UNPAID WORK
WOMEN'S RESPONSIBILITY
OR AN ECONOMIC ACTIVITY?

Introduction
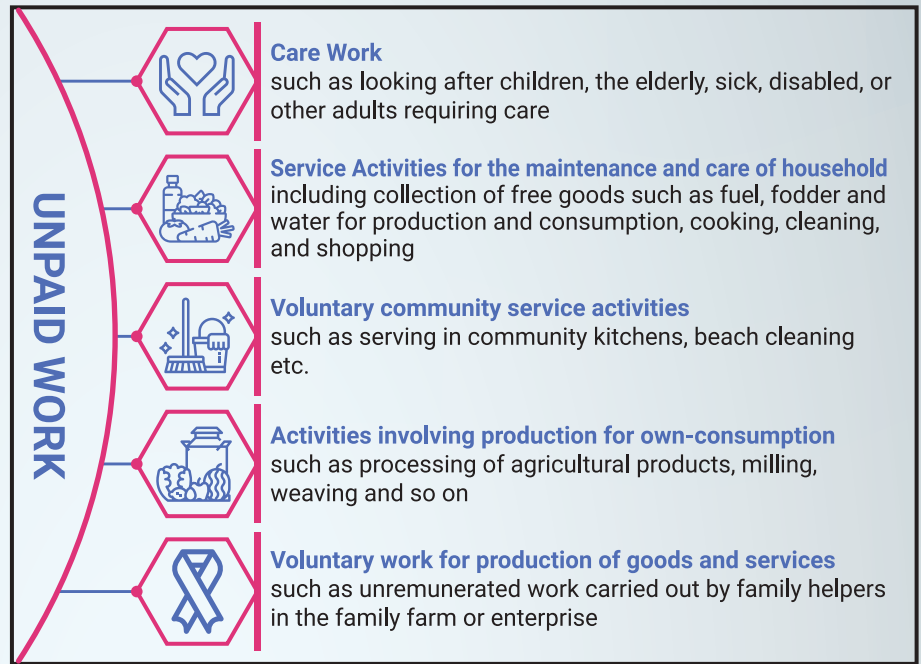
Owing to the sexual division of labour, gendered roles and social norms, the burden of unpaid work, both in India and globally is disproportionately shared by women. The onset of COVID-19 has led to closure of offices and educational institutions, normalization of work from home and online education, along with the lack of services of domestic workers. This has resulted in dramatic increase in the quantity of unpaid work that was required in households. The adversity created by the pandemic has reignited the discourse on women's unpaid work in the form of 'domestic responsibilities' and its association with declining labour force participation of women (about 21 million women exiting the workforce in India in 2019).

As a consequence to this, there have been talks about recognizing and monetizing unpaid household work, whereby, for the upcoming State Assembly election in Tamil Nadu, the political party Makkal Needhi Maiam (MNM) has promised to recognize housework as a salaried profession.

Before we delve further into the problem and its potential solution, it becomes crucial to understand what constitutes unpaid work and how is it distributed in the present society? Why do women perform majority of the unpaid work in our society? How does skewed distribution of unpaid work impact women? Should unpaid work be recognized and accounted as an economic activity? And what can be done to overcome issues associated with unpaid domestic and care work? In this edition, we will attempt to answer these questions.

What constitutes unpaid work and how is it distributed in the present society?

The term unpaid work, as given by the International Labour Organization is the 'non-remunerated work carried out to sustain the well-being and maintenance of other individuals in a household or the community, and it includes both direct and indirect care (i.e., routine housework)'. Overall, unpaid work can be categorized into following major divisions:
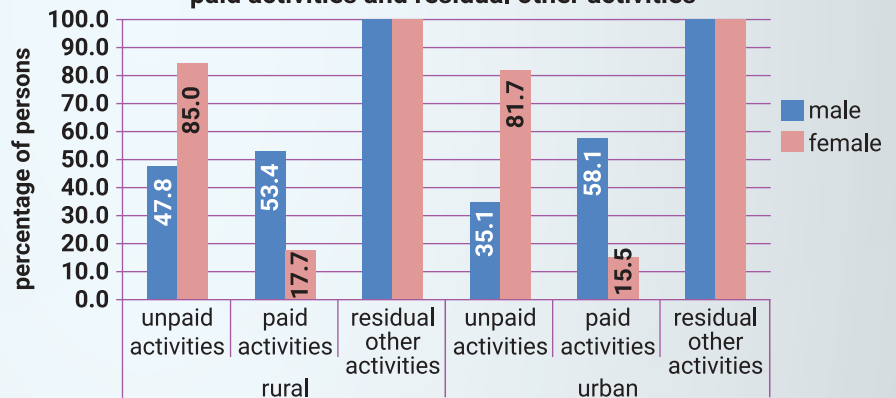
UNPAID WORK

Care Work
such as looking after children, the elderly, sick, disabled, or other adults requiring care

Service Activities for the maintenance and care of household including collection of free goods such as fuel, fodder and water for production and consumption, cooking, cleaning, and shopping

Voluntary community service activities such as serving in community kitchens, beach cleaning etc.

Activities involving production for own-consumption such as processing of agricultural products, milling, weaving and so on

Voluntary work for production of goods and services such as unremunerated work carried out by family helpers in the family farm or enterprise

Skewed Distribution of Unpaid Work

➤ **Global trends:** A report published by the International Labour Organization in 2018 shows that, globally, women perform three-quarters of unpaid care work.

   ● In no country in the world do men and women provide an equal share of unpaid care work.

➤ **Trends in India: 'Time Use in India-2019',** a survey conducted by National Statistical Office, has revealed that 91.8% of women in India between the ages of 15 and 59 participated in unpaid domestic work for household members in 2019 (in comparison, this percentage was 20% for men).

**Percentage of persons participating in a day in unpaid activities, paid activities and residual other activities**

	rural			urban		
	unpaid activities	paid activities	residual other activities	unpaid activities	paid activities	residual other activities
male	47.8	53.4	100.0	35.1	58.1	100.0
female	85.0	17.7	100.0	81.7	15.5	100.0

Why do women perform majority of unpaid work in our society?

➤ **Patriarchal norms:** Unpaid work of women is often a consequence of rigid patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes. 'Men as breadwinners'– 'Women as caregivers' model remains the dominant construct for gender relations globally.

➤ **Limited ability of women to participate in paid work:** Discriminatory social institutions prevent women from attaining necessary educational qualifications to participate in paid labour. Data suggests that women with no technical education have higher probability to be engaged in unpaid domestic work compared to women having any form of technical education.

Average time (in minutes) spent in a day per participant in unpaid activities, paid activities and residual other activities

	rural			urban		
	unpaid activities	paid activities	residual other activities	unpaid activities	paid activities	residual other activities
male	167	415	1139	110	486	1119
female	373	313	1067	337	367	1107
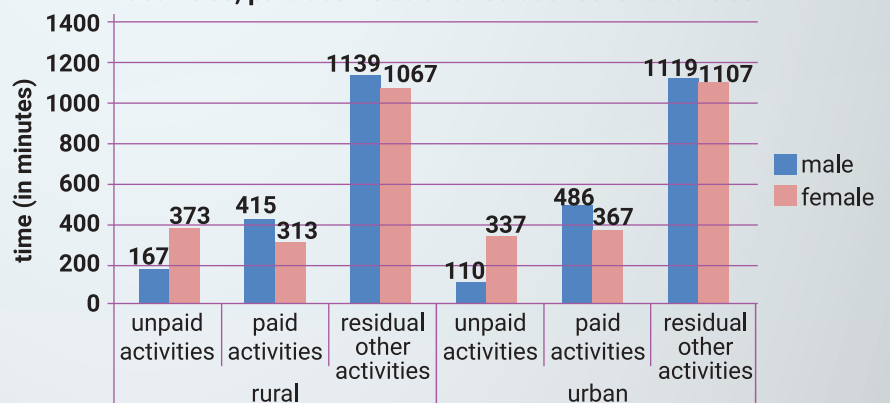
- **Lack of alternate care infrastructure:** Women are engaged in unpaid activities not by choice; rather they are constrained because institutions (both market and state) have failed to create affordable alternatives such as elderly care homes and childcare facilities, stable water supply etc.
- **Financial constraints:** Outsourcing unpaid care activities, such as cooking, cleaning or fetching water is not an affordable or realistic option for most women.
- **Structural transformations:** The structural transformation and automation of agriculture have led to the mechanization of work, which has pushed women to exit from farm activities, especially from the middle and larger size of landholding and to engage in unpaid activities.
- **Increase in household incomes:** Women in households with higher incomes generally participate in child rearing activities to provide better opportunities to upcoming generation.

How does skewed distribution of unpaid work impact women?

The chores that fall into the category of unpaid labour are **physically exerting and time consuming.** As such, the unpaid work of women takes away most of their time and subjects them to increased **time poverty and time stress.** 'Time poverty' is understood as experiencing such acute time pressure anxiety that there is little freedom to choose how to allocate one's time. This generates **considerable opportunity** cost (forgone benefit that would have been derived by an option not chosen) for women. These issues get further exacerbated for women who are also engaged in paid work. They are often described to work a "second shift" or experience a "double day", one at work and other at home.

These factors combined with other phenomena such as gender stereotyping, social norms etc. have resulted in following implications for women:

- **Barrier to women's labour force participation:** There is a strong negative correlation between a country's female employment rate and women's average unpaid working time. The immense burden of unpaid work prevents women from actively pursuing further education, employment opportunities and raising their skill-level which limits their ability to participate in paid work.
    - For instance, only 21.8 percent of women aged 15-59 years were engaged in paid work in comparison to nearly 70.9 percent of the men.
- **Occupational downgrading and segregation:** The struggle for women to reconcile care responsibilities with paid employment can lead to women choosing employment below their skill level. At the same time, it also leads women to choose sectors that are traditionally associated with their gender roles, such as nurses, domestic helps etc. as they are expected to be proficient in performing such tasks. This relegates them to economic activities with **low earnings, insecurity and irregularity.**
- **Discrimination in hiring and pay:** The responsibility of unpaid work, especially childcare activities, eventually falls on women even if they participate in paid work outside their homes. This promotes ideas like women aren't competent or dedicated workers since they have other priorities beyond their work. This leads to discrimination during recruitment and career advancement opportunities.
- **Increases hierarchy in gender relations and gender inequalities in the family:** Financial dependence of women arising out of unpaid work results in decreased agency, limited decision-making power and restricted mobility within the household. This affects the intra-household distribution of resources in favour of men as guided by the power dynamics of gender relations.
    - Refusal or failure to undertake responsibility of unpaid work **may also lead to gender violence.** OXFAM India's 2019 household care survey found that one in three survey respondents thought that it was acceptable to beat a woman for failing to perform care work.
- **Deteriorates quality of life:** For women engaged in paid work, substantial burden of unpaid work, for extended periods of time may lead to sleep deprivation, social reclusiveness, or inability to adequately attend to activities involving personal care, socialization, leisure or entertainment.
- **Detrimental to women empowerment:** Underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions such as corporate executives, managers, technocrats, senior officials and legislators reduces their ability to exercise their voice and limits their access to collective action processes .
- **Increased vulnerability to environmental and economic changes:** Any changes such as climate-related shocks, austerity policies reducing social sector expenditure etc. tend to raise the burden of unpaid work on women, reducing women's well-being as well as productivity. For instance, with the onslaught of climate change, women's unpaid work in gathering water and fuel is growing even more.

Impact of unpaid work on the economy and society

There are various positive and negative impacts of unpaid care work on countries' economies, as well as on individual and societal well-being.

Positive impacts:

- **Subsidization of the market:** Unpaid work lowers the cost of labor for the market. The private sector has to pay much less than what it would have paid to maintain the same standard of living of workers (i.e., the wear and tear on workers, or labor depreciation, is taken care of by unpaid household services). This raises profits at the macro level, leading to an increase in the amount of capital accumulated and in economic growth.

- **Human capital formation:** Unpaid work contributes to human capital formation by raising and nurturing children who are the workforce of tomorrow.

- **Supplements government's duties:** Unpaid work supplements the goods and services made available through public-sector provisioning and also fills the gaps in public infrastructure. For example, unpaid work includes fetching drinking water which substitutes public provisioning of water supply and related infrastructure.

Negative impacts:

- **Reduced economic gains:** Skewed distribution of unpaid work leads to depletion of human capital (women) and a sub-optimal use of the labor force in the economy. Ultimately this reduces the potential gains to the economy in the long run.
  - In a report, the International Monetary Fund suggested that if women's participation in the economy was raised to that of men, then India could grow its GDP by 27 per cent.

- **Undervaluation of certain paid work:** Since unpaid work does not hold a monetary value, society assumes the work done by women as less significant, requiring lower skills, and, thus, deserving of lower earnings. So, the occupations that resemble unpaid work or professions dominated by women get badly paid. For instance, Anganwadi and ASHA workers are often paid meager wages and miss out on pension, maternity, holiday and other benefits.

- **Detrimental impact on quality of care:** Excessive and strenuous amounts of unpaid care work can result in sub-optimal care strategies, with detrimental consequences for care recipients such as infants, children, persons with disabilities and older persons.

Should unpaid work be recognized and accounted as an economic activity?

Since the work done at home doesn't necessarily generate products and services for the market, economists often ignore it in their calculations. The result is that a massive portion of the work done by women in India goes unrecognized as labour and remains invisible and unaccounted for in national statistics like the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Globally, while unpaid domestic work by women is valued at nearly 13 percent of the total economy, in India, women's unpaid domestic work is estimated to be valued at almost 40 percent of its GDP.

Even Supreme Court of India, in a Motor Vehicle Compensation Case, called for fixing notional income for a non-earning homemaker as a step towards the constitutional vision of social equality and ensuring dignity of life to all individuals. In this regard, need of recognizing unpaid work is highlighted by the following arguments:

- **Ensuring Rights of unpaid workers:** Valuation of unpaid work will make the contribution of unpaid workers visible, highlight the unjust inequalities and justify their claim on the public exchequer. It will bring them in realm of policy making and allow them to demand funds for improving their technology and working conditions and even pension benefits.
  - The valuation will also help in the engenderment of national budgets, as it will justify larger allocations to women's development and empowerment.

- **Recognition as a central process in empowerment:** The recognition of primary occupation of women as genuine work, that contributes not only to the family but to the welfare of the nation state as a whole, will give them a claim to equality within the patriarchal Indian household that only recognizes the work done by men.

- **Need of a holistic understanding of labour:** The society needs an inclusive definition of labour that isn't purely tied to the exchange value of a service on the market and recognizes an extremely intimate form of labour that has proved essential to keeping the unit of the family intact and functional.

- **Enhancing policy efficiency:** Non recognition of unpaid care work leads to incorrect inferences about levels and changes in individuals' well-being and the value of time, which in turn limits policy effectiveness across a range of socio-economic areas, notably gender inequalities in employment and other empowerment areas.
  - For instance, not factoring unpaid work reduces the effectiveness of any kind of active labor market measures, such as skills development or employment of women.
- **Moving towards monetization of unpaid work:** Recognition is the first step towards monetizing unpaid work, which will in turn have associated benefits such as-
  - Wages for housework would **make women financially independent** and help them gain agency in the household.
  - Provision of income to women **can contribute directly to poverty reduction** by augmenting household income. It can also trigger an **intergenerational virtuous cycle** and reduce non-income poverty in the long term, due to women's propensity to invest a larger proportion of their income on improving nutrition, health and education of household members, including girls.
  - Monetization of unpaid care work can translate into **better wages for workers involved in paid care work.**

While recognition of unpaid work will assert the dignity of housework and make it a visible and valued form of labour, there are some prevalent **challenges in recognizing and monetizing unpaid work:**

- **Legal complexities in measuring unpaid work:** Unlike standard market work measures, it is difficult to calculate and measure quality and quantity of unpaid work.

  - The most commonly used approach has been to measure market replacement cost by calculating what the value of unpaid care would be in the paid care sector if a person was employed to perform such work. However, it ignores the opportunity cost borne by women.

- **Reinforcing sex-based division of labour:** Paying monetary benefits for housework can formally endorse the social norm that domestic and care work are 'women's work', for which they are being paid. Thus, it has the **risk of furthering the gender disparity** in unpaid work within homes.

  - An indirect consequence of this stereotyping would be **discouraged participation of women in other economic activities.**

- **Impact on social setup:** Formalizing or monetizing unpaid work may erode sentimental aspect of care giving. This can end the complementary relationships within a household and encourage individualistic culture.
  - Also, it can create a divide among working women and housewives where working women who may not perform household duties may be looked down upon.

- **Commoditization of care:** It is difficult to commoditize 'Care' since it is much more than 'labor' and they are both performed in totally different environments, i.e., the competitive environment of the market and the work in the home, where profit is not a motive.

What can be done to overcome issues associated with unpaid domestic and care work?

The 'triple R' approach - 'recognition, reduction and redistribution', first recommended by Diane Elson (2008), is a well-accepted approach that attempts to integrate unpaid work into the mainstream economy by reducing it and by reorganizing it between paid and unpaid work. Such integration is expected to improve the efficiency of the total workforce on the one hand and generate some macroeconomic gains on the other hand.

Triple R Framework: It involves three components-

- **"Recognizing"** unpaid care work involves bringing an end to society's habitual practice of taking it for granted and challenging the social norms and gender stereotypes that undervalue it and make it invisible in policy design and implementation.
- **"Reducing"** unpaid care work means shortening the time devoted to such work when it involves drudgery, primarily by improving infrastructure.
- **"Redistributing"** unpaid care work means changing its distribution between women and men, but also between households and society as a whole.

Some policy recommendations under this approach have been stated below:

Recognizing	Reducing	Redistributing
➤ **Measuring unpaid work:** This is to be achieved mainly through conducting regular time use surveys that collect detailed and comprehensive information on all human activities, including unpaid activities. Such information can help in designing interventions to reduce and reorganize this work. ➤ **Valuation of Unpaid Work:** Valuation essentially describes unpaid work in monetary units, same as GDP, and makes it possible to give visibility to unpaid work in terms of its share of the total well-being of the economy. ➤ **Mainstreaming Gender Budgeting grounded in gender analysis:** It should assess how well a budget addresses gender gaps and reviews the actual distribution of resources between women and men, and girls and boys. ● Such an analysis **also allows for the inclusion of key issues** that are frequently overlooked in budgets and policy analyses, such as the net economic effect of uneven distribution of unpaid work as well as the uneven distribution of resources within families.	➤ **Providing Universal access to care policies and services:** They encompass the direct provision of childcare and eldercare services and care-related social protection transfers, and benefits given to unpaid care workers. ● It necessitates **building robust social infrastructure** such as care, health and education facilities (for example, childcare centers and care homes for the elderly), and physical infrastructure such as water and energy supply. **Employment guarantee programs** such as MGNREGA that can help build such infrastructure must be optimally utilised. ● Public care policies may include measures like **family allowances and child benefits** that contribute towards covering the cost of childcare; and **cash for care** that provide compensations for parents or **financial subsidies** to employers who provide workers with paid leave. ➤ **Investing in technological changes** for tasks involved in unpaid work that increases the productivity of human labour, improves performance and reduces the drudgery associated with many tasks. For example, providing fuel-efficient stoves for cooking in place of primitive stoves using fuel wood.	➤ **Reforms in Labour regulations:** Labour legislations can help deal with problems related to skewed distribution of unpaid work by- ● Promoting active labour market policies that support the attachment, reintegration and progress of unpaid carers into the labour force. ● Implementing gender-neutral and publicly funded leave policies for all women and men. ● Ensuring care-friendly and gender-responsive social protection systems. ➤ **Promoting Family-friendly working policies in private firms:** Family-friendly working conditions enable parents to balance their working hours and caring responsibilities. For instance, a flexible work schedule or teleworking allows women and men to choose working hours that better accommodate their caring responsibilities. ➤ **Tackling discriminatory social institutions:** Tackling entrenched social norms and gender stereotypes can 'de-feminise' unpaid work and re-shape gender norms that prevent men from assuming equal caring responsibilities. This can be achieved by bringing behavioral changes through education and encouraging male involvement in unpaid work.

Conclusion

Unpaid work is a universal issue that affects women across the globe, regardless of their levels of education and income or the level of development of their countries. Inequalities in unpaid care work and in the labour force are deeply interrelated. No substantive progress can be made in achieving gender equality in the labour force until inequalities in unpaid care work are tackled through effective recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work between women and men, as well as between families and the State. States have a role to encourage a more equal distribution of unpaid care work at the family level. Also, strategies to address unpaid care work at the community level are needed to promote effective change in attitudes towards unpaid care work.
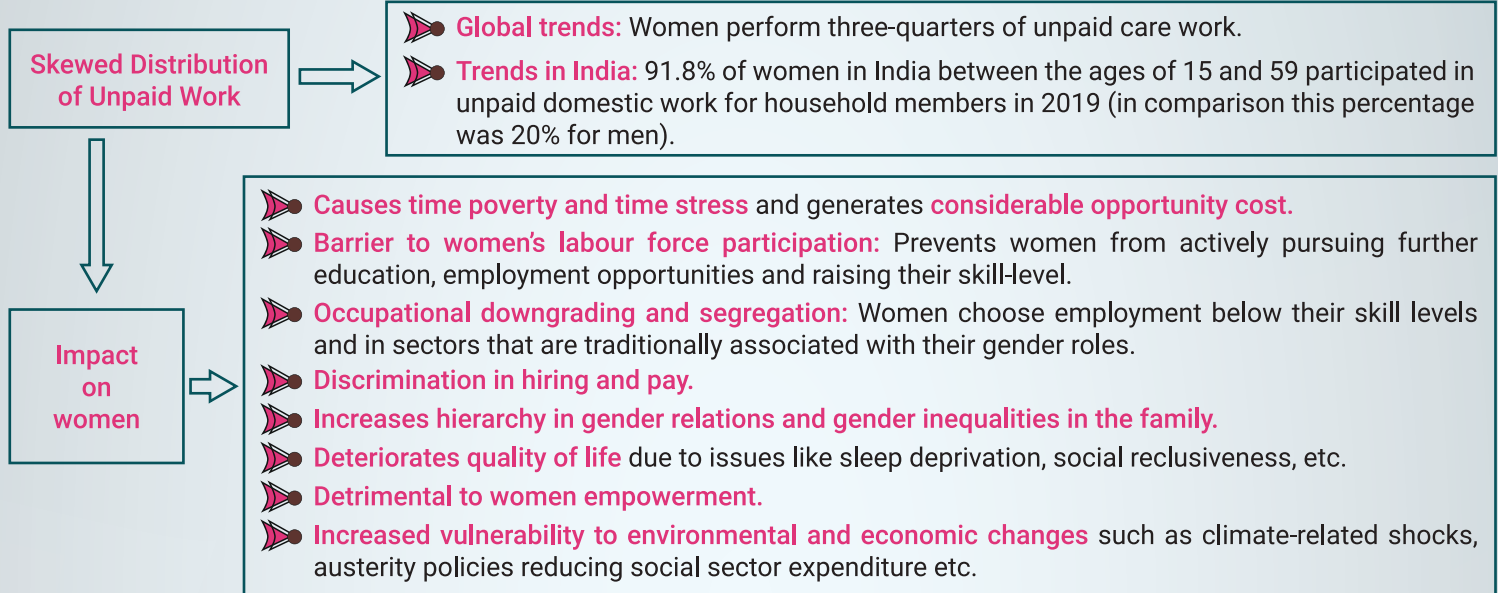
TOPIC AT A GLANCE

Unpaid work

- **Care work:** care of persons living in the house, such as looking after children, the elderly, sick, disabled etc.
- **Activities involving production of services meant for the maintenance and care of household.**
- **Unremunerated/voluntary work for production of goods and services** in households or market/non-market units.
- **Activities involving production for own-consumption** (such as processing of agricultural products, milling, weaving etc.)
- **Voluntary/community activities** or services rendered free to other households or the community.

Skewed Distribution of Unpaid Work

- **Global trends:** Women perform three-quarters of unpaid care work.
- **Trends in India:** 91.8% of women in India between the ages of 15 and 59 participated in unpaid domestic work for household members in 2019 (in comparison this percentage was 20% for men).

Impact on women

- **Causes time poverty and time stress** and generates **considerable opportunity cost.**
- **Barrier to women's labour force participation:** Prevents women from actively pursuing further education, employment opportunities and raising their skill-level.
- **Occupational downgrading and segregation:** Women choose employment below their skill levels and in sectors that are traditionally associated with their gender roles.
- **Discrimination in hiring and pay.**
- **Increases hierarchy in gender relations and gender inequalities in the family.**
- **Deteriorates quality of life** due to issues like sleep deprivation, social reclusiveness, etc.
- **Detrimental to women empowerment.**
- **Increased vulnerability to environmental and economic changes** such as climate-related shocks, austerity policies reducing social sector expenditure etc.

Recognizing and accounting unpaid work as an economic activity

Need of recognizing unpaid work

- **Ensuring Rights of unpaid workers:** It will make the contribution of unpaid workers visible, highlight the unjust inequalities and justify their claim on the public exchequer.
- **Women empowerment:** Helps women in claiming equality within the patriarchal Indian household.
- **Need of a holistic understanding of labour:** that isn't purely tied to the exchange value of a service on the market.
- **Enhancing policy efficiency:** across a range of socio-economic areas, notably gender inequalities in employment.
- **Moving towards monetization of unpaid work:** It will help women gain agency in the household, can contribute directly to poverty reduction and can translate into better wages for workers involved in paid care work.

Challenges in recognizing and monetizing unpaid work

- **Legal complexities in measuring unpaid work.**
- **Reinforcing sex-based division of labour** as it may endorse the social norm that domestic and care work are 'women's work'.
- **Impact on social setup** as it may erode sentimental aspect of care giving.
- **Difficult to commoditize 'Care'** since it is much more than 'labor' and they are both performed in totally different environments.

Way Forward- Triple R Framework

Recognizing	Reducing	Redistributing
Measuring unpaid work by conducting regular time use surveys. **Valuation of Unpaid Work** in monetary units. **Mainstreaming Gender Budgeting** grounded in gender analysis.	**Providing Universal access to care policies and services** by building robust social infrastructure and through measures like family allowances and child benefits etc. **Investing in technological changes for tasks involved in unpaid work.**	**Reforms in Labour regulations** such as implementing gender-neutral and publicly funded leave policies etc. **Promoting Family-friendly working policies in private firms** such as flexible work schedule or teleworking. **Tackling discriminatory social institutions** by bringing behavioral changes through education.