

From Invisibility to Recognition: Women's Unpaid Labour, Social Inequality, and Environmental Justice in India

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Abstract

Women's unpaid labor in India—encompassing domestic chores, caregiving, subsistence farming, and ecological resource collection—forms a significant yet unrecognised component of the economy. Despite women contributing over 289 minutes daily to unpaid household work compared to men's 97 minutes (National Statistical Office [NSO], 2019; BBC News, 2024), such contributions remain excluded from GDP calculations, reflecting entrenched gendered, caste, and class-based inequalities. This invisibility not only undermines women's economic participation but also exacerbates social inequities and environmental vulnerabilities. Drawing on intersectional feminism (Crenshaw, 1991) and eco-feminist theory (Shiva, 1988), this paper reviews and synthesises existing scholarship to explore how caste hierarchies, rural–urban divides, and ecological crises intersect to intensify women's unpaid labor burdens. Evidence suggests that unpaid labor contributes approximately 15–17% of India's GDP, with some estimates extending to 32% when valued through replacement and opportunity cost approaches (Sahoo et al., 2024). However, its exclusion from national accounts perpetuates systemic neglect. The ecological dimension further reveals that climate change, deforestation, and water scarcity disproportionately extend women's unpaid work time, while their traditional ecological knowledge remains marginalized in policy discourse. This article argues for policy reforms that recognize and redistribute unpaid work, invest in time-saving infrastructure, and integrate women's ecological contributions into environmental governance, thereby advancing gender justice and sustainable development.

Keywords: unpaid labor, gender inequality, eco-feminism, intersectionality, environmental justice, India

Introduction

Unpaid labor in India—including domestic chores, caregiving, subsistence agriculture, and the collection of water and fuel—forms an invisible yet indispensable foundation for both economic productivity and ecological sustainability (National Statistical Office [NSO], 2019). According to India's *Time Use Survey 2019*, women spend an average of 299 minutes per day

on unpaid domestic services, more than three times the 97 minutes spent by men (NSO, 2019; *Indian Express*, 2020). Recent data from 2024 indicate that women still devote around 289 minutes daily to unpaid domestic work and 137 minutes to caregiving—figures that remain far higher than those of men (Samriddhi Prakash et al., 2025).

Despite its enormous scale, unpaid labor continues to be excluded from GDP calculations and remains largely invisible in economic policy-making. Estimates suggest that domestic and care work contributes between 15–17% of India’s GDP, yet it is absent from official accounts (Sahoo et al., 2024; Prakash et al., 2025). A 2023 State Bank of India analysis valued women’s unpaid domestic work at approximately ₹22.7 lakh crore—around 7.5% of GDP—highlighting its immense but unacknowledged economic worth (SBI, 2023).

This invisibility is not accidental but deeply embedded within India’s intersectional hierarchies of gender, caste, and class. Women from marginalized communities, including Dalits and Adivasis, often shoulder the heaviest burdens of resource collection and household labor (Joshi & Joshi, 2019). Meanwhile, women from upper-caste and urban households are similarly constrained by entrenched social norms that confine them to the domestic sphere, even when they possess higher education or economic means (Rege, 1998; Saradmoni, 1992).

Environmental degradation further compounds this structural inequality. Deforestation, groundwater depletion, and climate variability extend the time women spend on unpaid resource-related activities. Eco-feminist scholarship underscores how patriarchal and capitalist systems exploit both women and nature, creating a cycle where ecological decline intensifies women’s invisible labor (Shiva, 1988; Agarwal, 1992). Yet, women’s ecological contributions—such as traditional water harvesting practices and biodiversity preservation—are rarely recognized in institutional or policy frameworks (Rao, 2012).

This paper employs **intersectionality** (Crenshaw, 1991) and **eco-feminist theory** (Shiva, 1988) as guiding frameworks. Intersectionality highlights how gender, caste, and class jointly shape women’s access to resources, recognition, and time, while eco-feminism reveals the structural links between environmental degradation and women’s disproportionate labor burden.

Rural–urban disparities further illustrate the inequitable distribution of unpaid labor. Rural women engage in subsistence farming, livestock care, and resource collection, often under physically demanding conditions. Urban women, especially those from lower socio-economic groups, face a “double burden” of unpaid household work and insecure informal employment such as domestic service, with little or no social protection (Samantroy & Nandi, 2022). Across both contexts, women experience “time poverty,” limiting opportunities for education, paid employment, or rest.

Despite its clear economic and ecological value, unpaid labor remains marginal in India’s policy discourse, where women are often framed as passive beneficiaries rather than active contributors. Research by Sahoo, Sarkar, and Kumar (2024) demonstrates that, depending on methodology, unpaid household work could account for up to 32% of nominal GDP—far

higher than conventional estimates. Recent policy briefs stress the importance of investing in the care economy—through childcare, eldercare, and other services—not only to expand women’s labor force participation but also to generate employment and economic growth (Samridhi Prakash et al., 2025; International Growth Centre, 2024).

Given these multiple layers of invisibility and inequality, this paper aims to:

- Illuminate gendered time-use disparities using the latest national data.
- Examine how caste and class intersect to shape women’s unpaid labor burdens.
- Analyze the ecological dimensions that exacerbate these burdens, particularly for marginalized women.
- Advocate for intersectional and eco-feminist policy interventions to recognize, redistribute, and reduce unpaid labor.

By moving beyond description toward actionable policy recommendations, the present paper underscores the need to integrate unpaid labor into national accounts, invest in care infrastructure, redistribute household responsibilities, and value women’s ecological contributions. Such reforms are critical not only for advancing gender justice but also for achieving inclusive and environmentally sustainable development in India.

The Gendered Burden of Unpaid Labor in India

In India, women perform up to eight times more unpaid care work than men—a gap significantly wider than the global average of three to one (The Indian Express, 2020; Observer Research Foundation [ORF], 2020; The Hindu, 2024). This imbalance is rooted in entrenched patriarchal norms that equate women’s identity with domestic responsibilities, leaving them with a disproportionate share of invisible labor. According to the National Statistical Office’s Time Use Survey, over 80% of Indian women engage in unpaid domestic and caregiving tasks compared to just 27% of men (The Wire, 2020; The Indian Express, 2020; Governance Now, 2021).

This overwhelming responsibility results in “time poverty,” a condition where women have insufficient time for rest, paid work, education, or leisure (ORF, 2020). For example, in 2024, Indian women spent on average 289 minutes daily on unpaid domestic work and 137 minutes on caregiving, compared to far fewer minutes by men (BBC, 2024). Time poverty not only diminishes women’s economic participation but also adversely affects their mental health and well-being.

Despite its magnitude, unpaid labor remains absent from Gross Domestic Product (GDP) calculations. Estimates suggest that such labor contributes between 15–17% of India’s GDP, yet it is systematically excluded from formal economic accounts (Governance Now, 2021). This invisibility perpetuates the undervaluation of women’s work and sustains policy neglect in care infrastructure and social protection measures.

The burden is not evenly distributed. Caste and class exacerbate inequalities in unpaid labor. Women from marginalized communities, such as Dalits and Adivasis, often undertake the most time-intensive tasks, including water and fuel collection, while also engaging in low-paid,

informal employment (The Wire, 2020). Urban women from lower-income households face a double burden, balancing unpaid care work with precarious jobs as domestic workers, often without access to affordable childcare or healthcare (The Hindu, 2024).

To address this inequity, scholars and policy experts advocate a multi-pronged approach: integrating unpaid work into national economic accounting, expanding public childcare and eldercare services, encouraging men's participation in household labor, and ensuring targeted support for marginalized women (ORF, 2020). Recognizing and redistributing unpaid labor is essential not only for gender justice but also for advancing India's inclusive growth and sustainable development goals.

Intersectional Inequalities: Caste and Class Dimensions

Unpaid labor in India cannot be understood in isolation from caste and class dynamics. Women's experiences of domestic and care work are not uniform; rather, they are deeply shaped by historical and structural inequalities. Dalit and Adivasi women, for instance, often shoulder the heaviest burdens of unpaid work, including agricultural field labor, manual resource collection such as water and firewood, and household maintenance. These responsibilities are compounded by caste-based occupational segregation and generational marginalization, which limit access to education, land, and formal employment (Observer Research Foundation [ORF], 2020; *Caste system in India*, 2024).

While privileged caste women may be exempt from the most grueling physical tasks, they remain constrained by patriarchal expectations to prioritize domestic responsibilities over professional or public life. As Sharmila Rege (1998) notes, upper-caste women often experience a "double bind"—their relative economic privilege does not free them from the symbolic weight of patriarchal domesticity. In contrast, Dalit and Adivasi women face what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) terms "intersectional disadvantage," where gender oppression intersects with caste and class subordination, creating layered inequalities.

The distribution of unpaid labor thus reflects entrenched social hierarchies. For Dalit and Adivasi women, unpaid care and subsistence labor are intertwined with survival struggles, while for upper-caste women, unpaid domestic work reinforces social respectability within patriarchal norms. Both realities, though differing in form, sustain systemic gendered subordination.

Recognizing these intersectional dimensions is critical for policy interventions. Generic solutions that treat women as a homogeneous group risk ignoring the disproportionate burdens borne by marginalized communities. Policies that expand rural infrastructure—such as piped water, clean cooking fuel, and accessible health care—could significantly reduce the time poverty faced by Dalit and Adivasi women. Meanwhile, urban programs aimed at subsidized childcare and eldercare could ease domestic burdens for working-class and middle-class women.

Ultimately, addressing unpaid labor requires not only gender-sensitive but also caste- and class-conscious strategies. Without acknowledging how social hierarchies structure women's daily labor, efforts to redistribute and recognize unpaid work will remain incomplete.

Ecological Burden: Environmental Justice and Unequal Labor

Eco-feminist theory emphasizes that patriarchy and environmental exploitation are intertwined, co-producing women's oppression through structures that devalue both nature and women's labor (Shiva, 1988). In India, this link is acutely visible in the disproportionate ecological burden shouldered by women. Environmental degradation—manifested in deforestation, water scarcity, and climate variability—has intensified the demands of unpaid labor, particularly in rural regions. For example, women in many villages now walk several kilometers daily to fetch water or collect fuelwood, significantly increasing time poverty and physical exhaustion (Observer Research Foundation [ORF], 2023).

The challenges posed by ecological stressors are not gender-neutral. Women, especially from marginalized communities, bear a dual responsibility of ensuring household subsistence while coping with the shrinking availability of natural resources. This labor intensification not only deepens gender inequalities but also highlights how climate change and environmental decline exacerbate unpaid care burdens (ORF, 2023). Despite their critical role in resource management, women's voices remain marginalized in environmental policymaking and climate governance structures. Their traditional ecological knowledge—rooted in community practices of sustainable farming, water conservation, and biodiversity preservation—continues to be overlooked in formal decision-making processes.

Historically, however, women have been at the forefront of environmental justice movements in India. The Chipko movement of the 1970s, for instance, demonstrated how rural women mobilized to protect forests from commercial logging, linking ecological preservation with community survival (ORF, 2022). These grassroots initiatives reveal women's agency in resisting both environmental exploitation and patriarchal marginalization, challenging dominant development paradigms that ignore their contributions.

Integrating women's ecological knowledge into policy frameworks is therefore crucial. Gender-sensitive environmental policies—such as expanding renewable energy access, ensuring equitable water distribution, and recognizing women as key stakeholders in climate adaptation—can help reduce the unpaid labor burden. Eco-feminism urges a reimagining of justice that values care work, sustains ecological balance, and ensures women's equal participation in decision-making.

Thus, environmental justice in India cannot be achieved without addressing the gendered dimensions of unpaid labor. Recognizing and redistributing women's ecological responsibilities is central to both social equity and sustainable development.

Divergent Realities: Rural vs Urban Contexts

The burden of unpaid labor in India manifests differently across rural and urban landscapes, underscoring the intersection of gender with place-based inequalities. In rural areas, women's

unpaid work is closely tied to ecological subsistence, with responsibilities extending to agriculture, livestock caregiving, fuelwood collection, and water procurement. These tasks are highly labor-intensive and increasingly demanding as environmental resources shrink. For instance, deforestation and groundwater depletion have compelled rural women to travel longer distances for essential resources, thereby intensifying physical and time poverty (Observer Research Foundation [ORF], 2023). This ecological dependency intertwines with caste and class hierarchies, disproportionately impacting marginalized women whose livelihoods rely directly on natural resources.

In contrast, urban women—especially from low-income households—face a double bind of unpaid domestic work and precarious paid labor. Many find employment in the informal sector, including as domestic workers, street vendors, or part-time caregivers, where wages are meager, job security is absent, and labor rights remain largely unrecognized. Simultaneously, they shoulder the primary responsibility for household chores and caregiving, with limited access to childcare facilities or state welfare services (Samantroy & Nandi, 2022). As The Indian Express (2023) reported, the lack of institutional support systems in urban centers leaves women struggling to balance long working hours with care duties, leading to heightened stress and compromised well-being.

These divergent realities reflect structural inequalities embedded in both rural and urban settings. While rural women grapple with ecological vulnerability and the physical drudgery of resource collection, urban women contend with the invisibility of care work compounded by the exploitation of informal labor markets (ORF, 2023). In both contexts, the undervaluation of unpaid labor perpetuates economic invisibility and constrains women's opportunities for education, skill-building, and meaningful participation in the formal economy.

To address these challenges, policy frameworks must move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. Rural interventions could focus on improving access to clean energy, water infrastructure, and sustainable agricultural practices, thereby reducing the physical toll of subsistence labor. For urban women, strengthening labor protections, expanding childcare facilities, and formalizing the rights of domestic workers could mitigate the compounding pressures of unpaid and underpaid work.

Ultimately, recognizing these divergent realities is essential for crafting inclusive policies that account for both ecological and urban vulnerabilities. Without such recognition, the cycle of invisibility surrounding women's unpaid labor will continue to reproduce gendered inequalities across India.

Economic Recognition: The Case for Valuation

The persistent invisibility of unpaid labor in India represents not only a moral and social failure but also a significant economic blind spot. Recent estimates suggest that unpaid household activities contribute approximately ₹22.7 lakh crore, equating to around 7.5% of India's GDP. Depending on the method of calculation—such as replacement cost (valuing unpaid work by what it would cost to hire labor) or opportunity cost (valuing it by the income women forgo)—

the share has, in some years, been projected as high as 24–32% of GDP (The Hindu, 2024). Despite its vast magnitude, this contribution remains excluded from national accounts, perpetuating the systemic undervaluation of women's work.

The potential gains from correcting this invisibility are profound. Nikore (2022) argues that enhancing women's economic participation could raise India's GDP by as much as 27%, underscoring the transformative impact of recognizing and redistributing unpaid care labor. Similarly, a report from the Observer Research Foundation (ORF, 2023) stresses that without acknowledging and alleviating the care burden, India risks stagnating in its pursuit of inclusive growth and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

At the global level, the International Labour Organization (ILO) highlights the severe economic losses stemming from unpaid care work. According to ILO estimates, the lack of recognition and redistribution results in an annual global loss of \$11 trillion, equating to nearly 9% of the world's GDP (Time, 2023). These figures reflect not only the hidden value of unpaid work but also the missed opportunity for states to unlock human potential, increase labor force participation, and foster equitable economic development.

Addressing this invisibility requires a multipronged approach. First, integrating unpaid labor into official GDP calculations would provide a more accurate representation of national productivity and ensure women's contributions are institutionally acknowledged. Second, policies such as subsidized childcare, parental leave, and flexible work arrangements would reduce the disproportionate burden shouldered by women. Third, public investment in social infrastructure—ranging from community health workers to renewable energy for rural households—could ease time poverty and enhance women's economic autonomy.

By placing a tangible economic value on unpaid labor, India has the potential to redefine growth as not merely a numerical rise in GDP but as inclusive development rooted in gender justice. Recognizing unpaid care work is thus not just an act of fairness—it is a necessary step toward unlocking the nation's full economic and social potential.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Addressing the invisibility of women's unpaid labor in India requires a comprehensive policy framework that not only recognizes but also redistributes and reduces the burden of care work. First, integrating unpaid care and domestic work into national accounts and key economic indicators such as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) frameworks is imperative. Doing so would provide statistical recognition of women's contributions and ensure that policy planning reflects the true scope of labor sustaining the economy (The Hindu, 2024).

Second, redistributing care responsibilities is critical. Policies that incentivize men's participation in household chores and caregiving—through paternal leave provisions, workplace flexibility, and public awareness campaigns—can challenge entrenched gender norms and promote more equitable sharing of domestic duties (Nikore, 2022).

Third, investment in time-saving infrastructure is essential. Expanding access to clean energy, piped water, childcare centers, and reliable public transportation would significantly reduce women's labor burden, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, thereby easing "time poverty" and creating opportunities for education and formal employment (Observer Research Foundation, 2023).

Fourth, policy must prioritize marginalized groups. Intersectional welfare programs targeting Dalit, Adivasi, and lower-class women are needed to address overlapping disadvantages rooted in caste, class, and gender (Rege, 1998). Such measures could include targeted social protection, skill development, and community-based cooperatives.

Finally, incorporating eco-feminist perspectives into policymaking is vital. Women's ecological knowledge, shaped through centuries of resource stewardship, must be integrated into environmental governance. Recognizing their leadership in sustainability and climate resilience would ensure that policies are both inclusive and environmentally just (Shiva, 1988).

Collectively, these reforms could transform unpaid labor from a site of invisibility and inequality into one of recognition, empowerment, and sustainable development.

Conclusion

Women's unpaid labor in India stands as both the economic backbone of households and communities and a site of entrenched invisibility. Despite accounting for vast contributions to caregiving, subsistence farming, and ecological resource management, such work remains excluded from official economic metrics and undervalued in public policy (National Statistical Office, 2019; The Hindu, 2024). The disproportionate burden carried by women, particularly among Dalit, Adivasi, and lower-class groups, illustrates how caste and class intersect with gender to shape inequitable labor patterns (Rege, 1998; Observer Research Foundation, 2023). Simultaneously, environmental degradation—including deforestation, water scarcity, and climate change—exacerbates this burden, underscoring the need for eco-feminist approaches that link gender justice with ecological sustainability (Shiva, 1988).

Failing to recognize and redistribute unpaid labor perpetuates cycles of exclusion, limiting women's opportunities for paid employment, education, and political participation while reinforcing patriarchal norms (Nikore, 2022). Moreover, it results in significant economic losses, both nationally and globally, due to the undervaluation of care work (International Labour Organization, 2023).

Moving forward, adopting intersectional and eco-feminist frameworks provides a pathway to transformative change. Policies must account for the economic value of unpaid labor, invest in time-saving infrastructure, and promote equitable care-sharing norms. Furthermore, integrating women's traditional ecological knowledge into environmental governance can advance both sustainability and inclusivity.

Ultimately, recognizing and valuing women's unpaid labor is not only a matter of justice but also a prerequisite for sustainable development and social equity. By making the invisible

visible, India has the opportunity to dismantle entrenched inequalities, enhance women's agency, and build a more just and resilient society.

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