



**ADDRESSING INVISIBILITY:
CRAFTING A SOUTH ASIAN ACTION
PLAN FOR UNPAID CARE WORK**

BY CHERRY HITKARI

Cherry Hitkari (hitkaricherry19@gmail.com) is a Non-resident Vasey Fellow and Young Leader at Pacific Forum. She is a Postgraduate student of Chinese language and holds a Bachelor's (Hons.) in History and a Masters in East Asian Studies with specialization in Chinese Studies from the University of Delhi.

Despite social progress brought about by economic development in the past decades, women in South Asia continue to bear the brunt of disproportionately distributed unremunerated care work. Unpaid care work [refers](#) to all unremunerated services provided within a household that involve catering to the needs of its members. Such activities [include](#) cooking, looking after children and elderly, production for subsistence, collection of everyday necessities such as fuel, washing clothes, etc. Of these activities, childcare, cooking, and cleaning occupy [nearly 85%](#) of the total time spent by women on unpaid care work globally. While unpaid care work supports economic activities, it remains absent from both gross domestic production (GDP) calculations and developmental policy formulations.

Time use surveys (TUS) show that developing nations portray greater gender disparity in the amount of time spent on care work than developed nations. This inequality is [defined](#) by both macroeconomic factors such as the state of the national economy as well as microeconomic factors such as personal incomes, with those in the lower rungs being more disadvantaged. A 2018 report of the International Labor Organization (ILO) [noted](#) that women engage in nearly 80% of unpaid care work hours in the Asia-Pacific region, which is 4.1 times more than men. This

leads to "[time poverty](#)" which leaves women with little to no time to participate in paid work, let alone recreational activities.

The [driving factors](#) behind such disproportionate share of unpaid care work include unequal access to the labor market; socio-cultural (gender) norms; lack of social care infrastructure; and the legal and institutional environment. These interrelated factors are further defined by age, class, ethnicity, and spatio-temporal factors such as regional disparities. Even if women participate in paid economic activities, unpaid care work either falls on women as a "double burden" or is outsourced to domestic helpers instead of being redistributed among men and women within the household. These domestic helpers, who too are mostly women, in turn depend on women in their own families for their share of unpaid care work. This creates a dichotomy where one woman's freedom binds the feet of another. Furthermore, exposure to long term or high intensity unpaid care work [cause](#) extreme physical and emotional stress that might lead to serious psychiatric and physical morbidities.

Unpaid care work thus stands as a major albeit invisibilized non-traditional security threat to women, for it does not just impact their lifespan and quality of life; hamper their prospects for socioeconomic progress, political participation, access to healthcare and education but also limits their life choices and agency thus preventing them from realizing their full potential. As climate change becomes more conspicuous, women's share of unpaid care work such as fetching water, gathering firewood, etc. [increases](#). The impact of unpaid care work on women thus needs to be addressed in congruence with other threats to human security.

South Asia in Perspective

While South Asia is a vibrant region with diverse cultural, linguistic, regional, socioeconomic and political distinctions, most communities follow a patriarchal, patrilocal kinship system where men are seen as the primary breadwinners and women, as primary caregivers. Traditionally, women have limited inheritance rights and their expected roles as full time caregivers severely hamper their economic

activities outside the household; this is in addition to restrictions imposed on their mobility owing to concerns of guarding their “chastity” and “family honor” in some communities. A “good wife” and “good mother” is expected to completely devote herself to cater to the needs of her family members, those who fail to comply are often dubbed as “deviant” or “bad” women. Unpaid care work remains highly invisibilized across South Asia which is viewed as a “duty” that women are expected to render out of “love” for the family. However, it is possible for a woman to love her family and also expect that household tasks are evenly distributed among family members in order to avoid oppressing any one individual more than the others.

Nevertheless, for the vast majority of women living in the Asia-Pacific, unpaid care work is burdensome and limiting. A United Nations report [noted](#) that women spend nearly 5.867 hours (352 minutes) per day on unpaid care work in India as compared to just 51.8 minutes spent by men. In Pakistan, women [spend](#) 11 hours more than men on unpaid care work. In Bangladesh, women [spend](#) 11.7 hours as compared to 1.6 hours spent by men. In Nepal, women [spend](#) 7.5 hours per day, which is 2.5 times higher than men. In Bhutan, women were found to be [spending](#) 15% of their time on domestic care work which is 2 hours 11 minutes more than men. A 2017 Time Use Survey in Sri Lanka [noted](#) that 87.3% of women and girls were engaged in household and care work in comparison to 59.7% men and boys. Data collected by the United Nations in 2016 similarly noted that women in Maldives [spent](#) 6 hours, almost double that of men. The disparity is the most concerning in Afghanistan, where women [spend](#) a total of 18.7 hours a day on unpaid care work as compared to just 5.6 hours spent by men.

In almost all cases, the situation has been [worsened](#) by the Covid-19 pandemic. Reasons range from loss of employment due to stringent lockdowns to lack of accessibility to affordable healthcare among women, and almost universally includes subjection to physical, sexual and emotional abuse in the household. Countries like Afghanistan are also [deeply affected](#) by the political rise of extremist forces such as the Taliban. Many countries in South Asia are yet to

officially adopt and institutionalize the collection of Time Use Survey data. Though revealing of the grim situation, such surveys do not necessarily capture the reality on the ground.

While the 2022 ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security [recognizes](#) addressing unpaid care work as a priority, [most countries](#) in South Asia have not adopted a National Action Plan (NAP) for Women, Peace and Security so far. In the light of the Taliban government’s onslaught on women’s rights, it is highly unlikely that Kabul would continue to commit itself to such a plan. Furthermore, the political sensitivity surrounding the issue acts as a major stumbling block in the official adoption of NAPs in these countries. While advocacy for the same continues, the implementation of an informal collaborative action plan can serve as a timely solution.

A South Asian Action Plan for Unpaid Care Work

As rapidly growing economies that house nearly [a quarter](#) of humanity, almost half of which are women; recognition of unpaid care work in South Asia is the need of the hour. The following informal Action Plan can serve as a solution:

1. Recognizing the intersectionalities of class, caste, region, religion, language, etc. that define the identity of a South Asian woman. It is also important to identify the most affected groups such as single women led households as targets and provide them with additional support.
2. Recognizing unpaid care work as an economic activity and including it in developmental policy making.
3. Including more women and men genuinely concerned with the issue in decision making and policy framing panels so that all policies related to employment are coherent of unpaid care work.
4. Strengthening the Social Protection Systems and Social Care Infrastructures through

-
- increased budgetary allocations on childcare, elderly care, women's health and education.
 5. Creating a culture of gender sensitivity regarding unpaid care work at all levels of education.
 6. Investing in capacity building among women in order to economically empower them. This must take the form of developing women-led banking networks promoting ease in granting loans, development of Self Help Groups and Skill Training workshops for women. Forming a joint resource fund for building such economic capacities among women.
 7. Promoting transnational collaboration among research institutes to identify overlapping issues, mutual concerns and challenges as well as issues unique to each region in order to develop the most effective and feasible tools to measure the impact of unpaid care work.
 8. Promoting regular and improved gender disaggregated data collection.
 9. Facilitating flexible work schedules and arrangements such as part-time jobs, etc. in addition to regular jobs for women and creating awareness among women about their rights and the initiatives launched.
 10. Institutionalizing paid parental leave and leave for elderly care for both men and women.
 11. Recognizing that women are among the worst hit in cases during Health Emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Ensuring provision of accessible and affordable healthcare including mental healthcare for women.
 12. Regularizing paid care work in informal sectors, promoting equal wages among men and women and improving working conditions in both formal and informal sectors.
 13. Providing universal monetary entitlements for unpaid care work including pension entitlements to compensate for inability to join the active workforce.
 14. Countering cultural stereotypes promoting toxic masculinity that prevent men from participating in domestic chores through active media campaigns.
 15. Promoting men in paid care work to counter the perception of women being primary caregivers. Identifying and Promoting local cultural norms which offer greater gender equality in terms of unpaid care work.
 16. Promoting childcare facilities at workplaces.
 17. Reaching a consensus on a set of defined parameters such as enhancing economic independence among women, reducing time spent on unpaid care work, etc. to enable a comparative study among nations in South Asia, monitoring progress as well as identifying and sharing best solutions.
 18. Building an active legal redressal mechanism with stringent implementation to deal with cases of physical, sexual, mental and emotional abuse faced by women in unpaid and paid care work in both informal and formal sectors.
 19. Countries displaying comparatively better records such as India, Sri Lanka, etc. must encourage and take lead in negotiating with countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, etc. that lag behind.
 20. Encouraging the active participation of civil society and women's Self Help Groups to form transnational alliances and act as pressure groups in demanding better conditions for women.

A collaborative effort in the form of an informal National Action Plan to be jointly formulated and implemented by governments at all levels, regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for

Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and civil society groups alike would not just empower women but also help in establishing better political relations in the region. Lessons can be taken from the 2022 ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security in formulating a nuanced and meaningful action plan.

Peace must not be understood as mere absence of violence. Violence continues to exist as systematic oppression embedded in societal institutions such as family where it often takes the guise of “duty,” “love,” and “care”; gendered unpaid care work being one such manifestation. Similarly, national and regional security assessments must also take into account individual development. Addressing women's unpaid care work would thus not just free them from the shackles of patriarchy but would also socially and economically empower them. Such measures would pave the way for a peaceful and secure South Asia in the true sense of the word.

Disclaimer: All opinions in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent any organization.