

The Price of Women's Unpaid Domestic Labour: An Analysis of How the COVID-19 Pandemic has Impacted the Division of Unpaid Labour in and Outside the Home

Samia Arya

The British School, New Delhi
samiaarya15@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine, if you will, a scenario in which an entire sector of labourers put in 12-16 hours of work per day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. And yet, this work was never paid; nor was it considered in calculating a country's GDP.

The irony is that this sector exists. For a significant portion of India's population, unpaid domestic labour forms the bulk of their daily work; and yet, it is neither compensated, nor assigned economic value, due to the narrowly defined scope of economic activity, as laid out in the formula used in the national income for accounting (CFI, 2021)

According to the World Economic Forum, "the proportion of unpaid work per day is far higher for women than men globally. In the case of India on average 66 percent of women's work is unpaid". (Samuel, 2019).

The traditional Indian household almost takes for granted that certain jobs within the household – domestic upkeep, cooking, cleaning, and childcare – fall within the purview of women only, while men are the conventional breadwinners. Regardless of the hours women put into this domestic labour, the work is often dismissed as a set of daily chores or a duty, and, therefore, is not accounted for in either the country's GDP or employment metrics. The result is that a massive portion of the work done by women in India goes unrecognised.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns mean that more people are spending time at home. Subsequently, there has been an increase in domestic work, but that work is also increasingly visible.

Through secondary research, survey and interview, this paper aims to analyse how the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has contributed to the amount and recognition of women's

unpaid domestic labour. In quantifying this work, this paper aims to contribute to larger discourse on women's unpaid work, which is especially pertinent in the Indian context, where women's labour force participation rate is very low.

2. BACKGROUND

In India, merely 25 percent of women are engaged in the workforce. (Ranz, 2021) Within that small percentage, almost 70 percent are engaged in agricultural activities that are informal in nature, with little to no economic remuneration nor recognition.

Demographic factors, mainly fertility rates and family structure, play a crucial role in determining the status of women as unpaid workers. However, lack of access to basic infrastructure, especially safe water, sanitation, energy for lighting and fuel, transport and childcare have a strong influence on the time spent for unpaid work.

Moreover, the failure of the state to provide alternatives for care and domestic assistance increases the burden of unpaid domestic and agricultural work on women. In this scenario, women turn to roles such as self-employment, home-based or part-time work; and casual, irregular, seasonal jobs in the informal sector, which tend to provide poor remuneration without any kind of social security.

Over a period of time, attempts have been made to incorporate women's domestic labour into the domain of economic activity that is accounted for, as well as to analyse it as a form of recognised labour. One approach, known as the "triple R" approach, focuses on recognition, reduction, and redistribution. (Hirway, 2015) It, firstly, recognises the opportunity cost that women must forego, when choosing unpaid domestic labour over other forms or paid work. Second, it advocates for the reduction of solely women doing household work, and calls for

a more equitable distribution of labour across genders. Finally, it argues that domestic work is separable from the worker and could be done by others; therefore, unpaid domestic work should be redistributed between men and women.

The burden of domestic work, borne largely by women, also poses structural challenges. It impedes entry into the labour market and restricts women's income, financial independence and earning potential. Low female workforce participation acts as a disincentive for the uptake of education and skill development, further augmenting their disadvantages in the labour market and reinforcing the gender division of labour.

The predominance of gender-biased views regarding women's roles in the household, economy, society, and political landscape of India are major impediments in changing the working status of women. Neither redistribution, recognition, nor reduction, on their own, are means for women to achieve a high economic status—because women's current low status is part and parcel of their disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and household work.

Within the household, the 'redistribution' of unpaid work requires a paradigm shift in the prevailing patriarchal norms and customs. Further, in Indian society, the 'recognition' of

women's roles in nourishing families is often denied and undervalued. The magnitude of unpaid domestic work has become even more arduous because the Indian economy has neither recognised, reduced, nor redistributed unpaid domestic work. This fault line continues to perpetuate women's lack of access to paid employment and women's low social status, education levels, and wealth.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To gain insight into women's paid versus unpaid labour, and how this has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, research was conducted both in the form of survey and interview.

Surveys were anonymous, and were shared using Google Forms. 20 people responded to the survey; 75% were female, and 25% male. Results and findings are detailed below.

To augment the survey findings, individual interviews were also conducted. Though the interviews were not anonymous, interviewees were informed that their results would remain anonymous, to prompt authentic, unbiased responses. In total, seven people were interviewed. 4 were male, and 3 were female. Interview responses are recorded below.

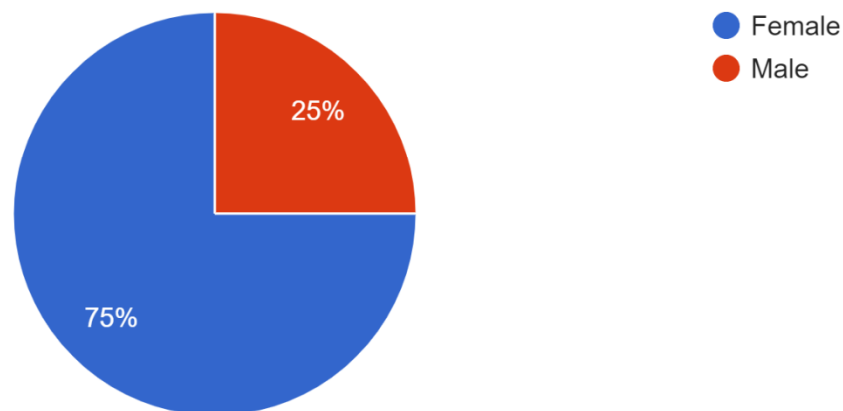
4. SURVEY & INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Survey Results:

Out of the 20 respondents surveyed, 75% were female, and 25% male.

What is your gender?

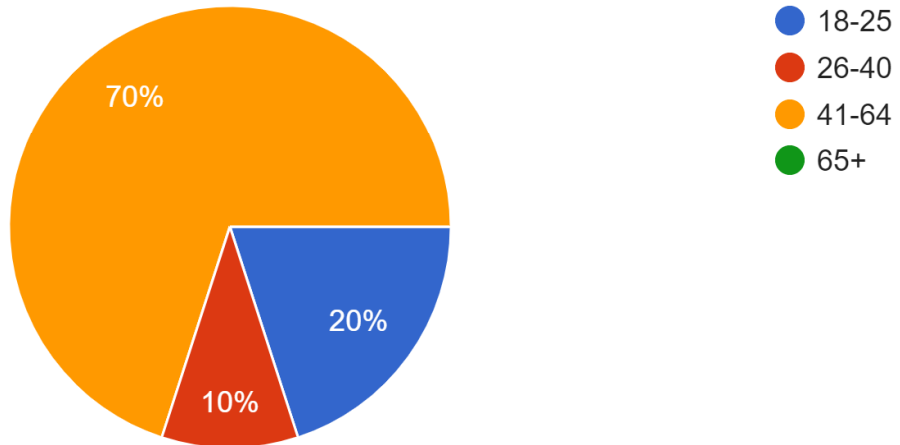
20 responses



70 % of the respondents fell into the middle-age bracket (41-60 years old).

What is your age?

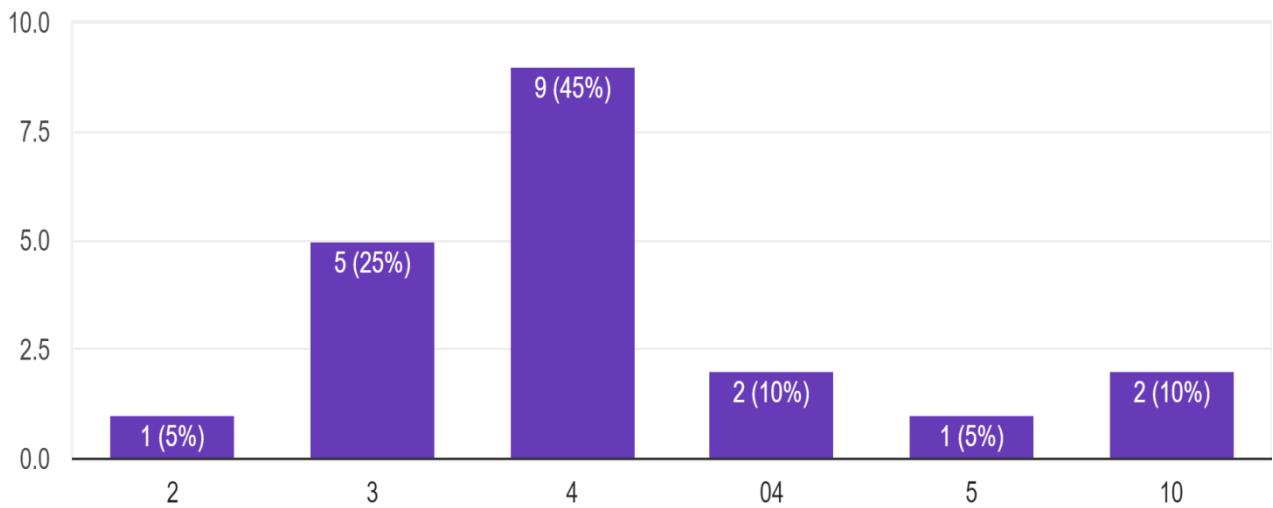
20 responses



A majority of respondents reported either 3 or 4 family members in their household.

Number of family members residing in your home.

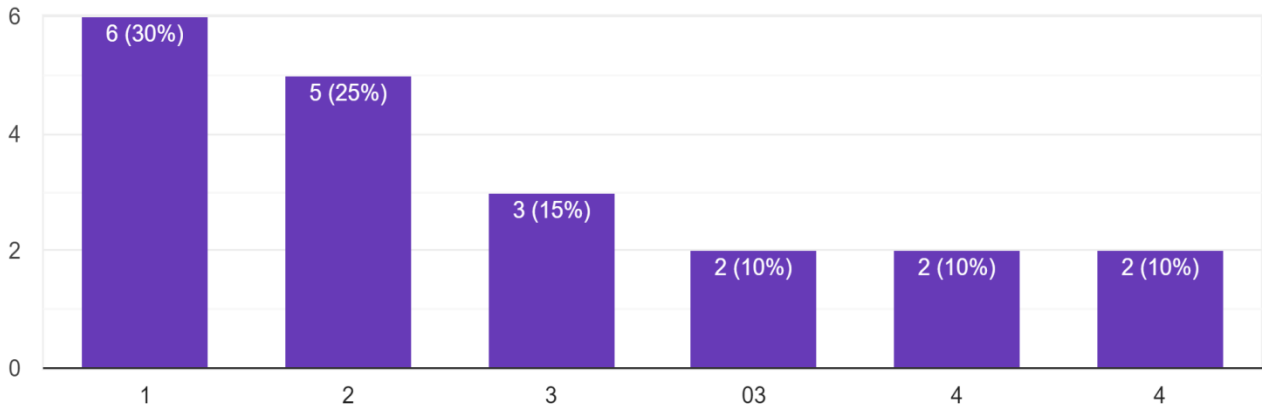
20 responses



30% of households had one earning family member, while 25% had two earning household members.

Number of working family members in your household.

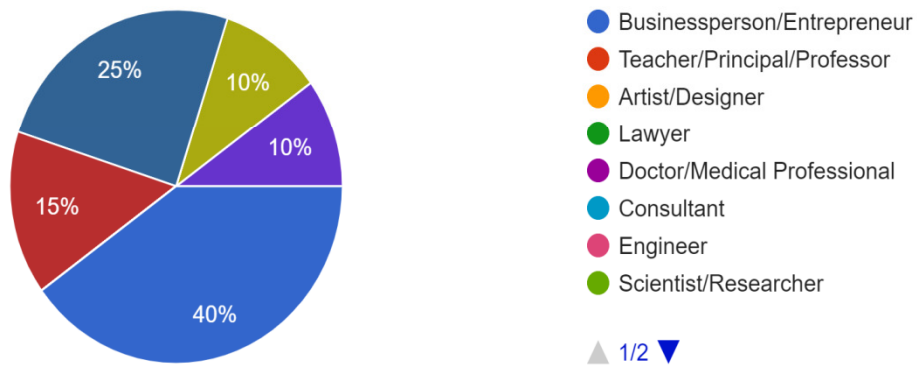
20 responses



Occupations were diverse, but the largest number of respondents (40%) reported being entrepreneurs/business owners.

What is your occupation?

20 responses

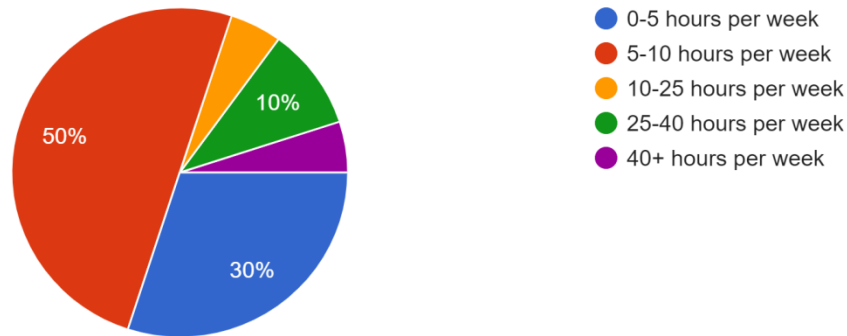


The most interesting findings came about when analysing how COVID impacted unpaid work.

In normal circumstances, 50% of respondents indicated that they spend 5-10 hours per week on unpaid domestic work. 30% spent 0-5 hours per week, and 5% spent 40+ hours per week.

In an average week, how many hours do you devote to unpaid work inside the home?

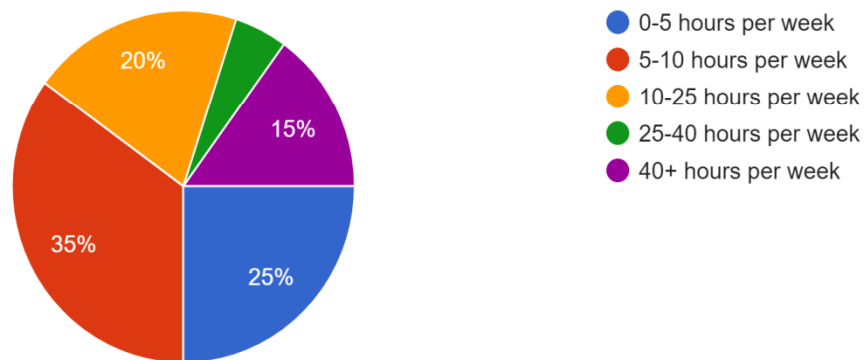
20 responses



During the COVID-19 lockdowns, however, these numbers shifted, with only 25% spending 0-5 hours per week on unpaid domestic work; 35% spending 5-10 hours; 20% spending 10-25 hours, and 15% spending 40+ hours.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, how many hours per week did you devote to unpaid work inside the home?

20 responses



This indicates that COVID-19 and lockdowns did impact domestic unpaid labour, particularly for women, who were expected to devote more time to online schooling, and who could no longer redistribute household chores, without the availability of full and part-time staff.

5. INTERVIEW QUESTION SET:

1. What differences, if any, have you noticed in your work within the home before, during, and after lockdown?
2. Would you say the pandemic has increased or decreased the amount of work you do (paid or unpaid) on a daily basis?
3. Does anyone support you in your work in or outside of your home? If so, who?
4. During the pandemic, have you had to either turn down work or quit a job?

5. During the pandemic, have you had to take on additional work?
6. Do you think other women share your same experience during the pandemic and lockdown?
7. Overall, has the pandemic been a positive, negative or neutral experience for you?

1st response -**Male, Age Range 60-70**

1. Lesser during lockdown, a bit better after lockdown. Very quiet during lockdown, a bit more activity.
2. Increases at home decreased at the office.
3. No, no one supports me in my work in or outside of my home.
4. Yes, I have. In my opinion, the pandemic has severely affected the global economy and financial markets.
5. No
6. Yes, I believe that every individual has had a different experience. Both men and women have had to face the implications that the pandemic has brought. Though, as per news reports, the unemployment rate for women has drastically increased, taking a toll on their mental health, therefore, working from home should be encouraged for women in the lower classes.
7. Negative in terms of business, negative impact on mental health and overall the pandemic has created a horrifying atmosphere.

2nd response -**Male, Age Range 60-70**

1. Working with ease and same efficiency. I am happier working from home with so many efficient platforms like Zoom, Teams, Google, making it easier to connect to a larger audience.
2. It has drastically decreased the work.
3. Since I am old and am advised to stay home and take precautions I am unable to work outside of the home. However, since I have been running a family business for the past three decades, I get supported by family who are in the business.

4. No, at present, the main objective for my company is to be able to recover from the debts incurred during the lockdown.
5. No, however, due to the additional free time I got during the lockdown, I began to engage in different activities in order to keep myself at peace and occupied.
6. Same experience for women, however, in my opinion their work increases as they look after their households as well.
7. Negative overall, but positive to be with the family and spend quality with my loved ones.

3rd response -**Male, Age Range 20-30**

1. I noticed that I have started putting work to play as the lockdown began for me. I started to introspect and realized that - less is more. Hence, I started to focus on things one at a time, rather than "multitasking".
2. The pandemic has definitely increased the work I do (unpaid), for the simple reason- I feel in charge of my doings, and personally, I tend to work more when I am wholeheartedly responsible for everyday activities/work rather than combined efforts.
3. Nobody in particular supports me in my work, but colleagues and friends do provide me with emotional support from time to time, which is what I need at times - as I do believe in being emotionally and mentally aware of your consciousness at all times.
4. No, I started working during the pandemic- so I have actually gained work during these distressing times.
5. No, no additional work has been added to my schedule.
6. Experiences are rooted from outlooks according to me. My outlook has definitely brought about a change in me, and I hope for all the other folks out there as well!
7. The pandemic has definitely been a bittersweet mix of negative and positive. But, I'd have to say I would lean towards it being positive as I got a chance to dig deeply within, and in today's date- with one's hectic schedules, such moments are rare.

4th response -**Woman, Age Range 20-30**

1. Before the lockdown, work was going normally with no added stress about any kind of virus. During lockdown working from within your home boundaries is easier but it can be demotivating in a few days. The brief period after the first lockdown was good but work pace was still slow.
2. The pandemic, personally for me, has increased my work time as I think it's given me more time to introspect and analyse my capabilities and weaknesses.
3. I have a great support system in my family and friends, which I appreciate and I'm grateful for.
4. I've quit a job to start something of my own.
5. No
6. Everyone has different experiences but in a situation like this it's not rare to find someone else who may be a complete stranger to be going through the same experience as you.
7. The pandemic has been a neutral experience for me, where I have days that I feel extremely unmotivated and low, but there are also days where I am functioning at my best ability.

5th response -**Male, Age Range 20-30**

1. Working from home has its own challenges, especially when your work involves interacting with so many people on a daily basis. While we're lucky enough to have zoom it can not replace face to face interactions.
2. It's difficult to give things a personal touch. Working in the field of psychology, I've noticed clients show more improvement and engage better when sessions are in person in comparison to online.
3. We work as a team, so it is important that the clinical team stays in touch throughout the day. We give updates via our WhatsApp group.
4. No
5. No
6. Not sure

7. While the pandemic has had its negative impact on the society as a whole. I have made constant efforts to engage myself in activities that keep me busy and positive. Being in lockdown I got to work on myself as a whole, practice self care activities and use my free time to chat with friends and watch movies. I would say it's been a neutral experience, with its highs and lows.

6th response -**Woman, Age Range 30-40**

1. There have been multiple changes that I have witnessed. The pandemic has altered the concept of conventional work. Working online at home can have its perks, however, after a certain amount of time it can be draining, disincentivizing a person to work, decreasing the efficiency of one's work.
2. Definitely increased. I had to work longer hours during my internship than I would've had to if I was to go to the office. My course load in classes has been higher than it was for in person classes. Professors have been giving extra assignments in place of participation credit. However in terms of motivation and willingness to complete my work the pandemic has definitely decreased the amount of effort I put into completing tasks.
3. While professors have assigned extra work, they have also been mindful of class material being harder to grasp via online lectures and so they have been very good with offering extra help. Other than being in the same boat, my friend group has been a great source of support and comfort in getting through studying and working remotely and the stress that comes with it.
4. I had to let go of a research assistant position because it required interacting with people in a small lab due to it being unsafe.
5. I did but it wasn't due to the pandemic.
6. Definitely, women have to work much harder to have their presence being acknowledged in a professional and academic setting as is. Having to do the same remotely has been a challenge and I believe a lot of women have faced this issue unfortunately.
7. The pandemic has been a negative experience overall. Despite the time I got to spend with my family it was heartbreaking watching the tragedies the pandemic brought upon unfold. I had to attend a semester at university from a different country, I'm joining the workforce at a very bad time for the job market and

the stress of loved ones catching the virus has been mentally exhausting.

7th response-

Woman, Age Range 40-50

1. Work has been very erratic due to the frequent lockdowns. As a business owner I was not prepared to deal with a calamity of this scale.
2. Pandemic has increased the work on a daily basis. Also some unnecessary follow ups.
3. Yes, I have a huge team of people working in my company who have been of great support during these precarious times.
4. No
5. No, however, I did engage in certain activities, like yoga, painting, cooking etc. in order to enhance my skills and engage in activities I am passionate about.
6. As a woman myself, I have shared a similar experience to men. The stress, workload and uncertainty has negatively impacted my mental health. However, I do believe that women working in the rural areas of our country are suffering due to the added pressures the pandemic has brought.
7. Neutral, as we as human beings forgot the joy the small things bring to our life's and started to appreciate the small things in life. More family time and time spent with closed ones.

Supporting one and other, it has taught us to be more empathetic towards people and to be humble and grateful.

6. DISCUSSION & ANALYSIS

The interviews conducted helped to give greater detail and nuance to the survey findings. They echoed the same findings - that domestic unpaid labour has increased, primarily for women, due to added responsibilities of online schooling, childcare, and healthcare of elderly relatives, alongside fewer opportunities to redistribute the workload.

The interviews also brought forth a new perspective - people were more deeply engaged in domestic duties, because the lockdown resulted in fewer paid opportunities to work outside of the home. Even for individuals who continued paid work from home, they reported a lack of purpose and motivation while working remotely.

7. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered the way we work. Work from home and online schooling, initially considered temporary measures, have now become the new normal. But along with this comes fundamental changes in the way men, and especially women, work for and without wages.

Recognition of women's unpaid domestic labour remains one of the most crucial tools for empowerment. Acknowledgement of domestic work as a form of economic labour will allow women to not only contribute monetarily to their households, but also to the overall welfare of the nation. It will also be a marked step towards greater gender equality between men and women.

If recognised as work, this arena of unpaid domestic labour, dominated almost entirely by women, can become a foothold for many women; a sector where they have some degree of parity with other earning members of the household. And this equality, beginning at the household level, becomes a fundamental building block for a more equal society.

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