

Domestic Work and Gender Inequality: A Sociological Perspective with Focus on India

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Abstract

Domestic work presents distinct and persistent challenges for women due to its deeply gendered nature and structural invisibility. Social norms have historically positioned domestic labour as a natural responsibility of women, resulting in an unequal division of labour within households, irrespective of women's participation in paid employment. This work is largely unpaid and excluded from formal economic accounting, leading to its systematic undervaluation despite its essential role in sustaining households and enabling broader economic productivity. The continuous and repetitive nature of domestic tasks contributes to significant time poverty among women, particularly those who simultaneously engage in paid work, thereby creating a dual burden that intensifies physical fatigue and emotional stress. In addition to performing routine household chores, women are expected to undertake caregiving and emotional labour, which involves sustained attentiveness, empathy, and responsibility, further compounding psychological strain. Moreover, women bear a disproportionate share of cognitive labour, including planning, organizing, and managing household needs, a form of mental work that remains largely unrecognized yet significantly contributes to stress and burnout. The absence of social protection, labour rights, and institutional support for domestic work exacerbates women's vulnerability, limiting their access to education, career advancement, leisure, and overall well-being. Collectively, these factors reinforce gender inequality by constraining women's economic autonomy and perpetuating the intergenerational transmission of unequal gender roles.

Keywords: domestic work, gender inequality, unpaid labour, India, feminist theory, cognitive labour

1. Introduction

From the earliest stages of human society, women have been predominantly engaged in domestic work. Over time, a social belief emerged—often treated as a natural or normative arrangement—that men should participate in external economic activities while women should manage household responsibilities. This gender-based division of labour has been deeply embedded in the economic structures of most societies (ILO, 2013). Women's domestic roles primarily consist of unpaid labour, which is essential not only for household survival but also for the continuous reproduction of society itself. Although domestic work does not appear to generate direct economic value, the smooth functioning of families and societies would be impossible without it (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Despite its critical contribution, such labour remains largely unrecognized and undervalued within conventional economic frameworks.

Although gradual changes in gender roles are evident in contemporary societies, both globally and in India, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of domestic and caregiving responsibilities (UN Women, 2021). In many cases, even when women participate in paid employment outside the home, they remain fully responsible for household work. In traditionally structured societies such as India, despite the increasing participation of both men and women in the workforce, employed women are still expected to manage domestic duties as an obligation (National Sample Survey Organization, 2019).

This dual burden—balancing professional responsibilities alongside household management—creates significant physical and psychological stress for women. As a result, many women find it difficult to devote adequate time and energy to career advancement, effective time management, and childcare responsibilities. This persistent imbalance highlights the structural challenges women face in reconciling paid employment with unpaid domestic labour (Benería & Sen, 1981).

Defining Domestic Work

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines domestic work as “work in or for a household, with domestic workers being persons in an employment relationship performing these tasks for remuneration, emphasizing that the work is for a third-party household” (ILO, 2011, p. 5). This definition underscores that domestic work is both productive and integral to social reproduction, while simultaneously highlighting the vulnerability of domestic workers and the importance of regulatory frameworks to protect their rights.

The Problem

Globally, an estimated 67 million domestic workers form a significant part of the informal workforce. Among them, approximately 80% are women, making domestic work highly gendered and disproportionately burdensome (ILO, 2013). These workers often operate in private households without clear employment contracts, leaving them excluded from labour protections and exposing them to physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, trafficking, and bonded labour (CHRI, 2018). Many domestic workers lack access to rest days, sick leave, and healthcare, which compounds their vulnerability and reinforces gendered inequities.

Domestic Work and Gender Equality

International initiatives, such as UN Women’s Fund for Gender Equality (FGE), have recognized the importance of domestic work within the broader gender equality agenda. Since 2009, the FGE has supported numerous projects focused on domestic workers, representing over 25% of its active portfolio (UN Women, 2021). These programs underscore the growing emphasis on formal recognition of domestic work and the need for policies that empower women economically and socially.

In India, cooperation among states and the central government is critical for addressing the challenges faced by domestic workers. A draft Model Act could be legislated by the Parliament and adapted by states according to local conditions (CHRI, 2018). Furthermore, the government should formulate a binding National Policy on Domestic Workers rather than relying solely on general guidelines (CHRI, 2018).

The government has developed an Integrated National Plan of Action against Trafficking, which includes remedial measures such as Integrated Anti-Trafficking Units and Anti-Trafficking nodal cells. However,

comprehensive legislation on labour trafficking remains necessary to protect domestic workers effectively (CHRI, 2018). Additionally, reviewing the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, could improve complaint mechanisms for domestic workers (CHRI, 2018). Supporting organizations that represent domestic workers and encouraging collective action is essential for improving their bargaining power and reducing vulnerability.

Sociological Analysis

From a feminist theoretical perspective, domestic work exemplifies structural gender inequality, reinforcing patriarchal norms and limiting women's autonomy (Benería & Sen, 1981). Marxist theory situates domestic work as part of the reproduction of labour power, arguing that unpaid household labour sustains capitalist economies by indirectly supporting paid labour (Marx, 1867/1990). Weberian analysis highlights the bureaucratic invisibility of domestic work and the social stratification that reinforces gendered labour divisions (Weber, 1922/1978). Durkheimian theory emphasizes the moral and social functions of domestic work, suggesting that its undervaluation can weaken social cohesion and intergenerational transmission of norms (Durkheim, 1893/2014). These perspectives collectively underscore why domestic work is both socially essential and a site of structural inequality.

Policy Implications

To address domestic workers' vulnerabilities, India requires comprehensive policy and legal frameworks. Enacting a binding National Policy on Domestic Workers, standardizing labour protections across states, and ensuring mechanisms for grievance redressal are crucial steps. Strengthening civil society organizations to encourage collective bargaining and sustaining programs that integrate domestic workers into social protection schemes are also necessary. Finally, public awareness campaigns and gender-sensitive labour reforms could help redistribute domestic responsibilities more equitably, reducing the dual burden on women.

Conclusion

Domestic work is central to both household functioning and the broader economy, yet it remains undervalued, unpaid, and disproportionately performed by women. In India, structural inequalities, lack of labour protections, and social norms reinforce the gendered nature of domestic work, creating significant physical, emotional, and cognitive burdens for women. Policy interventions, including binding national legislation, anti-trafficking measures, and support for domestic worker organizations, are essential to reduce vulnerability and enhance gender equity. From a sociological perspective, understanding domestic work through feminist, Marxist, Weberian, and Durkheimian lenses provides insight into its social, economic, and moral significance. Recognition, reduction, and redistribution of domestic labour are key strategies for promoting gender equality, economic justice, and the well-being of women across India.

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