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WOMEN AND DOMESTIC WORK IN INDIA: HIDDEN LABOUR, EVERYDAY CHALLENGES AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

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ABSTRACT

Domestic work is essential to the well-being of households and to the functioning of the wider economy, yet it remains undervalued because it is widely treated as women's natural responsibility rather than as labour. This paper examines two connected forms of domestic work in India: unpaid household and care work performed by women in their own homes, and paid domestic work performed in the homes of others. Using a qualitative, analytical review of national time-use statistics, International Labour Organization reports, recent legal developments and sociological research, it analyses the gender norms, economic inequalities and employment conditions that shape women's experiences in both settings. Time Use Survey data show that in 2024, 81.5 per cent of women aged six and above performed unpaid domestic services on a given day, compared with 27.1 per cent of men, and that participating women spent 289 minutes a day on these tasks against 88 minutes for men, a gap that has barely narrowed since 2019. Studies of paid domestic workers document widespread informality, the absence of written contracts and social security, harassment and caste-based discrimination. Drawing on feminist theories of social reproduction and the "5R" framework for care work, the paper argues that women face a double burden of unpaid work at home and poorly protected paid work. It concludes that recognising domestic work as work, reducing its drudgery through public services, redistributing it within households, and ensuring fair rewards and representation for paid domestic workers are central to gender equality and social justice.

Keywords: Women, Domestic Work, Unpaid Care Work, Domestic Workers, Time Use, Informal Employment, Gender Inequality, India

INTRODUCTION

Domestic work includes cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, collecting water and fuel, caring for children, older people and the sick, and maintaining the household. Some women perform these tasks without pay in their own homes; others are employed as cooks, cleaners, carers or household helpers in other people's homes. Although these forms of work differ in their employment arrangements, both are shaped by the belief that women are naturally responsible for household care.

Domestic work is socially necessary, but much of it is poorly recognised. When performed without pay, it is largely excluded from conventional measures of economic output. When performed for wages, it is frequently placed at the lower end of the occupational hierarchy and, in India, is also marked by caste and class. Globally, women perform 76.2 per cent of all unpaid care work, more than three times as much as men International Labour Organization (2018), and 57.7 million of the world's 75.6 million domestic workers are women International Labour Organization (2021).

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This paper examines both forms of domestic work with three objectives: (i) to analyse the extent and distribution of unpaid domestic work in Indian households using recent time-use data; (ii) to examine the conditions of paid domestic workers and the legal framework that governs them; and (iii) to propose measures for recognising and redistributing domestic work and for improving protection for those who perform it for pay.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist sociology has long challenged the view that housework is a private act of love rather than work. Oakley (1974) treated housework as an occupation with its own routines, pressures and dissatisfactions. Hochschild and Machung (1989) showed that employed women in dual-earner households often return home to a "second shift" of domestic labour. Theorists of social reproduction argue that the daily and generational work of sustaining people is a precondition of the market economy, which depends on this work without paying for it Folbre (2001), Fraser (2016).

The policy framework most widely used to address this inequality is the call to *recognise*, *reduce* and *redistribute* unpaid care work Elson (2017). The International Labour Organization. (2018) extended this into a "5R" framework by adding the need to *reward* care workers fairly and to *represent* them through social dialogue and collective organisation. An intersectional perspective is also essential. In India, caste, class, migration and religion shape who performs which domestic tasks, for whom and on what terms (Raghuram, 2001; Ray & Qayum, 2009).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Historical studies show that paid domestic service has long been organised around gender, race and class. Katzman (1978) documented the long hours, isolation and lack of autonomy of domestic servants in industrialising America, and Kessler-Harris (1981) showed that women's work, paid and unpaid, has always been central to economic life even when it was not recognised as such. Lutz (2011) traced how globalisation has created a transnational care economy in which migrant women perform domestic and care work in wealthier households.

In India, Raghuram, (2001) showed how caste-based notions of purity and pollution shaped the organisation of paid domestic work and the allocation of tasks among workers. Ray and Qayum (2009) described "cultures of servitude" in which relationships between employers and domestic workers combine paternalism, dependence and inequality. The contributors to Neetha (2019) edited volume analysed the specific features of paid domestic work, including its location in private homes and the difficulty of regulating it. More recent surveys confirm these patterns. In a study of 524 domestic workers in Ahmedabad and Kolkata, Ghatak and Sarkar (2022) found widespread informality: workers usually lacked written contracts and social security, wages were set through informal bargaining, many worked for several households and government intervention was minimal. Sumalatha et al. (2024) surveyed 600 female domestic workers in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Mizoram and found that most reported poor working conditions, workplace harassment and discrimination. Because these studies cover selected locations, their findings cannot be assumed to represent all domestic workers in India, but they document consistent and serious concerns.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative, analytical design based on secondary sources. These include the National Statistical Office's Time Use Surveys of 2019 and 2024 Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (2020), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (2025); the Periodic Labour Force Survey Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (2026); ILO reports on care work and domestic workers International Labour Organization (2018), International Labour Organization (2021); legal and policy documents, including the Supreme Court's judgment in Ajay Malik v. State of Uttarakhand (2025) and Karnataka's draft Domestic Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Bill, 2025 Government of Karnataka (2025); and peer-reviewed sociological research. The material was analysed thematically using the 5R framework. Time-use surveys record activities over a single reference day and may not capture variation over time or between households, and the field studies cited cover selected locations; these limitations are taken into account in interpreting the findings.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

UNPAID DOMESTIC WORK IN INDIAN HOUSEHOLDS

Unpaid household work supports families and enables other household members to take part in paid employment, education and public life. It is not shared equally. Table 1 compares the results of India's two national Time Use Surveys.

Table 1

Table 1 Participation in and Time Spent on Unpaid Domestic and Care Work, India, 2019 and 2024

Indicator	Women	Men
Participation in unpaid domestic services, age 6+, 2019	81.2%	26.1%
Participation in unpaid domestic services, age 6+, 2024	81.5%	27.1%
Minutes per day per participant, unpaid domestic services, age 6+, 2019	299	97
Minutes per day per participant, unpaid domestic services, age 6+, 2024	289	88
Participation in unpaid caregiving for household members, age 6+, 2024	34.0%	17.9%
Minutes per day per participant, unpaid caregiving, age 6+, 2024	137	75
Minutes per day per participant, unpaid domestic services, age 15–59, 2019 and 2024	315 and 305	–

Sources: MoSPI (2020, 2025).

The data reveal a persistent and substantial gender gap. Women were three times as likely as men to perform unpaid domestic work on a given day, and those who did so spent more than three times as long on it. Between 2019 and 2024 the gap barely narrowed: women's average time fell by only 10 minutes, and men's participation rose by only one percentage point. Women aged 15–59, the years of peak economic activity, who participated spent about five hours a day on unpaid domestic services.

These figures describe reported activity on a single day and do not capture every household's experience, but their implications are clear. A heavy domestic workload reduces the time women have for study, rest, paid employment and community life. It helps explain why women's labour force participation remains much lower than men's: in 2025, the labour force participation rate for persons aged 15 and above was 40.0 per cent for women, compared with 79.1 per cent for men Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (2026). Globally, 606 million working-age women, compared with 41 million men, were outside the labour force in 2018 because of unpaid care responsibilities International Labour Organization (2018). The burden is also shaped by infrastructure: where households lack piped water, clean cooking fuel, accessible transport or childcare, women's domestic workload is heavier.

The gendered division of domestic work is also reproduced across generations. Because the Time Use Survey covers everyone aged six and above, its figures include girls who take on cooking, cleaning and the care of younger siblings while still at school. Early socialisation into domestic responsibility teaches both girls and boys that such work is "naturally" female, and it can reduce the time girls have for study and play. Time-use data are therefore important not only for measuring inequality but also for making visible the contribution of unpaid work, which national accounts largely ignore even though it sustains every other form of economic activity.

PAID DOMESTIC WORK AND ITS CONDITIONS

Paid domestic workers provide indispensable services to households. Many are women who work in several homes, sweeping, washing, cooking and caring for children or older people; some live in their employer's home, while others travel between workplaces. Estimates of the size of India's domestic workforce vary widely, because much of the work is part-time, informal and unregistered. Globally, the International Labour Organization (2021) found that more than 60 million domestic workers were in informal employment and that 36 per cent were wholly excluded from labour laws.

Domestic work takes place in private homes, where hours, duties and expectations are negotiated informally and where the employer's authority is difficult to challenge. The studies reviewed above document the consequences: the absence of written contracts, wages fixed by informal bargaining, lack of social security, harassment and discrimination Ghatak and Sarkar (2022), Sumalatha et al. (2024). Caste further structures the sector. Tasks regarded as "polluting", such as cleaning toilets, are often assigned to workers from historically stigmatised castes, while practices such as separate utensils or restrictions on entering the kitchen reproduce caste hierarchies inside the employer's home Raghuram (2001), Ray and Qayum (2009). Workers' experiences also vary with the type of work, the employer relationship, migration history and social background, so a single policy approach may not fit all.

THE LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

India's legal protection for domestic workers remains fragmented. India supported the adoption of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), which recognises domestic workers' right to decent working conditions, but has not ratified it. Domestic

workers were included in the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008, now subsumed in the Code on Social Security, 2020, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 explicitly covers them through district-level Local Committees. Since 21 November 2025, the four labour codes, including the Code on Social Security, have been in force, providing a framework for registering unorganised workers and extending social security schemes to them. Several States have included domestic work in their minimum wage schedules, and Tamil Nadu has a welfare board for domestic workers.

Judicial and State action has recently gained momentum. In Ajay Malik v. State of Uttarakhand. (2025), the Supreme Court observed that domestic workers in India lack effective legal protection and directed the Union Ministries of Labour and Employment, Social Justice and Empowerment, Women and Child Development, and Law and Justice to constitute an expert committee to consider a legal framework for their protection and regulation. In 2025, Karnataka released a draft Domestic Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Bill that proposes the registration of workers, employers and placement agencies; written agreements; minimum wages and overtime pay; a 48-hour weekly limit; weekly holidays; a tripartite welfare board funded partly by an employer contribution of up to 5 per cent of wages; and district grievance committees Government of Karnataka (2025). These developments show growing recognition that domestic work requires specific regulation, but their value will depend on implementation and on workers' ability to use the protections in practice.

THE DOUBLE BURDEN AND INTERSECTING INEQUALITIES

The two forms of domestic work are connected. Many paid domestic workers return home to perform unpaid domestic work in their own households, carrying a double burden that leaves little time for rest, health care or collective organisation. At the same time, the employment of domestic workers by middle-class households allows some women to reduce their own unpaid work without challenging the gendered division of labour, so that domestic work is redistributed between women of different classes and castes rather than between women and men Ray and Qayum (2009). Low social recognition links both forms: unpaid work is described as a woman's "duty" and paid domestic work as "unskilled", language that obscures the skill, time and physical effort involved in caring for people and maintaining a home.

ORGANISING AND COLLECTIVE VOICE

Domestic workers are difficult to organise because they work alone, in separate homes, often for several employers and without a common workplace. Nevertheless, organisations such as the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and domestic workers' unions in a number of Indian cities have campaigned for minimum wages, weekly holidays, identity cards and inclusion in welfare schemes. Such organising matters for two reasons. First, it converts private grievances into public demands that governments and courts can recognise. Second, it gives workers a collective presence in negotiations with employers and in the design of welfare boards and grievance committees. In the terms of the 5R framework, representation is the condition that makes the other four Rs sustainable, because rights that workers cannot claim collectively are rarely enforced in practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS: APPLYING THE 5R FRAMEWORK

The analysis points to five sets of measures, corresponding to the 5R framework:

1) **Recognise.** Unpaid domestic work should be acknowledged as a contribution to family and social well-being and measured regularly through time-use surveys whose results inform policy. Paid domestic work should be recognised in law as work.
2) **Reduce.** Public investment in piped water, sanitation, clean cooking fuel, accessible transport, childcare and elder care can reduce the drudgery and time involved in domestic responsibilities.
3) **Redistribute.** Household tasks and care responsibilities should be shared more equally. Schools, the media and families can encourage boys and men to take part in cooking, cleaning and caregiving, and workplaces can support men's care roles.
4) **Reward.** Paid domestic workers should have written agreements on duties, wages, working hours, rest periods and leave; minimum wages; and access to social security under the Code on Social Security, 2020 and State welfare schemes.
5) **Represent.** Domestic workers' unions and organisations should be supported and included in policy-making and grievance mechanisms, and accessible channels should exist for workers to seek advice and report harassment. A national legal framework, as contemplated by the Supreme Court, and ratification of ILO Convention No. 189 would strengthen these protections.

CONCLUSION

Domestic work is indispensable, but the women who perform it often receive inadequate recognition, protection and control over their time. Time-use data show that Indian women continue to carry most unpaid domestic and care work, with little change between 2019 and 2024. Paid domestic workers, meanwhile, face low status, informality, insecurity and unfair treatment, shaped by

caste and class as well as gender. Both forms of work are linked by persistent expectations that place responsibility for care and household maintenance primarily on women.

A fairer society requires more than praise for women's contribution. It requires sharing unpaid work, reducing its drudgery through public services, improving conditions for paid domestic workers and ensuring that legal protections are accessible in practice. Recent judicial and legislative initiatives offer an opportunity to do so. Future research should combine time-use analysis with field studies of domestic workers in smaller towns and rural areas, which remain under-studied. Recognising domestic work as real work is an essential step towards gender equality and social justice.

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