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# Unpaid Household Work: A Feminist View Point

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## ABSTRACT

*The very root of familial ideology can be described to contain a set of values pertaining to kinship & household structures namely the patriarchal nuclear family and the sexual division of labour. Herein women are constructed as wives, mothers, responsible for child rearing as their role was seen as natural and biological for the purposes of procreation and domestic labour. Men on the other hand, men are being constructed as husbands and fathers, are responsible for familial welfare. This exact sexual division of labour gave rise to the concept of family wage that propagated men to be able to earn a wage that was sufficient to support the family. It was actually intended to release women from dual responsibilities of earning for the family and doing household work. But this instead had negative implications and created a negative narrative. It created economic dependency of women on their husbands, amplifying patriarchal structures further.*

*As a result, women remained confined within these private domesticated spheres, which over centuries, led to a gender disparity between the exposure and growth of men and women. The concept of house work that had genesis in the familial ideology and family wage has been generalised from a viewpoint that household work does not require as much labour as going out and working in the external corporate environment. Demographics in India show a range of familial structures belonging to lower and middle economic classes, wherein a majority of married women are house makers or housewives as the nomenclature goes, making the wife to become a direct dependant on the husband for all her needs. This arrangement promotes abuse, violence and mistreatment that can be predominantly understood from theories of dependency and exchange theory of violence. Underlying factors that aid in women taking the role of house maker or house wife may be choice, but are usually motivated by lack of access to education, gender roles that confine women to the household, unsafe and unsuitable working environments, cultural, familial and societal as well as biological pressure.*

*The change this paper seeks to bring about is one wherein the work done by one half of the society is granted due legal, political, economic recognition and safeguarding, without having to bear disproportionate costs that the other half does not have to. It deals with the central idea of whether housework done by housewives can be given tangible and monetary*

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*credit in the form of paid work promoting substantive equality and challenging the familial ideology of division of labour. It seeks to challenge the cult of domesticity embedded by virtues of piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness, restricting a woman's contribution in household chores without regard from a feminist viewpoint.*

**Keywords:** *feminism, gender equality, women, leadership, equity.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Familial ideology characteristically contains a set of values which mainly pertain to kinship & household structures. Namely, the patriarchal nuclear family and the sexual division of labour. In these household structures, a woman's role is constructed as a wife and a mother, who is responsible for child bearing. This particular role was seen and developed from a natural and biological perspective, constructed for the purposes of procreation, nurturing and domestic labour. Men on the other hand, their roles being constructed as husbands and fathers thus being the dominant members of the family as they are responsible for familial welfare and being the primary bread winners. The sexual division of labour gave rise to the emergence of family wage that propagated men to be able to earn a wage that was sufficient to support his family. It intended to release women from dual responsibilities of earning for the family and doing household work. But this instead had negative implications. It created economic dependency of women on their husbands and advanced patriarchal paradigms in society. This arrangement promotes abuse and violence that can be predominantly understood from theories of dependency and exchange theory of violence.

Familial ideology deals with the central idea of whether housework done by housewives can be given tangible credit in the form of paid work, promoting substantive equality and challenging the familial ideology of division of labour. It seeks to challenge the cult of domesticity embedded by virtues of piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness, constraining women's contribution in household chores without regard from a feminist viewpoint.

## **II. THEORETICAL APPROACH EXPLAINED**

Sexism is one of the key elements that motivates violence, both fundamentally being closer to economic and cultural roles. Dependency theory of violence towards women plays a vital role in explaining how a lack of resources and opportunities ultimately makes women dependent on their male partners. This further perpetuates patriarchy induced victimization of women - the whole damsel in distress role which further emphasizes the idea that men also have to be the 'savior's' of women. Here undue advantage of their dependency on men is taken as well as

glorified.<sup>2</sup> Feminist theory identifies patriarchy and the role of power dynamics as the root cause of domestic violence, whereby males do whatever is needed to exercise control over women and keep them subservient using violence is one possibility.<sup>3</sup> Fixing roles to respective genders can be long traced back to historical times wherein the men went on hunting expeditions and war awhile the females due to frequent biological changes in feminine body being pregnancy and menstruation reduced their capability to participate in those activities. Thus began the process of gendering spaces assigning public space to men and private realm to women.<sup>4</sup> In the Indian context this was further motivated by religious texts stating women as unfit individuals in the public sphere. Most women in India who come from varying familial backgrounds are victims to cultural and gender inequality, a lack of proper education, a lack of safety and security at workplaces, and a lack of other forms of opportunities that retains them from joining the mainstream workforce in public spheres. This mostly materializes mainly in the form of economic dependency while running the household and conducting daily chores. The patriarchal structure thus dominates mainly by emphasizing the sexist tendencies present in the division of labour, failing to shed light on any dignity and recognition to the labour input of women. Not only are they dependent for economic resources but are also denied any social recognition, validation, remuneration and dignity of labour. They are often tagged as ‘economically unproductive individuals’ in society. Hence, arises a need to address this form of violence stemming from economic dependency, in spite of putting in labour to run daily household activities that receive no tangible form of credit and importance in monetary terms.

### **III. REMUNERATING UNPAID FORM OF HOUSEWORK**

Introducing a structure that should be introduced by the United States, which primarily focuses on paying housewives for the labour they put into managing these numerous household activities sheds light on a solution to solve gender based unequal economic remuneration and dignity of labour. The first benefit that these women gain, is the ability to voice out violence and systematic discrimination faced mainly within the four walls of the house, by providing scope for an alternative lifestyle that is economically viable and possible due to this allowance.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rodríguez-Menés, Jorge, and Ana Safranoff. “Violence against Women in Intimate Relations: A Contrast of Five Theories.” *European Journal of Criminology*, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Mukesh Eswaran and Nisha Malhotra, *Domestic Violence and Women’s Autonomy: Evidence from India*, University of British Columbia. June 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Shreyasi Ghosh. *Beyond Spaces: Debunking Public/Private Divide in Understanding violence Against Women in India*. *International Journal of Gender Studies*. 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Lizzy Davies, Italian campaigners call for housewives to be paid a salary *The Guardian*(2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/07/italian-campaigners-housewives-paid-salary> (last visited Mar 29, 2019).

Previously, the lack of economic independence along with the absence of alternative options, majorly demotivated and derailed women to report violence which was committed against them. Conservatives would point out that paying housewives for their labour would diminish the concept of caring and nurturing the family out of love and affection and that those emotions would be sabotaged. Activities performed under the scope of work can be broadly classified as own-use production services, voluntary work of services and third-party criterion. Own-use production services include all those activities that provide service for final use that may include cooking, cleaning to childcare services. Voluntary work for services can be distinguished from the former by segregating the nature of intended recipient such as cooking meals for the benefit of a non-family member.

A critical element of the definition of work from the 19th ICLS is the concept of the third party criterion. Hawrylyshyn (1977) describes this in a form that appeals for its combination of economic theory guidance and common sense. Hawrylyshyn regards unpaid household service work as “those economic services produced in the household and outside the market, but which could be produced by a third person hired on the market without changing their utility to the members of the household”<sup>6</sup> thus making it easier to distinguish whether the activity was done out of labour or for leisure. The primary obstacle that lies in realising and setting a fixed amount can be solved by computing the amount according to the minimum or basic wage rate.

There are two main choices here: the opportunity cost approach- valuing time at the wage rate of the person performing the work – or the replacement cost – valuing the work at the wage rates of professionals in the market. Within the replacement cost approach, further options are available.<sup>7</sup>

All work can be valued using generalist wages (e.g., housekeeper), or specialist wages for each individual activity (e.g., chef wages for preparing meals, child-minder or nanny wages for looking after children etc.).<sup>8</sup> Australia, Mexico and China have come up with a new hybrid approach that pays generalist wages for household activities and specialized wages for complex work. Although assigning a fixed wage for a long period of time for the activities engaged by the housewife fails to appreciate and thus provide social mobility to its importance in realizing dignity of labour, economic independence, breaking shackles of violence, tainted marriages and uplifting debt-ridden families. Recognising and remunerating housewives for their housework

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<sup>6</sup> Methodological approaches, Guide on Valuing Unpaid Household Service Work, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

<https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/publications/2018/ECECESSTAT20173.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> id.

<sup>8</sup> id at 5.

that contributes to about 80% of the day and approximately 39% of India's GDP calls for a significant economic inclusion.<sup>9</sup>

#### **IV. INDIA'S TAKE ON PAYING HOUSEWIVES**

“Indian women are marginalized in decision-making and leadership at a very early age in their lives. A variety of processes that begin in infancy interplays to further such marginalization. In contrast to boys, girls are encouraged to play passive and nurturing roles and given little opportunity to make decisions or develop leadership skills outside the familial environment. Within the family as well, most women have very little say in decisions affecting their own lives, even after marriage are made to stick to gender roles of caring and indulging in household activities.”<sup>10</sup> As the basic tenet of feminism lies in uprooting the patriarchal structure from the root cause, it reaffirms the principle of subjecting women to violence and disregarding their input in all kinds of decision-making processes to establish their dominance on the pretext of being the sole bread earner in the family. Discrimination towards women in maximum components of India emerges from the social and religious role of women in society. As such, in lots of elements of India, women are not considered to be on par with men thus occupying a lower status inside the circle of relatives and social network, which consequentially restricts equal possibility of their access to education, economic possibilities, and mobility.

Discrimination additionally limits women's picks and freedom. Those choices are in addition structured on structural factors like caste and class. In September 2012, Women and Child Development Minister, Krishna Tirth proposed the idea of quantifying and valuing the work done by housewives to be remunerated by the husbands with a view to bring in economic autonomy and dignity of labour in the familial structure to mitigate subordination of women in households<sup>11</sup>. The core of the policy lies in understanding whether this kind of an arrangement is progressive or regressive. Prima facie it seeks to economically empower women and elevate their societal status, but critically analyzing it leaves us with the same issue of dominance we seek to diminish. Seeking salary from the male partner entitles him at a higher position to take advantage of the same by converting an undervalued housewife to an undervalued housekeeper. It further gives birth to an employer-employee relationship where aspects of keeping a check on the work, auditing, and firing in case of low quality of work arises. These aspects seek to

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<sup>9</sup> Unpaid Domestic Labour And The Invisibilisation Of Women's Work, FEMINISM IN INDIA(2018), <https://feminisminindia.com/2017/09/04/unpaid-domestic-labour/> (last visited Mar 29, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Mamoni Kalita , Aviral Kumar Tiwari. The state of Indian housewives' participation in domestic decision making and opposition of domestic violence. Malaysian Journal of Society and Space. 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Government considering salary for housewives from husbands - Times of India, THE TIMES OF INDIA(2012), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/edit-page/Government-considering-salary-for-housewives-from-husbands/articleshow/16341380.cms> (last visited Mar 30, 2019).

make the women invariably amplifies more dependency on the male counterpart and does not seek to address single women running the household and men with low income paying jobs. Thus, it is important to recognize the labour put in by homemakers as an economic activity and seek remuneration directly from the state to abolish the social stigmas which are attached to the work of housewives.

## V. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Division of labour between paid and unpaid work has deep roots in gender roles since historical times. Due to cultural, economic, social, religious, caste factors women are often seen responsible for handling family and household activities or domestic work. The undervaluation and gender biased nature of this labour has posed threat to housewives, making their contribution invisible in the society as compared to the “conventional” bread winner of the household. Policies such as monetizing this unpaid form of labour and recognising it as an economic activity by the state should be considered, researched and implemented upon so that it clearly recognises women’s diversified roles in the society.<sup>12</sup>

Amount of money can be paid by calculating average wage rate using generalist, specialist or hybrid approach by classifying the nature of work involved. The same can be achieved through education to promote gender equality and revolutionize gender stereotypes, by educating women and creating a sense of realization that receiving remuneration for the activities done by them in the household is rightfully entitling them their share and promoting gender equality through unbiased gendered division of labour. All societies depend on the family to fulfil many essential functions, including care for the young, the old, and the sick. Despite the existence of a welfare state in Britain, for example, the family remains a major provider of welfare services, and the same can be seen throughout the world. Attempting to turn over all the social services provided for free by women to the private realm would be wasteful, unaffordable, and harmful to the family<sup>13</sup>. There is an emerging need to address the gender perpetuation of public and private realms that sees its origin from ancient times to religious scriptures in the Indian context. Implementing and recognising household work as economic activity would not only significantly contribute to the GDP but also address social stigmas attached to being a housewife. Making it a paid form of labour would motivate a paradigm shift and change the way public and private spheres are viewed from a gendered lens and cause a significant mindset

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<sup>12</sup> Natasha Choudhary, Asuthosh Tripathy, Beena George. Women’s Economic Contribution through Their Unpaid Household Work: The Case of India. (last visited Mar 30, 2019) [https://healthbridge.ca/images/uploads/library/India\\_summary\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://healthbridge.ca/images/uploads/library/India_summary_report_final.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> id.

shift in a gender biased society. Thus, it is essential to note the fluid change from recognising household work as an economic activity from private to public sphere. Unless a change in the perspective with respect to household chores like cooking, cleaning, caring for others is not emphasized enough for it to gain importance as valuable contribution with economic returns, eliminating dependency and establishing a platform towards gender equality is a farfetched dream.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Id at 10.



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