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Care Work, Gender, and the Everyday Household: A Theoretical Reading of Unpaid Labour and Social Inequality

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Abstract

Care work is very important for daily life, but it is mostly invisible and not valued. It includes cooking, cleaning, looking after children and old people, giving emotional support, and managing the home. People often think this is a natural duty of women. This paper says that unpaid care work is not a natural or private duty. It is created by society through gender rules, family traditions, and social inequality. Using ideas from feminist sociology, social reproduction, and governmentality, this paper shows how families make gender roles look normal. In India, women do much more unpaid housework than men, even when they also have a paid job. So, we must accept care as real work to bring gender justice, equality in the home, and better policies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

No family or society can run without care work. But we often do not see it as real work. It needs time, skill and emotional energy, but in the family it is called a woman's natural duty, not work. Sociology shows that this unequal division is not a personal choice. It is shaped by society, by gender rules, by job systems, and by culture. The home is not a private matter only; it is a main place where inequality is created. This paper is theoretical. It does not give new field data. It explains existing ideas to show why domestic work is still done mostly by women.

Care work is the foundation of everyday life. No household and no society can function without it. From cooking and cleaning to looking after children, the elderly and the sick, care work keeps daily life running. Yet, despite being so essential, it remains one of the most invisible and undervalued forms of labour.

In most societies, care work is considered a natural duty of women rather than real work. It is seen as an act of love, sacrifice and devotion that women should do for their family. Because it is done inside the home, it is treated as a private and personal matter, not as a social or economic issue. This thinking hides the time, skill and emotional energy that care work needs.

A sociological perspective helps us to see this differently. It shows that the unequal division of care work is not a matter of personal choice or natural ability. It is socially constructed. Gender norms, patriarchal family ideology, labour market structures and weak public welfare support together shape who does care work and who does not. The household is therefore not just a place of affection; it is a primary site where gender inequality is produced and reproduced every day.

In the Indian context, this inequality is more visible. Studies consistently show that Indian women spend many more hours on unpaid domestic and care work than men. Even when women participate in paid employment, their responsibility for housework does not decrease significantly. This creates a double burden for women and limits their opportunities for education, employment, leisure and participation in public life.

This paper offers a theoretical reading of care work in the everyday household. It does not present new empirical data, but draws upon feminist sociology, the theory of social reproduction, and the concept of governmentality to explain why unpaid care work remains persistently gendered. It argues that recognizing care as real labour and redistributing it fairly is essential for achieving gender justice and equality within the household and society.

Unpaid Care Work

Unpaid care work means all the work done at home without pay for the family's well-being. It includes housework like cooking, cleaning, washing, and direct care like looking after children, old people, or sick people. In the world and especially in India, this work is done mostly by women. This work keeps the formal economy running, but it is hidden and not counted in GDP. In short, unpaid labour is the invisible engine of the economy, but it is not valued and is divided unequally between men and women.

Care as Labour

Care work means daily activities like cooking food, washing clothes, cleaning, caring for children and elders, managing time, and giving emotional support. These works are repetitive but need full attention. It is labour because it keeps social life going. It is important to call care as labour. It is not just love or duty. While it has emotions, it is also organized and given unequally. When it is done without pay and without respect, it becomes a free help to the family and to the economy. Care work has two sides. One is material side - it takes time and energy. Second is moral side - society expects women to do it. That is why its value is not seen.

Gendered Division in Household

Home is the main place where gender inequality happens daily. In all societies, women do more unpaid housework than men, even when women also do a paid job. This happens because culture teaches that women are caring and responsible for the home, and men are for outside paid work and power. So housework becomes women's work, and men's help is seen as optional. This inequality creates big problems. Women get less time for education, paid work, rest, and public life. It also reduces their freedom at home. So unequal care work passes inequality from one generation to the next.

Theoretical Perspectives

Three theories help us understand care work:

- a) **Feminist Sociology:** It says the division of work between men and women is the main reason for women's lower position. Unpaid domestic work is not a private matter, it is a political issue that creates gender hierarchy.
- b) **Social Reproduction Theory:** It says paid work and capitalism depend on unpaid care work. Care work produces workers at no cost. So its low value is not by mistake; the economic system itself devalues it.
- c) **Governmentality:** It shows how care becomes a moral duty. Women are taught that good mother and good wife means doing all care work. So women themselves accept this inequality as normal. Together, these three theories explain why care work is unequal. Feminist theory explains gender order, social reproduction explains economic hidden help, and governmentality explains moral pressure.

Household and Social Reproduction

Social reproduction means the work needed to sustain life and continue society. Care work is basic for this. When the government does not provide enough childcare, eldercare, and other facilities, families have to manage it at home. In practice, women's unpaid work fills this gap. So home is not separate from public life. The time and energy spent at home is connected to job market, welfare policies, and gender rules.

Unpaid Labour and Social Inequality:

Unpaid labour means the work done at home without any pay. It includes cooking, cleaning, washing, looking after children, caring for old and sick people, and giving emotional support. Though this work is very important, it is not counted as real

work and it is not paid. This unpaid labour is mostly done by women. In Indian society, women are expected to manage the home. Even when they go out for a paid job, they still have to do all the housework. This is called the double burden. Men's contribution to housework is seen as help, not as their responsibility.

This creates social inequality in three ways:

1. **Time Inequality:** Women have less time for rest, education, and paid work.
2. **Economic Inequality:** Because unpaid work is not counted in GDP, women's contribution to the economy becomes invisible. They remain dependent on men.
3. **Power Inequality:** When women spend all their time at home, they get less chance to take part in public life, politics, and decision-making. Theories like feminist sociology and social reproduction theory say that this inequality is not natural. It is created by patriarchy, family norms, and lack of public support like childcare and eldercare. So, to reduce social inequality, we must first recognize care as real work, and second, redistribute it equally between men and women and between family and state.

Indian Context

In India, this problem is very clear. Studies show Indian women spend much more time on unpaid housework than men. This shows gender inequality in time use. Our culture says women are natural managers of home. Even when women do paid jobs, their housework does not reduce. They have to do double work - office and home. Men's participation does not increase. In Indian families, women's sacrifice is praised as devotion, not seen as work. So it becomes difficult to demand sharing of work. To understand India, we must see how patriarchy, family ideology, and lack of public care facilities together make inequality look normal.

Changing Domestic Life

Gendered care is strong, but it is not fixed. City life, migration, online work, and new family types are changing home life. Work-from-home mixes paid and unpaid work, but it does not automatically bring equality. Often it increases women's burden. Now there are also new ideas like shared parenting and husband helping in care. This shows that domestic work can be changed, though slowly. Home is a place where old traditions and new ideas both exist. We should not say everything has changed, but change is possible. The real challenge is to move from just talking about equality to actually sharing care work equally.

Policy and Equality

If we accept care as real labour, we need better policies. We need government childcare centres, support for eldercare, flexible work timings, and social security that does not assume women will do unlimited free work. Gender equality cannot happen only if women get paid jobs; housework must also be shared. Policies are important because care is shaped by institutions. If laws and systems still treat domestic work as private and invisible, women will continue to carry the burden.

So we need two things: Recognition and Redistribution. Recognition means calling care as work. Redistribution means sharing and supporting that work fairly.

CONCLUSION

Care work is basic for society, but it is not valued because it is done at home and by women. This paper shows that unpaid domestic work is not a natural feminine quality. It is organized by society through gender hierarchy, economic systems, and moral expectations. Home is not just a place of love; it is also a place where inequality is reproduced daily. To understand this we need feminist sociology, social reproduction theory, and governmentality. These show that care is material, moral and political at the same time. In India, unequal unpaid care is a big barrier to gender equality. So sociology must put care work at the centre of study. The fight for equality is also a fight for fair distribution of time, labour and daily life.

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