Unpaid Care Work: Why Does It Matter Whose Work It Is?

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The conditions of unpaid care work impact how unpaid carers enter and remain in paid work, and influence the working conditions of all care workers. This "unpaid care work–paid work–paid care work circle" also affects gender inequalities in paid work outside the care economy and has implications for gender equality within households as well as for women's and men's ability to provide unpaid care work.[1]

Caring for household members. Well-being of the family. Putting food on the table. Washing clothes. Making ends meet. Looking after the young, the old and differently-abled family members. These are everyday activities. These are always performed by someone or some people for someone or some people. What we take as accepted norms and practices of everyday life in a household or a family are in fact deeply rooted in the fabric of "social norms." One can ask, so what? This is how it has been, how it should be and how it will be. Someone has to do these things, and someone always does. The questions to ask (but often are not) are, by whom and why?

The issue here is the fact that the concept of "care" is not necessarily associated with "work." "Care" is often conflated with notions of altruism or unselfishness and self-sacrifice rooted in the family and related to a gender division of labor where women are seen as **the** care givers. In mainstream economics as well as in the social perceptions of persons, "work" is understood as activity that brings in monetary income: "having a job," "looking for or engaged in employment." There is no questioning or critiquing the social, economic and political factors that underlie the seemingly "natural" division of labor within the household and the family.

In the 19th century Friedrich Engels wrote *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, a pioneering socialist exploration of women's oppression within the family as the effect of the economic oppression of woman.[2] Feminists in the 1980s honed in on the issue of women's work and labor to critically look at ways in which the global capitalist market requirement for women's labor for the production of goods falls short of recognizing the value of women's reproductive roles.[3] By the end of the 1990s, there was more interest in developing national accounting processes to measure time use in women's household work. Feminist economists argued that these measures continued to exclude the social dimensions of unpaid care work within households. Others argued that time-use methodologies must necessarily be formulated to specifically address these gaps for any meaningful change in policy on labor, social support programming and gender equality.[4]

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[1] ILO (2018), "Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work," Geneva.
[2] Sharon Smith, "Engels and the Origin of Women's Oppression," International Socialist Review, Issue 2, Fall (1997).
[3] Kate Young, Carole Wolkowits, and Roslyn McCullagh, *Of Marriage and the Market: Women's Subordination Internationally and its Lessons*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).
[4] Diane Elson, "Recognize, Reduce, and Redistribute Unpaid Care Work: How to Close the Gender Gap," *New Labour Forum* 26, no. 2 (2017): 52–61. The Murphey Institute. City University of New York.

It is within these debates and discussions that I would like to bring in some dimensions of unpaid care work in Sri Lanka which remain outside the mainstream economic discourse on policy.

To give a quick profile of some economic and social indicators in Sri Lanka, we have an estimated population of 21 million comprising 51% females and 49% males. We have a long record of state provision and extensive outreach of health and education services that are accessed by girls and boys, women and men.[5] In 2012 the sex-ratio (the number of men per 100 women) in the total population was 93.8 and in the population 60 years and above it was 79. By 2032 it is projected that this will change to 92 and 78 respectively.[6] We have to recognize that Sri Lanka has an ageing population which in the next two decades will comprise significantly more women than men. The implication here is that there will be a large proportion of elderly women in households who will be in need of care.

Sri Lanka offers a worthy example given its record of long years of free education and health programs. However, the labor force participation of women at 34.9 is almost half that of men (73.4).[7] Out of an estimated 7.7 million persons categorized as "economically inactive" 74.3% are women. The issue here is that 60.5% of women and 4.9% of men are found to be "engaged in housework."[8]

Herein lies a fundamental issue: what criteria and what values (social, economic and political) are embedded in (international definitions) of the concepts of "labor" and "work." Why is it that work done in the home centering on taking care of household members is not recognized for its economic value? In addition, women who undertake some form of income-earning activities whether in the formal or informal sector also are expected to and do undertake "housework" which is not given economic value. The work undertaken by these women (and men) is also not factored in when policy is directed towards economic development. Is it not time that a feminist discourse is brought in to ensure that work both in the private and public sphere is valued? Is it not time to acknowledge that recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work is a must if we are to challenge discriminatory gender norms and practices that impede effective policy making and implementation for development for all?

The contents of this article reflect solely the opinions of the author.

[5] Central Bank of Sri Lanka Annual Report 2018.
[6] Indralal De Silva and Sunethra Perera, "Demographic Change and its Implications on the Labour Force in Sri Lanka," University of Colombo (2014).
[7] Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics (2019), Labour Force Survey First Quarter 2019. Colombo.
[8] Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics (2019), Labour Force Survey Annual Report 2017. Colombo.