"Identifying the Challenges of Addressing Unpaid Labour in Bangladesh and its Mitigation Strategies"

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ABSTRACT

Unpaid labour, particularly in domestic, agricultural, and informal sectors, constitutes a significant but undervalued component of Bangladesh's economy. This article examines the systemic challenges—cultural, legal, and economic—that perpetuate the marginalization of unpaid work, disproportionately affecting women and children. Through a mixed-methods approach, the study identifies gaps in policy frameworks and proposes actionable strategies, including legal reforms, gender-sensitive awareness campaigns, and data-driven inclusion of unpaid labour in national accounting systems. The findings underscore the urgency of recognizing unpaid work to achieve gender equity and sustainable development in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Unpaid labour, gender inequality, informal economy, care work, policy reform

INTRODUCTION

Unpaid labour remains a cornerstone of Bangladesh's socio-economic fabric, yet its contributions are systematically excluded from formal economic metrics. Predominantly shouldered by women, such work encompasses domestic chores, caregiving, and subsistence farming—activities critical to household survival but rendered invisible in national policies (BBS, 2022). The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) estimates that women in Bangladesh spend 6–8 hours daily on unpaid labour, compared to men's 1–2 hours. This disparity reflects entrenched gender norms and a lack of institutional recognition, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality.

This article addresses a critical research gap: while existing studies (e.g., Kabeer, 2019; Hossain & Tisdell, 2020) analyze informal labour broadly, none specifically interrogate the structural barriers to valuing unpaid work in Bangladesh. By combining empirical data with policy analysis, this study aims to:

1. Quantify the scope of unpaid labour across urban and rural contexts.
2. Evaluate the socio-cultural and legal factors enabling its persistence.
3. Propose mitigation strategies aligned with Bangladesh's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
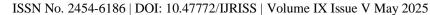
Global and Local Contexts:

Global Trends:

Globally, unpaid labour accounts for 9–13% of GDP (ILO, 2023). In low-income countries, women bear the highest burden, spending up to 10 times more hours on unpaid work than men (UN Women, 2020). Developed nations mitigate this through social policies (e.g., paid parental leave, public childcare), but Bangladesh lacks comparable infrastructure.

Bangladesh's Reality:

Rural women here engage in 12–14 hours of daily unpaid labour, including fuel/water collection and farm work (BIDS, 2023). Cultural norms equate women's unpaid roles with moral duty, stifling their economic participation

(Rahman, 2021). The *Domestic Worker Protection Policy (2015)* remains unimplemented, leaving 91% of domestic workers—mostly female—without legal safeguards (ActionAid, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

A sequential mixed-methods design was employed:

1. Quantitative Survey:

- Sample: 500 households (stratified rural/urban, 60% female respondents).

- Tool: Adapted ILO Time-Use Survey modules.

2. Qualitative Interviews:

- 30 in-depth interviews with female unpaid workers.

- 5 FGDs with community leaders and policymakers.

3. Policy Analysis:

- Reviewed 7 national policies using the WHO's Gender-Responsive Assessment Tool.

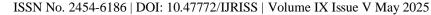Ethical approval was obtained from Belkuchi Govt. College.

Key Findings:

1 Economic Impacts

- Unpaid care work subsidizes Bangladesh's GDP by 10.3% (BIDS, 2023) but impoverishes women.

- 78% of female respondents reported income loss due to care responsibilities.

2 Legal-Policy Gaps

- No laws mandate wages for domestic/care work.

- Labour Act 2006 excludes unpaid family helpers.

3 Cultural Barriers

- 89% of male FGD participants viewed unpaid labour as "women's natural role."

Mitigation Strategies:

1 Policy Interventions

- Legislate paid family caregiving under the National Social Security Strategy.

- Expand the Labour Act to cover unpaid farm/family workers.

2 Grassroots Actions

- Gender quotas in local governance to amplify advocacy.

- Mobile childcare centers to reduce women's workload.

3 Data Integration

- Mandate time-use surveys in national censuses.

CONCLUSION

Unpaid labour in Bangladesh is both a driver of inequality and an untapped economic resource. Addressing it requires dismantling patriarchal norms, reforming legal frameworks, and valuing care work in GDP calculations. This study provides a roadmap for policymakers to translate invisibility into equity.

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