BACKGROUND

The work of caring for the family is multi-dimensional. It is woven into the socio-cultural fabric of the family irrespective of the number of individuals, their ages, their needs or genders of its members. Caregiving as a concept and as an activity remains associated with and largely confined to women. Over the last three decades, the focus on recognising the social, political and economic relevance of care within household has challenged these notions of gendered altruism and placed the issue of care as a central, tangible constituent of feminist discourses.

Feminist explorations and evidence building on unpaid care work have brought out dimensions of women’s economic empowerment, gendered identities and the role of public policy. It has pushed for a recognition of the political economy of unpaid care work, the imperatives of valuing the labour of women within the household. It has brought to light the impact of global crises such as the Covid 19 pandemic on the women, in paid work but more importantly in unpaid care work in their households. The tasks of recognising, measuring for recognition, reducing and redistribution and measuring for redistribution of unpaid care work remains key in South Asia as in other regions.

The on-going discussion and debates on unpaid care work includes a continuous revisiting and deepening meaningful analyses of the relationship between women’s engagement in paid work and inclusion in the national labour force and, the economic and social value of women’s labour within the family and household. Most international development agencies now acknowledge the need for provision of care services including childcare, elder care and care for dependents with disabilities. A key concern remains on the budgetary allocations for the provision of care facilities for families with young children, for persons with disabilities and for elders.

Many South Asian countries have allocations in national budgets for social protection programmes for households designated to be in poverty. However, most such programmes are formulated with an implicit acceptance of the gendered provision of care within the family with women bearing the primary responsibility. The importance of enabling women to engage in income earning activities, to be part of the labour force are often presented as a panacea for growth in GDP. At the same time cultural norms and concepts of gender roles and gender relations are cited as the rationale for the continuation of domestic divisions of unpaid work. As more women in the region are joining the labour force, there is yet little policy recognition of the value of unpaid care work at the level of the household, the community and the national economy. Interventions such as introducing and implementing meaningful provisions such as paternity leave, or provision of well resourced care facilities accessible to households are among some of the concerns that arise from much of the policy making in the region.

The social and economic upheaval resulting from Covid-19 is highlighting the extent of the burden of unpaid care work that women bear. These factors strengthen the urgency globally and especially in South Asia for feminist researchers and activists to revisit discourses on women’s labour and explore issues of equality and equity in recognising unpaid care work.

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