On unpaid labour BY T O O B A S Y E D | 3/8/2020

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| ACCORDING to the World Bank, women make up only one quarter of the total workforce in Pakistan. Among the primary reasons for this are deeply entrenched societal norms (such as chardiwari) and gender segregation.In a classical patriarchal setting, women are confined to the private sphere and their role is limited to providing the unpaid care work that enables men to work outside the home.Even if women work outside the home, most (for instance, those working in the helds) are not accounted for in the documented economy. In urban centres, the concept of purdah is a major factor preventing women`s participation in the formal economy, which is especially true for migrant women on whom the burden of her entire community`s sense of `honour` rests.The system of patriarchy sustains itself by hiding the economic and social inequalities it creates. In a deeply patriarchal society like Pakistan, women are seen as the cultural reproducers of the nation, and any role for them outside the home is considered irrelevant andinsigniñcant.Itis due to this that many women stop working as soon as they marry. In Pakistan, around 60 per cent of women MBBS graduates do not go on to work as doctors because of the expectation that they must now dedicate their time to caring for their family. Women who, whether by necessity or choice, do step into the public realm and seek employment are not considered worthy of the same social standing as those who observe purdah.Nonetheless, for neither woman is her unpaid labour acknowledged.According to some estimates, the total cost of women`s unpaid care work is almost a fourth of the country`s GDP. It is this unpaid care work which forms the basis of the paid work done mostly by men.According to the ILO, on average, men in Asia and the Pacific region spend only 28 minutes per day on unpaid labour, which is just 8pc of their total working time.Meanwhile, women and girls are made to assume the bulk of the responsibility for unpaid care work le, child rearing and education; caring for elderly, sick or disabled family members; cooking and cleaning; fetching water and fuel supplies working on average anywhere between 12 to 16 hours a day. This gender inequality in care work is directly responsible for women`s low economic participation.Women, who assume most if not all care responsibilities, are more likely to be engaged in informal economy ie, as piece-rate, home-based or domestic workers. Without the labour protections afforded by formal employment, women`s informal labour results in lower and more precarious incomes, as well as vulnerability to other forms of exploitation.Women from marginalised bacl(grounds, particularly migrants, suffer the most within this informal economy. According to UNDP, Pakistan has one of the highest rates of urbanisation in South Asia, which means that people from across the country move towards the cities in search of better livelihoods. Inequalities in land distribution and dispossession is one of the key reasons for this migration with women owning less than 3pc land in Pakistan which then reproduces the same spatial inequalities in urban centres.These dispossessed women move to the cities to work as domestic labour, with no social guarantees or benefits. Middle-class women who can afford to pay for care work shift this burden onto them exposing them to abuse, occupational hazards and horrible working conditions all the while perpetuating the gendered division of labour.For women who do enter the formal workforce, this rarely results in a more equitable division of labour at home. Moreover, work-ing women are mostly limited to `respectable` and `acceptable` occupations that mimic care work; undervalued, underpaid and further reinforcing women`s primary gender role as a caregiver, even in the public sphere.The lack of recogni-tion of women`s unpaid labour also enables the state to abdicate its responsibility to provide essential public services. For example, if only a fraction of people with severe disabilities receive effective care from the public sector, this means that women are Ellingthe gapleftby the state notproviding basic universal healthcare. The state thus performs a double disservice. On the one hand, it fails to provide public services; and on the other, it fails to remunerate women for the endless hours of labour they contribute towards the country`s economic and social well-being.There is no disputing that the care economy is maintained and run solely by women.And it is time that this unpaid labour is recognised through effective legislation.However, this alone cannot solve the issue of women`s low labour participation. For that, men must start assuming their fair share of nurture and care responsibilities at home and in society.  The writer is a member of the Women Democratic Front and visiting faculty at Quaid-i-Azam University.Twitter: @Tooba\_Sd  |