

ESTIMATING THE SOCIOECONOMIC VALUE OF UNPAID CARE WORK AMONG SRI LANKAN WOMEN: EVIDENCE FROM TIME USE DATA

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Abstract: Unpaid care work plays a significant role in sustaining economic and social systems, yet it remains largely invisible in developing countries where gender norms strongly shape labour responsibilities. In Sri Lanka, women disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid domestic and caregiving activities, including childcare, eldercare, cooking, and household maintenance. Despite its critical role in sustaining households and supporting the formal economy, unpaid care work is rarely recognised in conventional economic indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This study estimates the socioeconomic value of unpaid care work performed by Sri Lankan women using nationally representative time-use data. The analysis employs two valuation approaches: the replacement cost method and the opportunity cost method. The findings reveal stark gender disparities in the allocation of unpaid care responsibilities, with women dedicating significantly more time to domestic and caregiving tasks than men. The estimated monetary value of women's unpaid care work represents a considerable contribution to the national economy, ranging from 21.4% to 25.9% of GDP. The results further suggest that this unequal distribution constrains women's labour market participation and limits their economic advancement. However, the analysis is constrained by data availability, as the 2017 Time Use Survey remains the most recent nationally representative time-use dataset in Sri Lanka. The study contributes to debates in feminist economics and gender and development studies and underscores the importance of policy interventions aimed at recognizing, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care work.

Keywords: unpaid care work, gender inequality, time use data, economic valuation, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Unpaid care work encompasses the vast range of activities performed within households that sustain family members and communities, including childcare, care for the elderly and disabled, cooking, cleaning, fetching water, and other domestic tasks. Despite its critical role in social reproduction and human capital development, unpaid care work is systematically excluded from conventional measures of economic activity, rendering it invisible in national accounts and policy discourse. This invisibility has profound implications for gender equality, as the burden of unpaid care falls disproportionately on women across all regions of the world, including in South Asia.

Sri Lanka presents a compelling case for studying the valuation of unpaid care work. The country has made notable strides in gender equality across health and education. Yet women's labour force participation remains relatively low at approximately 33.5%, compared to 73.6% for men (Department of Census and Statistics [DCS], 2022). Gender norms in Sri Lankan society continue to assign the primary responsibility for

domestic and caregiving activities to women, reinforcing occupational segregation and constraining women's economic empowerment. Understanding the scope and economic value of women's unpaid contributions is therefore essential for designing evidence-based gender policies.

This study addresses a significant gap in the Sri Lankan literature by providing monetary estimates of unpaid care work using nationally representative time-use data. Two established valuation methodologies are employed: the replacement cost method and the opportunity cost method. By translating time spent on unpaid activities into monetary terms, this study makes a previously invisible contribution legible within economic discourse and policy frameworks.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The literature review situates the study within broader debates on unpaid work, feminist economics, and time use. The methodology section describes the data source and valuation approaches. The results section presents key findings on time allocation and estimated monetary values. The discussion section contextualizes the findings within the Sri Lankan policy landscape, followed by the contributions of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Unpaid Care Work and Gender Inequality

The concept of unpaid care work gained academic and policy prominence through feminist economics scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s, which challenged the androcentric biases of mainstream economics. More recent studies have further emphasized the importance of recognizing and valuing unpaid care work in advancing gender equality and inclusive economic development (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2023). Traditional economic models treated household production as outside the scope of economic analysis, effectively devaluing work performed predominantly by women. Feminist economists argued that this omission perpetuated gender inequality by rendering women's labour contributions invisible and thus politically inactionable.

Globally, time-use surveys consistently reveal that women perform two to ten times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men (ILO, 2018). This unequal distribution is particularly pronounced in South and Southeast Asia, where cultural norms strongly associate femininity with domestic roles. According to Sri Lanka's 2017 Time Use Survey, women spent an average of five hours and 36 minutes per day on unpaid domestic and caregiving activities, compared to one hour and 30 minutes for men, with women's share of daily unpaid domestic work standing at 86.4% against 54% for men (DCS, 2017; Munasinghe, 2026). DCS participation data further reveal that 38.4% of females engaged in unpaid care activities compared to only 19.5% of males, with female participation in childcare alone (34.8%) more than double the male rate (13.8%) (DCS, 2017). More recent surveys by the Women and Media Collective across seven districts similarly indicate that participation rates in each category of unpaid care exceeded 90% among women. The "time poverty" resulting from this burden limits women's ability to engage in paid employment, pursue education, participate in civic life, or invest in rest and leisure (Women and Media Collective, 2025). Furthermore, 67.5% of women

who expressed a preference for paid employment were nonetheless unable to engage in paid employment due to caregiving responsibilities (UN Women Sri Lanka, 2023).

The relationship between unpaid care work and labour market outcomes is well-documented. Antonopoulos (2009) argued that the unequal distribution of unpaid work functions as a hidden subsidy to firms and the formal economy, as households perform essential reproductive labour without compensation. More recent evidence continues to demonstrate that women bear a disproportionate share of unpaid care responsibilities and the associated economic costs (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2023). In South Asia, the care economy has been identified as a major structural driver of women's low labour force participation and concentration in informal and precarious employment (UN Women, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these dynamics globally: ILO (2022) documented a significant surge in women's unpaid care hours across low- and middle-income countries as schools, care facilities, and public services closed, deepening pre-existing gender inequalities. UN Women (2020) similarly reported that the pandemic disproportionately increased women's total work burden, reversing hard-won gains in female labour force participation in many regions.

Valuation Methodologies for Unpaid Work

Several methodological approaches have been developed to assign monetary value to unpaid care work, enabling its integration into satellite national accounts. The three most widely used are the replacement cost method, the opportunity cost method, and the input-output method (Suh & Folbre, 2016; ILO, 2018).

The replacement cost method estimates the value of unpaid work based on the market wage of a hired worker who would perform the same task. It may employ a generalist rate (using the wage of a domestic worker) or a specialist rate (using the wage of a professional providing an equivalent service, such as a chef or nurse). This approach has the advantage of reflecting the actual market value of the specific activities performed and is commonly used in satellite account calculations (Landefeld & McCulla, 2000; ILO, 2018).

The opportunity cost method values unpaid work at the foregone earnings of the individual performing it, typically calculated as the market wage they could command in paid employment. This approach captures the personal economic cost of providing care and is particularly informative for understanding the individual-level financial sacrifice associated with unpaid work (Suh & Folbre, 2016). Its limitation is that the estimated value depends on the caregiver's wage profile, leading to higher valuations for high-income individuals and lower valuations for those with limited market opportunities.

Several regional studies have applied these methods to South Asian contexts. Hirway (2015) estimated the value of unpaid care work in India using time-use data, finding that it represented approximately 39% of GDP. Nazneen and Sultan (2009) documented similar patterns in Bangladesh, while Jayaweera (2013) noted the acute invisibility of women's domestic contributions in Sri Lankan policy discourse despite their economic significance. In Sri Lanka specifically, the Women and Media Collective (WMC) conducted a multi-district study titled 'Recognising Unpaid Care Work in Sri Lanka: Key Research Findings from Six Districts,'

surveying 840 respondents across six districts through a structured time-use diary capturing 25 daily tasks. Applying the replacement cost method, the study found that the value of unpaid work performed by the average woman was higher across all task categories than that of men (Opatha, as cited in Munasinghe, 2026). Subsequent research utilising the 2017 TUS further estimated the total economic contribution of unpaid work to range from 10.3% to 42% of GDP, depending on the wage rates applied, with women contributing the vast majority of this value (Munasinghe, 2026).

Policy Frameworks and the "3Rs" Agenda

International policy frameworks have increasingly recognized unpaid care work as a development priority. The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) both call for recognition of women's unpaid labour and its integration into economic planning. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Target 5.4, explicitly commit member states to recognizing, valuing, and promoting shared responsibility for unpaid care work through the provision of public services and social protection policies.

The "3Rs" framework, Recognize, Reduce, and Redistribute, developed by Oxfam and feminist economists, provides an actionable policy agenda (Esquivel, 2016). Recognition involves measuring and valuing care work in official statistics. Reduction refers to decreasing the overall volume of care work through infrastructure investment and public services such as childcare and eldercare facilities. Redistribution involves a more equitable sharing of care responsibilities among women and men, households, the state, employers, and other private-sector institutions. Building on this, the Women and Media Collective (2026) has proposed an expanded 5R framework, Recognize, Reduce, Redistribute, Represent, and Respond, which additionally calls for the representation of caregivers in climate and development decision-making processes, and for responsive governance reforms that incorporate care needs into disaster management and social protection systems. This expanded framework is particularly salient for Sri Lanka, where climate-related disasters compound women's unpaid care burdens, and informs the policy recommendations of the present study.

METHODOLOGY

Data Source

This study utilizes the nationally representative Time Use Survey conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) of Sri Lanka. The survey captures 24-hour diary data on how individuals allocate their time across a comprehensive range of activities classified according to the International Classification of Activities for Time Use Statistics (ICATUS). The sample encompasses adults aged 15 and above across all nine provinces, covering both urban and rural areas and all ethnic groups.

For this study, unpaid care activities are operationalized to include: (1) childcare (direct and supervisory); (2) care for elderly and disabled household members; (3) meal preparation and cooking; (4) household cleaning and maintenance; (5) laundry and garment care; and (6) shopping and household management. These categories align with the ICATUS classification and are consistent with international conventions for measuring unpaid care work (UNSD, 2018).

The 2017 Time Use Survey remains the most recent nationally representative dataset on time use available in Sri Lanka. Although more recent economic and social developments may have influenced patterns of unpaid care work, the survey continues to provide the most comprehensive and reliable empirical basis for estimating the economic value of unpaid care activities at the national level. Its nationwide coverage and standardized data collection procedures make it the primary source for macro-level valuation of unpaid work in Sri Lanka.

Replacement Cost Method

Under the replacement cost method, the monetary value of unpaid care work is estimated by multiplying the average daily hours spent on each category of unpaid activity by the corresponding market wage for a hired worker performing an equivalent task. The generalist replacement cost approach is employed, using the average daily wage of a domestic worker in Sri Lanka as reported by the DCS Labour Force Survey. The aggregate annual value is derived by multiplying the estimated daily value by 365 days and the relevant population size.

Formally, the replacement cost estimate (VRC) is calculated as:

$$VRC = \sum (H_i \times WDW \times N \times 365)$$

where H_i is the average daily hours spent on unpaid care activity i , WDW is the average daily wage of a domestic worker, and N is the number of women in the relevant age group.

Opportunity Cost Method

Under the opportunity cost method, unpaid care work is valued at the earnings the caregiver foregoes by not participating in paid employment. The average female wage in Sri Lanka, disaggregated by education level, is used as the opportunity cost proxy, sourced from the DCS Labour Force Survey. This method captures the personal economic sacrifice of women who provide unpaid care rather than engaging in paid labour.

Formally, the opportunity cost estimate (VOC) is calculated as:

$$VOC = H_{total} \times W_f \times N \times 365$$

Where H_{total} is the total average daily hours spent on unpaid care, W_f is the average daily wage of women in paid employment, and N is the relevant female population.

While this study employs distinct replacement-cost and opportunity-cost methods, recent feminist economic literature has highlighted the potential advantages of hybrid valuation approaches. Hybrid models combine elements of both methods, such as applying specialist wages to skilled care activities (e.g., nursing or teaching) and generalist domestic wages to routine household tasks. Such approaches may provide a more nuanced estimate of unpaid care work by better reflecting the diversity of care activities and their corresponding market alternatives. However, implementing hybrid models requires detailed task-specific wage data, which are not consistently available in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, the present study employs the more widely used replacement-cost and opportunity-cost approaches to ensure methodological consistency and comparability with previous studies (Suh & Folbre, 2016)

RESULTS

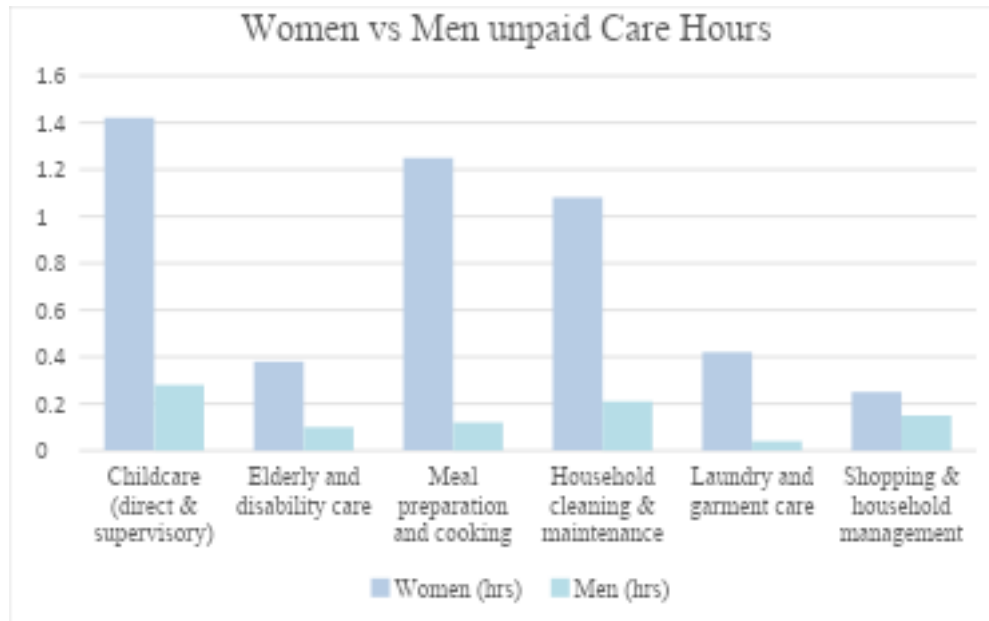
Gender Disparities in Time Allocation

Table 1 presents the mean daily hours spent on unpaid care activities by gender. The results reveal stark gender disparities across all categories of unpaid care work. Women devote substantially more hours per day to unpaid care and domestic activities than men, with women performing the vast majority of unpaid care work in Sri Lankan households.

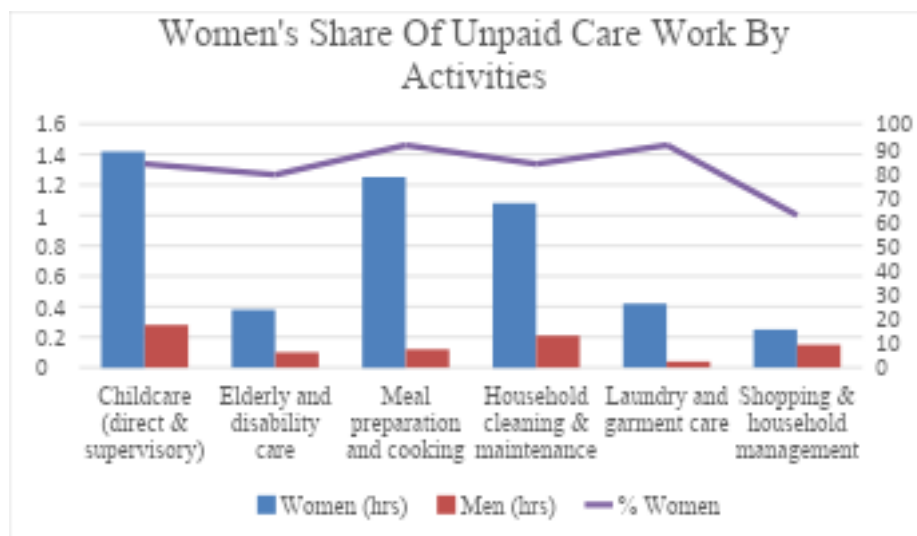
Figure 1

Women vs Men: Hours Spent on Unpaid Care Activities

Note. Data derived from the **2017 Time Use Survey (TUS)**, Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka.

**Figure 2**

Women's Share of Unpaid Care Work by Activities



The most pronounced disparities are found in meal preparation and cooking, and laundry and garment care, where women account for more than 90% of the time devoted to these activities. Childcare responsibilities also exhibit a substantial gender disparity, with women spending considerably more time on direct and supervisory childcare than men. Overall, women spend approximately 4.8 hours per day on unpaid care activities compared with only 0.9 hours for men, indicating that women undertake more than five times the unpaid care burden. Even in household management and shopping, where the gender gap is comparatively smaller, women still account for the majority of time spent. Previous studies suggest similar patterns across urban and rural settings, although rural women may face greater care burdens due to infrastructure limitations.

The findings highlight the persistent feminization of unpaid care work in Sri Lanka and demonstrate how unequal care responsibilities continue to constrain women's economic participation by reducing the time available for paid employment, skills development, and income-generating activities.

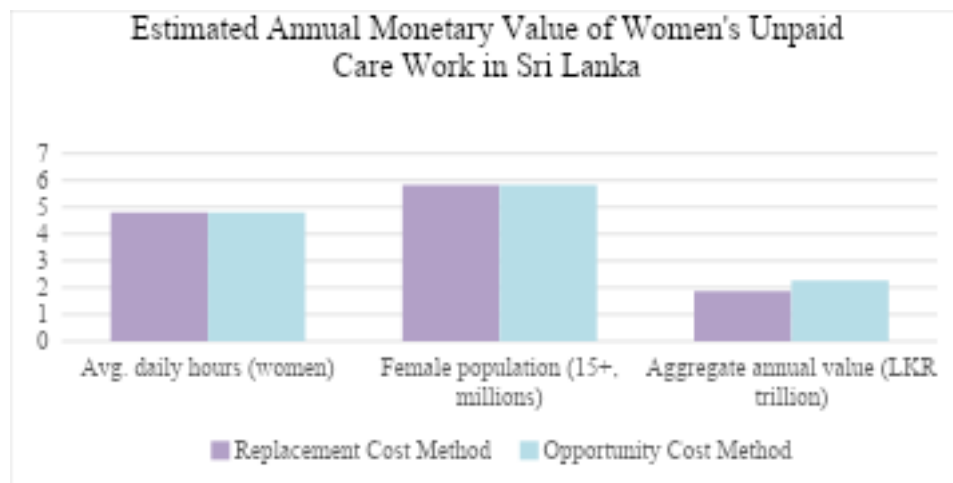
Monetary Valuation of Unpaid Care Work

Table 2 presents the estimated annual monetary value of women's unpaid care work in Sri Lanka under both valuation methods. The replacement cost method, using the average daily wage of a domestic worker, yields a substantial aggregate annual value that represents a considerable share of Sri Lanka's nominal GDP for the reference year. The opportunity cost method, using the average female daily wage, yields a higher aggregate estimate, reflecting the higher foregone earnings associated with women's potential market participation.

Figure 3

Estimated Annual Monetary Value of Women's Unpaid Care Work in Sri Lanka

Note. Note. Data derived from the **2017 Time Use Survey (TUS)**, Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka.



Both methods confirm that women's unpaid care work constitutes a substantial share of economic output, comparable in scale to major sectors of the Sri Lankan economy, such as manufacturing and tourism. These findings highlight the extent to which women's unpaid labour supports household welfare and broader economic productivity. The difference between the two estimates reflects the higher opportunity cost associated with women's potential market earnings compared to domestic worker wages, underscoring the

structural inequity of requiring educated and skilled women to forego paid employment to perform unpaid care.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study carry important implications for both economic analysis and social policy in Sri Lanka. The estimated monetary values of women's unpaid care work situate Sri Lanka within the range of comparable estimates from other developing economies (Hirway, 2015; ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2020), while providing country-specific evidence to support advocacy for policy reform.

The substantial gender gap in time use represents a significant structural constraint on women's economic participation. Women who bear the primary responsibility for unpaid care work face a compressed time budget that limits their availability for paid employment, skills development, and economic investment. These results suggest that the unequal distribution of unpaid care responsibilities may constrain women's labour market participation and limit their opportunities for income generation and economic advancement. These findings support recent evidence demonstrating that unpaid care work remains a fundamental but largely unrecognized component of economic systems, with women bearing a disproportionate share of care responsibilities and associated opportunity costs (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2023; Women and Media Collective, 2025).

The rural-urban dimension warrants particular attention in the Sri Lankan context. Rural women, who face limited access to household infrastructure such as piped water, gas cooking, and mechanized household appliances, spend considerably more time on subsistence-oriented domestic tasks. Infrastructure investment in rural areas thus represents both a poverty-reduction strategy and a gender-equality intervention by reducing the time burden of unpaid care and potentially enabling women to redirect time toward productive economic activities.

The Sri Lankan policy landscape has begun to acknowledge gender disparities in labour market participation, but has yet to develop comprehensive responses to unpaid care work as a structural driver of inequality. The National Policy on Women (2019) and the Women's Empowerment Policy Framework reference gender equality in employment but do not explicitly address the care economy. Civil society organizations, including the Women and Media Collective, have been pivotal in bridging this gap through community-level engagement and advocacy with policymakers and ministry representatives, raising awareness of what constitutes unpaid care work and its relationship to women's labour force participation (Munasinghe, 2026). A significant institutional barrier is the absence of recent nationally representative time-use data; the only such dataset currently available is the 2017 DCS survey, which does not capture the unpaid care burden generated by the post-2019 economic crisis (Kulatunga, as cited in Munasinghe, 2026). Mandating periodic time-use data collection is thus identified as a critical first step toward systematic valuation. This study's

findings support the need to extend existing policy frameworks to include care-sensitive measures, including establishing subsidized, state-supported workplace childcare facilities and community-level crèches in free trade zones (like Katunayake) and rural areas to actively reduce women's time burdens, as well as flexible work arrangements and parental leave policies that encourage shared caregiving. Such interventions align with the expanded 5R framework advocated by the Women and Media Collective (2025) and endorsed by UN Women Sri Lanka (2023): Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, Represent, and Respond, which calls for state and private sector actors to share care responsibilities and embed gender-responsive budgeting in public investment.

Based on the findings, four immediate policy priorities emerge for Sri Lanka. First, the Department of Census and Statistics should institutionalize periodic Time Use Surveys to ensure the regular measurement and monitoring of unpaid care work. Second, the government should expand affordable childcare and eldercare services, particularly in rural communities and free trade zones where women face substantial care burdens. Third, labour policies should promote flexible working arrangements and shared parental leave to encourage a more equitable distribution of care responsibilities between women and men. Finally, unpaid care work should be incorporated into national planning and budgeting processes through the development of household satellite accounts and gender-responsive budgeting frameworks. Together, these measures would contribute to recognising, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care work while strengthening women's economic participation.

The structural limitations of using 2017 data must be contextualized within Sri Lanka's recent socioeconomic history. Contemporary institutional briefs from UN Women (2020) and recent evidence from the Women and Media Collective (2025) indicate that the post-2019 economic crisis, characterized by fuel and gas shortages, high inflation, and food insecurity, significantly intensified the time-poverty of Sri Lankan women. Routine household maintenance and cooking required extended hours due to resource shortages. UN Women Sri Lanka (2023) additionally documents that the crisis compelled families to make difficult trade-offs around education, with adolescent girls facing heightened school dropout risk as they absorbed greater care loads at home. The WMC's (2025) seven-district study further highlights that the uneven geographical distribution of childcare services with private providers predominating limits access for lower-income families, placing a dual burden on women both within and beyond their households. Therefore, the 21.4% to 25.9% GDP contribution estimated from 2017 baseline data should be viewed as a conservative floor; the actual contemporary value of unpaid care in a crisis economy is likely substantially higher.

The valuation discrepancy between the replacement cost and opportunity cost methods reflects a deeper normative tension in the economics of care. The opportunity cost method, by anchoring value to market wages, produces higher estimates for educated and higher-income women, potentially generating regressive distributional effects in policy design. The replacement cost method, by contrast, values all care work at the same rate regardless of the caregiver's characteristics, offering a more egalitarian basis for policy valuation.

Future research should explore hybrid approaches that account for both the market value of specific care tasks and the demographic heterogeneity of caregivers.

Integration of unpaid care work into satellite accounts attached to the System of National Accounts (SNA) represents a critical step toward policy visibility. Several countries, including Mexico, India, and France, have developed household satellite accounts that estimate the value of domestic production (UNSD, 2018). Sri Lanka's Department of Census and Statistics could build on existing time-use data infrastructure to develop a similar framework, providing policymakers with a more complete picture of the national economy.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This study makes several original contributions to the literature on unpaid care work, feminist economics, and gender and development in Sri Lanka. First, it provides comprehensive empirical estimates of the socioeconomic value of women's unpaid care work in Sri Lanka using nationally representative time-use data. By applying both the replacement cost and opportunity cost methods, the study enables methodological comparison and triangulation of results, demonstrating that women's unpaid labour represents a considerable contribution to the national economy under both approaches.

Second, the study contributes to the growing body of South Asian research on the care economy, which has historically been underrepresented in global feminist economics scholarship. The Sri Lankan case offers insights relevant to other middle-income countries in the region where similar gender norms and labour market structures operate.

Third, the findings provide an evidence base for policy advocacy aligned with the SDG 5.4 framework and the 3Rs agenda (Recognize, Reduce, Redistribute). By demonstrating that women's unpaid care work constitutes a substantial share of national GDP, the study makes a compelling case for investment in expanded childcare services, gender-responsive labour policies, and improved integration of unpaid labour into national economic and statistical frameworks. The study's findings complement the ground-level evidence generated by the Women and Media Collective's multi-district research, linking macro-level valuation with community-level realities.

Future research should address several limitations of this study. As of 2026, the most recent nationally representative time-use data available for Sri Lanka remains the 2017 DCS survey, leaving a significant gap of nearly a decade during which the country has experienced major economic shocks, including the post-2019 crisis and the severe economic downturn of 2022. Consequently, this study cannot fully capture the likely intensification of women's unpaid care burdens during this period. A key policy priority for Sri Lanka is therefore the implementation of an updated nationally representative Time Use Survey and the institutionalization of regular time-use data collection. Updated and disaggregated data are essential for accurately measuring unpaid care work, monitoring gender inequalities, and informing evidence-based policies

aimed at recognizing, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care responsibilities. The valuation methods employed are also subject to methodological limitations discussed in the literature review.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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