

The unpaid household labour GDP ignores

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At dawn, 45-year-old Yasmin Ara rises before the rest of her family. She prepares breakfast, packs lunches for her three children, and ensures they are ready for their classes. Once they leave, her work continues — cleaning, doing laundry, planning the next meal, and caring for her elderly in-laws.

Her day becomes an unbroken cycle of caregiving, cooking, tutoring, and managing the household, all on her own. The skills she once honed at university have faded, replaced by expertise in managing domestic duties.

Despite staying up late and getting no rest, no salary, no promotion, no economic security, only exhaustion — society views her as an “unemployed housewife” who “does nothing.”

“Having a degree in Economics, I had dreams of working in a bank,

globally 16.4 billion hours are devoted to unpaid care work daily. This is equivalent to 2 billion people working full-time without pay, or about 25 percent of the world's population.

If valued at an hourly minimum wage, this unpaid labour would constitute 9 percent of the global GDP, amounting to \$11 trillion.

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It found that women in Bangladesh spend seven times more time on unpaid household and caregiving work than men.

Women spend 4.6 hours daily on household tasks, while men spend only 0.6 hours. Similarly, women dedicate

However, this doesn't fully account for the value of household and caregiving work, which requires skills and emotional labour.

When adjusting for the skills and emotional factors involved in care work, such as knowledge of nutrition, medicine, and emotional intelligence, by increasing the reference wage for unskilled workers, the value of women's unpaid care work in Bangladesh is estimated to be 18.5 percent to 19.6 percent of the GDP.

In 2015, the Manusher Jonno Foundation commissioned the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) to research women's economic contributions and found that the value of women's unpaid household work was 76.8 percent of GDP in fiscal 2013-14 if additional women were hired to replace them.

If the woman in a family did the same work for pay in another family, the value would be equivalent to 87.2 percent of GDP.

As per the Labour Force Survey 2023, among the youth who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET), 61.7 percent are women, with family and household work serving as a significant setback to their employment opportunities, alongside institutional barriers that limit their labour market participation.

down. I scream. I cry — holding my child in my arms, knowing she needs me, especially when she is physically unwell, but I just can't give her my attention when I have deadlines to meet,” she added.

“And yet, quitting is not an option. My job is a financial necessity. It's soul-crushing. It feels like I have no life left at all,” she said.

Maisha Mubassara, a 29-year-old government teacher and mother of two, faces similar struggles. Despite spending nearly half her income on daycare and domestic help, there's no rest after work. The challenges don't stop when she gets home.

“When I come back, there's no time to breathe. I have to take care of the children, feed them, and put them to sleep. My work never really ends.”

A 2024 UNDP report highlighted that integrating the care economy into social protection is key to equity, resilience, and inclusivity.

“By investing in policies that support women's participation in the economy, such as affordable childcare, paid parental leave, and flexible working arrangements, societies can harness the full productive capacity of women,” it mentioned.

THE GDP GAP
Currently, the existing GDP framework, guided by the System of National Accounts (SNA), does not account for unpaid care work.

However, experts have long advocated for the inclusion of unpaid care work in an extended System of National Accounts (SNA) through a satellite accounts system rather than integrating it into the main GDP framework.

In line with that, in 2023, the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina instructed the Planning Commission to explore ways of including unpaid care work in Bangladesh's GDP calculations.

Asma Akter, deputy director of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), said, “Since unpaid care work is not exchanged for money in the formal market, it falls outside the scope of GDP measurement. That is why an alternative method is needed.”

She added that efforts are underway to develop a new calculation model.

The newly formed Women's Affairs Commission Chief Shireen Huq confirmed that their reform proposals include recognising unpaid care and domestic work and assessing its monetary value in economic calculations.

Naila Kabear, feminist economist and emeritus professor of Gender and Development, however, argued that GDP measurement is flawed as it ignores the billions of hours of unpaid care work mostly done by women.

GDP only counts goods and services that are bought and sold, failing to recognise essential activities like childcare, housework, and elder care.

As a result, nearly 90 billion hours of unpaid care work worldwide go unaccounted for, even though society would collapse without it, she mentioned in her paper “Radical Pathways Beyond GDP: Why and how we need to pursue feminist and decolonial alternatives urgently”, published by Oxfam.

Kabeer highlighted alternative ways to measure progress, focusing on well-being, social justice, and sustainability rather than just economic output.

