**Time to care**

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Women around us are exhausted by caring for people around them! They are exhausted of routine housework like cooking and cleaning and taking care of their families.

As per Oxfam’s ‘Time to Care’ report of 2020, women undertake more than three-quarters of unpaid care work and make up two-thirds of the underpaid/paid care workforce. On this Women’s Day, we need to collectively commit to addressing care work.

Why do women care? Women are socially conditioned to aspire towards care work. They face an interesting and often conflicting mix of emotions; a sense of love towards their family, balanced with the idea of duty or responsibility. Some women, often married ones, take up additional burden due to family pressures. Care work even when paid is largely underpaid. Just think about how much our house help is paid.

On this Women’s Day, it is critical that we spotlight care as the unequal and gendered distribution of care responsibilities is keeping women behind. It is directly contributing to their drudgery, fatigue and poor health. It is preventing them from seeking formal paid jobs, thus restricting their access to money. It also restricts the type of jobs available to women and is also leaving women and girls time-poor; they are often unable to meet their basic needs.

Care work is largely invisible. The work is simply taken for granted. We need to collectively recognise two things around care – one being that it is largely undertaken by women, and second that care work is inherently valuable for societies. Women’s unrecognised labour is what is making societies and economies function. Without support at the household, the breadwinners cannot go out and earn money. Over the years, the terminology has also moved away from the burden of care; Care work becomes a burden when it is shouldered by the select few, it has inherent value in itself.

Women are running economies with cheap and free labour. Oxfam has calculated that women’s unpaid care work alone is adding value to the economy to the tune of at least $10.8 trillion a year. Our economy would grind to a halt without the support women unwaveringly provide. We need to as a system reward care work; this is both monetary and otherwise. Paid care needs to be paid higher at a living wage to push for the idea that care work is inherently valuable to societies.

During the fieldwork my colleagues and I conducted on unpacking the link between care and climate change, we discovered that the burden of care of women in Badin has increased so much owing to rising temperatures that their daughters have to support household tasks. The daughters end up quitting school and committing fully to ensuring that the household is running. Thus, a generational cycle of poverty and drudgery is perpetuated. There are many other stories where women are unable to realise their potential or pursue their passions because of household responsibilities.

We need to reduce the amount of time and effort spent on care work. This can include investing in efficient technologies like washing machines, cookers. In Badin, for example, women spent hours collecting water. A simple contraption like hippo rollers can make their lives significantly easier.

We need to work towards redistributing care. The household tasks can be spread out more equitably between men and women. The marketing of household goods can be further pivoted to encourage this redistribution. Recent advertisements of leading brands are already promoting positive messaging around this.

Caregivers need to be involved in decision-making to drive care-sensitive outcomes. The domains are quite rigid; men are the decision-makers and providers while women are the nurturers. Adding to these cultural notions is the fact that women also don’t have the time, energy or the means to organise on this issue. Because we are socialised since childhood around the idea that women were natural caregivers, there is also the concern around who do we organize against. Ideas around care are embedded in traditional family structures. Do we organise against our families or even ourselves? This often also prevents women from seeking support and speaking up.

I went into my fieldwork with a sense that care work is limiting the life chances of women. However, the women shared that they love care work; they can love taking care of their children and their loved ones. It is therefore possible to love care work and still have it limit one’s opportunities. It is and will always remain an uncomfortable conversation for women.

We all have a role to play in addressing care, from families to workplaces to policy makers. We need kinder and empathetic workplaces. Women are still unable to fully escape household care work and often face a double burden. Workplaces need to promote policies that include creche facilities, flexible and reduced working hours, care leaves. We need policies that reward and help place a higher value on care work. This could include legislation to protect the wages of domestic workers.

We need consumer goods that can reduce the time and effort spent on care work. Oxfam’s recent work on developing a set of care principles can really inform organisational strategy in this regard. We need household conversations and support that can divide the care responsibilities fairly over everyone. We need caregivers involved in key policy and programme decisions. Care work needs to be seen in its continuum and we need systems that work for everyone.

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