

‘Second Shift’ For Whom?

Classed Inequalities in Women’s Rest and Care Work in Urban India

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Abstract

According to the most recent Periodic Labour Force Survey, women's labour force participation increased from 23.3 per cent in 2017–18 to 41.7 per cent in 2023–24. While the increasing participation suggests progress, this apparent progress hides continuing asymmetrical distribution of both paid and unpaid domestic responsibilities, where women in formal employment often outsource their domestic obligations to domestic workers.

Arlie Hoshchild's notion of the 'second shift' helps frame this dynamic, showing how the double burden of paid employment and domestic labour is not eliminated but rather displaced along class lines. This displacement has direct implications for access to rest and leisure: while formal sector working women may secure time and respite by outsourcing care, domestic workers confront an intensified double shift that spans both their employers' households and their own.

Relying on secondary sources, this paper argues that class is a determinant of who can claim rest and leisure. By situating care work within the broader debates on the intersectionality framework and social reproduction theory, the analysis highlights how class hierarchies perpetuate unequal access to wellbeing and underscores the urgency for designing evidence-based targeted policy interventions to promote rest as a right and redistribute unpaid care work more equitably.

Keywords: Care Work, Class Inequality, Rest, Domestic Worker, Middle Class

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Introduction

In recent times, India has been experiencing a distinctive edge with a significant proportion of its population transitioning into the working-age group, favouring economic growth (Jain, Goli and Jana 2025). To further maximise these impacts, there has been a renewed interest in involving more women in the workforce. As more women enter the labour force, data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS 2023–24) suggest that their labour force participation rate (LFPR) increased from 23.3 per cent in 2017–18 to 41.7 per cent in 2023–24, representing a rise of 18.4 per cent (PIB press release 2025).

In addition to the obvious advantages, this increase brings up the interplay between women’s participation in the labour force and the invisibility of unpaid domestic work in India. On the surface, this data point appears to be in tandem with India’s commitment to progress towards gender parity in economic inclusion; however, it masks deeper structural inequalities related to access and agency in utilising one’s time as one chooses. The growth is often interpreted as women’s empowerment and economic inclusion in sync with the broader developmental narrative of the country about ‘women-led development’ (Kabeer, Deshpande and Assaad 2019). Yet, these narratives run the risk of masking the knots of persistent inequalities across paid work, unpaid care work and access to rest, which continue to shape women’s lives.

Within these knots, class remains a pertinent dimension in which women’s paid and unpaid work intersects across different hierarchies. While educated, urban women are

increasingly entering formal workplaces, they are doing so within a structure that continues to assign domestic and caregiving responsibilities to them. As a result, the 'freedom' for one group of women is coming to rely on the underpaid labour of another and is being facilitated by the domestic and care work that poorer women perform in their homes (Anderson 2001). Such a dichotomy raises the argument that these relationships are not solely economic; rather, they are also temporal and emotional, determining who is permitted to rest and whose labour is devalued as being 'natural' (Jose *et al.* 2025).

Feminist scholars have been challenging the notion that women's participation in paid work automatically equates to empowerment (Kabeer 2008). Such critiques draw attention to the conditions under which women enter the workforce, the kinds of labour they perform, and the unequal burdens that continue to structure their everyday lives, under what conditions, for whom and at what expense. While previous works have focussed on these dimensions, including the burden of labour and gender inequality, this paper uses rest as an analytical category to examine how the redistribution of care work across class lines shapes women's access to time, leisure and recovery. This extends the debate on social reproduction beyond labour force participation to examine temporal inequalities between different socio-economic classes. By asking who can rest and whose labour enables that rest, the paper seeks to understand how empowerment for some women is sustained through the intensified work of other women. Using secondary sources, this paper examines how paid and unpaid care work, allocated according to class divisions, fosters an unequal politics surrounding dignity and rest, and advocates designing evidence-based, targeted policy interventions to promote rest as a right and redistribute unpaid care work more equitably.

Gender, Class and Care Work in India

The discourse surrounding women's labour in India deals with the lack of recognition of unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) definition, 'unpaid work is the production of goods and services by household members that are not sold on the market' or do not receive direct remuneration (Miranda 2011). Feminist economists argue that unpaid labour, which is frequently excluded from national income accounts, is a significant contributor to the economy. However, it is largely overlooked in policymaking because of patriarchal biases that are ingrained in macroeconomic frameworks (Hirway 2015).

Scholars argue that unpaid labour is structurally essential and serves as the foundation for social reproduction; it provides support to both public and private sectors through unpaid caregiving and household maintenance. Sociologists have discussed how entire systems, from capitalist economies to education, are sustained by a foundation of reproductive and emotional labour that is neither acknowledged nor compensated (Bhattacharya 2013; Federici 2019). This labour includes domestic chores (cooking, cleaning, etc.) and care work (childcare, elderly care, etc.), as well as the less visible aspects of managing emotions, providing moral support and sustaining intrapersonal relationships.

The concept of care work, paid and unpaid, has emerged as a critical component of comprehending gendered labour inequalities within this framework. Care work is defined as 'the work that involves connecting to other people, to help people meet their needs' (Folbre 2006). Gender segregation in unpaid domestic duties mirrors social norms and perceptions regarding a 'natural household division of labour', which is also often termed '*invisible*' as it isn't categorised as a type of work deserving direct wages (Oakley 1974). Despite being

indispensable, it remains undervalued and is deemed to be an extension of assigned roles. While these debates highlight the gendered nature of unpaid labour, they also raise questions about how care responsibilities are redistributed in urban Indian contexts.

Paid Domestic Work and Class Stratification

The conversation about women's unpaid labour is especially pertinent in the context of India, given women's labour participation rates. Post liberalisation, the expanding urban 'middle classes' have created a demand for domestic service, connecting the independence of some women to engage in the labour market with the economic insecurity of others (Ghosh 2009; Neetha 2013). In order to sustain their lifestyles, urban middle-class women have relieved themselves of (at least some of) the 'double burden' of managing their households. Scholars indicate that urban middle-class women's hiring of domestic workers is a classed and gendered transfer of reproductive labour (Sahu 2023). The accessibility of low-paid domestic workers allows middle-class women to enter formal employment without fundamentally shifting societal and patriarchal expectations of responsibility surrounding the family. This presents a paradox in that paid domestic work may provide paid work for poor women, but it also reproduces class distinctions within feminist advancement.

This independence also depends on the poorly compensated and unregulated labour of women who are often from lower castes and in vulnerable socio-economic positions. The works of Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum in their book, *Cultures of Servitude*, contribute significantly to the literature on domestic work and informal labour, offering a comprehensive examination of the intersections between gender, class, culture, and labour. Through nuanced ethnographic studies in Kolkata, the authors unveil the complexities that underlie domestic work, extending beyond mere employer–employee relationships and

highlighting the often invisible and undervalued labour that sustains households and economies (Ray and Qayum 2009).

Their work demonstrates how employers construct and reinforce middle- and upper-class identities through their management of domestic workers and household labour. On the contrary, domestic workers confront issues characterised by dominance and inequality, offering insight into the negotiations, challenges and agency within the context of their work. These dynamics suggest that the burden of care is not diminished, but rather is redistributed across class lines, further raising questions of how it relates to women's agency over time.

Rest and the 'Right to Time'

While the literature on labour and care in India is extensive, the issue of rest and agency to use one's time remains unexplored. For people in the workforce, international conventions and frameworks, including the International Labour Organization's (ILO's) Hours of Work (Industry) Convention, 1919 (No. 1) and the Weekly Rest (Industry) Convention, 1921 (No. 14) emphasise the importance of rest for all workers and recommend maximum hours of work with rest days between periods of work (International Labour Organization). Even though countries that have ratified conventions are presumed to have contributed to the incorporation of such frameworks and conventions into national labour laws, as a signatory state, India has not yet established standards for such rights, particularly for informal workers.

Time poverty relates to the lack of discretionary time experienced by people, especially women, because of the combined demands of paid and unpaid work (Hirway 2015). Social reproduction theories further demonstrate how the reproduction of labour

power through unpaid domestic work is essential to the maintenance of capitalist economies; this work remains relevant to this reproduction but is neither recognised nor rewarded (Fraser 2017; Federici 2019). This advances the argument for the importance of time itself, suggesting that sufficient rest is more than the absence of work; it is also an ethically and economically significant factor in dignity and wellbeing (Elson 2017).

In discussions surrounding gendered labour, the idea of the 'right to time' and the opportunity to rest becomes a question of social justice rather than a matter of convenience, as more often than not it is distributed unequally in households (Halkosaari 2020). Access to rest also projects the larger discourse of power dynamics in terms of gender and patriarchy. Scholars have repeatedly highlighted how rest and leisure are shaped by societal gender relations, which perpetuate inequalities in their access, and it is attributed that women are often at a disadvantage, with women having less free time than men due to ongoing domestic and parental responsibilities (Yerkes, Roeters and Baxter 2018).

Urban India's unequal access to rest is most apparent in the domestic work arrangements. The phenomenon is the outsourcing of the second shift, in which middle-class women who can afford to outsource household and care responsibilities are granted partial access to personal time and leisure (Hochschild and Machung 1989). In contrast, domestic workers face a more intensified 'double burden', which requires them to work long hours in others' homes as well as shoulder unpaid household work responsibilities in their own homes. To better understand this, it is useful to situate these inequalities within broader feminist theories of labour and social reproduction.

Second shift, social reproduction and the political economy of rest

The theoretical basis of this paper is grounded in three interconnected strands of feminist theory: (a) Arlie Hochschild's notion of the 'second shift', (b) social reproduction theories as discussed by scholars such as Tithi Bhattacharya, Silvia Federici and Nancy Fraser and (c) the developing conversation on rest and time justice within feminist political economy. Collectively, these frameworks offer a perspective to comprehend gender and class inequalities in the distribution of labour, time and rest.

Arlie Hochschild's seminal work, published in 1989, explores the household and childcare duties that follow the day's work for pay outside the home as a double burden or the 'second shift', where women come home from a full day of paid work to another round of unpaid housework and childcare (Hochschild and Machung 1989). This idea reflects not only an imbalance in household chores but, more fundamentally, a broader societal contradiction: although more women are participating in the workforce, expectations regarding domestic labour remain the same.

While Hochschild studied the American middle class and documented how women split their time and emotions, this manifests differently in the Indian context. This concept appears differently due to the widespread class-based outsourcing of reproductive work. Middle-class women who are part of the formal workforce handle the second shift by delegating it to domestic workers. This relegation of domestic work down the class ladder enables middle-class women to get closer to the ideal of achieving work-life balance, though it does so at the expense of exacerbating another woman's labour (Gothoskar 2013). These dynamics perpetuate class divisions within feminist advancements, as one woman's rest and leisure are dependent on another's labourious efforts.

Although Hochschild focusses on the lived experiences of women in a dual role, the theory of social reproduction emphasises a structural explanation of unpaid labour towards capitalist economies. Scholars mention that social reproduction is the continuous and intergenerational reproduction of labour power through work such as caregiving, cleaning and emotional labour, which plays an integral role in the functioning of capitalism, despite being unrecognised in economic indices (Hirway 2015).

A poignant argument is that women's unpaid labour in the home subsidises capital accumulation because it reproduces the workforce without compensation (Federici 2019). On the other hand, there are discussions of an ongoing 'crisis of care', in which neoliberal restructuring has not only privatised care but has also feminised the responsibility for social reproduction, withdrawing support from the state (Fraser 2017). All of this is particularly relevant in India, given that the state has abdicated its welfare functions and has commodified domestic labour through informal employment on behalf of capital, allowing the privatisation of care to be experienced as a direct transfer of this burden from the state and the employer to working-class women.

Scholars have pointed out that as the neoliberal state has worked to exacerbate class inequalities, the burden of survival for women has incurred a higher cost. For the majority of poor women entering into paid domestic work, it is less of a choice and more a matter of survival (Ghosh 2009; Neetha 2013). The inequity of their responsibilities supporting both middle-class families and their households always leaves a state of time poverty (Raghu 2021). The concept of rest, frequently neglected, has acquired importance within feminist theory as a symbol of dignity and justice. While care work seems to manifest in external ways, it also includes resting as a type of self-care.

Thus, rest is not merely a lack of doing work but a political condition that reflects whose time is considered valuable and whose is expendable (Tronto 2013). Contemporary scholarship on temporal justice calls attention to the idea that fair time distribution, including in work or rest, is as crucial as fairness in income (Goodin 2009). However, at present, there is an unequal distribution of time, with domestic workers experiencing time deficits due to the demands and expectations of both paid and unpaid work obligations. Thus, rest can clearly be identified as a site of class privilege in a segmented labour market in India, where the ability to rest, or even get unstructured time, is dependent on economic and social position. While these theoretical frameworks explain the structural organisation of care work, the specific relationship between class, labour and access to rest in India remains underexplored.

Understanding the nexus between class, care work and access to rest

Much of the research on women's engagement in the workforce also discusses the quantitative shifts in their engagement in the labour market and unpaid caregiving work associated with households (Jain, Goli and Jana 2025). However, it tends to ignore the qualitative implications of these divisions of labour, especially how these divisions allow women to rest, recuperate and engage in leisure.

Additionally, the current analyses of care work in India haven't explicitly explored how the liberation of one group from domestic duties is sustained by the intensified labour of another. This interdependence emphasises a classed politics of rest that has not been sufficiently theorised in Indian contexts. This paper seeks to address this gap by incorporating insights from theories related to 'second shift and social reproduction (Hochschild and Machung 1989; Fraser 2017; Federici 2019). It seeks to further explore the influence of

structural inequalities within the care economy, conceptualising rest as a feminist and policy concern rather than as a private entitlement.

The politics of rest in India is tied to class and gender hierarchies, which dictate how time, work and rest are scheduled for various social groups. Feminist theorists have often analysed the gendered division of labour (Hochschild and Machung 1989; Ray and Qayum 2009), but analysing class with care work adds another layer to understanding who is allowed to rest, when and at what cost. The increasing participation of urban, middle-class women in the labour force is now often cited as a form of women's empowerment, but it rests on an invisible backdrop of care (Anderson 2001).

Who Gets to Rest? — Classed Dimensions of Care Work

In India, the Time Use Survey (TUS) 2024 shows that this uneven distribution of time is still evident among genders. While women carry significant unpaid domestic work and caregiving responsibilities, spending an average of around 289 minutes per day on these tasks, men only spend an average of 88 minutes per day for the same (MOSPI 2024). The pattern has not changed much since TUS was last conducted in 2019, with women spending an average of 315 minutes of their day on these tasks, and in 2024, this figure is down to an average of 305 minutes (*The Hindu* 2025).

Additionally, the interpretation of the increasing labour force participation among women, as mentioned in the PLFS, does not diminish or lessen the burden of unpaid care work that women have to do, as indicated through TUS. Research shows that middle-class women participating in paid work often turn to outsourcing domestic work (Nair and Hoffman 2022). These patterns suggest that women's entry into paid employment does not

necessarily reduce unpaid care burdens but may instead lead to the outsourcing of domestic work to poorer women, particularly domestic workers.

In 2024, the data also revealed stark differences in women's time use patterns based on their socio-economic status. Middle-class urban women often want to do something more in life than spend their entire lives raising their children at home; to 'remain sane', they want to engage in meaningful work, which paid employment offers (Wide and Näre 2023). Thus, they outsource these unpaid responsibilities. Women who work in the informal labour sector, such as domestic workers, have the least amount of discretionary time (Samantroy 2022). This makes time a resource closely tied to class-based experiences, alleviating the middle-class woman's time deficit by transferring the burden.

The issue of rest occurs not only in material terms. There is a cultural attachment to values that prioritise productivity and self-sacrifice for women, situating rest as a luxury (Ghosh 2009). For domestic workers, the right to rest is constrained not only structurally but also symbolically; the home of the employer is their working space, and their bodies are dutifully rendered into service (Ray and Qayum 2009). This dynamic creates 'care-chains', a transfer of reproductive labour from privileged to disadvantaged women (Hochschild 2014). In contrast to this, for their employers, the questions of rest and leisure relate to their elevated class position of being 'worthy' of such activities, similarly reproducing the moral legitimacy of class privilege (Anderson 2000).

In India, there has been a gradual acceleration of the privatisation of care. The market now allows for care through non-traditional domestic work arrangements for childcare, eldercare and household chores, generating commodified labour relations. Employers in effect buy time, in the form of care by another woman; the state defers responsibility for

social reproduction. This represents the crisis of care, a conflict built into the system between the demand for capitalist development and the sustaining of life (Fraser 2017). In the Indian context, this crisis is evident in the overwork and lack of rest experienced by working-class women, and among middle-class families who anxiously rely on paid-care services. Both demographics engage patriarchal relationships, but in uneven ways. Middle-class women are burdened by guilt and a shortage of time, while working-class women are burdened by fatigue and a lack of recognition.

Policy Implications: Addressing Time Poverty and Care Inequalities

Rest represents a marker of social class in urban India. To rest also means having control over your own time; that is, knowing when work starts and when it ends. The commodification of care and the payment of women have changed leisure into an unequal exchange, where one woman's time resting is based on another woman's time working.

Reframing rest as a policy concern questions the assumption that increasing women's labour force participation automatically improves gender equality. Although discussions of policy frequently emphasise income equality or skill development, they often don't consider this disproportionate allocation of time, which is a more essential factor affecting wellbeing.

Recognising care work and domestic labour

India's policy framework has only recently begun to recognise unpaid and care work, especially for domestic workers. In 2017, though the Domestic Workers (Regulation of Work and Social Security) Bill introduced in the Rajya Sabha did not get passed, in the house it raised important points — offering social security to domestic workers, creating a domestic workers social security fund, having mandatory registration of workers, employers and

placement agencies and forming state and district boards to monitor the implementation (Domestic Workers (Regulation of Work and Social Security) Bill, 2017).

Even the 2020 Code on Social Security signifies a partial move towards formalisation for informal sector workers; however, it does not formally guarantee rest time, paid or sick leave or comprehensive welfare benefits for domestic workers (Ministry of Law and Justice 2025). Feminist scholars also argue that focussing on labour participation without addressing time poverty does not contribute to real empowerment (Jose *et al.* 2025). The redistribution of care, therefore, cannot be separated from discussions of class and rest.

Addressing time poverty in care work

India's estimated 3.9 million domestic workers, comprising mostly women, represent one of the most vulnerable groups in the labour market (ILO 2022). At the centre of this lies the lack of recognition for care work. Although various government initiatives, including the Labour Codes (2020) and Draft National Policy on Domestic Workers, recognise the roles women play in the care economy, they have yet to establish binding frameworks.

Policies that guarantee regulated working hours, weekly rest periods, social security benefits, and recognition of domestic workers' unions could be a step towards redistributing rest. These policies, however, need to be accompanied by cultural shifts that value rest as a right rather than a privilege, crucial for dignity, health and autonomy (Tronto 2013).

Shifting Norms Around Gender, Work and Rest

While structural reforms are necessary, normative changes are equally important. The belief in 'good womanhood' glorifies ever-productive women, regardless of the degree of sacrifice involved, and berates rest (Wide and Näre 2023). Media campaigns and workplace-

based initiatives can contribute much of this important rebranding of rest as a right.

Furthermore, awareness campaigns that normalise men's equal involvement in domestic and caregiving work can also help shift these norms.

In summary, the question of rest as an analytical category renders class visible in women's access to time. To fully understand this intersection, we must go beyond merely quantifying work and consider how time is valued. If rest is not seen as a feminist issue and a class issue, then the dialogue around gender equality will remain exclusive and incomplete.

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