

HOW TO TREAT UNPAID WORK

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Women - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

Even if a woman waives off the due amount as her own decision, she can do that with respect and honour and will have the proof of her financial contribution. | Photo Credit: [Getty Images/iStockphoto](#)

Women everywhere [carry a disproportionately higher burden of unpaid work](#), namely, unpaid domestic services as well as unpaid care of children, the old and the disabled for their respective households. Though this work contributes to overall well-being at the household level and collectively at the national level, it is invisible in the national database and particularly in national policies.

This work is repetitive, boring and frequently drudgery — a 24-hour job without remuneration, promotions or retirement benefits. It restricts opportunities for women in the economy and in life. Women do this job not necessarily because they like it or are efficient in it, but because it is imposed on them by patriarchal norms, which are the roots of all pervasive gender inequalities. This unequal division of unpaid work between women and men is unfair and unjust and it deprives women of equal opportunities as men.

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For political parties to recognise this work is a positive development, and the demand for wages for housewives has emerged from this concern. However, its implementation may create problems such as affordability of the government and calculation of the amounts. Women may not be eager to enter the labour market. More important, these wages may confirm unpaid work as women's work only, which would deny opportunities to women in the wider world. Payment of pension to old women (60+ years) may be a better idea to compensate them for their unpaid work.

What governments could do is recognise this unpaid work in the national database by a sound time-use survey and use the data in national policies. Also, they could relieve women's burden of unpaid work by improving technology (e.g. better fuel for cooking), better infrastructure (e.g. water at the doorstep), shifting some unpaid work to the mainstream economy (e.g. childcare, care of the disabled, and care of the chronically sick), and by making basic services (e.g. health and transportation) accessible to women. Also, they could redistribute the work between men and women by providing different incentives and disincentives to men (e.g. mandatory training of men in housework, childcare, etc.) and financial incentives for sharing housework. These measures will give free time to women and open up new opportunities to them.

What is critical is to understand the linkages between unpaid work and the economy. The household produces goods and services for its members, and if GDP is a measure of the total production and consumption of the economy, it has to incorporate this work by accepting the household as a sector of the economy.

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At the macro level, unpaid work subsidises the private sector by providing it a generation of workers (human capital) and takes care of wear and tear of labour who are family members. The private sector would have paid much higher wages and earned lower profits in the absence of

unpaid work. Unpaid work also subsidises the government by taking care of the old, sick and the disabled. The state would have spent huge amounts in the absence of unpaid work. Unpaid work is a privately produced public good which is critical for the sustenance of the mainstream economy. This work, therefore, needs to be integrated with the mainstream economy and policies. It will be up to public policies then to improve the productivity of unpaid workers, reduce their burden, and tap their potential in development, as the household could also be an important economic sector.

By excluding this work from the economy, macroeconomics shows a clear male bias. It is not surprising that many economists call economics “a wrongly conceived discipline” that is narrow, partial and truncated. There is an urgent need to expand the purview of economics not only for gender justice but mainly for moving towards a realistic economics.

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

END

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