutions to wealthy families in developed countries. It's important to note that migration isn't only from developing to developed, countries; migration also occurs within India and throughout the developing world, it is common for wealthier women to have their clothes washed, their children looked after by, their meals prepared etc. by hiring women who belong to lower class, caste and also women belonging to minority groups. The well-off are therefore able to satisfy their care needs by hiring underprivileged women but the underprivileged women who migrate have no other option but to transfer their familial and community responsibilities to other poorer family members. The above facts indicate that the burden of unpaid care work falls on the poorest section of society in developing countries.

Indira Hirway and Rania Antonopoulos in the chapter "Unpaid Work and the Economy" in the book *Unpaid Work and the Economy: Gender, Time Use and Poverty in Developing Countries* (Antonopoulos and Hirway, 2010) point out that the stage of economic development is

an important factor influencing the number of people engaged in unpaid work. In the chapter “Understanding Poverty: Insights Emerging from Time Use of the Poor” of the same book Indira Hirway explains that majority of women in developing countries bear a greater burden of total work as they have to perform care work as well as subsistence work. According to Hirway women in developing countries are burdened with unpaid work as they have to depend on low level of technology, they cannot afford to hire servants and the public provisioning of basic necessities is not satisfactory. This means that women in developing countries have less time and energy for performing paid work, less time for developing their capabilities, suffer from reduced level of well-being and tend to engage their children in unpaid work as they themselves cannot cope with it leading to the reproduction of poverty. The points above suggest that women in developing countries such as India will benefit greatly if their unpaid care work is made visible, as the recognition of this unpaid labor by policymakers will eventually make it possible to incorporate unpaid labor into the country’s national accounts.

Hirway is an advocate of Time Use Surveys; and, according to her the NSSO surveys in India do not have the ability to estimate the labor force correctly due to its classification of categories. The people who fall under the categories 92 (attended domestic duties only) and 93 (attended domestic duties and were also engaged in free collection of goods such as vegetables, roots, firewood, cattle feed, etc., and sewing, tailoring, weaving, etc.) are treated as “non-workers” and are assumed to be outside the labor force, meaning that a lot of women remain missing from the labor force (Hirway, 2012). Hirway suggests complementing NSSO survey data with TU data, which will offer a clearer picture of the female labor force. It will also facilitate capturing unpaid care work, as TU data provides in-depth information on time distribution of people between paid and unpaid activities. Hirway contends that making care work visible through Time Use Surveys in India will enable design of policies for gender equality (Hirway, 2009).

The Challenges of Making Unpaid Care Work Visible

TUS have been conducted in India, the 1998-99 TUS was a standalone survey undertaken by the Central Statistical Organization (CSO). The survey was undertaken in six states: Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Orissa and Meghalaya. The survey covered 18,628 households and 77,593 people (Hirway, 2010). The households were selected through stratified random sampling. According to Neetha N. (2010) the survey was however more oriented towards improving statistics on labor use and national income and therefore unpaid care work was not prioritized as much as it should have been. Data was collected on the following: activities which were for the market but not captured by conventional surveys, due to conceptual and methodological issues leading to gaps in labor force and/or national income accounts; activities which were economic but non-market oriented and were covered under the production boundary according to 1993 SNA classification, such as production for subsistence; non-market oriented activities which fall under the extended production boundary according to 1993-SNA classification and includes unpaid care work (related to domestic as well as voluntary services); and personal care and leisure time. However, the data collection agencies focused more on the market-oriented activities so non-market activities received secondary importance. Although the non-market activities were recorded, the visibility issue faced difficulty due to the non-comparability of the TU data with other labor force data.

TUS can be of 2 types. One takes the form of interviews also known as stylized approach where respondents are given a pre-defined list of activities and are asked to articulate the amount

of time they spend on each activity over a given period. The other type of TUS follows a diary approach where respondents articulate their activities at different times over a specified period in their own words and these activities are then postcoded. The TUS in 98-99 followed the stylized interview approach, information was collected through three sets of schedules: household characteristics, individual characteristics and the time disposition of selected individuals. The interview approach is more suited to collecting paid economic activities not unpaid activity as unpaid activity is not performed continuously. Pre-defined activities set limitations to understanding unpaid work as unpaid work can be quite diverse.

The CSO survey took into account seasonality and was conducted over a one-year period. The investigators had to collect data from each village within 9 days. The first two days were spent in house listing and household selection, and the third day was used to collect information about the type of days for individuals in selected households. Over the reference week information was collected for any one of the normal days and a weekly variant day, one day recall method was used to record data. However, the quality of data is questionable as the investigators had to extract information from a large number of respondents on a particular day.

The activity classification was also an important factor, 176 activities were incorporated into 9 major groups and 16 two-digit subgroups. However, the activities classified were different from the classification developed by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), which meant that comparison with international surveys was difficult.

The results showed that men in both urban and rural areas spent more time on only SNA work than women. Women spent significant proportions of the day on unpaid care work. The male-female gap in terms of unpaid care work was sharp, irrespective of rural/urban or interstate difference. Neetha N. points out that unpaid care work may have been underreported by women as many women do not consider these activities important enough to be reported.

Although Neetha N. has put forward the limitations in design, scope, and methodology of TUS in India, the main problem that revolves around the visibility of unpaid care work is the narrow classification provided by UN-SNA 1993. Since 1975, the UN system has shown concern and has taken initiatives for valuing and measuring women's unpaid work. These initiatives, however, are not meeting their desired objectives due to the statistics division. The UN System of National Accounts has been revised three times, first in 1953, then in 1968 and 1993 respectively. In 1993 the revision rendered former unpaid work such as subsistence production, creation of fixed assets for household utilization, gathering water, fuel etc. and other such activities within the SNA production boundary. However, unpaid household activities, do-it-yourself activities, voluntary work, and the services of consumer durables still fell outside and continue to fall outside the SNA production boundary. Solita Collas-Monsod (2010) points out that SNA has covered the economic contributions of women with a cloak of invisibility by using narrow, erroneous definitions and concepts. The reasons given by SNA for not including activities such as cleaning, meal preparation, caring for children and elderly is that the nonmonetary nature of these activities would obscure market activities, would make it difficult to define unemployment, another major reason SNA puts forward is that obtaining market prices for these types of activities is inconvenient. According to Solita Collas-Monsod (2010) the SNA only considers market activities as economic activities which is highly erroneous as it renders producers of non-market activities mostly women as economically inactive whereas their contributions facilitate the participation of their husbands and children in the economy as producers and consumers.

In 1993 the use of satellite accounts was recommended by the UN-SNA for including Non-SNA unpaid work (such as childcare, cooking, shopping etc.) that can be linked to but separate

from SNA accounts, but this is problematic as it downgrades women's contribution to GDP to a secondary position, which violates gender equality.

Solita Collas-Monsod (2010) suggests ways of eliminating the cloak of invisibility that SNA has wrapped around the economic contributions of women, firstly by incorporating TUS in regular household surveys, secondly using time-use data to generate monetary measures of the value of nonmarket production so that nonmarket production can be integrated into GDP figures, in the current context through the use of satellite accounts, thirdly creating satellite accounts and institutionalizing them and then finally fully incorporating unpaid labor into the country's national accounts. However, all of these seem far-fetched in the context of Indian patriarchy, which continues to dominate public policy. Despite the effort from Indian feminists to make unpaid care work visible, there is still lack of demand from policymakers as they do not understand how to utilize the concerned statistics for more effective decision-making. The realities that Indian women face are put forward by Jayati Ghosh in the book *Never Done and Poorly Paid*, she points out that in the Indian subcontinent social and economic practices tend to nourish patriarchy even as public policy is officially oriented towards reducing it.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clear that making unpaid care work visible is easier said than done. Despite the recommendations by researchers and scholars from India and beyond, more effort is needed from the U.N. and other international human rights institutions to think about how to operationalize already known data—patriarchal institutions, male leaders, and too often, elite women, need to be made to understand the importance of making women's unpaid care work visible. Although scholars have recommended TUS as a tool to make visible unpaid care work, it is of importance to note that the measurement aspect dominates TUS which might not lead to a true understanding of care work which is complex. Further Solita Collas Monsod (2010) has pointed out that the national accounting system was based on a model of an advanced industrial economy in which transactions in money are dominant, this sheds light on why developing countries are losers in terms of making women's unpaid care work visible.

The United Nations intervened in the field of feminist politics as the sponsor of women's rights, beginning with the Global Conference on women held in Mexico City in 1975, when it took charge of promoting women's rights at a global level. However, in the process the politics of women's liberation were shaped according to the requirements of international capital and the developing neoliberal agenda (Federici, 2012). All attempts to make unpaid care work visible will fail if classification provided by UN SNA 1993 is used as it renders the economic contribution of women as non-economic; hence, women need to understand the value of their own labor and policymakers need to perceive the benefits of incorporating women's unpaid contributions into a country's national accounts.

References

- Antonopoulos, R. & Hirway, I. (2010). Unpaid Work and the Economy. In R. Antonopoulos & I. Hirway (Eds.), *Unpaid Work and the Economy: Gender, Time Use and Poverty in Developing Countries* (pp.1-14). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Collas-Monsod, S. (2010). Removing the Cloak of invisibility: integrating unpaid household services in national economic accounts—the Philippines experience. In R. Antonopoulos & I. Hirway (Eds.), *Unpaid Work and the Economy: Gender, Time Use and Poverty in Developing Countries* (pp.230-248). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Federici, S. (2012). *Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*. PM Press.
- Fraser, N. (2017). Crisis of care? On the social-reproductive contradictions of contemporary capitalism. *Social Reproduction Theory*, 23.
- Ghosh, J. (2009). *Never done and poorly paid: Women's work in globalising India*. Women's Unlimited.
- Goode, W. J. (1960). A theory of role strain. *American sociological review*, 483-496.
- Hirway, I. (2009). Mainstreaming time use surveys in national statistical system in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(49), 56-65.
- Hirway, I. (2010). Understanding Poverty: Insights Emerging from Time Use of the Poor. In R. Antonopoulos & I. Hirway (Eds.), *Unpaid Work and the Economy: Gender, Time Use and Poverty in Developing Countries* (pp.22-51). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hirway, I. (2012). Missing labor force: An explanation. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47 (37), 67-72.
- Neetha, N. (2010). Estimating unpaid care work: Methodological issues in time use surveys. *Economic and political Weekly*, 45(44), 73-80.
- Razavi, S., & Staab, S. (Eds.). (2012). *Global variations in the political and social economy of care: Worlds apart* (Vol. 8). Routledge.