

Choice or duty – experts want government survey to check on women’s unpaid care work

In 2024, females in the 15-29 age bracket spent an average of 164 minutes a day taking care of their family without getting paid, up from 154 minutes in 2019. For males, the increase over the same five years was a mere two minutes to 77 minutes

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Unpaid care work is seen as one of the most important factors that stop women from working (Representative image/File)

Experts have called on the Indian government to find out if the unpaid work performed by women in taking care of their children and elders is because they want to do it or they feel it is their responsibility. The suggestion was made at a panel discussion held on Monday in

Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, at the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation's (MoSPI) data-user conference on the Time Use Survey.

“While government schemes increasingly recognise women's unpaid caregiving, provision may be made in TUS schedule to capture whether women are doing these unpaid work out of preference or under any obligation,” a statement by the statistics ministry said at the conclusion of the data-user conference on Monday.

MoSPI's Time Use Survey shows how much time Indians spend on different activities, such as learning, paid work, unpaid domestic work, and caring for household members. However, the survey's primary aim is to measure participation of men and women in paid and unpaid activities.

‘Time poverty’ among women

Unpaid care work is seen as one of the most important factors that stop women from working. “This disproportionate burden of unpaid care work creates what is called ‘time poverty’, which inhibits women's ability to dedicate time to paid work and acquire the skills necessary to seek better job opportunities,” an Observer Research Foundation paper noted in 2022.

“Cross-country estimates in 2014 showed that a two-hour increase in unpaid labour commitments correlates with a decrease of 10 per cent in the FLFPR (Female Labour Force Participation Rate),” the paper, authored by Mitali Nikore, an economist, said.

India suffers from very low involvement of women in the workforce. As per the government's latest Periodic Labour Force Survey, the female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) in August was just 33.7 per cent for those aged 15 years and above compared to 77 per cent for males. For young females, or those in the 15-29 age bracket, the LFPR was even lower at 21.4 per cent. The same ratio for males was nearly three times higher at 60.7 per cent.

Rising unpaid care

As per the results of the latest Time Use Survey for 2024, released earlier this year in March, Indians who performed unpaid caregiving services for household members spent 116 minutes a day, or almost two hours, on the same. However, for females, the time spent was higher at 137 minutes, while it was much lower at 75 minutes for males.

What will be of concern to policymakers is that the amount of time spent by females, especially the youth, taking care of their family members has increased far more rapidly in the last five years than it has for males. In 2024, females in the 15-29 age bracket spent an

average of 164 minutes every day taking care of their family without getting paid, up from 154 minutes in 2019. For males, the increase over the same five years was a mere two minutes to 77 minutes.

Activities covered under unpaid caregiving include childcare and instruction, care for dependent adults, help to non-dependent adult household members, other related activities, travelling and accompanying goods or persons related to unpaid caregiving services for household members, and all care activities.

The aforementioned panel discussion also saw two other suggestions being made to the statistics ministry through the Time Use Survey. One, the ministry was called on to collect information on household members' digital access, distinguishing between shared and exclusive use and to assess its impact on individual time-use patterns. Second, the experts pushed for capturing women's passive or supervisory care needs. The panel discussion, titled 'Changing Patterns of Time Use, Care Work and Gender in a New Digital Era', included academics from Sonapat's SRM University, New [Delhi](#)'s Centre for Women's Development Studies, [Ahmedabad](#) University, and Thiruvananthapuram's Centre for Development Studies.

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