Now, experts seek to quantify the value of work done by homemakers

The National Sample Survey Office steps up efforts to ensure that women are paid what they deserve

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Gender inequality and the ghostly treatment given to household chores has been discussed and debated for decades. Sadly, the contribution made by women in their homes for the well-being of their families has never been recognised or acknowledged, neither by society nor the government.

The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO’s) decision to estimate the value of unpaid work, especially household chores by women, is, perhaps, the first step in registering the country’s unpaid labour.

Women, especially working professionals, have to master the art of multi-tasking to balance the household and a career. When they can’t, they quit the job and prioritise the family, as was the case with former IT professional Surabhi Rastogi

‘A lot of women sacrifice careers for their families’

WORKING WOMEN QUIT JOBS TO HANDLE HOUSEHOLD CHORES

“Work doesn’t end. My husband is mostly travelling, meaning I have to take care of everything at home — from caring for my father-in-law to cooking, cleaning and buying groceries, as well as attending to my eight-year-old child,” says 42-year-old homemaker, Gayathri P.

Her story resonates with many others. Surabhi Rastogi was compelled to leave her job with an IT company, as she urgently needed to take care of her son at home. “I did not have house help, hence, I had to leave the job. Also, the company I was working with did not offer flexible timings. So, there was no way out but quit,” she says. In between, she managed to do a makeup course, but has no time to pursue that either.

The VoiceNOW Survey 2018 found that 63% of women hold themselves back from top positions at work, as they find themselves embedded in a web of expectations and traditions. “The question we all should be asking is that why are women taking up all the care work, when men are right there within the same household? Of course, there are reasons such as social norms and structures. But if the very idea of men cooking, cleaning, washing and taking care of the elderly appears preposterous and unrealistic, then is it any wonder that that governments are dragging their feet on recognising
women’s labour within the household,” points out Niveditha Menon — Senior Research Advisor at the Centre for Budget and Policy Studies (CBPS), Bengaluru.

**Patriarchy to Blame for Years of Unaccounted Labour?**

“Women’s labour within the household is usually conflated with narratives of love and duty. Women’s role within the household is defined in such a manner that her hard work is deemed ‘natural’ and ‘normal’. If we are unable to engage within our own families, why this labour of love repeated, endless, mind-numbing and necessary. Thus, it’s hardly surprising that a national discourse has not been started, where we bring about accountability structures for ensuring relief for unpaid labour,” Niveditha further asserts.

**Women’s Labour Has Always Been Undervalued**

“There is wage disparity, while ‘volunteerism’ expected of women when they engage in any state-run or private enterprise — meaning women’s labour, even when it is counted in the traditional GDP framework, is grossly undervalued. The state is especially culpable in this matter,” says Niveditha.

Asha Ramesh, a gender and development activist, adds, “Women’s role in social production needs to be acknowledged as a key contributing factor to the nation’s development.”

**Create an Ecosystem for Women to Work and Pursue Their Dreams**

“If the government is willing to quantify this labour, there should also be focus on how to reduce that burden. The amount of time they spend in taking care of the elderly and children at home either results in reducing their daily wage or results in loss of pay at work. Women are dropping out of organised sector because of commitments at home. Either way, women are losing out on jobs,” says Asha. The government needs to make efforts to build structures, safety nets, policies and institutions that can ensure gender equality.

Rashmi Daga, the founder of one of India’s food-tech start-ups, ensured that she built a proper ecosystem around her, which helped her in her journey. “Not many women are encouraged to take up challenging roles. Women are taking up conservative roles as they age, whereas men are seen taking up challenging and demanding roles as they grow old. Why does that happen? I have been lucky enough in terms of pursuing my dreams. I have hired help for everything, and have created a successful ecosystem around me. But not many have that choice, and the reality is different for them,” says Rashmi.

**Homemakers Should Be Made Financially Independent**

“The quantification should happen in such a way that an amount can be earmarked for her and at her disposal. Let’s say, the amount of work a woman does in a month sums up to ₹10,000. Then that amount should be her money and she should be allowed to do whatever she wants to do with that. It’s important to make homemakers financially independent,” says Rashmi.