

# RETHINKING ECONOMIC JUSTICE: CENTERING UNPAID LABOR AS THE KEY TO GENDER EQUALITY AND EQUITY

"Reframing Economics for Gender Equality: Valuing Unpaid Care Work"

Business, Enterprise Employment Services (BEES) Network for Women in South Asia

Bina Pradhan

18 March 2025

# INTRODUCTION

- There is a general agreement that unpaid care work is a fundamental pillar of economies and societies worldwide – one of the prime concerns across countries and development agencies has been reducing unpaid care work of women and visibility of their contributions.
- Yet care work remains invisible in economic policies and development framework, and is undervalued as it is still:
  - assumed to be “unproductive” because of its use value & does not directly add any new surplus value, &
  - “Non-economic”
- While women now constitute 40% of the paid workforce and half of the world’s food producers (World Bank, 2012), they continue to bear the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, which extends far beyond childcare and eldercare.
- This unpaid care work is mostly performed within the households and subsistence sector (which commonly provides a minimal standard of living although not in terms of money).
- Most policy/program intervention toward gender equality has been in recognizing 3 “Rs” focusing more on the “Direct Care”, and “Indirect care” yet to be addressed in the economic framework of development.
- Today I argue that recognizing unpaid care work in its full scope- including community services, social reproduction, and the maintenance of generations of human resources - is essential for achieving gender equality and advancing economic justice – Meaning care work is central to economic structure .

# IMPACT OF UNPAID CARE WORK ON GENDER INEQUALITY

1. Unpaid care work shapes the ability, duration and types of paid work that can be undertaken because of the notion/belief that unpaid care work is women's responsibility.



2. As care work has no market value/monetary value, care workers do not have a voice nor the decision making power – economically it disempowers care workers, who are invariably women, from having savings or income from their work



3. The division between unpaid and paid care work reinforces an inside/outside dichotomy—where women are confined to undervalued household labor, while men dominate the more prestigious, market-based work. This false separation not only devalues domestic labor but also entrenches gender inequality in economic structures.



4. As Unpaid care work is regarded as “non-economic” hence unproductive in the economic definition, it is outside the scope of economics and its outcomes are hidden away under social reproduction



5. Most importantly, unpaid care work provide systemic transfer of subsidy to the economy in bearing the cost of social reproduction that is hidden, and women bear the burden of tax in time

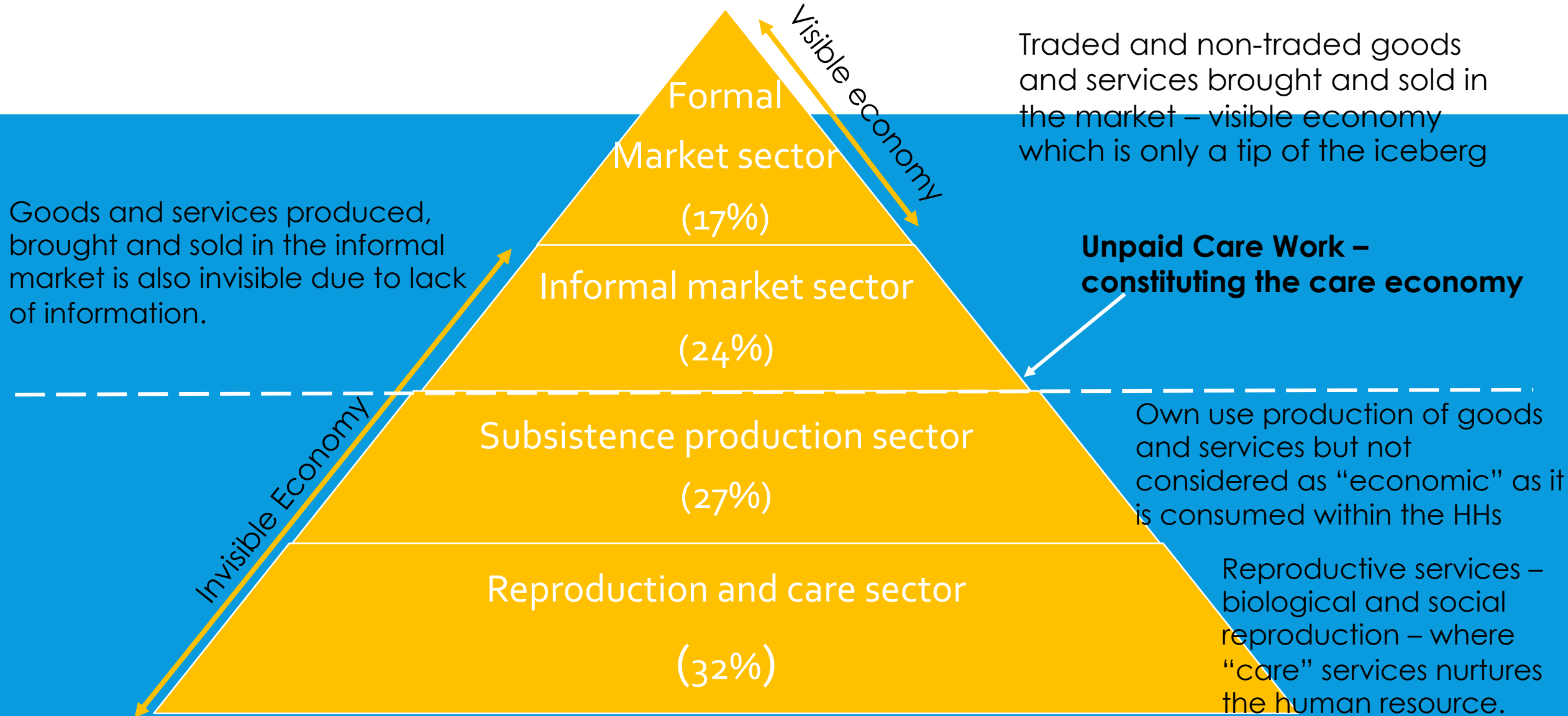
# BROAD SCOPE OF CARE WORK

Unpaid care work encompasses a wide range of activities necessary for the well-being of individuals, families, and societies. These include:

- Direct caregiving (childcare, eldercare, and care for persons with disabilities).
- Domestic labor (cooking, cleaning, water collection, shopping etc).
- Subsistence farming.
- Community care work (volunteer-based support for healthcare, education, and disaster response).
- Social reproduction (maintenance of human resources through nurturing, unpaid education support, health care initiatives, and emotional labor).

Despite its economic and social significance, unpaid care work remains largely unrecognized in national accounts and policy frameworks, leading to gendered economic disparities and "time poverty" among women.

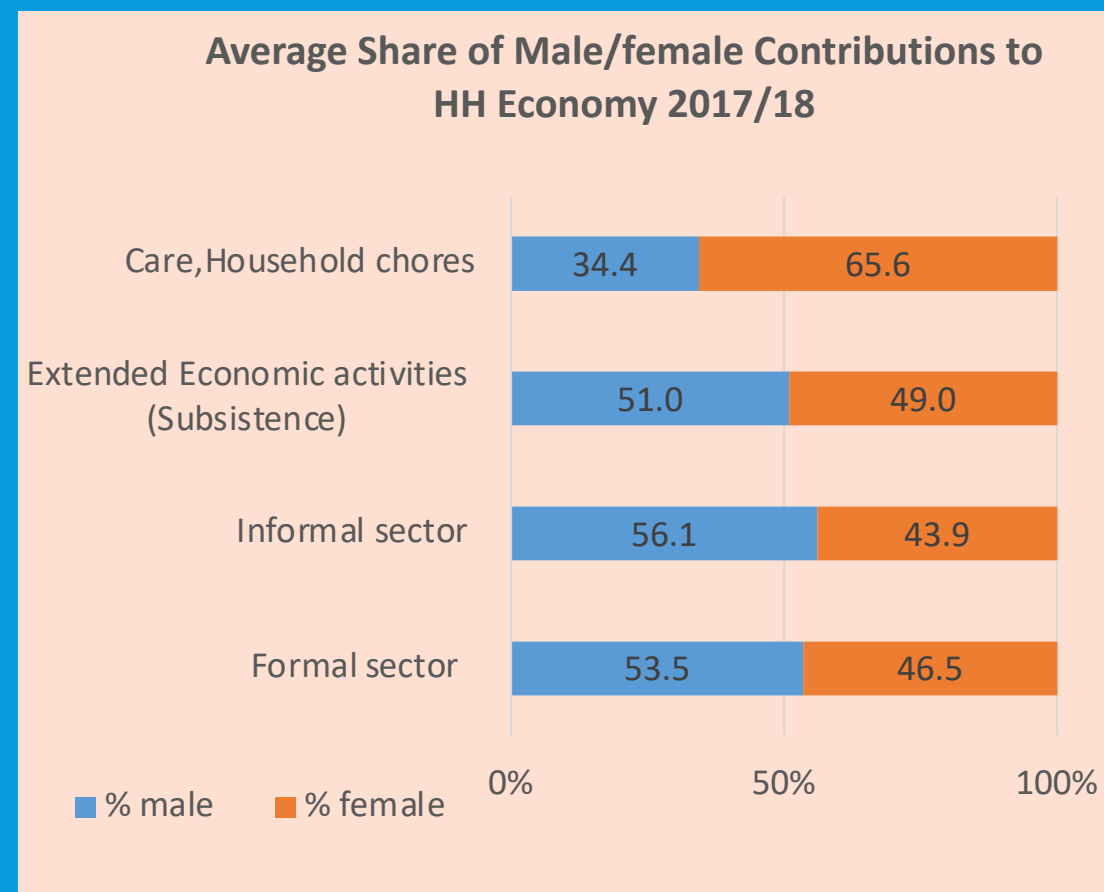
# FIGURE 1: VIEW OF THE ECONOMY: STRUCTURAL DISTRIBUTION OF DIFFERENT SECTOR



## DISTRIBUTION OF WORK TIME IN DIFFERENT SECTOR OF THE ECONOMY IN 2017/18

Sectors	Mean working hours (spent last week)					
	Male	Female	M/F Average	Total	% male	% Female
<b>1. Market sector</b>						
a. Formal sector	50.7	44.0	48.5	94.7	53.5	46.5
b. Informal sector	47.5	37.2	43.4	84.7	56.1	43.9
<b>2. Subsistence Sector (extended eco. Activities)</b>						
	11.1	10.7	10.8	21.8	51.0	49.0
<b>3. Care Sector (HH Chores or non-economic activities)</b>						
	8.3	15.8	13.8	24.1	34.4	65.6

Source: Nepal Labor Force Survey 2017/18, National Statistic Office, GON,



# ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF UNPAID CARE WORK

- **Invisible yet Indispensable Contributions to the Economy:** Unpaid care work sustains the paid economy by ensuring the reproduction and maintenance of the labor force. Time-use studies indicate that if unpaid care work were assigned a monetary value, it would account for up to 10-39% of GDP (OECD, 2019)
- **Time Poverty and Gender Inequality:** Women's and girls' participation and access to economic opportunity for advancement has "stalled" across countries due to their disproportionate unpaid care responsibilities (IFC, 2017). Without adequate state and social support, they remain trapped in cycles of economic dependence and inequality.
- **Reinforcement of Gender Norms:** The invisibility of unpaid care work perpetuates patriarchal norms that position caregiving as a "natural" duty of women rather than a collective societal responsibility.
- **Lack of recognition of unpaid work:** The lack of recognition of unpaid work in the national accounts and its inclusion in macroeconomic structure has a negative impact on gender equality at the macroeconomic level due to the importance of these accounts as instruments for policymaking.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRUCTURAL INTEGRATION OF UNPAID CARE WORK IN THE NATIONAL ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK

1. **Integration into National Accounts:** Governments should make maximum utilization of the existing time use data from the National Labor Force Surveys (NLFS) that is collected periodically to calculate the economic value of unpaid care work as a proportion of GDP, national statistics, and labor policies. This will enable evidence based policymaking and ensure care work is recognized as a critical economic contributor.
2. **Investing in Care Sector infrastructure:**
  - Expansion of publicly funded childcare and eldercare services.
  - Strengthening community-based care initiatives.
  - Increase access to clean water, energy, and public transportation to reduce the unpaid labor burden.
3. **Integrating the subsistence and Care/Household sectors in the National Economic framework and Planning (shown in the figure above from NLFS data):**
  - **Assign market value** to the goods and services produced in these sectors using economic data from NLFS.
  - **Strengthening subsistence sector** by investing in agroforestry-based value chains to strengthen subsistence livelihoods
  - Provide financial support for climate-resilient products and services
  - Strengthen skills of all women and men engaged in subsistence sector to enhance their productivity and production capacity.



# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRUCTURAL INTEGRATION

## 4. Have Social Protection and Economic Policies in Place:

- Establishment of universal care allowances or social protection schemes for caregivers.
- Implement gender-responsive budgeting to prioritize care-sensitive policies.
- Legal recognition of unpaid care work in employment laws to support flexible work arrangements and paid family leave.
- Shifting Social and gender norms and values by :
  - Launching public awareness campaigns promoting shared caregiving responsibilities.
  - Integrate gender-equitable perspectives on caregiving into education systems.

## Conclusion

Recognizing women's paid work has contributed to greater gender equality – now extending this recognition to unpaid care work is the next critical step. Beyond childcare and eldercare, the full spectrum of unpaid work—including social reproduction and community care—must be valued, redistributed, and supported through transformative policies. Recognition alone is insufficient; structural change is necessary to ensure that unpaid care work is no longer a hidden form of economic exclusion but a recognized and equitable part of national development strategies.