

Everyday Struggles of Unpaid Care: A Study of Informal Caregiving in  
Guwahati

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### **Abstract**

Informal unpaid care giving constitutes one of the most invisible yet indispensable forms of social reproduction in urban India. This study examines the lived experiences of informal caregivers in Guwahati, a rapidly urbanising city where migration, nuclearisation of households and labour market pressures are reshaping care arrangements. Based on 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted across diverse socio-economic neighbourhoods, the paper conceptualises caregiving as both an affective practice and a gendered political economy.

Drawing on feminist theory and symbolic interactionism, the study demonstrates that caregiving is sustained through cultural idioms such as 'seva' and 'matri rin', which provide moral legitimacy while simultaneously obscuring the economic and gendered dimensions of care work. The findings reveal a fundamental duality: caregiving sustains kinship cohesion and cultural continuity, yet produces emotional exhaustion, time poverty and economic dependency disproportionately borne by women.

By foregrounding Guwahati, the paper contributes region-specific insights and situates unpaid care within the processes of urban transformation, arguing for its recognition as an essential social infrastructure.

**Keywords** Informal Care, Care Economy, Gender, Emotional Labour, Urban India, Guwahati

## **Everyday Struggles of Unpaid Care: A Study of Informal Caregiving in Guwahati**

### **Introduction**

Rapid urban transformation in India has significantly reconfigured family structures, labour participation and everyday social life. Processes such as migration, the nuclearisation of households and the expansion of precarious employment have intensified pressures on families to manage care internally. Informal caregiving as unpaid care provided within family and kinship networks remains central to sustaining social reproduction yet continues to be systematically undervalued in economic accounting and public policy.

This study examines informal caregiving in Guwahati, a key urban centre in Northeast India undergoing accelerated socio-economic change. Care practices in this context are shaped by a tension between enduring cultural norms and emerging urban constraints. Cultural idioms such as *seva* (service) and *matri rin* (filial obligation) continue to frame caregiving as a moral duty, even as shrinking kinship networks and economic precarity intensify caregiving burdens.

This paper addresses three central questions: How do caregivers negotiate the dual pressures of tradition and modernity? In what ways does caregiving reproduce gendered inequalities? How do caregivers construct meaning around their roles in the context of urban transformation?

### **Review of Literature**

Collectively, the reviewed literature highlights significant issues surrounding informal caregiving in India, particularly focussing on the gendered burden of unpaid care work predominantly borne by women. Hochschild's (1983) foundational concept of emotional labour frames the emotional exhaustion experienced by caregivers. Sinha(2024) reveals how

unpaid care negatively impacts women's labour market participation and wellbeing in urban settings like Guwahati. Gustafsson (2022) uncovers the cultural expectations within caregiver relationships, while Murthy (2016) discusses the psychological burdens tied to unpaid care and mental health stigmas. Tasnim (2020) emphasises the invisibility of unpaid care due to patriarchal norms, advocating for policy changes, whereas Nikore's (2022) analysis underscores its economic significance. Mishra (2023) presents a dual perspective on caregiving as both burdensome and fulfilling, while Brear (2024) examines Assamese notions of 'good care' Isaac (2016) adds a cross-cultural lens, showing how community values shape caregiving, helping to maintain cultural traditions amidst urbanisation. Collectively, these studies reveal the health costs, positive aspects of caregiving and existing research gaps in qualitative studies focussed on urban caregivers in rapidly changing environments.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on feminist theory and symbolic interactionism to develop a multi-layered understanding of informal caregiving.

Feminist scholars conceptualise unpaid caregiving as a central component of the care economy, emphasising how women's labour sustains households and economies without recognition or compensation. Emotional labour, as conceptualised by Arlie Hochschild (1983) highlights the affective dimension of care work, where individuals actively regulate emotions to conform to socially prescribed roles. This renders caregiving both invisible and naturalised within patriarchal structures.

Care economy perspectives further underscore the systematic undervaluation of unpaid labour within capitalist economies, where care work is essential yet excluded from formal economic metrics. These perspectives illuminate how caregiving reproduces both gender inequality and economic dependency.

Symbolic interactionism, as developed by Herbert Blumer(1969), provides a micro-sociological lens to examine how caregivers construct meaning through everyday interactions. Practices of caregiving, feeding, cleaning, comforting become symbolic acts through which identities such as ‘good daughter’ or ‘dutiful wife’ are performed. Cultural idioms such as seva transform caregiving into a moral project, where obligation is internalised as identity.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of informal caregivers in Guwahati. A total of 20 participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, age, class background, and caregiving context, including eldercare, disability care and childcare. Fieldwork was conducted across multiple neighbourhoods, including Beltola, Panbazar, Chandmari, and Jalukbari, capturing varied socio-economic conditions.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 30 and 40 minutes. The interviews explored caregiving routines, emotional experiences, socio-economic challenges, and coping mechanisms. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms have been used to ensure confidentiality.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Initial open coding identified recurring themes such as emotional labour, gender norms, cultural meanings, and urban pressures. These themes were then interpreted through feminist and symbolic interactionist frameworks, enabling a connection between lived experiences and broader social structures.

### **Result and Discussion**

#### **1. Labour and the Regulation of Self**

Caregiving involves continuous emotional regulation. Neelima explained, 'I cry in the kitchen, but smile in front of my father'. This reflects what Arlie Hochschild (1983) conceptualises as emotional labour, where caregivers actively manage feelings to maintain household stability. Care work thus extends beyond physical tasks to include affective labour that sustains relational harmony.

Repeated exposure to such emotional regulation produced what several respondents described as 'numbness'. This indicates not only emotional exhaustion but also the normalisation of self-suppression as part of caregiving identity. Emotional labour operates here not merely as interpersonal adjustment but as a gendered expectation embedded within the moral economy of care.

## **2. Gendered Moral Economy of Care**

Caregiving remains deeply feminised and socially regulated. Maya (38) stated, 'If I don't take care properly, people will judge me'. This illustrates how caregiving is tied to the moral evaluation of femininity, where women are expected to embody patience, sacrifice and selflessness. This aligns with Nancy Folbre's argument (2001) that care work forms the invisible foundation of economic systems while remaining systematically undervalued.

Male caregivers remain exceptions within this moral framework. Bipul (35), who cares for his father, reported experiencing social ridicule. His experience highlights both the persistence of gender norms and emerging shifts, while reinforcing the idea that caregiving continues to be socially constructed as feminine labour.

## **3. Cultural Idioms: Seva and Matri Rin**

Cultural concepts such as *seva* and *matri rin* shape caregiving as an ethical obligation. One participant noted, 'My mother carried me; now I carry her' framing care as reciprocity rather than as labour.

However, these meanings also obscure the exploitative dimensions of caregiving. Caregivers internalise hardship as moral duty, limiting the articulation of resistance. Culture thus operates simultaneously as a source of meaning and a mechanism of control. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, as Herbert Blumer suggests, such meanings are constructed and sustained through everyday interactions, transforming caregiving into a moral identity that makes resistance socially difficult.

#### **4. Urban Transformation and the Privatisation of Care**

Urban processes have fragmented traditional support systems. Megha (32) reflected, 'I am proud, but also stuck', capturing the tension between autonomy and obligation.

Migration, smaller housing arrangements and demanding work schedules have reduced collective caregiving practices, leading to the individualisation of responsibility. Care becomes increasingly privatised, intensifying both emotional and physical burdens. This reflects a broader shift under urban modernity, where caregiving responsibilities are transferred from extended kin networks to individuals.

#### **5. Economic Costs and Time Poverty**

Caregiving generates significant economic consequences. Rashmi (45) left her job to care for her husband, illustrating the economic invisibility of unpaid care work.

Low-income caregivers face compounded burdens. One domestic worker stated, 'I care for others for money, but my own care is unpaid'. This highlights the intersection of class and

gender within the care economy, where unpaid labour sustains formal economic systems while remaining unrecognised and undervalued.

## **6. Care, Class and Intersectionality**

Caregiving experiences in Guwahati are further shaped by class inequalities. While middle-class households may have access to paid assistance, lower-income caregivers often combine wage labour with unpaid caregiving responsibilities.

As one domestic worker explained, 'I look after my employer's mother in the morning and my own at night. I get paid for one, not for the other'. This highlights the intersection of gender and class, where the burden of care is unevenly distributed.

### **Policy Gaps and the Need for Social Recognition of Care**

Despite its central role in sustaining households and enabling economic productivity, unpaid caregiving remains largely absent from urban policy frameworks in India. In cities such as Guwahati, institutional mechanisms including caregiver assistance programmes, respite care services and community-based support systems are limited. As a result, caregiving continues to be confined to the private sphere, relying primarily on familial obligation rather than public provision.

This policy gap reflects the structural invisibility of care within urban governance. While cities prioritise infrastructure and economic growth, the social infrastructure of care remains neglected. From a feminist political economy perspective, this exclusion reinforces gender inequality, as women's unpaid labour continues to subsidise both household survival and the formal economy.

Recognising unpaid caregiving is therefore essential for advancing gender equity and inclusive urban development. In the context of Guwahati, this requires a shift from viewing

care as a private responsibility to understanding it as a collective social concern, supported through neighbourhood-based collectives, caregiver support groups and municipal welfare initiatives.

At a broader level, care must be reframed as a public and political issue. As Tronto (1993) argues, care sustains democratic life through interdependence and moral responsibility. Recognising caregiving in these terms can foster more inclusive and socially just urban futures.

### **Policy Implications**

Building on these gaps, the study suggests several policy interventions:

#### **1. Introduction of Social Protection Mechanisms**

Governments should design targeted social protection schemes for unpaid caregivers, including financial assistance, health insurance coverage and access to mental health services. Such measures can reduce the economic vulnerability associated with long-term caregiving.

#### **2. Integration into Labour and Welfare Policies**

Unpaid caregiving should be formally recognised within labour and social welfare frameworks. This may include incorporating caregiving into employment policies through flexible work arrangements, leave provisions and recognition in labour statistics.

#### **3. Development of Community-based Care Infrastructure**

The establishment of urban ‘care community centres’ can provide shared spaces for caregiving support, including day care for the elderly, disability support services and respite care. These centres can also function as hubs for training and resource-sharing among caregivers.

#### **4. Awareness and Cultural Reframing**

Public campaigns are needed to challenge the perception of caregiving as solely a private or feminine responsibility. Reframing care as a collective civic duty can encourage greater social participation and redistribution of responsibilities across genders and communities.

#### **4. Financial Recognition of Care Work**

Introducing caregiving allowances, pension credits or subsidies for long-term caregivers can acknowledge the economic value of unpaid care. This is particularly important for women who exit the labour market due to caregiving responsibilities, ensuring long-term financial security.

#### **Significance of the Study**

This study holds both academic and policy significance. Academically, it contributes to the literature on the care economy by foregrounding Guwahati and Northeast India, regions that remain underrepresented in sociological research. By integrating feminist theory with symbolic interactionism, the study bridges structural analyses of gender inequality with micro-level understandings of meaning-making.

Empirically, the study provides grounded insights into how urban transformation reshapes caregiving practices, intensifying privatisation and gendered burdens. From a policy perspective, it underscores the urgent need to recognise unpaid caregiving as essential social infrastructure.

#### **Conclusion**

Informal caregiving in Guwahati reflects the complex intersection of gender, culture and urban transformation. While caregiving sustains households and cultural continuity, it simultaneously produces structural inequalities and emotional strain.

By combining feminist and interactionist perspectives, this study demonstrates that caregiving is both a system of gendered labour and a site of meaning-making. Urban change has intensified the privatisation of care, placing disproportionate responsibility on individual caregivers, particularly women.

This paper contributes to broader debates on the care economy by foregrounding a regional urban context and emphasising the need for policy recognition of unpaid caregiving as essential social infrastructure.

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