

Time to value women's work

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Women's lower status is due to the perception of their contribution as less important compared to those of men. Work undertaken by women is mostly considered non-work or only household work which does not bring any monetary remuneration; therefore it is considered not equally important or prestigious. The non-recognition of their contribution leads to their devaluation and disrespect which manifests itself in discrimination and violence.

Everything that a woman does at home is considered as household work, even those that have monetary value. Preservation of seeds, husking, thrashing paddy or caring for cattle and poultry, are also considered household or *shangsharer kaaj*, or care work. As women do not take their products to the market or get paid for their labour, they remain, as economists explain, out of the SNA, which means their contribution is economically invisible and not accounted for in the GDP.

A study conducted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) for Manusher Jonno Foundation in 2015 titled "Estimating women's contribution to the economy" revealed that on an average a female member of a household undertakes 12.1 non-SNA activities (System of National Accounts); the corresponding figure for a male member is only 2.7. The study goes on to summarise that the estimated value of women's unpaid non-SNA (household) work, if monetised, would be equivalent to 76.8 to 87.2 percent of GDP (FY 2014-15). However, the most revealing finding of the study is "if women's unpaid work were to be monetised it would amount to 2.5 or 2.9 times higher than the income of women received from paid services." For example, if a woman received remuneration of Tk 5,000 per month for her work in the garment factory, the corresponding amount for a woman's unpaid work if monetised would be Tk 15,000!

The non-recognition of women's unpaid work has resulted in not valuing them as a productive force. The invisibility of their contribution results in their devaluation and not getting the honour and respect they deserve at home and in society. On the other hand, the situation of the 20 million plus women employed in agriculture, forestry, fisheries and livestock is no better. Their work is back-breaking, remuneration is half of

that of men for the same amount of work and yet at home they are required to perform all the duties and responsibilities that society has accorded to them as wives, mothers and homemakers. The meagre salary they earn is most often spent for the wellbeing of their families, again leaving them poor and disempowered.

In order to change the situation of women socially, economically and politically, radical policy support is required along with a change in the mindset and attitude of family members and society towards women. Women's work should be appreciated and respected no matter where they work, at home, in the field, in factories or offices. It is no longer logical to prefer a boy child to a girl child. Those who still believe in the age-old custom of male preference should know that most probably, it is a girl child who will grow up and take care of her parents and against all odds will stand by them in times of crisis. Every day we hear and read stories of women's

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strength and resilience, their loyalty and effort to keep the family together, nurturing and looking after every member.

Another important aspect of recognising women's contribution is to change the way the present system of national account is determined which needs revisiting in order to recognise all of women's work, both paid and unpaid, so that their contribution is included in the GDP. This will require international as well as national lobbying. The SNA is calculated by the United Nations and follows a standardised format for all countries. In the present system of calculation women's unpaid work cannot be counted resulting in the invisibility of a vast dimension of women's work.

Policymakers, families and the society at large have to recognise that women have dual roles. One is reproductive such as giving birth to children and all the care work she performs at home. The other is productive, also performed at home but with significant

economic implications and monetary value. Both these roles are equally important and critical to the wellbeing of family and society. The lack of evaluation of women's contribution has resulted in its non-recognition and therefore devaluation which in turn has led to their lower status at home and society. Appreciation of women's work has to start at home by family members as it is in their homes that they want to be respected and honoured.

Someone had once said that the measure of a society is in the way it treats its women. Society needs to change its perception about women and their contribution. Evaluating their work in all its dimensions and giving it the recognition and worth that it deserves is one of the ways that society can raise the status of women and thus reduce violence and discrimination against them.

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PHOTO: STAR

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