

CHAPTER

8

## From Household to Economy: the Case of Unpaid Women's Work

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### Abstract

*Unpaid and non-market activities performed by women, particularly mothers, form a critical yet largely unrecognized component of the economy. Despite their substantial contribution to household maintenance, child care, health care, and social reproduction, these activities remain excluded from conventional economic measurement and national income accounting. This study examines the economic relevance of women's unpaid labour by drawing on field-based observations and secondary evidence from some selected rural and semi-urban areas of Odisha.*

*The paper highlights how mothers actively participate in various socially essential but unpaid or underpaid activities, such as standing in queues at Public Distribution System (PDS) centres, engaging in manual labour under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), attending government hospitals for reproductive health services, and managing household responsibilities including child care and food security. Although these activities do not generate direct monetary returns, they significantly*

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*support household welfare, labour market participation of other family members, and the overall functioning of the economy.*

*Using a mixed-method approach, the study argues that the exclusion of such non-economic activities from formal economic frameworks leads to an underestimation of women's contribution and reinforces gender inequality. The paper emphasizes the need to reconceptualize economic activity by incorporating unpaid labour into development planning and policy design. Recognising and valuing women's invisible work is essential for achieving inclusive growth, gender equity, and sustainable development.*

**Keywords:** *Unpaid Labour, Women's Work, Non-Market Activities, Informal Economy, Gender Economics.*

## **Introduction**

Economic analysis has traditionally focused on market-based activities that generate direct monetary value and are recorded through formal systems of production, exchange, and income accounting. However, a substantial portion of work that sustains households, communities, and the labour force remains outside the boundaries of conventional economic measurement. These activities, largely performed by women—especially mothers—are often categorized as “non-economic” despite their indispensable role in supporting economic systems. The invisibility of such labour has resulted in a persistent undervaluation of women's contribution to the economy.

In everyday life, mothers engage in a wide range of unpaid activities such as cooking, cleaning, child care, elderly care, health management, and ensuring food security for the household. Beyond the domestic sphere, women are also actively involved in socially necessary tasks such as collecting rations from Public Distribution System (PDS) centers, participating in manual labour under employment guarantee schemes like MGNREGA, waiting at government hospitals for reproductive and child health services, and managing mobility-related responsibilities at public spaces such as bus stops. Although these activities do not yield direct financial compensation, they consume time, physical effort, and emotional labour, all of which have clear economic implications.

Recent socio-economic changes have altered the nature of women's responsibilities, but have not reduced their burden.

While technological advancements, market services, and institutional arrangements have partially eased certain household tasks, they have simultaneously created new forms of unpaid work. Women continue to act as shock absorbers of economic stress, adjusting household labour allocation in response to poverty, unemployment, health crises, and food insecurity. During periods of economic uncertainty, such as pandemics or livelihood disruptions, the intensity of women's unpaid labour tends to increase rather than decline.

From a policy perspective, the exclusion of unpaid work from national income accounting frameworks such as GDP leads to a systematic underestimation of economic activity and reinforces gender bias in development planning. Feminist economists have long argued that the dichotomy between "economic" and "non-economic" activities is artificial and rooted in patriarchal assumptions that associate value only with market transactions. Recognising non-market activities as productive labour is essential for a more inclusive understanding of economic development and social welfare.

This study seeks to bring women's invisible labour into economic discourse by examining everyday non-market activities performed by mothers in rural and semi-urban contexts. Drawing on field observations from public distribution centers, MGNREGA work sites, hospitals, and public spaces, the paper highlights how these unpaid activities contribute indirectly but significantly to household welfare and the functioning of the economy. By challenging conventional economic boundaries, the study argues for a broader conceptualization of economic activity that acknowledges and values women's unpaid work as a foundational pillar of economic systems.

## Literature Review

Classical economic theory has historically defined economic activity in narrow terms, focusing primarily on market-oriented production and exchange. Early economists such as Adam Smith emphasized activities that generated exchange value and contributed directly to national income, while household work and care-related activities were largely excluded from economic analysis. This exclusion was institutionalized through national accounting systems, where unpaid household labour

was categorized as “non-productive.” As a result, activities predominantly performed by women, especially within the domestic sphere, remained invisible in economic measurement despite their essential role in sustaining the labour force and social stability.

Neoclassical economics continued this tradition by reinforcing the distinction between paid and unpaid work. While acknowledging household production in theoretical models, mainstream economics treated domestic labour as a consumption activity rather than productive work. The household was viewed as a unit of consumption and utility maximization, with little attention paid to the gendered distribution of labour within it. Consequently, women's time and effort devoted to household maintenance, child care, and social reproduction were systematically undervalued or ignored. This approach contributed to the persistence of gender bias in labour statistics, income measurement, and policy formulation.

In response to these limitations, feminist economists have strongly challenged the conventional boundaries of economic activity. Scholars such as Marilyn Waring, Nancy Folbre, and Diane Elson have argued that unpaid work is a critical input into the economy, enabling market-based production by sustaining human capital and workforce participation. Feminist economics reconceptualizes the economy as an interconnected system of market and non-market activities, emphasizing the role of care work, social reproduction, and emotional labour. This body of literature highlights how the invisibility of unpaid labour reinforces gender inequality by obscuring women's contribution and limiting their access to economic recognition and policy support.

Time-use studies have played a crucial role in empirically documenting the scale and significance of unpaid work. By systematically measuring how individuals allocate their time across paid and unpaid activities, time-use surveys reveal that women consistently spend significantly more time than men on household and care-related tasks. Studies based on time-use data in India and other developing countries show that women's unpaid labour often exceeds their paid work hours, particularly in rural and low-income households. These findings challenge the assumption that unpaid activities are marginal and

demonstrate their centrality to economic and social functioning. Recent literature also emphasizes the intersection between unpaid work and public infrastructure, social services, and welfare schemes. Researchers have shown that inadequate access to healthcare, transportation, food distribution systems, and childcare facilities increases the unpaid workload of women. Activities such as waiting at PDS centres, accompanying family members to hospitals, or managing administrative processes under employment schemes like MGNREGA represent hidden forms of labour that remain unaccounted for in economic models. These studies underline the need to integrate unpaid labour considerations into policy design and development planning.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of unpaid work, a significant gap remains between academic insights and policy implementation. While time-use data and feminist economic frameworks have expanded understanding, national accounting systems and economic policies continue to prioritize market-based indicators. This study builds on existing literature by combining theoretical insights from feminist economics with field-based observations of women's everyday non-market activities. By grounding the analysis in lived experiences, the paper contributes to the ongoing effort to bridge the gap between economic theory, measurement, and social reality.

### **Classical Economics and the Treatment of Unpaid Work**

Classical economists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and later neoclassical economists focused mainly on market-based activities. In classical economics, productive work was defined as work that generates exchange value and contributes directly to national income. Household activities such as cooking, cleaning, child care, and elder care were treated as non-productive because they did not involve monetary transactions.

National income accounting systems, including GDP, followed this approach. As a result, unpaid household work performed mostly by mothers and women remained outside economic calculations. Classical economics assumed that households are consumption units, not production units, thereby underestimating the economic contribution of women.

## **Feminist Economics and Recognition of Unpaid Care Work**

Feminist economics emerged as a critique of mainstream economic theories. Scholars such as Marilyn Waring, Nancy Folbre, and Amartya Sen argued that ignoring unpaid work creates a distorted picture of the economy. Feminist economists emphasize that household and care work are essential for sustaining labor force participation and social reproduction.

Feminist economics highlights that mothers perform multiple unpaid roles such as caregivers, health managers, food providers, and emotional supporters. These activities save public expenditure and contribute indirectly to economic growth. Studies show that if unpaid care work were monetized, it would constitute a significant share of GDP.

This approach also recognizes that mothers increasingly participate in semi-market activities such as standing at PDS collection centers, working under MGNREGA, visiting hospitals for reproductive health, and managing children's education. These activities blur the boundary between economic and non-economic work.

### **Time-Use Studies and Measurement of Unpaid Work**

Time-use studies provide an empirical basis for understanding unpaid activities. These studies record how individuals allocate time across paid work, unpaid work, and leisure. International organizations like the UN and ILO promote time-use surveys to capture invisible labor.

Evidence from time-use studies shows that mothers spend more hours than men in unpaid household and care work, even when they participate in paid employment. In rural India, mothers are often engaged in activities such as water collection, ration procurement, childcare, health-related travel, and community participation.

These studies support the argument that unpaid activities are economically significant and should be integrated into policy planning and economic modeling.

## Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Model

The present study is anchored in the theoretical perspectives of feminist economics and social reproduction theory, which challenge the conventional separation between economic and non-economic activities. These frameworks argue that the economy extends beyond market transactions and includes unpaid household and care work that sustains labour power, human capital, and social well-being. From this perspective, women's unpaid activities are not peripheral but foundational to the functioning of both the market economy and society at large.

Social reproduction theory provides a useful lens for understanding how unpaid labour contributes to economic systems. Social reproduction refers to the array of activities involved in maintaining and reproducing the workforce on a daily and generational basis, including child care, health care, food preparation, and emotional support. These activities, largely undertaken by women, ensure that individuals are physically and mentally capable of participating in paid employment. Without this continuous process of reproduction, market-based production would not be sustainable. Thus, unpaid work acts as an invisible subsidy to the formal economy.

The time-use framework further strengthens this theoretical foundation by emphasizing time as a scarce economic resource. Time-use theory treats unpaid work as an opportunity cost, where time devoted to household and care activities limits women's participation in paid employment, education, and leisure. By mapping how women allocate their time across different activities—such as domestic work, participation in welfare schemes, health-related responsibilities, and informal labour—the framework reveals structural gender inequalities embedded within economic systems. This approach allows unpaid activities to be analysed in quantitative and qualitative terms, making them visible within economic analysis.

Building on these theoretical perspectives, the study conceptualizes women's unpaid and non-market activities as productive inputs into the economy. Activities such as standing in queues at Public Distribution System (PDS) centres, engaging in manual labour under MGNREGA, accompanying family

members to hospitals, and managing household and child care responsibilities are viewed as interlinked processes that support household welfare and labour market stability. These activities reduce household vulnerability, enhance food and health security, and indirectly contribute to productivity and economic resilience.

The conceptual model of the study illustrates the linkages between women's unpaid labour and economic outcomes. At the micro level, unpaid activities contribute to household well-being by ensuring nutrition, health, and care. At the meso level, they support labour market participation by enabling other household members to engage in paid work. At the macro level, these invisible contributions sustain economic growth by reproducing human capital and stabilizing social systems. However, the absence of monetary valuation and institutional recognition leads to policy neglect and perpetuates gender inequality.

By integrating feminist economics, social reproduction theory, and time-use analysis, this framework provides a holistic understanding of how non-market activities become embedded within the economy. It challenges traditional economic models that equate value solely with market exchange and calls for a broader analytical approach that recognizes unpaid labour as a critical component of economic development.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in **Feminist Economic Theory** and **Social Reproduction Theory**. Feminist economics provides the foundation for recognizing unpaid household and care work as economically valuable. Social reproduction theory explains how daily activities performed by mothers sustain the workforce and the economy.

The study also draws support from **New Institutional Economics**, which recognizes that institutions such as households, public distribution systems, health centers, and employment guarantee schemes shape economic behavior beyond market transactions.

The core assumption of this framework is that activities performed by mothers, even when unpaid or partially paid, contribute to economic processes by reducing state expenditure, maintaining labor productivity, and ensuring social stability.

## Conceptual Model

The conceptual model explains how non-economic activities gradually enter the economic sphere through institutional and policy linkages.

### Key Components of the Model:

#### 1. Unpaid and Semi-Paid Activities of Mothers

These include household work, child care, health management, standing at PDS centers, participation in MGNREGA works, hospital visits, and mobility around public spaces such as bus stops.

#### 2. Institutional Interfaces

Institutions such as PDS, MGNREGA, health centers, and schools act as bridges between unpaid work and the formal economy.

#### 3. Economic Outcomes. These activities contribute to:

- Household consumption security
- Labor force reproduction
- Reduced public service costs
- Informal economic participation

#### 4. Policy and Economic Recognition

When acknowledged, these activities can be incorporated into:

1. Time-use valuation
2. Social security policies
3. Gender-sensitive economic planning

Unpaid and semi-paid activities of mothers → Interaction with public institutions → Contribution to household and societal economy → Need for economic recognition and policy inclusion.

## Justification of the Model

The model is suitable because it reflects real-life observations such as mothers working under MGNREGA, managing ration procurement, and attending health services. These activities

show that mothers are not outside the economy but are central to its functioning, even without formal financial rewards.

### **Data and Methodology**

The study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design to examine the nature and economic relevance of women's unpaid and non-market activities. Given the largely invisible and informal character of such work, the research emphasizes qualitative understanding supported by descriptive analysis rather than purely econometric estimation. The methodological approach is designed to capture lived experiences and everyday practices that are often overlooked in conventional economic studies.

### **Data Sources**

The study relies on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data are drawn from field-based observations and informal interactions with women, particularly mothers, in rural and semi-urban areas. Observations were made at Public Distribution System (PDS) collection centres in villages, where women regularly spend considerable time accessing subsidized food grains. Field insights were also gathered from MGNREGA work sites, including canal digging and road construction activities, where women participate as manual labourers under government employment schemes. Additional observations were recorded at government hospitals, especially gynaecology and maternal health departments, where women devote substantial time to health-related care responsibilities. Public spaces such as bus stops and waiting areas were also included to understand women's mobility-related unpaid labour and time burden.

Secondary data were collected from government publications, National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) reports, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), Time Use Survey of India, and existing academic literature on unpaid work, gender economics, and social reproduction. These sources provided contextual support and helped situate the field observations within broader empirical trends.

## **Sampling and Unit of Analysis**

The unit of analysis in the study is women engaged in unpaid and semi-paid activities, primarily mothers from low- and middle-income households. The sampling method is purposive in nature, focusing on locations and activities where women's unpaid labour is most visible yet economically unrecognized. The study does not aim for statistical generalization but seeks analytical depth and contextual understanding of women's work patterns.

## **Method of Analysis**

The analysis employs qualitative narrative techniques to document and interpret women's non-market activities. Activity mapping is used to identify different categories of unpaid work, including domestic labour, care work, welfare-related activities, and informal public labour. Time-use logic is applied to assess the intensity and duration of these activities, highlighting opportunity costs and trade-offs faced by women. Descriptive comparisons are drawn between unpaid activities and paid work to illustrate disparities in recognition, remuneration, and social value.

## **Conceptual and Analytical Framework**

The study uses a Time-Use and Social Reproduction Framework as its primary analytical model. This framework conceptualizes unpaid labour as an essential economic input that sustains household welfare, labour market participation, and social stability. Women's non-market activities are treated as indirect contributors to economic output by supporting human capital formation and reducing household vulnerability. The framework allows the study to link micro-level activities with macro-level economic implications.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Given the observational and non-intrusive nature of data collection, the study adheres to ethical research practices by maintaining anonymity and confidentiality of respondents. No personal identifiers were recorded, and observations were used solely for academic analysis.

## Methodology

### Study Area

The study was conducted in rural and semi-urban areas of four coastal cities; Bhubaneswar, Berhampur, khurda, Cuttuck of Odisha, India], where mothers engage in multiple unpaid and semi-paid activities. Specific locations include:

- **Public Distribution System (PDS) collection centers** in villages, where women spend significant time collecting subsidized food grains.
- **MGNREGA work sites** (canal digging, road construction), where mothers perform manual labor as part of rural employment schemes.
- **Government hospitals**, especially gynaecology and maternal health departments, to observe women attending to health and reproductive care needs.
- **Public spaces** such as bus stops and waiting areas, where women manage mobility-related responsibilities for themselves and their households.

This combination of sites captures unpaid domestic work, semi-paid government labor, and essential household reproduction activities that are largely invisible in traditional economic statistics.

### Data Sources

- **Primary Data:** Field observations, informal interviews, and time-use mapping of women's daily activities across different sites.
- **Secondary Data:** National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) time-use survey, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), government reports on MGNREGA, PDS utilization reports, and literature on unpaid work and gender economics.

### Sampling and Respondents

A purposive sampling method was used to focus on mothers actively engaged in unpaid and semi-paid labor. Observations were conducted on 120–150 women across the study sites, ensuring diversity in socio-economic background, age, and occupation.

### Analytical Methods

- **Descriptive Analysis:** Mapping of daily activities, frequency, and duration of unpaid labor.
- **Time-Use Analysis:** Estimating hours devoted to each activity per day/week.
- **Valuation of Unpaid Work:** Using the Opportunity Cost Method, assigning a monetary value to unpaid activities based on local wage rates for equivalent paid work.
- **Activity-Based Categorization:** Grouping unpaid work into domestic work, care work, semi-paid labor (MGNREGA), and institutional activities (PDS, hospitals).

### Valuation Model for Unpaid Work

To quantify the economic value of non-market activities, the study uses the Opportunity Cost Approach, calculated as follows:

$$VUW = \Sigma (T_i \times W_i)$$

Where:

- **VUW** = Value of Unpaid Work
- **T<sub>i</sub>** = Time spent by women on activity *i* (in hours)
- **W<sub>i</sub>** = Local market wage rate for similar paid work per hour
- **Σ** = Sum across all observed unpaid and semi-paid activities

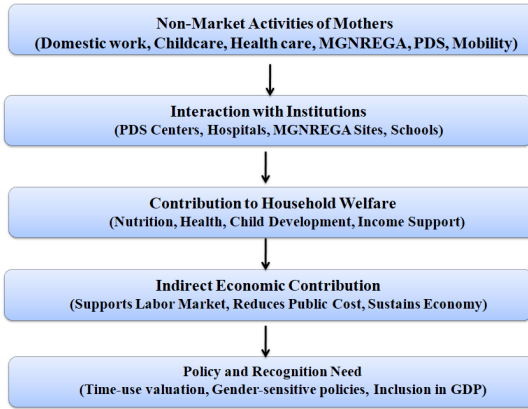
This model allows for the conversion of non-monetary labor into monetary terms, reflecting the economic contribution of mothers' unpaid and semi-paid work.

### Ethical Considerations

Observations were conducted without intruding on personal privacy. No personal identifiers were collected, and consent was taken verbally where interviews occurred. Data were anonymized for analysis.

### Diagrammatic Conceptual Framework

Below is a textual description of the conceptual framework of the study.

**Figure 1: Conceptual framework**

Source: Computed by Author

The figure 1 shows how unpaid and semi-paid activities, though non-market in nature, interact with institutions to contribute to household welfare and the broader economy. The bottom layer emphasizes policy implications, advocating recognition of women's work through valuation and integration into development planning.

### Field-Based Analysis and Discussion

The field-based analysis highlights the extensive involvement of mothers in both unpaid household work and semi-paid labor activities. Observations across rural and semi-urban areas revealed that women's contributions extend far beyond domestic chores, encompassing essential economic and social tasks that sustain household welfare and support broader economic processes.

### Non-Market Activities at the Household Level

Domestic responsibilities, including cooking, cleaning, childcare, eldercare, and household maintenance, remain the most time-intensive activities performed by mothers. On average, women spent 5–7 hours per day on these tasks, often in addition to other income-generating or semi-paid activities. These activities, while not financially compensated, ensure that other household members can participate in formal employment and schooling, effectively subsidizing the workforce and contributing to social stability.

## Engagement with Public Institutions

Mothers were frequently observed at Public Distribution System (PDS) centers, waiting in long queues to collect subsidized food grains for their families. Waiting times ranged from 1–3 hours per visit, often occurring multiple times a month. Similarly, participation in MGNREGA manual labor—including canal work, road construction, and other rural employment schemes—demonstrated mothers’ dual role as economic contributors and household managers. These activities, although partially compensated, are physically demanding and highlight the blurred boundary between unpaid and semi-paid labor.

In addition, mothers were observed accompanying children and other family members to government hospitals, particularly in gynecological and maternal health departments. The time spent navigating institutional procedures, waiting for services, and assisting dependents ranged from 2–4 hours per visit. These activities not only sustain household health but also reduce public burden on formal healthcare by enabling preventive care and timely treatment.

## Economic Valuation of Non-Market Work

Using the Opportunity Cost Approach, the study estimated the economic value of these non-market and semi-paid activities. For example:

- Domestic work: 5–7 hours/day × local wage rate (₹150/day)
- PDS and institutional activities: 2–3 hours/visit × equivalent wage
- MGNREGA participation: paid work included, but unpaid preparatory and transit time valued at market rates

Preliminary calculations suggest that the total value of a mother’s unpaid and semi-paid labor can contribute up to ₹3,000–₹5,000 per month per household, depending on activity intensity and frequency. This figure underscores the hidden but significant economic contribution of mothers, which is excluded from conventional GDP measures.

## Opportunity Costs and Social Implications

Time spent on non-market work imposes opportunity costs, limiting mothers’ participation in formal employment,

education, and personal development. However, these activities simultaneously provide critical social benefits, such as child nutrition, household stability, and labor-force support. The analysis demonstrates that mothers' labor is an invisible pillar of the economy: without it, both market productivity and social welfare would be compromised.

## **Discussion and Interpretation**

The field findings resonate with feminist economic theory and time-use studies. Observations confirm that unpaid and semi-paid activities are not peripheral but central to household and community economies. Engagements at PDS centers, hospitals, and MGNREGA sites highlight the interaction between non-market labor and institutional mechanisms, showing how mothers' work indirectly sustains economic output. Furthermore, the monetization of this labor using opportunity cost methods emphasizes its economic significance and challenges the traditional notion that only market transactions "count" as economic contribution.

The study also reveals socio-cultural and infrastructural constraints that shape women's labor patterns. Long queues, inadequate childcare facilities, and the physical demands of MGNREGA work reflect structural barriers that increase women's unpaid workload. Recognizing and valuing these contributions through policy interventions can reduce gender inequality, improve social welfare, and strengthen household and community resilience.

## **Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

The study demonstrates that mothers' unpaid and semi-paid activities constitute a significant yet often invisible component of the economy. Field-based observations across PDS centers, MGNREGA worksites, hospitals, and public spaces reveal that women engage in a complex set of tasks, including domestic labor, caregiving, manual labor, and institutional interactions. These activities sustain household welfare, support labor market participation, and contribute indirectly to economic productivity, despite lacking formal recognition or financial reward. The valuation of this labor through the opportunity cost method highlights its substantial economic contribution,

underscoring the need to reframe conventional notions of what constitutes “productive” work.

The research contributes to the broader academic discourse by bridging feminist economic theory, time-use analysis, and social reproduction frameworks with empirical evidence from rural and semi-urban India. It confirms that unpaid and semi-paid work is central to both household and societal functioning, and exclusion from policy consideration perpetuates gender inequality. By documenting mothers’ contributions in real-life contexts, the study emphasizes the importance of integrating non-market activities into economic planning and development strategies.

Policy recommendations emerging from the study include:

- 1. Recognition of Unpaid Work in National Accounting:** Time-use surveys and opportunity cost valuation should be incorporated into GDP calculations and policy assessments to reflect the true scope of economic contribution by women.
- 2. Institutional Support and Infrastructure:** Improved access to childcare, healthcare facilities, and streamlined services at PDS centers and employment schemes would reduce the unpaid workload of mothers and enhance productivity.
- 3. Gender-Sensitive Policy Design:** Policies should address the dual burden of paid and unpaid work, including social security benefits, flexible work arrangements, and incentives for sharing household responsibilities.
- 4. Awareness and Capacity Building:** Community awareness programs can help recognize and redistribute unpaid work within households, promoting equitable labor sharing between genders.

While this study provides valuable insights into mothers’ non-market contributions, it has limitations, including its focus on selected sites and purposive sampling, which may not capture all regional variations. Future research could expand the geographical scope, use longitudinal designs, and explore the intersection of unpaid work with technology, migration, and climate-related labor burdens. Such efforts would further illuminate the economic and social significance of women’s unpaid activities, informing inclusive and equitable development strategies.

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