

**Business, Enterprise and Employment Support for Women in South Asia
Network (Guarantee) Limited**

Knowledge Hub Webinar Series

**Mainstreaming Care and Gender: A Critical Investment to Address Neglected
Care Work and its Socio-Structural Exclusion
10th December 2024**

This webinar, held on World Human Rights Day, brought together prominent experts from South Asia to discuss the critical issues surrounding unpaid care work, gender equality, and related challenges. Below is a synthesis of the key themes and findings:

Economic Impact of Unpaid Care Work

- Contributes 9% to global GDP (approximately \$11 trillion annually).
- Significant regional disparities exist in South Asia:
 - In Bangladesh, women spend 7.3 times more time on unpaid care work than men.
 - In India, women contribute over five hours daily to unpaid care work, while men contribute just 13 minutes (0.22 hours).
 - In Nepal, women spend 6 times more time on unpaid care work than men

Mental Health and Gender-Based Violence (*Dr. Dechen Wangmo, Head, PEMA Secretariate, Bhutan*)

- One in eight people globally live with mental health disorders.
- Countries allocate less than 2% of health budgets to mental health.
- South-East Asia has the third-highest mental health disease burden (13.2%).
- Bhutan is implementing innovative solutions, including simple screening questions in healthcare settings.
- Emphasis on integrating mental health services with GBV response frameworks.

Women's Economic Contributions (*Ms. Shaheen Anam, Executive Director, Bangladesh*)

- If monetized, women's unpaid household work would constitute 76.8% of Bangladesh's GDP.
- Women spend 7.3 times more time on unpaid care work than men.
- Time poverty significantly limits women's workforce participation and educational opportunities.
- Advocacy efforts focus on including unpaid work in national accounts.

Care Economy Transformation (*Ms. Patricia Fernandez-Pacheco, UN Women Country Representative, Nepal*)

- Nepal's women spend six times more time on unpaid care work than men.
- Unpaid care work contributes approximately 30% of Nepal's GDP.
- Potential for creating 14 million jobs in education and healthcare, 60% of which filled by women
- Emphasis on the "5 R's": Recognize, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward, and Represent.
- Mapping care services and launching social campaigns to promote care-sharing responsibilities

Women in Informal Sectors (*Ms. Nirali Shah, Coordinator, SEWA, India*)

- Focus on waste recyclers who manage a significant portion of India's 62 million tons of annual waste.
- SEWA's initiatives include Value Creation Centers and door-to-door collection programs.
- Emphasis on eliminating exploitative intermediaries and ensuring fair wages.
- Integration of environmental sustainability with women's economic empowerment.

Key Recommendations

1. Increase investment in care systems and infrastructure.
2. Reposition care work as a public good.
3. Transform social norms around gender roles and caregiving.
4. Develop comprehensive care policies integrated into economic planning.
5. Improve data collection and measurement of unpaid care work.
6. Enhance mental health services and their integration with gender-based violence response.
7. Support women in informal sectors through organized programs and fair wage initiatives.

Detailed Analysis

The webinar, held on World Human Rights Day 2024, brought together experts to examine how unpaid care work affects gender equality and economic development. To understand the scope of this issue, consider that unpaid care work—such as childcare, eldercare, cooking, and household maintenance—contributes about \$11 trillion to the global economy annually. That's roughly 9% of global GDP, yet this work remains largely invisible in economic measurements and policy discussions.

The situation in South Asia reveals stark gender disparities. In Bangladesh, women spend 7.3 times as many hours on unpaid care work as men do. The disparity is even

more dramatic in India, where women contribute over five hours daily to unpaid care work while men contribute just 13 minutes. These numbers highlight deeply embedded gender roles in South Asian societies.

The mental health implications of these disparities are significant, as Dr. Dechen Wangmo from Bhutan explained. Mental health challenges disproportionately affect women, often exacerbated by gender-based violence. Yet most countries spend less than 2% of their health budgets on mental health services. Bhutan is taking an innovative approach by introducing simple screening questions in healthcare settings, such as "Are you safe at home?" and "Are you happy at home?" These questions help identify potential issues early without requiring extensive resources.

The economic impact of this unequal distribution of care work is substantial. In Bangladesh, if we were to assign a monetary value to unpaid household work, it would represent more than three-quarters of the country's GDP. This helps us understand just how much economic value women are creating without recognition or compensation. The time women spend on unpaid care work directly limits their ability to participate in the formal workforce or pursue education, creating what economists call "time poverty."

Nepal provides an interesting case study in how countries can begin addressing these challenges. Women there spend six times more time on unpaid care work than men, but the government has begun incorporating care work into national planning. Studies suggest that properly investing in the care economy could create 14 million jobs in education and healthcare sectors alone, with women filling about 60% of these positions.

The informal sector presents additional challenges, as illustrated by India's waste recycling industry. Women waste recyclers manage significant portions of India's 62 million tons of annual waste, yet face multiple forms of marginalization. SEWA, a women's organization in India, has developed innovative solutions like Value Creation Centers that eliminate exploitative middlemen and ensure fair wages while promoting environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

The webinar highlighted the interconnected nature of these challenges and the need for comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approaches to address them. Experts emphasized that addressing care work and gender equality is not just a women's issue but a critical factor in achieving broader societal development and economic growth.

Recognizing care work as a public good, investing in infrastructure, transforming social norms, and improving data collection are essential first steps. By understanding the full scope of the challenges and implementing practical solutions, societies can move closer to achieving gender equality and sustainable development. While the challenges are significant, the discussions during this webinar demonstrated that meaningful progress is possible with coordinated efforts and investments.