



“Redistributing Women’s Unpaid Work Can Generate Millions of Jobs in India”

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“Infrastructure Is Not Just Roads and Rails — It’s Water, Energy and the Hours Women Win Back”

Intro: Every day, millions of women shoulder hours of unpaid care and domestic work, shaping and limiting India’s economic potential. What policies can redistribute this burden? How can investments in care infrastructure and social protection transform lives? Why does informal employment trap women in low-paying jobs? In this exclusive interview, **Dr. Ellina Samantroy**, reveals evidence, challenges and solutions that could redefine women’s work, rights, and India’s economic future. She is our **Socio-economic Voices** of the week speaking to **Mahima Sharma** at **Indiastat**...take a read.

MS: The Time-Use Survey shows large gender gaps in daily unpaid care and domestic hours. Which three policy instruments would you prioritise to shift even one hour per day of unpaid care from women to the market or state? How would you pilot them in an Indian district?

Dr. Ellina: Women in many countries spend a significant share of their time performing unpaid domestic and care work. This affects their education and restricts their transition to the labour market. A recent Statistical Brief of the ILO in 2024 highlighted that 748 million people aged 15 and above were outside the labour force due to care responsibilities, of which 708 million were women and only 40 million were men. In India, the recent National Time Use Survey 2024 conducted by the MoSPI has clearly revealed that women spend 305 minutes (around 5.08 hours) in unpaid domestic services and 140 minutes (2.3 hours) in unpaid caregiving services for household members. While men spend only 86 minutes in unpaid domestic services and 74 minutes in unpaid caregiving services reflecting stark gender differentials in participation in unpaid work and disproportionate burden on women to undertake household responsibilities.

As a policy response to address unpaid work, several discussions have taken place in important international policy forums like the G20 reflecting India’s commitment towards addressing the issue. The G20 New Delhi Leaders’ Declaration (2023) under India’s presidency emphasised the need to invest in social protection and affordable care infrastructure to promote women’s participation in education and employment.

The three important policy instruments can be:

1. Institutionalising state-sponsored care facilities, family support systems and community engagement in redistributing unpaid domestic and care work
2. Enabling access to energy, water, infrastructure, social protection etc that reduces time spent in unpaid work
3. Policies aimed at eliminating gender discrimination against girls remain critical in ensuring their right to education and overall development.

For piloting some of these policies in an Indian district, it is important to understand women's time spent in unpaid work in that particular district. Since the amount of time spent in unpaid work varies across geographical regions, it is important to uncover these challenges and promote targeted interventions through gender responsive social protection measures like affordable care services, awareness campaigns etc through self-help groups, community engagement etc.

MS: How can GDP and budget frameworks include unpaid care so it shapes fiscal policy?

Dr. Ellina: It is important to promote gender responsive budgeting by integrating gender equality into the policy and programmes of the government. The sixty-eighth session of the UN Commission on Status of Women in 2024 had reflected that transformative care-led strategies, gender responsive budgeting and greater investments in social services are important in the context of promoting gender equality. As I have mentioned earlier, there is a need to promote greater investments in public services, infrastructure and social protection policies.

If you remember, the Union Budget in 2024 had allocated over Rs 3 lakh crore to schemes benefiting women and girls, including investments in care infrastructure. It had intended to support working women through setting up hostels, creches etc. to encourage women to participate in employment.

Later, the budget in 2025 reiterated the need to promote development measures focussing on women through promoting entrepreneurship. However, these budgetary allocations have immense scope to further expand welfare schemes for girls and women while promoting investments in gender-responsive social protection measures.

These measures need to be strengthened through effective gender budgeting for addressing the challenges of the unpaid work of women. Such budgetary frameworks have the potential to address women's unpaid work to a large extent and can promote shaping fiscal policy towards stable and better economic growth.

MS: What small-scale public investments (childcare, community kitchens, eldercare) give the quickest job returns for women? And how must India evaluate the quick impact so as to keep improvising?

Dr. Ellina: India's workforce participation for women has been lower as compared to men. Though the workforce for women has been increasing from 22 percent in 2017-18 to 40.3 percent in 2023-24 as reported by the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), the increase is mostly attributed to increase in self-employment. Self-employment for women in rural areas has increased to 73.5 percent in 2023-24 which raises serious concerns about the quality of employment and challenges in extending social security and legislative protection to these women workers. Also, women's excessive participation in unpaid and care work pushes them largely to informal employment like self-employment.

Therefore, greater investments in care infrastructure (access to child, elderly and care for differently abled), community centres, self-help groups led kitchens, early childhood education, etc. can play a prominent role in encouraging women to participate in gainful economic opportunities.

A World Bank report on Brighter Jobs and Brighter Future in 2020 had reflected on investing in more and better quality childcare as an important strategy for countries seeking to build human capital and could bring transformational change to many government priority areas. The cash transfer schemes in India have immense potential in changing the lives of women having multiplier effects on their lives. They can be further leveraged towards improving the quality of lives of people by focussing on health, nutrition, education, sanitation etc and also facilitating access to entitlements from different Central and state government programmes and schemes. Impact assessment studies need to be promoted for evaluation of existing programmes so that they can be improvised.

MS: Time-use surveys can be hard to convert to policy. Which time-use indicators should be tracked quarterly for accountability?

Dr. Ellina: Time use surveys can play a prominent role in policy making particularly in the context of improving labour market participation of women. Many countries have implemented gender sensitive care policies deriving evidence from time use surveys. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for action had informed about using time for policy making. The surveys are crucial for monitoring SDGs, designing workplace balance policies. India has already taken a significant stride in conducting national time use surveys, some of the indicators from the Time use survey can be tracked quarterly for gender responsive policy making.

Several countries across the world have used time to use data to inform policy directly. A report by the Centre for Social Global Policy, University of Toronto had informed that South Korea's 3rd Gender Equality Basic Plan and the 3rd and 4th Basic Plans for Low Fertility and Aging Society (2021-2025) has used the 2019 KTUS data on gender inequality in unpaid work among dual earner couples to set policy directions to enhance work-family balance and better childcare.

The indicators on unpaid domestic services, unpaid care-giving services, time spent in collecting household inputs, travelling time, learning etc can be tracked for designing appropriate policies on women's employment, social protection and care policies. For example time spent in unpaid domestic and care work can reflect on unequal distribution of unpaid work towards promoting policies on redistribution of unpaid work.

Time spent travelling can inform better transportation and policies on mobility which acts as a major constraint for women's withdrawal from the labour market. Also, time spent in care related activities can inform policies on elderly care, child care etc.

MS: PLFS shows rises in female participation concentrated in informal and low-paid sectors. How can informal female work gains convert into formal, better-paid jobs within 5 years?

Dr. Ellina: India has portrayed a complex labour market scenario with the majority of its workforce concentrated in the informal sector. **More than 90 percent of workers in India are in the informal sector.**

As per PLFS 2023-24, about 85.9 percent women are in the informal sector. Though the labour force participation of women has increased by more than 18 percentage points during 2017-18 and 2023-2024 as reported by the PLFS, the increase has mostly been in self-employment. Women's self-employment increased from 51 percent in 2017-18 to 67.4 percent in 2023-24 in the 15 and above age group, raising serious concerns regarding access to social security and coverage under labour laws. On the contrary, regular employment for women had declined from 21 percent in 2017-18 to 15.9 percent in 2023-24 which reflects a greater push towards informal employment.

Further women do not have regular job contracts that discourages them from accessing social protection. **The PLFS 2023-24 reported that 77.4 per cent women did not have a written job contract and only 16 per cent had a job contract for a duration of more than 3 years.** The lack of regular job contracts restricts their access to existing social protection measures.

Some of the **significant challenges associated with women's concentration in informal jobs** has been:

- unpaid care work
- lack of adequate skills
- lack of access to social protection measures etc that restrict women's entry to regular employment.

From a policy perspective, **efforts towards formalisation include regularisation of jobs with promotion of job contracts.** The new labour reforms have immense potential for the regularisation of employment. The fixed-term employment (FTEs) that was introduced in 2018 in the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Central Rules, 1946 (now subsumed under Industrial Relations Code 2020) can be strengthened towards promoting FTEs. A

worker engaged under FTE is entitled to all social security benefits which are available to permanent employees alongwith eligibility for gratuity if served for a period of one year.

In addition, skill development programmes need to be aligned with a sectoral approach focussing on sectors like manufacturing, education, digital economy etc that are emerging in the future of work. The boosting of Micro small medium enterprises (MSMEs) can also encourage women to participate in regular employment. The Eshram portal can play a prominent role in registration of unorganised workers and enabling their access to labour protections.

MS: Data gaps exist (seasonality, unpaid work overlap, undercounting). What minimum changes to PLFS / Time-Use / administrative surveys would you mandate to produce gender-disaggregated, occupation-level hourly data usable by ministries and states?

Dr. Ellina: There has been undercounting of women's work over as conventional labour force surveys are not methodologically equipped to elicit information on seasonality, unpaid work etc. Therefore these surveys need to be strengthened as per the recommendations of the International conference on Labour Statisticians for improving indicators on informality, unpaid work, seasonality etc. Several forms of informal employment like domestic work, home based employment are not adequately captured in PLFS due to methodological considerations.

These forms of employment need to be captured adequately in Occupational Classification lists (NCO) adopted in surveys like PLFS. The 21st International Conference on labour statisticians in 2023 had recommended including improved definitions of the formal and informal sectors, household own-use production and community sector, and formal and informal employment, enhancing data quality and harmonization across countries.

It has also identified time-use surveys as an important source for the production of statistics on participation and time spent in informal unpaid work such as the own-use provision of services (in particular informal unpaid domestic work and care work).

However, **PLFS can provide better estimates of women's work by incorporating more probing questions on 'reasons for quitting employment'** by combining employment with education, employment with domestic work, care work etc as recommended by the 20th ICLS in 2018. These indicators will provide deeper understanding on challenges before women to participate in employment. In case of time use surveys, more information on multiple and simultaneous activities can help in understanding the intensity of activities. Further, there is a need to promote harmonisation of concepts in data sets for international comparability and influencing policy at the national and regional level. The harmonised data can be used across Ministries and various States for more informed policy making. Also there is a need to regularise the time use surveys for evidence based policy making.

MS: For better monitoring, should India adopt a standard "Care-Adjusted Employment" metric (e.g., paid hours + a proportion of unpaid care hours)? What should be the first three policy decisions it should trigger?

Dr. Ellina: Care adjusted employment metric which helps in capturing and measuring care work has several policy implications.

Firstly, the estimates provide full visibility to the care economy and can help in designing policies to redistribute care work. It can contribute in working towards SDG 5 target 5.4 that reflects on public provisioning of care services.

Secondly, such metrics can promote increasing investment in care infrastructure which includes access to energy, water, electricity etc. A recent report by the UNWOMEN in 2025 on financing care infrastructure had reiterated that women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid care work and evidence shows that access to infrastructure is a critical enabler of women's ability to mitigate or reverse social and economic disadvantages that can come with these care responsibilities. The report further stated that closing care policy gaps and expanding

high-quality care services could generate nearly 300 million jobs by 2035, directly and indirectly, with the majority benefiting women.

Thirdly, the estimates can also contribute to legislative intervention for integrating care into labour laws and social protection measures. For example, Uruguay's care act in 2015 has changed the concept of care by positioning it as a human rights issue. As per the legislation, all children, persons with disabilities and elderly persons, have the right to get care. The law also recognises the right of caregivers to perform their work in dignified conditions and aims to change the prevalent gendered division of labour. The time use surveys can contribute to creating evidence about inequalities in gender division of labour in the household. Data on paid and unpaid work can help countries to integrate care into legislation and social protection policies.

MS: Only parts of the Labour Codes are active and states differ in applying them. What three rules should the Centre make work first to help women and care workers - like clearer parental leave, portable benefits or childcare at workplaces? And why do these matter most?

Dr. Ellina: India has been a founding member of ILO and has been a signatory to several ILO conventions. The labour legislations in the country are mostly aligned with the international labour standards. The country has undergone a process of labour reforms with the codification wherein 29 central acts were subsumed into four labour codes namely:

i. **The Code on Wages 2019**

ii. **Code on Social Security 2020**

iii. **The Industrial Relations Code 2020**

iv. **The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (OSHWC), 2020** which is indeed a significant reform in India's regulatory framework towards employment protection and ensuring the rights of women workers' rights.

Some of the labour codes have specific provisions for women workers with regard to access to social protection (including maternity, child care, flexible work etc).

The Code on Social Security 2020 subsumes the Maternity Benefit Act 1961 which was amended in 2017 to enhance maternity leave for a period of 26 weeks from the earlier 12 weeks. The amendment exceeds the maternity protection of 14 weeks enshrined in International Labour Organisation's Maternity Protection Convention 183, 2000 and its accompanying Recommendation (No.191) that promotes the optimal maternity leave to be at least 18 weeks.

The new amendment under Section 11 A of the Social Security Code has included several gender sensitive provisions like mandatory creche facilities for establishments with 50 or more employees, provisions for work from home (flexible working) and leave provisions extended to surrogate as well as adoptive mothers.

The OSHWC Code has introduced a provision of creche facilities for Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) in Section 24 (3) wherein it states that clusters of small-scale industries can pool their resources and can set up a common crèche.

Further, the labour codes also provision for the creation of a social security fund for providing universal access to social security to unorganised workers. The provisioning of social security which includes maternity and care benefits can be implemented through welfare boards operating at the State level. The State governments are in the process of finalising the State rules for effective implementation of the labour codes. Once the rules are finalised, women workers both across formal and informal sectors can be benefitted.

MS: Many care jobs (domestic help, community care) are still invisible. How can the Labour Codes officially recognise and protect these workers through simple steps like registration, fair wages or social security and still

meet global labour standards?

Dr. Ellina: The E-shram portal of the Ministry of Labour and Employment is the largest database for registering all unorganised workers including domestic workers, community care workers, home based workers, self-employed workers and all other categories of informal workers. The purpose of the portal has been to link all informal workers to various social security and welfare schemes. In fact, the E Shram aims to provide full visibility to informal workers.

In 2025 2.83 crore domestic and household workers were registered in the E Shram portal who are already linked to various social security schemes. Many of these schemes are officially recognised under the labour codes and the registered workers will have access to social security provisions.

With regard to labour codes, the Code on Wages 2019 consolidates laws related to minimum wages, payment of wages, bonus and equal remuneration. It applies to all workers in both formal and informal workers including Domestic Workers. The labour codes includes Domestic Workers under the definition of 'wage workers' who is a person employed for remuneration in the unorganized sector, directly by an employer or through any contractor, irrespective of place of work, whether exclusively for one employer or for one or more employers, whether in cash or in kind, whether as a home-based worker, or as a temporary or casual worker, or as a migrant worker, or workers employed by households including Domestic Workers, with a monthly wage of an amount as may be notified by the Central Government and the State Government.

The Social Security Code 2020 mandates the establishment of the National Social Security Board at the central level and State Unorganised Workers' Boards in every State for provisioning social security to all workers including domestic workers. There is a need to streamline these boards and promote welfare boards for domestic workers and other workers in different sectors.

MS: Laws exist but enforcement is patchy. What three quick fixes (for example, online worker lists, open complaint dashboards or regular wage checks) could states roll out within six months to protect women in informal jobs. And which two would give the biggest impact?

Dr. Ellina: For effective enforcement of labour laws, there is a need to

- 1. Issue Guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to the State Governments** - The Ministry of Labour and Employment can provide these guidelines and SOPs to various State Governments to promote welfare and protection of women workers. The SOPs can guide the States in promoting decent employment conditions, fair wages, provisioning of social security coverage and protect the rights of women workers in the informal sector
- 2. Grievance Redressal Mechanism** - The workers can be provided access to grievance redressal mechanisms developed by the Labour departments to report about any violation. A toll free helpline number can also be introduced for lodging complaints on non-payment of wages, occupational safety and health issues, access to social security etc
- 3. Strengthening of the State Welfare Boards** - The State governments can be encouraged to establish Welfare Boards for Domestic Workers by drawing evidence from inter-state discussions. The labour departments in different States can issue guidelines to respective States/UTs to encourage the constitution of these boards. There is a need to promote simplified registration mechanisms, to increase enrolment of unorganised workers under the welfare schemes. Apart from this, effective monitoring and evaluation need to be developed for periodic review on implementation of welfare provisions pertaining to unorganised Workers under the labour codes.

In fact the establishment of welfare boards will have a greater impact by offering benefits like health insurance, maternity assistance, pensions and education aid for their children. For example some States have initiated welfare

boards for domestic workers like Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Jharkhand have separate boards which provide different benefits to the Domestic Workers.

Even the SOPs can help the State governments in developing mechanisms for promoting the welfare of women unorganised workers and protecting their rights.

About Dr. Ellina Samantroy

Dr. Ellina Samantroy, Fellow at the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, is a Sociologist and policy expert. She has over 20 years of experience in academia, training, and policy research. She holds a PhD in Sociology from JNU, New Delhi. Her work focuses on unpaid work, time-use studies, gender, social protection, and labour standards. She has collaborated with UNICEF, World Bank, ITC-ILO, and ILO, and has published, including her 2023 book Gender, Unpaid Work and Care in India (Routledge, UK). She serves on committees on domestic workers' rights (2025) and Improving female labour participation (2023) under the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India. She has represented India at major international forums, including the BRICS Employment Working Group Meeting (2023, South Africa) and the ITC-ILO Board Session (2017, Italy).

About the Interviewer

Mahima Sharma is an Independent Journalist based in Delhi NCR. She has been in the field of TV, Print & Online Journalism since 2005 and previously an additional three years in allied media. In her span of work she has been associated with CNN-News18, ANI - Asian News International (A collaboration with Reuters), Voice of India, Hindustan Times and various other top media brands of their times. In recent times, she has diversified her work as a Digital Media Marketing Consultant & Content Strategist as well. Starting March 2021, she is also a pan-India Entrepreneurship Education Mentor at Women Will - An Entrepreneurship Program by Google in Collaboration with SHEROES. Mahima can be reached at media@indiastat.com

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