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## **Unpaid Care Work in Bangladesh: Policies, Practice and Evidence**

Lopita Huq  
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# Unpaid Care Work in Bangladesh: Policies, Practice and Evidence

Lopita Huq

## Summary

This review examines selected policies and plans of the Government of Bangladesh and available research in Bangladesh in response to the need to address unpaid care work - the work, mainly done by women and girls, of caring for others (often called reproductive work), at the policy level. Its purpose is to look at whether and the extent to which unpaid care work is addressed in existing national laws, Government policies and research in Bangladesh. The review was undertaken as part of a collaborative project on 'Gender, Power and Sexuality' involving the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in the UK, SMERU in Indonesia, and the Centre for Gender and Social Transformation (CGST) in Bangladesh, that aims to ensure inclusion of unpaid care work on the national and global policy agendas.

The findings from the review reveal that unpaid care work has primarily featured in a limited way, and mostly as background noise both at the research and policy level in Bangladesh. The search for pathways to women's empowerment in Bangladesh has focused on women's participation in paid work and this is reflected in both policies and research. In this regard, unpaid care work has mainly featured as a constraint to women's participation in paid work. Although rarely addressed directly in policies or in research to date, some very recent changes indicate the creation of new spaces in policies for the emergence and recognition of unpaid care work.

The findings from the review revealed the following about existing policy and state programmes:

- a) in policy documents, women's unpaid care work is mentioned in explaining gender roles in Bangladesh, but specific policy prescriptions for reduction and redistribution of care work are few
- b) existing labour legislation focuses on women in formal sector employment and their child care needs, but ignores other care needs and the needs of women in informal sector employment
- c) few policies on education and social protection specifically prescribe policy and programmatic support for women's reproductive work
- d) the overall emphasis on unpaid care work has decreased over time in various Government plans and policy documents related to women
- e) however some new spaces may be opening up at policy levels for the inclusion of unpaid care (e.g. the National Action Plan for Women) and related consultative processes that are important for bringing about a focus on unpaid care.

The review also highlights the following about existing research on unpaid care:

- f) first, researchers have largely focused on counting women's contribution to GDP through including unpaid care in GDP calculations
- g) time use studies have been conducted to calculate the burden of unpaid care, but these have rarely discussed redistribution of the care burden; and
- h) how unpaid care work can be integrated into different policy areas requires a careful identification of the nature of the 'care needs' in specific sectors such as education, social protection, labour, and water.

**Keywords:** Bangladesh; unpaid care work; gender equality; women's empowerment.

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## Abbreviations

ASK	Ain o Salish Kendra
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BIGD	BRAC Institute of Governance and Development
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garments Manufacturing Employers Association
BMP	Bangladesh Mahila Parishad
BNWLA	Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association
CEDAW	Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CGST	Centre for Gender and Social Transformation
CiC-BD	Citizens Initiatives on CEDAW Bangladesh
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
GQAL	Gender Quality Action Learning
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
ILO	International Labour Organization
LFS	Labour Force Survey
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MOLE	Ministry of Labour and Employment
MOWCA	Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs
MTBF	Medium Term Budget Framework
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NSAPR II	National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction II
PEDP II	Primary Education Development Programme II
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers
REOPA	Rural Employment Opportunities for Public Assets
SFYP	Sixth Five Year Plan
SNA	System of National Accounts
SSNP	Social Safety Net Projects
UNRISD	United National Research Institute for Social Development
VGD	Vulnerable Group Development
VGDUP	Vulnerable Group Development Ultra Poor
VGF	Vulnerable Group Feeding

# Introduction

*How society addresses the issue of care has significant implications for the achievement of gender equality, by either broadening the capabilities and choices of women and men, or confining women to traditional roles associated with femininity and motherhood.*

Razavi (2007: 379)

## **Purpose of this review**

Economies have relied on a seemingly endless supply of care work provided overwhelmingly by women to sustain families, societies and the labour force, without giving it any social or economic value. The focus on unpaid care work in recent years has come about largely due to the critique by feminist scholars of structural neo-liberal trends that prioritise and value market-oriented production of goods and services, and dismiss the care work, performed overwhelmingly by women, which sustains and reproduces society and provides the basis for market functioning and economic growth (Razavi 2007). This narrow, androcentric and instrumentalist conception of how the economy operates, adopted by most Governments, donors, multilateral organisations thus only considers paid, visible forms of women's economic activities and fails to address the 'interconnected interests and trade-offs of women as producers, employees and carers and more generally does not recognise the value to society of activities which fall outside the market' (Eyben and Fontana 2011: 3). The growth perspective thus promotes only those dimensions of gender equality that are instrumental to achieving other development goals (Kabeer and Natali 2013), and dominates the advocacy for women's economic empowerment only to the extent that is a contributing factor to economic growth (Eyben 2012).

Not only does this perspective fail to recognise women's contribution to the economy through unpaid care work, it also neglects its implications for women's empowerment and gender equality. Women and girls across *all* societies undertake the bulk of unpaid care work, more than men, despite substantive increases in female labour force participation in many contexts (Esplen 2009; Kabeer 2007). This socially ascribed responsibility undermines women and girls' rights and opportunities and limits their capabilities and choices. Being time consuming, arduous and unvalued, the performance of unpaid care work reinforces gender inequalities, particularly among people living in poverty who cannot afford paid care, by impinging upon girls' education, restricting opportunities for paid work, putting women at greater risk of gender-based violence and limiting women's political participation (Esplen 2009). Aside from the argument for gender equality on intrinsic grounds, there is substantive evidence that gender equality, particularly in education and employment, contributes to economic growth (although the reverse is not necessarily true; Kabeer and Natali 2013). Nevertheless, unpaid care work stays off the policy table and development agenda.

Over the past decades however, economic, social and demographic changes in Bangladesh as elsewhere in the world have meant the demand for care is increasing while its supply is diminishing (Esplen 2009; Razavi 2007). Increasing women's participation in the labour force, ageing populations and greater investments in girls' education are squeezing the time that women and girls used to spend on unpaid care work. These have also increased the urgency with which unpaid care work needs to be addressed in policy. While there have been advances in theory and policy advocacy relating to care in rich countries, they are not always relevant to low-income countries. And even while there is a growing literature on care in low and middle income countries, they are largely neglected in their development policy

debates and programming 'because its recognition as a central policy issue would require a major re-think about how our economy works and what we value' (Eyben 2013: 2).

It is in response to the need to address unpaid care work at the policy level that this review takes stock of existing policies and available evidence in Bangladesh, and looks at whether and the extent to which unpaid care work is addressed in existing national laws, Government policies and research in Bangladesh. The review has been undertaken as part of a collaborative project on 'Gender, Power and Sexuality' involving IDS (UK), SMERU (Indonesia) and CGST (Bangladesh) that aims to ensure inclusion of unpaid care work into national and global policy agenda. The findings from the review reveal that unpaid care work has primarily featured in a limited way and mostly as background noise both at the research and policy level in Bangladesh. The search for pathways to women's empowerment in Bangladesh has focused on women's participation in paid work, and this is reflected in both policies and research. In this regard, unpaid care work has mainly featured as a constraint to women's participation in paid work. Yet while the issue has rarely been addressed directly in policies or in research, some very recent changes indicate the creation of space in policies for the emergence and recognition of unpaid care work.

### **Scope of the review**

The overall review will attempt to contribute to an understanding of why it is important to focus on women's unpaid care work in policy and research at this point in time. The first part of the review focuses on policies and plans of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) that could be expected to recognise the issue of unpaid care work as part of its development agenda, seeking to reduce gender disparities in key sectors and address women's rights. It looks at whether and to what extent they refer to unpaid care work, or refer to any measures or initiatives that can be seen to redistribute or reduce it, (irrespective of whether they specifically mention unpaid care work or 'care'). It further attempts to document how the issue has gained recognition or receded from policy focus at different points in time.

The second part of the review examines available research related to women's unpaid care work. It attempts to show the kind of research within which unpaid care work emerges, whether it is addressed implicitly or explicitly, how the issue is treated (whether it is sidelined, has only negative connotations or is recognised as a positive contribution) and whether they provide any indications for reduction or redistribution of unpaid care work.

### **Structure of the review**

Section 1 of the review focuses on the Bangladeshi context and the rationale of the review. Section 1.1 describes the backdrop within which unpaid care work in Bangladesh is being examined which includes the perception of unpaid care work and its implications for Bangladeshi women. Section 1.2 discusses the developmental and legal changes and achievements in relation to women. Section 1.3 discusses the imperative to address the issue of 'unpaid care' and the rationale for the review. Section 1.4 briefly describes the methodology used. Section 2 discusses the findings from the policy review and Section 3, the findings from the review of the research. Section 4 highlights findings from Section 2 and 3 and attempts to indicate what is required to facilitate the visibility of unpaid care work in the policy arena in Bangladesh.



# 1 Background and rationale

This paper uses the definition of unpaid care work as elaborated in UNIFEM's Progress of the World's Women 2000, as follows:

The term 'unpaid' differentiates this care from paid care provided by employees of the public and NGO (non-Government organisations) sector and employees and self-employed persons in the private sector.

The word 'care' indicates that the services provided nurture other people.

The word 'work' indicates that these activities are costly in time and energy and are undertaken as obligations (contractual or social).

(Budlender and Moussie 2013: 9)

Unpaid care work therefore involves cooking, cleaning, collecting fuel and water, providing care to children, elderly and the sick. It also includes voluntary community work (Budlender and Moussie 2013). Caring not only involves providing for the material needs of the recipients but also their emotional needs. In other words, it refers to a responsibility and a set of activities 'meeting the material and/or developmental, emotional and spiritual needs of one or more other persons with whom one is in a direct personal relationship' (Eyben and Fontana 2011).

## 1.1 Why unpaid care work matters for women in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, care work is synonymous with women's work, whether paid or unpaid.<sup>1</sup> It is taken for granted that a woman's primary role is a caregiver. Her skill is seen as a 'natural' part of her 'womanhood' – the implication being that she does not need to learn these skills – and integral to her performance as a sister, daughter, wife, daughter-in-law or mother in accordance with societal expectations and patriarchal norms. This conflation of her identity as a woman and a caregiver gives little, if any, value to the tasks she performs; her unpaid care work goes largely unnoticed at the household and societal level, both by men and women, who are socialised from an early age into norms of a rigid sexual division of labour.

The discourse of 'gender equality' promoted by the Government has focused on enhancing women's access to health, education, markets, paid work, justice (particularly with regard to violence against women) and political participation. Expansion of livelihood options for girls and women (job opportunities, work in the health sector and garment factories, internal and international migration for employment) have been key focal areas for women's empowerment. However, taking up such opportunities and increasing participation in other areas of work and public life have unseen costs in terms of unpaid care. The implications of the norm of women as caregivers on women's choices are evident from the everyday lives of women across the social classes, to a greater or lesser extent.

The disproportionate responsibility women bear for providing care and its time-consuming nature limit what women can choose to do, whether it is to participate more fully in civil, social and political life, or to engage in full-time paid work. It limits the achievement of their own wellbeing, as the wellbeing of others is always prioritised (as is expected of Bangladeshi

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<sup>1</sup> Although this review deals with unpaid care work, women in paid care work also require policy attention. Paid care and domestic work is unrecognised under the existing Labour Law, and abuse and violence towards care workers is acceptable and common. Paid care workers are chiefly poor women providing undervalued services within a home environment, and so are more vulnerable than in most other forms of work.

women) and their own leisure time is curtailed. Responsibilities for care put enormous pressures on women, particularly poorer women who often combine low paid work or piecework to ensure food security with the provision of care. Responsibilities for care can reinforce low self-esteem and subservience to men in a context where unpaid care work is not valued, and serve to keep women financially dependent on men. In Bangladesh husbands are seen as primary breadwinners and marriage the ultimate source of security (financial, physical and emotional) for women. Although this situation is changing, this dependency encourages women to protect their marriage at any cost, including of violence. This issue is particularly pertinent for Bangladesh given that unpaid care work is more difficult in the context of poverty, where public service provision of basic amenities is poor and where women have to rely on their own labour to undertake unpaid care work, are unable to benefit from the support of paid care work or technological innovations to reduce care work (Budlender and Moussie 2013).

## 1.2 The development context and women in Bangladesh

Poverty reduction foregrounds the development strategy of the Bangladesh Government and provides the lens through which policies addressing gender equality and women's empowerment issues are formulated. The overwhelming focus of policies and research on women's work has therefore been around paid work.

The mainstream development narrative in Bangladesh follows a particular trend largely concerned with poverty alleviation and human development outcomes, given its emergence as a war-torn and impoverished nation only 40 years ago. The UN Human Development Report of 2011 ranks Bangladesh at 146 out of 187 countries. Between 1980 and 2011, Bangladesh's Human Development Index (HDI) value increased from 0.303 to 0.500, an increase of 65 per cent or an average annual increase of about 1.6 per cent.

Attempts by successive regimes (both military and civilian) to 'woo the international donor community have led to a steady mainstreaming of gender equality and women's rights issues within the public policy discourse' (Kabeer *et al* 2013: 63). Bangladesh has witnessed enormous strides in gender equality on some key social development indicators. Although Bangladesh ranks 112 out of 146 in the Gender Inequality Index 2011, the gains of Bangladeshi women have come at a rapid pace and from a lower starting point than other South Asian countries and despite the modest pace of overall poverty reduction (Nazneen *et al* 2011). Successive Governments have pushed policies and increased expenditures that have resulted in halving total fertility rates, reducing maternal mortality, infant and child mortality, closing the gender gap in child mortality and primary and secondary education, where girls now outnumber boys (Nazneen *et al* 2011; Kabeer *et al* 2013). Traditional bias towards a son preference is also changing with more women expressing indifference towards the sex of a child than preference for sons (Kabeer *et al* 2013; Huq *et al* 2013).

There has been a sustained increase in women's labour force participation: from 4 per cent in 1974, to 8 per cent in 1984, 24 per cent in 1999-2000, 32 per cent in 2009-2010 and 36 per cent according to the latest official statistics (from 2012). While the size of the female labour force more than doubled from 5.4 million in 1995 to 12.1 million in 2005-06, the male labour force grew from 30.7 to only 37.3 million in this period (Mahmud and Tasneem 2011). Despite these significant increases, labour force surveys continue to under-report women's economic activities (*ibid*). Women's economic opportunities have expanded as a result of their access to microcredit, export-oriented manufacturing employment, agricultural wage labour and expanded health and education activities at the community level led by Government and NGOs (Kabeer *et al* 2013). Various social protection policies and safety net measures promoting women's work, providing pensions to elderly, widowed and disabled women and addressing food security have also been taken up by the Government. Around 2 per cent of GDP is spent on social protection annually.

Laws addressing child marriage, dowry, violence against women and children and sexual harassment have also been passed. Most recently the Domestic Violence Bill (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010, for the first time legally tackles violence perpetrated inside the home, a domain previously considered 'private' and beyond the ambit of the law. Efforts have also been made to encourage women's political participation by reserving one-third of seats in local and national Government.

Another notable phenomenon is international migration by Bangladeshi women. This is increasing, but from a low level of around 2–4 per cent of total migration from Bangladesh (Islam 2013). One of the reasons for the low figures is the ban on female migration (except on white collar professionals) at various stages between 1988 and 2001 (Islam 2013; Kumari and Shamim 2010). Between 1991 and 2013, around 2 percent of women migrants were skilled workers, and the rest were domestic workers (The New Age, June 21, 2013). In 2006, the Government established the Overseas Employment Policy to ensure the welfare of Bangladeshi workers abroad, and the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment has recently taken up the initiative to facilitate training, registration and international migration of women as domestic workers, with measures to ensure their safety (The New Age, March 20, 2013). This indicates that there is now some recognition of paid care work, at least in the context of migration.

### **1.3 The rationale for a focus on unpaid care work in Bangladesh**

Some of the gains described above are likely to have implications for women's capacities to provide unpaid care work to the level at which they have done customarily. Conversely, the gains are themselves constrained by women's responsibilities for care. Together these provide the rationale for an exploration of unpaid care work in Bangladesh.

Demographic changes are a key factor. The fertility rate<sup>2</sup> has reduced from 6.0 in 1971 to 2.3 currently (Kabbeer *et al* 2013). Household size has also shown a steady decline from 5.26 in 1995–95, to 5.18 in 2000, 4.85 in 2005 (BBS 2010) and 4.44 in 2012 (BBS 2013a). This may be an indication not only of lowering fertility rates but also of the increasing nuclearisation of families from the traditional norm of joint families. At the same time, average life expectancy has gradually increased from 50 years in 1965, to 55 in 1980, 59 in 1990, 65 in 2000 to 70 in 2013 (Index Mundi 2013). Life expectancy is higher for women (72 years) than men (68), so there has been a gradual increase in the female population over 60 years (0.035 per cent of the total population in 2010 compared to 0.028 per cent of the total population in 2000 (CiC-BD 2010). This means that there are on average fewer people in a household who can provide care for a growing proportion of older people than in the past. It further indicates that the growing elderly population will have a greater proportion of elderly women than men. Although both elderly men and women are vulnerable to lack of care, women may be more vulnerable if they do not own any assets or have any sources of income, and because they may face greater difficulties in accessing pensions and safety nets.

A second set of factors is around women's work. Women's participation in the labour force has undoubtedly increased, but why and what kinds of work they engage in, and the implications for their rights as workers tend to be neglected. Most women work in the informal sector, which is flexible but more often than not provides poor remuneration, and no social security or rights. Unpaid household or care work tends to be the main reason women need flexible work. It is this lack of flexibility in formal sector work that drives women towards the informal economy.

The Bangladesh Decent Work Country Profile (ILO 2013) notes that although female labour force participation rate (LFPR) has increased over the years, women workers are more

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<sup>2</sup> The total fertility rate is the average number of children women will bear in their lifetime.

concentrated in the informal sector than men. Female LFPR in the informal sector increased from 85 per cent in 1999-2000 to 92 per cent in 2010. Moreover, according to the report, most workers who are engaged in informal employment are unpaid family workers or self-employed (i.e. own-account workers). In 2010, 56 per cent of women were estimated to be contributing or unpaid family workers compared to only 7 per cent of men; including own-account workers, they constitute 81 per cent of women in employment. Excess hours of work (more than 48 hours per week as stipulated by ILO) have increased for both men and women. The report states that own-account workers, unpaid family workers and casual employees, represent a sizeable and increasing share of employed persons working excess hours and mostly engaged in poorly remunerated jobs, which combined have negative implications for the allocation of work, family, and personal time: 'Occupational segregation by gender persists and is determined by both employers' and workers' preferences and stereotypes, workers' competencies, and societal perceptions regarding male and female workers' (*ibid.*: 50). The report noted the further tendency to set lower wages in sectors in which women predominate. Domestic workers in particular were noted to be underpaid, overworked, unprotected and socially stigmatised.

Women will continue to be trapped in informal employment if there is no recognition, reduction or redistribution of unpaid care work. This can only add to their drudgery without adequate remuneration, security or rights, and they will remain excluded from the rights and benefits that accrue to workers (mostly male) in the formal sector, being outside the purview of the Labour Law (ILO 2013).

Female migration also has implications for unpaid care work. Although the percentage of female international migrants is small, a rapidly increasing number of women migrate internally, particularly for garment factory and domestic work. A study of families left behind by international migrants in Bangladesh and India reveals interesting contrasts between male and female migrant families in terms of the negative impact on family members (Kumari and Shamim 2010). While family members of male migrants mainly complained of loneliness and divorce, female migrant family members further reported remarriage and extra-marital affairs of male members, family feuds and a general breakdown of family life on the one hand and absence of proper child care and a negative effect on children's schooling on the other, indicating a 'care crisis' in these households. A higher proportion of both male and female migrant families were found to be from relatively smaller families. Similar findings emerged from a study of women migrating internally for garment work, which suggested a change in earlier migration trends from larger families, with the decisive factor being the absence of an older brother (Naved *et al* 2001). Female garment workers were found to be migrating at younger ages, most while unmarried, and most with only siblings and distant or non-relatives, instead of with their parents. The absence of these young women from households undoubtedly has some impact on the care of parents or older people, and of younger siblings for whom older sisters have been responsible in the past.

The ways in which families strategise to absorb shocks and crises brought on by increasing food prices also have implications for unpaid care work. While it is thought that people are absorbing these shocks with resilience, the repercussions of it can be found in the costs of such resilience, in terms of increased time and effort to feed and take care of families, negative effects on family, social and gender relationships, mental stress and quality of life. Recent research on the rapid and cumulative 'slow burn' effect of food price rises on everyday life in ten developing countries including Bangladesh found that women were struggling to stretch their budgets to meet the needs of their family and trying to contribute to the household income, as they were unable to meet food requirements at current prices (Hossain, King and Kelbert 2013). This struggle has led women in rural Bangladesh (and Pakistan) to look for paid work outside their homes despite strong social norms against mobility. Women were therefore found to be working harder and for longer hours on both income earning and caregiving and reported to be 'exhausted' in trying to reconcile paid work

with domestic responsibilities (*ibid.* p. 52). This in turn has led to increased dependence for care work on 'substitute care givers', i.e., older family members, mainly grandparents, and on older daughters, affecting their schoolwork. Men's inability to fend sufficiently for their families has led to spousal conflicts. Moreover, increased levels of stress and conflict between members of the household have come to the fore given that usual care givers have less time to care for family members and older family members and children are overburdened with the responsibility of care work. The authors conclude that while social protection policies and managing food price volatility are crucial issues, social protection systems have to be more 'care-sensitive' and take into account women's unpaid care work and its value to society and the nation. Furthermore, there has to be a measurement and assessment of the impact of unpaid care work on development.

Pre-occupation with enhancing women's mobility, access to health, education, markets, paid work, justice and political participation in Bangladesh means it is likely that unpaid care work has been placed at the sidelines, if it has been considered an issue at all. This is the case even though unpaid care work is a crucial influence on the extent to which such opportunities can be accessed, and is itself impacted upon by the expansion of such opportunities as well as demographic changes. Valuing unpaid care work for its central importance to societal and human wellbeing (Eyben 2013), or as a contribution to the economy, and not simply a burden, is a perspective that has not been brought to the table. Moreover, if governments do not measure women's unpaid care work they cannot assess its contribution and impact on the different segments of society and on the economy as a whole (Budlender and Moussie 2013). Neither can they adopt informed policies that recognise the importance of care work, redistribute care work between men and women and between state and household, or reduce the element of drudgery in care work (according to the framework proposed in Elson 2010). Given the lack of any systematic review of the evidence about unpaid care work it is unclear how, if at all, this is debated in policy or research, or how existing policies and research in Bangladesh recognise and address this issue. It is this gap that this review seeks to address.

#### **1.4 Methodology**

This review has selected several Government policies and plans that can be expected to recognise the issue of unpaid care work as part of policies or initiatives seeking to reduce gender disparities in key sectors and address women's rights. These policies and plans are manifested in the development agenda of the Government and include the Five Year Plans, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP), the National Women's Development Policy 2011 and the National Action Plan 2012 for the implementation of the women's policy. These are based on, among other things, the principles of the Constitution of Bangladesh and the Millennium Development Goals. Bangladesh has ratified the Convention of Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and as such, Government as well as citizen-initiated submissions to the UN CEDAW Committee have also been included in this review. In terms of law, this review specifically looks at the Bangladesh Labour Act (2006) to examine whether any aspect of it addresses unpaid care work. It looks at whether and to what extent policies, plans and law refer to unpaid care work, and irrespective of whether they specifically mention this term, if they refer to any measures or initiatives that can be seen to redistribute or reduce it.

Two sets of policies, namely Early Childhood Development (ECD) and social protection policies have been excluded from this review as they have been examined in a thematic review of public policies (Chopra *et al* 2013). A thorough examination of these two policies in the context of Bangladesh revealed little in relation to unpaid care work. In terms of ECD, the review covered the National Education Policy 2000, the Primary Education Development Programme II, the Operational Framework for Pre-Primary Education 2008, the Comprehensive ECCD Policy Framework and the Expanded Programme on Immunization

(EPI). In terms of social protection, it covered the Female Secondary School Stipend Programme, Primary Education Stipend Programme, Old Age Allowance Scheme and Assistance Programme for Widowed and Destitute Women, Food for Work Programme, Employment Generation for the Hard-Core Poor, Rural Employment and Road Maintenance Programme, 100 Days Employment Generation Scheme, Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction/Targeting the Ultra Poor Programme and the Rural Employment Opportunities for Public Assets (REOPA) programme.

The other focus of this review was to look specifically at literature on unpaid care work in Bangladesh. The literature review does not claim to be exhaustive, given the numerous cross cutting issues related to care, but it selects literature that illustrates the state of the discourse within Bangladesh.

A Google search on 'unpaid care work,' 'domestic work' and 'household work' in Bangladesh, was unproductive, barring one or two pieces of research in which it was a focal point, revealing the paucity of research on this issue. The international discourse of 'unpaid care work' was therefore used to identify possible arenas where this discourse may arise. Thus, one deliberate focus of the search was to find evidence of any recognition of women's economic contribution through unpaid labour in official statistics in Bangladesh to counter the neo-liberal focus on economic growth. A Google search only revealed one study, undertaken by BRAC Development Institute (BDI), and therefore the review relied largely on the annual Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics Handbook, and the single other document which dealt with the issue at length, and which was suggested by key informants (Hamid 1996). A second focus of the search was on time-use studies, which within the larger global discourse are emphasised as a tool for measuring unpaid care work.

The parameters of the search were then extended to women's work, empowerment and gender equality. This uncovered an extensive body of literature that could not be exhaustively explored in its own right, and so the small number of studies which referred explicitly to unpaid care work were included. A search was also conducted on cross cutting issues with unpaid care work such as migration, activities or coping strategies of the elderly, children's work, etc. The remainder of the literature covered by this review largely consists of recent studies conducted at the BDI that offer some insights into women's unpaid care work. The literature review section therefore covers a small number of items under three headings: 1) examination of official statistics to re-calculate women's economic contribution through unpaid labour; 2) time use studies that focus or comment on women's unpaid labour; and 3) studies on perceptions and negotiations around unpaid care work.

## 2 Findings from policy documents

In general, the review found no mention of the term 'unpaid care work' in the examination of the selected policies, plans and laws. There is some scattered mention of household work and responsibilities and certain measures in a few of the policies that may have implications in the redistribution and reduction of women's unpaid care work, if the policies are effectively implemented. However, what also emerged from this review is that what gets to be included in national policies is closely connected to what is being focused upon in the international discourse at that time. Thus, while there was some recognition of women's household work in some of the early documents (albeit mostly as background), it subsequently disappeared from these documents following the almost exclusive focus on women's economic empowerment through paid work in the post-Beijing years. Now, with the recent international interest in unpaid care work, there seems to be a re-emergence of the issue in a focused

way as revealed in the very recent National Plan of Action 2012 formulated for the implementation of the National Women's Development Policy 2011.

The invisibility of unpaid care work in policy in Bangladesh, particularly in sectors where it is vital, was also revealed in the thematic review on public policies related to care (Chopra *et al* 2013). That review revealed that out of the five policies reviewed under Early Childhood Development in Bangladesh, only one, namely the Primary Education Development Programme II (PEDP II) recognised the care work provided by older siblings to younger ones and set up 'baby classes' to address the issue. Of the nine social protection programmes reviewed, only the Rural Employment Opportunities for Public Assets (REOPA) programme revealed provision for maternity leave and consideration of other household and reproductive responsibilities in their programme for promoting women's participation in project activities. The absence of any discourse around care, particularly in the social protection policies, which have obvious direct links to the issue, gives an indication of the extent of its exclusion from policy debates.

## 2.1 The Constitution and the Millennium Development Goals

The Constitution of Bangladesh and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) can be seen as the broad canvas on which perspectives on gender equality and specific gender related development goals are formulated. The Constitution of Bangladesh reflects the Government's stance on women's rights and provides the basis to push for policies seeking to redress gender inequalities. The fundamental principles of state policy enshrined in the Constitution direct the State to adopt effective measures to secure the participation of women in all spheres of national life (Article 10), including in local Government institutions (Article 9), ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens (Article 19(1)) and remove all social and economic inequalities between man and woman (Article 19(2)). Further, work is considered a right, a duty and a matter of honour for every citizen who is capable of working (Article 20.1) and it instructs the State to create conditions in which, '*...human labour in every form, intellectual and physical, shall become a fuller expression of creative endeavour and of the human personality*' (Article 20(2); Changemakers 2006: 10). The Constitution guarantees *inter alia* equality before law and equal protection of law (Article 27), non-discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 28) and mentions specifically that women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life (Article 28(2)), with the provision that 'nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making special provision in favour of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens' (Article 28(4))(Changemakers 2006: 13).

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provides a framework of reference for the formulation of specific policies and initiatives targeting women and children. Although care work does not feature in any of the MDGs, there are important links between each of them and unpaid care (Esplen 2009). The linkages noted by Esplen (*ibid.*: 25–26) are used here to assess Bangladesh's progress in achieving the MDGs.

MDG 1 (Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger) is linked inextricably with 'unpaid care work'. Although 'The Millennium Development Goals Bangladesh Progress Report 2012' (GoB 2013) claims that the targets for reducing the poverty gap ratio and proportion of population living below the national upper poverty line have been met, about 47 million people live in poverty and 26 million in extreme poverty (World Bank 2013). These extremely and chronically poor households are substantively less likely to be able to afford two meals a day, more likely to have more children, less likely to have children in primary school and less likely to have a literate person in the household, compared to the national average (Save the Children UK 2005). It is essential for women in these households to earn an income and invest time and labour in subsistence while also providing care for a greater number of

children. Care ties them to the home so that they are forced to take on low paid, low status, part-time informal sector work without leave or health benefits, with direct financial ramifications. While reducing the proportion of own account and contributing family workers in total employment is one of the targets under this goal, the Decent Work Country Profile (ILO 2013), states that 25 per cent of employed women are own account workers and 56 per cent are contributing/unpaid family workers, reflecting to last some degree, the link with unpaid care work.

Bangladesh is on track to achieve MDG2 (universal primary education), but still lags in terms of retention and completion. Children from poorer families, especially girls, leave school<sup>3</sup> or juggle between education and caring for younger siblings or old or ailing family members, for whom they are generally responsible, along with their mothers. That unpaid care work can reinforce gender inequalities (MDG 3: Promote Gender equality and empower women) has already been discussed. In relation to MDG 4 (Reduce child mortality) improved knowledge and care facilities may reduce as much as 40 per cent of child deaths; unpaid care work may impede maternal well-being with women undertaking heavy household chores throughout pregnancy and soon after delivery which relates to MDG 5 (Improve maternal health). Bangladesh has already achieved gender parity in primary and secondary education at the national level and has achieved, or is close to achieving, the targets for reducing under-five mortality and maternal mortality. Although considerable progress has been made, it is lagging in terms of reaching the target of proportion of women in wage employment in non-agricultural sector (MDG 3), of seats held in parliament by women (MDG 3), of births attended by skilled health personnel (MDG 5) and antenatal care coverage (MDG 5), among others, all of which are related to the issue of women's unpaid care work.

MDG 6 (Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases) is directly linked to unpaid care work, as families, mainly women and girls bear the responsibility of caring for ailing family members. The prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Bangladesh is minimal and it has been successful in treating malaria and TB. Moreover, the Government has reintroduced and revitalised 10,723 Community Clinics to improve primary healthcare for women. Although formulated in this manner MDG 6 may seem to have little implication for women's unpaid care work in Bangladesh, in actuality, health crises affect most people directly,<sup>4</sup> and in particular ill-health of the main breadwinner pushes already economically vulnerable people to the brink of survival, with women struggling to provide care and earn at the same time. Women and girls spend much time and energy in gathering fuel and fetching water, particularly where there is a scarcity of water and energy sources and a depletion of natural resources. These factors relate care to MDG 7 (Ensure environmental sustainability). Although the 2012 MDG Report shows near achievement of the target for improved drinking water sources, it does not show the continuing problem of arsenic in the groundwater and increasing water salinity, particularly in the southern belt of Bangladesh. This has meant women and girls are carrying heavy loads of water and travelling over longer distances for safe and drinkable water. Thus it would seem that despite advances, unpaid care work is invisibly impeding the achievement of several of the MDG targets and therefore needs to be addressed before setting up the targets for the post-2015 MDGs.

## 2.2 Labour laws

The Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (GoB 2006) does not recognise paid or unpaid care workers. Large numbers of women and girls, particularly migrant workers (internal and international) are engaged in domestic work. While some, albeit inadequate, measures have been taken up for the protection of international migrants, domestic workers in-country –

<sup>3</sup> Boys are withdrawn from school for paid work (Save the Children UK 2005)

<sup>4</sup> A survey conducted in 2007 on 2400 NGO members found that a substantively higher percentage of respondents faced health crisis than economic, legal or disaster related crisis in past 3 years (Mahmud and Huq, forthcoming)



including half a million children, 75 per cent of whom are girls - are left unrecognised and unregulated by the law (ASK 2012). Child domestic workers living away from their families and working behind closed doors are particularly vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and violence with 395 cases of violence including murder, rape, acid burns and sexual abuse, and most commonly physical injury recorded between 2009 and 2012. Almost all child domestic workers work seven days a week and many do not receive any wages at all. The majority of them sleep at their employers' house and have strict restrictions on mobility and freedom. As workers in the informal sector, they are not entitled to any legal protection under the Labour Act (ASK 2012).

The Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (GoB 2006) in Bangladesh is only applicable to workers in the formal sector. This leaves 78 per cent of the employed labour force working in the informal sector outside the purview of the Act, and completely unregulated. In Bangladesh, a large proportion of women (92 per cent in 2010; ILO 2013) work in the informal sector (domestic work, agriculture, construction, etc.) As workers in the informal sector, or as unpaid family labour, or own account workers, a significant proportion of women workers are therefore excluded from the rights and benefits that accrue to formal sector workers (a higher proportion of whom are male), including the stipulations that may specifically improve the conditions of women workers, such as minimum wages, regulated hours of work, paid leave, maternity leave, paid sick leave and pension (ILO 2013).

The Government of Bangladesh has introduced several changes in the legal provisions for minimum wage, working time and leave, in particular with respect to maternity and annual leave. These are only applicable under certain conditions for formal sector workers. Recent revisions to the Act ensure minimum wages (previously excluded from the law) and prohibit wage discrimination on the basis of sex. It continues to provide maternity benefits to women for up to two children but has increased provision of maternity benefits from four to six months (since 2011). Criteria for eligibility to receive maternity benefits have been relaxed to include women who have worked for at least six months, down from nine months. Maternity benefits are calculated on the basis of the median wage earned in the last three months preceding maternity leave. Low paid women receive low maternity benefits, and women with more than two children receive maternity leave entitlement. Public sector workers receive six months paid leave.

Working hours have also been regulated under the revised law in order to provide workers with a better balance between work, family and personal life. However, the Decent Work Report states that workers are increasingly working more hours, in particular urban workers who spend many hours commuting (ILO 2013).

Bangladesh has no national social security system and healthcare coverage is low across the labour force. Although the Government has invested in social protection, a large proportion of formal sector workers, the entire informal sector and own account workers are excluded from the system, which targets the very poorest. Informal sector workers benefit from some of the Government's various social safety nets (ILO 2013). Public sector workers get an allowance for persons with a permanent disability and no or low income. To some extent, informal sector workers receive employment injury benefits and disability benefits under the newly enacted Bangladesh Labour Welfare Foundation Act 2006. While there is provision for old age pension for public sector workers, only 3.3 per cent above the age of 60 years received it in 2010. Through the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Governmental so provides an old age allowance for targeted individuals, but of only BDT 300 (£2.28) every three months. Various categories of people including those who receive pensions, other cash or food transfers, domestic workers and vagrants are not eligible for this old age allowance.

Under the revised labour law it is mandatory for every establishment with 40 or more employees to have a crèche for children aged six and below. Although various loopholes

make it possible for many organisations to avoid providing these facilities, this is a positive development for the unpaid care responsibilities of workers in the readymade garment industry, which is the largest formal sector employer of women. However given the track record of the garment industry in complying with labour laws and regulations, the extent to which the provision of crèches will be implemented remains to be seen.

### **2.3. The Development Plans: The Sixth Five Year Plan (SFYP) and National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction II (NSAPR II)**

This examination of Government policies, plans and reports suggest that while women's household responsibilities, unpaid labour and even 'sex stereotyping' are acknowledged as issues, this does not necessarily translate into a policy discourse about whether and how to address unpaid care work. There have been no focused initiatives to date to assess the contribution of women's unpaid care work to the economy. However, the need for redistribution of household responsibility between the sexes has been noted in this regard. Connections to unpaid care work may be drawn from the efforts to set up crèches, day care centres and provide paid maternity leave as measures designed to enable women to engage in outside paid work while managing unpaid care work. Similarly, the provision of food transfer schemes such as Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) and Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) cards, as well as the provision of widow, old age and disability allowances, may also be seen as reducing some of the pressures on care work among the very poorest people.

Development plans such as the Sixth Five Year Plan (2011–2015) and the National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction II (FY 2009–2011) have integrated strategies for women's development and empowerment, basing their policy and legal framework on the Constitution, CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. The Sixth Five Year Plan (GoB 2011) and the National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction II (GoB 2009) share the same vision and goals for Women's Advancement and Rights (*ibid.*: 61–65). These include:

- elimination of discrimination against women;
- creating opportunities for education and marketable skills training to enable women to participate and be competitive in all economic activities;
- promoting an enabling environment at the work place by setting up day care centres for children of working mothers and working women's hostels and
- taking action to acknowledge women's social and economic contributions.

However, these visions and goals do not specify which of women's social and economic contributions they intend to acknowledge, leaving ample scope for patriarchal attitudes to identify the contribution to be valued (in which unpaid care work may not arise). Both development plans share similar strategic objectives such as advocacy plans for the equal treatment of girl and boy children, and the promotion of equal sharing of household and productive work. The mechanism for the latter is not spelt out in either document, although the revised National Education Policy will address it, according to the Government's sixth and seventh periodic submission to the CEDAW Committee. Both plans prioritise women in social protection programmes, and intend to give preference to women with disabilities through safety net measures (SFYP) and housing and accessibility to all physical facilities (NSARP II).

'Domestic responsibilities' are specifically mentioned only in the section on 'Women's Risks and Vulnerabilities' in the NSARP II. This addresses the risk of school non-attendance or drop-out by girls with domestic responsibilities; the indivisibility of work done as part of normal household work from agricultural responsibilities; and the double burden of education and work (including care-giving). 'Domestic responsibilities' are framed so as to exclude

mention of how adult women are affected by these responsibilities, highlighting the perception that women's domestic burdens do not contribute to their risks or vulnerabilities.

The NSARP II and the SFYP mention two strategies that may have implications for policy formulation around unpaid care work. The NSARP II mentions the need to strengthen the capacity of the national statistical system and the ministries to generate and report data, especially sex-disaggregated data, in understandable forms, viewing this as a challenge for which concerted actions would be needed. It states that dialogue will be undertaken among stakeholders to identify when and which types of sex-disaggregated data should be collected by the statistical system. The availability of sex-disaggregated data is one possible starting point for mobilising around policies for unpaid care work. A second may be gender budgeting: one of the SFYP strategies to integrate gender issues within planning and budgetary processes is to build the capacity of relevant Government officials on gender responsive budgeting and planning.

## **2.4 Gender Related Policies: Reports to the CEDAW Committee, the National Women's Development Policy 2011 and The National Action Plan 2012**

CEDAW plays an important role in shaping gender related policies in Bangladesh. The National Women's Development Policy 2011 takes CEDAW, along with the Constitution of Bangladesh and International Human Rights conventions, as its basis (MOWCA 2011). Following is an examination of the Government periodic reports to the CEDAW committee, the National Women's Development Policy and the National Action Plan 2012 to implement the policy with respect to unpaid care work.

Possibly the strongest recognition of women's unpaid care work was addressed in the Government's third and fourth periodic reports to the CEDAW Committee (GoB1997), although in the section describing women's status in Bangladesh and the challenges this posed. In this section, the report stated that although women play a major role in the functioning of the household and the economy, they are generally not seen outside the domestic sphere. More importantly, it acknowledged that national statistics have not been able to account for their contribution in the form of 'domestic work' and 'unpaid labour in family ventures'. It further stated that women work harder and longer hours than men. By their estimation, women's working days averaged 14 to 15 hours, including child rearing and household management. The report also stated that the definition of women's work makes it invisible in national statistics, and referred to the adoption of a more inclusive measurement of women's economic activities to better capture their contribution. It mentioned that the recent use of wider definitions of labour force activities and agricultural work had made it possible to capture women's expenditure-saving work and women's work in agriculture (although still insufficiently, as we shall see later). It further suggested that women's roles should not be conceived in economic terms only, but considered in relation to education, training and job opportunities, income, employment, assets, health, and the role they play in the family and in society. These characteristics, it claimed, are crucial in determining the amount of political power and social prestige a woman is accorded, and thus the extent to which she can influence decision-making within the home and in the community.

In outlining the Government's progress in terms of the different articles in CEDAW, the report made several important points relevant to unpaid care work.

- i. In a section under Temporary Special Measures (Section 2.3.6), the report stated that although the Labour Law [prior to its revision in 2006] gives women in formal sector employment three months maternity leave twice in the life of a woman worker, childcare facilities and exemption from night duty, in practice few women enjoy these benefits. It also mentioned NGO initiatives to provide day care centres in collaboration with employers, and the establishment of schools for child workers

removed from garment factories, in collaboration with garment manufacturers; (the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), the Government, ILO, UNICEF and the NGOs in the wake of Harkin's Bill to remove child labour from garments factories supplying to the USA in the early 2000s).

- ii. In reference to Article 5, (Sex roles and stereotyping), the report stated that true advancement towards equality requires fundamental social and cultural change. Social expectations of the roles to be played by women were still very traditional, giving importance to child rearing and household management. Interpersonal relationships between men and women and practices based on ideas of superiority and inferiority of one sex in relation to another and sex-stereotyping needed to be addressed: 'To this end the recognition of family life as a vital area, maternity as a social function and the need for shared responsibility of men and women in the upbringing of children, needs to be stressed' (GoB 1997: 29).
- iii. With reference to Article 11 (Equal Employment and Training Opportunities) the report stated that despite broadening the measures for labour force activities, the Government had not yet been able to reflect women's unpaid household work in the national accounting of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The recognition of and nascent discourse on women's unpaid care work in the combined third and fourth periodic report (GoB 1997) was gradually lost to view in the successive fifth periodic report (GoB 2003) and the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports to the CEDAW Committee (MOWCA 2009).

The Combined Sixth and Seventh Alternative Report to the UN CEDAW Committee (CiC-BD 2010) was prepared jointly by a citizen's platform of 38 women's and human rights organisations. Many of those in the platform were also members of the CEDAW Forum dedicated to the promotion and implementation of the Convention (BMP, BNWLA and Naripokkho 1997). The alternative report produced a number of recommendations focusing on specific points of CEDAW in relation to GOB's Third and Fourth Periodic Report in 1997. Although the report provided critical observations on different issues such as trafficking, child prostitution, acid violence, equal wage, maternity leave, political participation etc., it did not address women's unpaid care work either explicitly or implicitly.

By the time the combined sixth and seventh periodic report was submitted to the CEDAW Committee in 2009, concerns with gender mainstreaming (following the current Government's Vision 2021) and sex-disaggregated data had gained primacy. The combined sixth and seventh periodic report (MOWCA 2009) focused on policies and strategies for gender mainstreaming through integration into planning and budgeting as put forward by the NSAPR II and reflected in the Medium Term Budget Framework (MTBF). The report admitted the need for greater conceptual clarity among the implementers at the various levels. The other major focus was on how the different ministries had been providing MOWCA with sex-disaggregated data, the publication of the Gender Statistics in Bangladesh 2008 by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, and the Database on Women and Children Issues published by MOWCA on the basis of secondary data sources. However, a comprehensive sex-disaggregated database was not completed by 2009 (GoB 2009: 12).

While gender responsive budgeting and sex-disaggregated data (which informs formulation of a gender responsive budget) are important to bring unpaid care work onto the policy table, the combined sixth and seventh alternative report submitted to the UNCEDAW Committee by the Citizens' Initiatives on CEDAW-Bangladesh argued that there was little awareness of the importance of sex disaggregated data at the policy level (CiC-BD 2010).

The Government's response to the Committee's recommendation to 'design and implement comprehensive awareness-raising programmes to change stereotype attitudes and norms about the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and society' betrayed a limited understanding of these concepts (GoB 2009: 35). The Government cited again its various social protection measures as awareness-raising initiatives. It also mentioned encouraging women to participate in 'non-traditional' professions (as opposed to teaching and nursing), such as civil service, doctors, engineers, advocates as 'a significant measure' of Government efforts to address sex roles and stereotypes, although it does not detail how or why this is the case. The sole initiative that hints at awareness raising around the redistribution of unpaid care work is the National Education Policy, which was then in the process of finalisation.

In response, the CiC-BD report expressed concern over the persistence of patriarchal values and traditional norms which regulate social relations and shape institutional culture. Thus even while women turn to the state to change these relationships through legal and policy reforms, their implementation is not effective in challenging these deeply embedded values (CiC-BD 2010: 9). As an example of its entrenched nature the report noted the resistance to viewing women as a main worker in agriculture, rather than the stereotypical view of women as supplementary workers, which results in undervaluation of women's work and hinders access to training, capacity building, market linkages and other aspects of agricultural extension which currently target only men (*ibid.* p.46). This resonates with the need to recognise that actors and institutions that formulate policies are themselves guided by patriarchal norms (Nazneen and Mahmud 2012), which may be one of the reasons that unpaid care work has not emerged as a policy concern.

The CiC-BD report mentions various social safety net measures to ensure the 'advancement' of women, but the coverage is limited. The report notes that:

- Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) cards reach 750,000 distressed and ultra-poor women, providing them with food assistance and development package training;
- Vulnerable Group Development for Ultra Poor (VGDUP) cards go to 80,000 women, providing them with access to life skills training on income generation, health, nutrition, rights, a subsistence allowance, support for savings, and asset transfers, etc.;
- 18 day care centres have been created in Dhaka and five divisional towns;
- Widow allowances went to 0.9 million women in 2008–2009, but no numbers were provided for recipients of the old age allowances.

The CiC-BD report noted that older women had not been considered as a policy priority although the CEDAW Committee took the decision to adopt a general resolution at the 42<sup>nd</sup> session to protect them from multiple forms of discrimination. If priorities and policies are formulated on this basis, this would have the potential to reduce the pressure of elderly care that constitutes a major part of unpaid care work in Bangladesh.

Finally, the conversation around women's work, (both in the Government and the CiC-BD's report), was very much around increasing participation in the labour force, women's unpaid economic activity, (as distinct from unpaid care work, which is assumed not to contribute to the economy) and women's work in the informal sector which remains unaccounted for in the national economy or regulated by the 2006 Labour Act. However, the CiC-BD report pointed to the need to question the dominant development paradigm which advocates 'growth above all else', discounting 'inequality, social dispossession and unsustainability' as inimical to the rights of women who provide the cheap labour necessary for this growth (CiC-BD 2010: 10). This may be seen as an entry point for bringing unpaid care work within the purview of women's rights activists and policymakers.

It is the National Women's Development Policy 2011 that offers the most scope for bringing unpaid care work into policy debates. The background section of the report briefly but clearly points to the fact that 'there has been no appropriate evaluation of the intellectual and physical labour women invest in household work' (MOWCA 2011: 1). The objectives of the policy include:

- Developing women as an educated and skilled human resource,
- ensuring regular attendance of girls in school,
- providing social safety nets for ultra-poor women, and allowances for widows, elderly, and destitute women,
- recognising women's contributions to socio-economic development through their work in the formal and informal sectors,
- ensuring an accurate accounting of women's contribution within national statistics and
- taking into account women's agricultural and home-based labour in the calculation of national development and economic growth.

In a section on supportive services to facilitate the participation of women in the labour force, the policy recognises the need to provide day care centres for children of working mothers, and crèches in the workplace as well as care homes and improved facilities for elderly people and people with disabilities, and providing special support to families for rearing children with disabilities. All of these 'supportive services' are of direct relevance to the redistribution of unpaid care work, and the reduction of the drudgery it can involve.

However, it is the National Action Plan 2012 (which is currently undergoing revisions through consultations with various ministries) that clearly articulates the issue of unpaid care work, echoing the current international discourse around it.<sup>5</sup> In the section on women and economic development, it states:

Although women's economic activity is increasingly being recognised, there is still a huge population of women whose contribution to the economy through work within the household or outside of the market is not recognised. Particularly the work of housewives is not given recognition by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Apart from this, women do a lot of work in the community for which they receive no remuneration, which is why it is not considered to be economic activity. Although BBS's definition is based on ILO's definition of economic activity, in practice it is the social definition of work which takes only the work of adult men into account. This is why formal economic value of women's contribution to household work remains unrecognised by BBS. However, there is substantial evidence from research that women's unpaid work is making a positive contribution to the economy. For example, if women's contribution was taken into account as is men's then our GDP would have doubled. Time spent in labour would amount to 16 hours for women, which is far greater than for men. The time has now come to accurately define women's economic activity and re-assess both men and women's contribution to the overall economy and society. It is with the representation of their economic contribution in all official statistics that women will be recognised as 'economic citizens'.  
(MOWCA 2013: 52; translated from the Bengali by the author).

The National Action Plan 2012 specifies actions against the objectives of recognising women's contributions through work in the formal and informal sector to socio-economic development; ensuring accurate reflection of their contribution in national statistics; and

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<sup>5</sup> The National Action Plan broadly focuses on gender equality, women's empowerment and women's increased participation in all spheres. Some of the specific aims are pertinent to the issue of unpaid care, such as ensuring women's fundamental and human rights, focusing on the female child and children with disabilities. This includes the plan to formulate an early childhood policy by 2014, change attitudes towards discrimination between children at the family and societal level, and education and adult literacy.

taking into account agricultural and home-based labour of women in calculating national development and economic growth. It also identifies the ministries responsible (Finance, Planning, Bureau of Statistics, MOWCA, Local Government, Information, Commerce, Labour and Employment) for ensuring calculation of sex disaggregated data, providing statistics on the economic contribution through unpaid work of rural and urban women, evaluating and including the monetary valuation of women's agricultural and household work in all national accounts and communicating women's economic contribution through mass media.

The reason this perspective and articulation in the action plan so closely resembles the contemporary international discourse and concerns around unpaid care work is that researchers and activists involved in the present action research project (to which this review contributes) were part of the series of consultations to formulate the action plan and succeeded in persuading MOWCA of the rationale for a focus on unpaid care work. This specific articulation of 'unpaid care work' was not present in the earlier draft of the Action Plan. It remains to be seen whether this perspective is retained in the final version after the consultation with the relevant ministries.

## 3 Findings from research in Bangladesh

There is very little research from Bangladesh directly and explicitly dealing with unpaid care work. The use of this terminology is not evident. It has variously been called 'household work' or 'domestic work'. 'Unpaid care' is often subsumed under the term 'unpaid labour', where even if a distinction is made between unpaid care work and 'unpaid economic activities', the unpaid care work aspect is generally ignored, particularly when attributing contribution of women's 'unpaid labour' to the economy. This is not surprising given the discussion so far on the mainstream development narrative, which also shapes the kind of research that is done (and funded) and the kind of questions that are asked. As outlined in the methodology section, this review of the research focused on: 1) examination of official statistics to re-calculate women's economic contribution through unpaid labour; 2) time use studies that focus or comment on women's unpaid labour; and 3) studies reflecting on perceptions and negotiations around unpaid care work.

### **3.1 Examination of official statistics to re-calculate women's economic contribution through unpaid labour (including unpaid care work)**

According to the 2012 Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh (BBS 2011), half of all working age urban women (6 out of nearly 12 million) and 53 per cent of all working age rural women (19 out of 36 million) are involved in 'household work'. This is in contrast to 2 per cent of all working age urban men and 2.6 per cent of working age rural men. Household work is categorised with those not in the labour force, along with 'students' and 'others'. Eighty per cent of all urban women not in the workforce are engaged in household work (or 'housewives'), as are 83 per cent of all rural women out of the labour force.

These labels and categorisations encourage the assumption that those doing only household work contribute nothing to the economy and are therefore not worth counting within the labour force. Several problems have been identified with this type of categorisation:

- Official statistics (for various reasons discussed below) subsume under this category women's unpaid labour in the form of economic activities that are unpaid (for example working in the family farm, enterprise), or paid in kind, or those which constitute expenditure saving activities (Mahmud and Tasneem 2011).

- Women themselves do not recognise their work in the household as economic activity or making an economic contribution (*ibid.*).
- Women's work in the household is multiple and fragmented in nature in contrast to men's that is clearly identifiable, uniform and outside the household. As a result, they cannot articulate their primary occupation and end up identifying themselves as 'housewives' when questioned by enumerators gathering labour statistics (Efroymsen *et al* 2007). This results in an exaggeration count of the number of 'housewives' estimated in the labour force survey.

Labelled in these ways, the statistics help promote the readily acceptable idea, conforming to the prevalent and preferred patriarchal perspective, that more than half of the women in Bangladesh, whether in urban or rural areas, are *merely* 'housewives'. The implication is that their work is of no value, socially or economically, that would require it to be enumerated as with other kinds of work. This reductive understanding exacerbates the invisibility of unpaid care work in official statistics and in the perception of policymakers. It also avoids recognition that it is not only the category of 'housewives' who perform unpaid care work, but all women and some men, whether they are part of the labour force or not. This includes those who fall outside the age group of the 'working population', i.e., below 15 years of age.

The most comprehensive work done to date that directly addresses and demonstrates the contribution of unpaid care work to the economy of Bangladesh is Shamim Hamid's essay on 'Non-Market Work and the System of National Accounts: The Case of Bangladesh' (Hamid 1996). Her brief account and critique of the System of National Accounts (SNA) as it is applied in Bangladesh, problems with the categorisation and enumeration of women's work and her findings from a time-use study and the calculations of the GDP using different definitions for estimating national income, makes her essay worth discussing at length.

Hamid states that while women are major producers of non-market goods and services, mainly through 'housework' that enables the effective functioning of the conventional economy, it has been ignored by national statistics, which only account for market, i.e. remunerated work or labour for which the returns are monetised. Both the UN SNA applied in Bangladesh and the national labour force statistics estimate national income by taking into account only market work and thereby fail to capture the total production of the country by excluding non-market production of goods and services by women. (It should be noted that Bangladesh is not unusual in this regard.) The SNA guidelines followed in Bangladesh date back to 1953, before the inclusion of subsistence production in the revised version of SNA in 1968. The report of the Commission for National Income, which was established to reconcile the two GDP estimates produced annually by the Bangladesh Bureau of statistics and the Planning Commission (BBS 1992 cited in Hamid 1996) however failed to identify this gap or to suggest production boundaries more appropriate for Bangladesh. It further failed to point out that problems with the methodology and definitions of BBS resulted in sex-biased statistics. This was despite the fact that this point had been amply illustrated by the sharp increase in the female labour force participation rate between 1985/86 and 1989 as recorded in the 1992 BBS Labour Force report 1992, with the incorporation of paid and unpaid agricultural work (although it continued to exclude housework).

According to Hamid, the exclusion of housewives, the inactive and children from the labour force following the standard ILO classification has a significant impact on the under-numeration of the female labour force. During the time she was writing, 95 per cent of the active age (10-64 years) women and girls were subsumed under the heading 'housewives not in the labour force'. As a result 'housewives' who were generating Tk150 million (currently more than GBP 1 million) daily through non-market activities such as fuel and water collection, home repairs and maintenance, fishing and care of domestic livestock and poultry, were excluded from the labour force. Meanwhile the unemployed, who generate less than Tk6 million daily from these same activities were taken into account as a legitimate part



of the labour force (Hamid, 1988, 1989; cited in Hamid 1996). This led to a substantial underestimation of the labour force and consequently the national income. Hamid stated that although these shortcomings were supposed to be addressed in the (then) proposed Revised System of National Accounts (UN 1990 cited in Hamid 1996), this still retained a degree of arbitrariness in its production boundaries by including, for example public sector services of 'Water, Electricity and Gas' but excluding water carrying services provided by individuals in rural and urban areas where the state fails to provide these basic amenities. Moreover the revised system continued to place no value on services provided by household members, especially women, through activities like cooking, cleaning and childcare, categorising them as production mainly to be excluded (Hamid 1996: 10).

Hamid argued for the inclusion of both market and non-market work in GDP, as it would be a better indicator of women's contribution to national income, and of the economic significance of non-market work. This would encourage policymakers to allocate production resources to producers commensurate with their contribution to the national income, among other things (measuring development, monitoring changes in allocation of labour resources that reflects actual growth, effectively measuring household income and standard of living and formulating welfare and population policies). The study disaggregated conventional GDP and re-estimated the national income of Bangladesh by evaluating time allocated by household members to housework and subsistence production using a time use budget study of 62 villages (2,653 respondents) in Bangladesh. It found the highest participation of women in work relating to home and family care, in collecting water, food, fuel and fodder, in expenditure saving activities which includes repair and maintenance of dwellings, in livestock and poultry care, in crop processing and in cottage industry. Men were found to perform fewer types of activities in terms of farm and field work, livestock, marketing, collecting house building material and petty trade. The pattern revealed that women's time was heavily fragmented and involved a wide range of activities to which time was allocated in small units, whereas men performed fewer and more homogenous types of work, and were able to allocate their time in large blocks. The dual burden of women's market<sup>6</sup> and non-market work was demonstrated by the finding that while men spent 23 per cent of their time on market work and only 2 per cent on non-market work, women spent 23 per cent of their time on non-market work and a further 9 per cent on market work. The study also found that women performed 97 per cent of all housework and time spent on work for the family. Home care was found to increase as the economic condition of the household improves. Housework also increased with the size of the household but appeared to be dependent more on the number of old and adult males in the household (those 10 years and above) than on the number of infants (0–4 years) or children (5–9 years). This, according to the author is an indication of the patriarchal system prevalent in rural Bangladesh.

Through her estimations Hamid not only calculated women's contribution to the economy but was able to characterise household type and class of the major contributors and normative underpinnings finding expression in the under-valuation of women's work, summarised below.

- i. The contribution and estimation of women's market and non-market work:
  - Conventional GDP estimates capture 98 per cent of men's production but only 47 per cent of women's. Women's contribution to national income using conventional estimates is 25 per cent and men's contribution 75 per cent. If non-market work (subsistence plus housework) is included in national income estimates, women's contribution is 41 per cent, and men's 59 per cent.
  - Non-market work increases conventional GDP estimates by 29 per cent. Women's contribution to market work is 25 per cent, and to non-market work 97 per cent. Under

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<sup>6</sup> The study defined 'market work' as that comprising agriculture and non-agriculture activities and 'non-market work' as that comprising subsistence activities and housework. 'Work' is thus the sum of market and non-market activities.

the then-prevalent 1953 UNSNA production boundary definitions, 95 per cent of non-market production of Bangladesh was excluded.

- Under the proposed recommendations of the Revised UNSNA, 38 per cent of men's non-market work and only 4 per cent of women's non-market work would be accounted for in GDP estimates.
- ii. Time spent on market and non-market work:
- Of the total time spent on work in rural areas women contribute 53 and men 47 per cent (in the case of children, boys: 65 in market and 25 per cent in non-market work; girls: 35 in market and 75 per cent in non-market work).
  - Of the total time spent on market work women contribute 25 per cent, and men 75 per cent; of total time spent on non-market work, women contribute 89 per cent and men 11 per cent.
- iii. Household characteristics of major contributors:
- Women from extreme poor households make the highest contribution in terms of time to market work indicating that poverty is a major incentive for women to enter paid work.
  - Women from extended nuclear families contribute the most in terms of time to market work. Since the extended nuclear families comprise lateral generations living together this indicates that female family support for housework enables women to enter the labour market.
- iv. Under-evaluation of women's work:
- Female to male wage ratios showed undervaluation of women's skills in all sectors of the economy.
  - Opportunity costs (income that could have been earned in the time spent on non-market work) were 64 per cent of the formal wage rate; the informal wage rate (wage that would have had to be paid to someone to perform the non-market work he/she was performing) was 80 per cent of the formal wage rate, indicating a high degree of self-exploitation of the rural labour force, and the low perceived value of non-market work.
  - Marginal differences in wage rates between women and children indicated that women's skills were valued at par with children.
  - Men had more leisure time than women.
- v. Class differences:
- Women from poor households had more leisure time than women from non-poor households indicating that women from poor households were under and unemployed in both market and non-market work.
  - Moderately poor households had the least leisure, and were the most diversified in their income sources. This indicated that such households worked the hardest and were in a position to make optimal use of support from development programmes.
  - Extreme poor households spent the most time in gathering and foraging activities.
  - As the economic condition of households improved, men's participation in non-market work decreased, while that of women remained static. This indicated that male family labour received first priority for being replaced by hired help.

In 2013, the struggle in Bangladesh is *still* very much around making women's unpaid labour visible. The recognition of unpaid care work as something of value to the society and to the economy has to thus first contend with the common perception that dismisses women's 'unpaid labour' as not work. According to the time use statistics in the Bangladesh Decent Work Profile Report, men spend 7.8 hours more on economic activities than women. However, if unpaid household work is added, then it appears that in fact, women work 8.1

hours more than men (ILO 2013). Thus the recognition of unpaid care work as economic activity has the potential to radically change understandings of women's contribution to the economy.

An examination of the official BBS statistics carried out by Mahmud and Tasneem (2011) estimated a female labour force participation rate of 67 per cent compared to the official Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics estimate of 30 per cent. The major source of the discrepancy lay in the uneven coverage of women's home-based economic activity and particularly in terms of their unpaid labour contributions. Mahmud and Tasneem point out that although women in Bangladesh perform a variety of economic activities ranging from homestead based expenditure saving activities, self-employment, seasonal or part time work or work that takes place within the home in the family farm or enterprise, to outside paid work, much of it remains *socially* unrecognised as work.

There are strict perceptions about the division of labour by sex where men are perceived to contribute to productive labour while women contribute to reproductive and care labour. 'Work' is commonly understood, by men as well as women, as an activity that produces goods and/or services having a market value, and by extension as generally the activity of adult males. Mahmud and Tasneem found that the interpretation of 'work', followed by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, (at all levels) is closer to the social perception of work, even though the official definition of work or economic activity in Bangladesh supposedly used by BBS is based on the ILO definition of economic activity that is more inclusive.<sup>7</sup> Moreover BBS enumerators often gather their data from the (male) household head, who has little knowledge about the work women do. The authors believe that this, along with conceptual problems, problems with fielding the survey, enumerator quality and workload lead to, not only the neglect of women's unpaid care work (reproductive and household maintenance activity) but also women's unpaid work in family farm or enterprise, resulting in the designation of a large proportion of women who engage in economic activities as 'housewives' in the labour force (Mahmud and Tasneem 2011). In the context of Bangladesh, where women are generally considered to have a lower social position *vis-à-vis* men, non-recognition as workers hold grave consequences for women. This is particularly true for poor women, in terms of their own self-esteem and the value assigned to them by their family and community, and as citizens:

recognition as a worker who contributes to the household and community economies has transformative implications for women's lives. The extent to which work might help to transform the life options available to women – including the extent and terms on which they undertake unpaid care work, depends upon how society and state values this work and accords recognition (Mahmud and Tasneem 2011: 6).

### 3.2 Time use studies

Time use studies are an effective tool to assess and raise the profile of unpaid care, because they make it possible to measure how different groups of people (men and women, rich and poor, rural and urban) use their time (Budlender and Moussie 2013). In contrast to labour force surveys, which focus on the type of work that can categorise the individual as 'employed' for inclusion in national accounts, time use studies record all the activities performed by an individual over a given period of time (day or week), including unpaid care

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<sup>7</sup> ILO definition of economic activity: a person aged 15 years and above, who was either working one or more hours for pay or profit or working without pay in a family farm or enterprise or organisation during the reference period, (week preceding the interview date), or found not working but had a job or business from which he/she was temporarily absent during the reference period.

work (Budlender 2008). Comparisons can then be drawn between time spent on paid, unpaid, non-work and leisure activities, in order to inform policies.

Time use surveys have been carried out in Bangladesh since the 1970s (Cain 1977; Cain 1991; Cain *et al* 1979; Farouk and Ali 1977; Khuda 1980; Khandker 1988; Farouk 1980; Amin 1994). Although all have data on time spent by women on unpaid care work, the surveys are mostly used to answer questions regarding women's work in terms of productive activities, subsistence activities, paid employment and their links with fertility, kinship structures, markets, seasonality, etc. However, what is evident from their work is that women's time is mainly absorbed by unpaid care work for which they are almost exclusively responsible.

Some studies found that time spent on unpaid care work increases with improved socio-economic status for women, although it declines for men. Studies in rural areas have found that women work longer hours particularly in agricultural households where wealthy landowners are more likely to hire help for agricultural work rather than for domestic work. In fact women's work burden increases because they have to cook for the hired agricultural workers (Cain *et al* 1979; Amin 1997; Amin and Chandrasekhar 2009). On the other hand, Khandker (1988) found that husband's pre-marital wealth and landholdings induce a substitution from work (household work and income generating work) to leisure. He also found that while there is a positive association with women's own wage and labour force participation and a negative association with household work, a spouse's wage is negatively associated with women's income generating activities and positively with women's leisure time. This finding would clearly depend on the socio-economic status of the household, with women in poorer households being less able to afford leisure (Ilahi 2000).

Another study, Zaman 1995, found that while women spend most of their time (6-8 hours) on domestic chores (cleaning, meal preparation, fuel collection, childcare, etc.) irrespective of class, there is substantial variation between rich peasant households and small or landless peasant households during busy and slack seasons. Women from small and landless families, along with their involvement in field and post-harvesting work also spend more time on domestic chores in busy and slack seasons than women in rich households. The latter spend most time on domestic chores in the intermediate season as they have helping hands in the busy season. Women in middle peasant households spend the same amount of time in domestic chores, across all seasons.

Most have presented difficulties involved in estimating time for different activities as women quite often undertake multiple tasks at a given time (e.g. child-minding or breastfeeding while cooking). This is particularly true of childcare, which is generally underreported even in time use studies (Rahman 1986). Children below one year of age remain awake for six hours a day and children between 1-2 years of age remain awake for 10-12 hours a day, but most time use studies do not report more than two hours spent on child care (*ibid.*). Childcare tends to be underreported because it is not considered to be work at all by women (Rahman 1986; Zaman 1995), or noted as a joint activity with other work that takes primacy in reporting and is only reported upon after careful probing (Ilahi 2000; Amin and Chandrasekhar 2009; Rahman 1986). Yet since childcare responsibility tends to be a crucial influence on the decision to enter the labour force and under what conditions, it is an area that requires further attention.

These time use studies offer sometimes-divergent findings as most are small-scale based on one or a few villages. However, regional, seasonal and socio-economic and age group variations in time use cannot be analysed from small-scale studies. Furthermore, most of the time use surveys are done on the rural population, leaving a large gap in knowledge of the growing urban population. The only study on urban population found by the search indicates certain differences in time use between rural and urban women in Bangladesh (Efroymsen *et*

a/ 2007). This study found that rural women undertake a much wider range of activities than urban women. For urban women especially, helping children with their homework, taking them for private tuition and taking children to school takes up a lot of time, particularly as mothers often wait at the school till the children are let off, to save on transport costs.

Most of these studies are out of date, given that the time women have to spend on unpaid care work has been squeezed by recent trends towards women's increased labour force participation and international migration. Moreover, women's increasing absence from the household is accompanied by trends towards nuclearisation of family structures, smaller household sizes, and a growing proportion of elderly people in the population. All of these factors are likely to mean greater demand for women's care work, whereas such time is already squeezed.

In an unprecedented move, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics undertook a time use pilot survey for the first time in 2012. However, before detailing the findings of their draft report, this review will look at earlier time use studies as these help to situate understandings of not only how women use their time and the nature of unpaid care work, but also the socio-cultural context that has shaped and continues to influence women's work to a large extent.

Any discourse on women's work in Bangladesh is inevitably linked with patriarchy and more often than not, *purdah*, or the customary practice of female seclusion. Mead Cain, a demographer working with time use data in Bangladesh in the 1970s, placed patriarchy and *purdah* at the centre of his analysis of the data he collected between 1976–1978 in a single village, to analyse household and kinship structures, patriarchy and women's work, fertility, son preference, economic activities of children, dependence, mobility and mortality among the elderly, etc. Although subsequently subjected to critique (see Alam and Matin 1984) and despite his pessimism about the unchanging plight of women in the grip of patriarchy and *purdah*, his work remains relevant for understanding the nature of unpaid care work in Bangladesh. It revealed patterns of time use similar to later findings, and raised issues that remain important in analysing women's unpaid care work, particularly in relation to their participation in paid work.

Cain incorporated unpaid care work within what he called 'home production',<sup>8</sup> distinguishing between labour necessary for the maintenance and upkeep of the household, which is directly not productive in the sense of generating income or contributing to physical capital formation and labour necessary for generating income and capital (Cain 1977). The former was seen as 'enabling' in so far as it freed other members of the household to engage directly in 'productive' activities. Women almost exclusively contributed to 'enabling' labour, which he described elaborately to indicate the time-consuming nature of such work.

This sexual division of labour was seen as engendered by *purdah* and patriarchy, based on men's control of property, income and women's labour. It works to limit women's work to inside or near the homestead and men's to work outside the home:

Purdah is a complex institution that entails much more than restrictions on women's physical mobility and dress. It denies women access to many opportunities and aspects of everyday life and at the same time confers upon them social status as a protected group. (Cain 1977: 408).

At six years boys and girls gather firewood, collect water and take care of younger siblings, but the process of socialisation towards consolidating sexual division of labour also begins at this age. By six to seven years, girls are active in sweeping, washing dishes, tending

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<sup>8</sup> These include collecting firewood, housework, shopping, rice processing, food preparation, child care and care of others.

chickens and picking chillies, graduating to rice processing and food preparation by age nine to ten. Boys start tending cattle and fishing by eight to nine years, and agricultural work by the time they are eleven. These early experiences engender from a very young age the norms regarding appropriate work roles and responsibilities of males and females.

This division of labour between young boys and girls persists almost 40 years on, although the amounts of time invested in these activities have possibly changed due to increased schooling. However, a recent study based on a national survey of adolescents which includes time use variables found that while girls and boys both spend more time in school than in the past, girls spend less time studying at home than boys and are significantly more likely to work, mostly on domestic chores, than boys (Amin and Chandrasekhar 2009). Moreover, their workload increases in households where there is a child under five years, and is reduced where there is an older (65+ years) household member who shares some of the workload. Children's time use is closely associated with markets for both adult and child labour, with the relationship between daughters' time-use and their mothers' labour force participation particularly close (Ilahi 2000: 34). Thus while economic incentives may draw women into the labour market, children may be drawn into household work to substitute for their mothers.<sup>9</sup>

Cain's work was particularly important for illustrating the life cycle variations in women's unpaid care work. Age stratification enables patriarchal control by older women of younger women.<sup>10</sup> He found that total work time for daughters-in-law is greater than for wives of household heads and almost double that of their mothers (Cain *et al* 1979). However, this advantage of performing the least amount of unpaid care work is forfeited in the case of widows, who are not integrated into their son's household or who are female heads, in which case their total time spent on work is greater than that of other mothers. In general, elderly women carry out similar activities to their younger counterparts, but spend less time on them, with childcare one of their main activities (Cain 1991).

Average hours of work per day were nearly the same for males (8.33 hours) and females (8.29 hours) throughout the year. Women allocated 81 per cent of their labour time (6.68 hours) to 'home production', most of which, with the exception of collecting firewood, was within the homestead. Among income earning activities, handicrafts, hut construction, animal care and crop production also take place within the homestead, and only wage work (mostly at employer's house and including general housework, rice processing, sewing quilts and other food processing) and other income earning work took place outside the home. Almost all of men's home production time was accounted for by shopping for consumer goods, as women did not go to the market because of *pardah*. Across classes, men allocate little time to childcare, food preparation, firewood collection, rice processing or other types of housework. Male labour did not substitute for female home production labour regardless of how much income earning work women were doing; in other words, there was no evidence that men did more care work to ease women's workloads, even when those women were earning.

Cain specifically focused on childrearing and work and found it difficult to assess the extent to which childcare represents a constraint to women's market work independent of the general system of patriarchy. At that time, childcare had little impact on rich women's labour time as they did not participate in market work that took them outside the home. However, some evidence suggested richer women worked longer hours, mainly due to increased childcare and other home production time. Among poor women, those without children spent

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<sup>9</sup> This study refers to a study in India (Skoufias 1993) where it was found that increase in women's wages reduces time spent by boys and girls in school, but significantly only for girls.

<sup>10</sup> This relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are, however, changing with increased education and younger women's paid work, so this finding is likely to be different with more recent time use data (Kabeer 2012 [www.opendemocracy.net/5050/naila-kabeer/decline-in-missing-women-in-bangladesh](http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/naila-kabeer/decline-in-missing-women-in-bangladesh)).

on average twice as many hours on income earning activities than poor women with young children. In other words, the trade-off between childcare time and income earning time is most pronounced among the poor. As with richer women, childcare time, other home production time and total work time are greater for poor women with infants than for those without.

Cain concluded that it does not follow that demands of childcare are a major influence on women's engagement with market work. He concluded that 'the degree of labour market segregation is not simply a neutral accommodation of women's childbearing role. Rather, market segregation is both a consequence and a means for perpetuating the system of patriarchy' (Cain *et al* 1979: 428). The systemic nature of patriarchy was a major obstacle to finding solutions to women's vulnerability and lack of income earning opportunities, so that policies to increase women's economic autonomy or protect their rights would face resistance from women as well as men if they violated norms of *pardah*.

The increasing levels of women's participation in the labour market despite the centrality of *pardah* posed in Cain's work (and others; Amin 1994) has led some to believe that *pardah* is weakening although there is a dearth of evidence to support this claim (Mahmud 1997). Rather, an explanation may be found in terms of women making a choice not between *pardah* and income earning, but as a household strategy striving to seek a balance between women's household production responsibilities and the urgent need to earn an income for their family (*ibid.* p. 239). Patriarchal norms manifest in the prescribed gender roles however limits investments in building women's skills that have market value and thereby negatively influence their participation in the labour force. Policies therefore need to address women's increased labour force participation in a way 'that is favourable both to women's efficient time allocation and their general well-being' (*ibid.* p. 259).

Turning now to the most recent time use data available, the review looks at the time use pilot survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in 2012. Although the draft report (BBS 2013b) does not mention what prompted this decision, BBS officials noted advocacy from women's rights groups for some time to do this. Time use surveys are both time-intensive and costly, so the decision to conduct the pilot was at least partly donor-driven. The mandate of the time use survey is set out in the report to include drawing out productive activities that are not currently measured in statistics in order to expand the existing coverage of national income and product accounts, to reveal the inter-relationships between peoples' paid and unpaid work as well as the capacity of the people to continue providing unpaid labour in the future. Details of various activities are covered in the survey other than those discussed below. The activities include 'providing community services and help to other households', which falls within our definition of unpaid care work. However, the survey found that no time was spent on this activity. The following tables are adapted from the draft survey report (*ibid.*).

Nationally, women spent well over three times more hours than men on unpaid domestic services, with employed women still spending twice as much time on this as men but the same amount of time providing care as women not in paid work; rural and urban women also spend around the same amount of time on care (see Table 3.1). That is, time spent on unpaid care provisions remains constant for women regardless of their employment status and location.

**Table 3.1: Average number of hours spent on ‘unpaid domestic services’ and ‘unpaid care giving services’ by sex and by national population and employed population**

	Male	Female
Unpaid domestic services for own final use <sup>11</sup>		
15+ year population (national)	1.3	4.8
15+ year employed population	1.3	2.8
Unpaid care giving services to household members <sup>12</sup>		
15+ year population (national)	0.1	0.7
15+ year employed population	0.1	0.7

Source: BBS (2012).

It is only when employed women are disaggregated by employment status that some differences are seen in the average time spent in providing unpaid care (see Table 3.2). Pronounced differences are only found in the case of women engaged in non-agricultural daily wage labour (0.3 hours) and women who are employers (0.0 hours), who have less time to spare or can afford to pay for care services. Men consistently spend negligible time on unpaid care to household members (0.0-0.1 hours) except for men who are regular salaried staff, who spend 0.3 hours on it.

However, there are wide differences between the average time men and women spend on ‘unpaid domestic services’ among the employed population (see Table 3.2). The data show that men and women who are self-employed in agriculture, unpaid family workers or agricultural day labourers spend more time on ‘unpaid domestic services’ than members of their own sex employed in other categories. This most likely reflects the fact that they most probably represent the poorer sections of the population who cannot afford paid care services; in these situations it seems likely that men do share domestic responsibilities.

**Table 3.2: Average time spent on ‘unpaid domestic services’ by sex and employment status**

	Male	Female
Regular salaried staff	0.9	1.6
Employer	0.8	2.2
Self-employed (agriculture)	2.0	3.7
Self-employed (non-agriculture)	0.9	2.9
Unpaid family worker	1.3	3.3
Irregular paid labour	0.7	1.8
Day labour (agriculture)	1.8	3.0
Day labour (non-agriculture)	0.9	2.2

Source: BBS (2012).

More variation in time use is found among women in different employment status than men, with women who are regular salaried staff and who are irregularly paid workers spending the least amount of time. While obvious links may be drawn between the small amounts of time spent on domestic services with the demands of time on a woman engaged as a regular

<sup>11</sup> This is considered work in relation to the general production boundary (household) but not in relation to SNA production boundary and includes cooking, cleaning, sweeping, etc. (BBS 2013b).

<sup>12</sup> It includes all activities in relation to unpaid services for the care of children and adults, as well as sick and disabled members of the household.



salaried employee, explaining why women in irregular paid work do less unpaid domestic services requires deeper analysis.

**Table 3.3: Average time spent on paid work, household work, leisure and other work by sex and location**

	All (employed and not employed) 15+ year population		15+ year employed population	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Rural				
Paid Work <sup>13</sup>	5.8	1.5	6.4	5.0
Household Work <sup>14</sup>	1.5	5.6	1.5	3.5
Leisure	1.2	1.1	1.2	0.8
Urban				
Paid Work	6.4	2.0	7.3	6.0
Household Work	1.0	5.0	1.0	2.9
Leisure	1.9	1.9	1.8	1.5

Source: BBS (2012).

The distribution of average hours spent in paid work, household work and leisure as shown in Table 3.3 reveal that while rural women among the employed 15+ population spend 3.5 hours more in paid work than the 15+ population, they spend only 2.1 hours less in household work and also have less leisure time. This pattern is the same but more pronounced among urban women. This reveals the increased work burden on women who are employed. Furthermore women who are employed spent more time on work (paid + household) than men. What the table also reveals is that rural men are more likely to share in household work than urban men.

The survey data also reveals that among the 15+ population, time invested in household work peaks for women in the age group of 30–59 years (6.0 hours), with women in 15–29 years age group (5.4 hours) and 60+ years (3.5 hours), investing comparatively less time. The pattern is similar among the female employed population, but with fewer hours spent on household work. Even married women were found to spend more time (2.4 – 3.5 hours) on unpaid domestic services than unmarried women (1.5 hours), currently married (0.5 hours) and separated women (0.7 hours), all of whom spent more time on unpaid caregiving services than unmarried, widowed or divorced women (0.2 hours). The survey also revealed regional variations: most time was invested in Sylhet and Rangpur (6.0 hours) and least in Rajshahi (4.9). It was only in Rajshahi, however, that women were found to spend substantively more average time on paid work (2.1 hours).

Finally data on average hours spent in terms of the activities that are covered in the national accounts (SNA) and those spent in extended SNA which include domestic service and unpaid caregiving service are shown above. The data shows that if the coverage under SNA is indeed extended, women's contribution to the economy will increase (as will the GDP of Bangladesh).

<sup>13</sup> Paid work includes work in formal sector, work for household in primary production activities, work for household in non-primary production activities, work for household in construction activities and work for household providing service for income (BBS 2013b).

<sup>14</sup> This includes unpaid domestic and caregiving services.

**Table 3.4: Average hours worked by 15+ years population and employed population by status of SNA and extended SNA by sex**

	Male	Female
15+ year population (national)		
SNA	6.73	2.19
Extended SNA	1.31	4.80
15+ year employed population		
SNA	7.0	5.6
Extended SNA	1.3	2.8

**3.3 Studies reflecting on perceptions and negotiations around unpaid care work**

Recent qualitative studies have looked at perceptions and negotiations around unpaid care work. From these studies it is evident that household work or unpaid care work is generally perceived as the responsibility of women, even while women are engaging more in paid work. A study of community health workers, largely women, found the general perception to be that:

The women have to manage both the outside and inside work. They may need to keep domestic help for the household work; those who cannot afford this have more work to do. They have to do the household work at night and outside work during the day. (Mahmud and Sultan 2011: 13).

However, there also seems to be a perception that the situation is changing. Men are sharing more of the household responsibilities, or a normative perception that they should do so has grown (Efroymsen *et al* 2007; Mahmud and Sultan 2011; Mahmud *et al* 2012). Poorer families are anyway more likely to support sharing of household work as paying for care work is not an option (Mahmud and Sultan 2011). Men’s contribution is mostly to childcare, which is not considered as demeaning for a man to do than other types of housework. Men also sometimes undertake some household activities when their wives are ill. Social perceptions around gender roles can inhibit men from helping:

Though it’s a natural rule for everyone to help each other, but sometimes it becomes difficult to do so because of the environment. If I try to help my wife other people will say that I am not a good man (husband of a government health worker who does not help with household work, quoted in Mahmud and Sultan 2011: 13).

Given this perception, ‘gender equality’ – a notion now quite common among the general population – is rendered meaningless. One woman reflecting on the implication of gender equality in terms of domestic division of labour said:

Nowadays boys and girls have equal rights. But no matter how much right one has, girls always have somewhat less than boys. Suppose ... both husband and wife work. The boy will come back home and rest. But the girl will never be able to come back home and not do anything. She will come and quickly see to what her husband wants to eat, what her children will eat. If she has parents-in-law, then she will prepare their meals and serve them food. She will not be able to come home and rest (Huq *et al* 2013: 36).

This double burden is a cause of discontentment for women and a cause for stress in family relations (Mahmud and Sultan 2011). Redistribution of unpaid care work thus emerges as a major issue of concern.

A report (Kabeer *et al* 2013) on findings from a women's work survey in Bangladesh pointed to the fact that women working in the informal sector perform a greater number of domestic tasks than women in formal employment or women who are economically inactive. While an explanation may be found in the latter's ability to hire paid care workers, it may also be explained by the fact that they reported being able to rely on their older daughters for help, which women in informal employment were least likely to report. The study also found that women working outside the home were also most likely to feel being under constant pressure not only because of the harassment they faced in the public domain but also because of their constant attempt to reconcile their paid work and household responsibilities.

This problem of reconciling paid and unpaid work was addressed in another study which explored whether the non-governmental organisation BRAC's Women's Health and Development Programme (WHDP) overburdened its women participants (Afsana *et al* 1998). Women included in WHDP were characteristically poor women who were involved in more than one activity under the programme. Most of the women were seasonal daily labourers who also spent time on home-based income generating activities. Their involvement in the programme was without remuneration.

The study found that women on average spent 15 hours a day on different types of activities. On average women spent less than two hours a day on childcare, but women with small children spent as much as five hours. On the days of programme meetings, women had to wake up earlier than their usual 5am and hastily complete their household work. If unable to do so, women would shift their responsibilities to their older daughters or mothers-in-law, which created family tension and conflict. Most women would not attend meetings if it caused inconvenience to the family, for example leaving behind a sick child or affecting their income earning work. With their triple burden (unpaid care work, programme activity and paid work), women, particularly those belonging to large nuclear families with small children, undertook hours of household work and childcare, income generating work, curtailed their free time to perform programme activities, and were fatigued and exhausted by the end of the day. They would also have to take their children to the meetings if they were unable to leave them with neighbours. Women belonging to joint families faced less stress as they had support with both childcare and household work. Curtailing their 'free time' had financial repercussions since women typically used this time for subsistence production and income generating activities which were essential for maintaining the nutrition level of the household and for bringing in extra income (Afsana *et al* 1998).

This brings to the fore the question of how much more can be squeezed out of women's time unless unpaid care work can be reduced or redistributed. Space for negotiations around unpaid care work may emerge from the competing value attached to women's care work and their income, if its importance for the well-being of the household is recognised. However, how it is reorganised may have implications for care recipients like older women and girls, who are more likely to fill the void than men, unless perceptions around gender roles change.

Studies on women's work in Bangladesh as elsewhere have focused on the strong association between paid work and empowerment. In fact women's employment in the formal sector has been found to be most consistently associated with various empowerment indicators (Kabeer *et al* 2013). Informal sector work, in which most women are engaged in has also been associated with empowerment but to a lesser extent. Furthermore various studies including those cited above have shown that the value families give to women's work is tied to its paid status as well as social visibility. Unpaid care work being neither paid nor visible is generally not valued. Some have suggested that violence towards women at the

household level may have to do partly with deemed worthlessness of women's unpaid care work (Efroymson *et al* 2007). However, research also needs to be done on whether women's paid work and the consequent 'care crisis' also exposes women to violence.

Women are quite aware of the crisis of care they themselves may have to face in their old age. With preferences for smaller families, the tendency for nuclearisation of households, migration out of sons and their families for work, distance from their daughters, greater authority of educated daughters-in-law who may be reluctant to provide the kind of care that they earlier provided to their in-laws, women worry about who is going to take care of them when they can no longer fend for themselves (Huq *et al* 2013). They feel that unless they can offer money (or the prospect of inheriting money or assets), no sons or daughters-in-law will take care of them.

One study suggested that providing support to the elderly is still strong in Bangladesh and the type of support they receive depends on the gender of the recipient as well as the provider (Kabir *et al* 2002). Propensity to receive support was stronger among the rural elderly compared to their urban counterparts. Spouses are a great source of support. However, elderly men were much more likely to be married (and therefore able to receive support from their wives), than women who were mostly widowed. Most live with their children or in the same compound as their children. The elderly were found to receive material support<sup>15</sup> mainly from sons and practical<sup>16</sup> and emotional support from wives, daughters and daughters-in-law. A higher proportion of men were among those who do not get material support, which is partly a reflection of their gainful employment and asset ownership, as well as the cultural expectation that men fend for themselves financially, while women are not expected to do so. Among those who do receive material support, men were most likely to say that they received cash, but women were not. While shelter is considered to be a basic need of elderly women, having cash in hand is not. In terms of emotional support, the study found that the lack of spousal support was not compensated by support from children or others among the urban elderly as much as they were among the rural elderly. These attest to the greater vulnerability of elderly women than men and the even more vulnerable status of elderly women in urban areas.

The study also demonstrated the high level of contribution of the elderly to all types of household tasks. Elderly women in rural areas were found to make a greater contribution to all types of household tasks than their urban counterparts. Elderly men in rural areas had greater contributions in terms of washing and drying clothes, looking after others, looking after the house in the absence of others, etc., than elderly urban men, while the latter contributed more in terms of cooking, cleaning, making beds, etc. than their rural counterparts. Apart from domestic chores, the elderly were found to play an important role in taking grandchildren to school, helping them with their studies, taking other household members to the doctor, paying bills, etc. The relationship between the elderly and the young is one of mutual support in Bangladesh and it has long been so. Without the support of one group, the other group is bound to suffer. The fact that practical support is mainly provided by women, their increased participation in the labour force will undoubtedly put households into a crisis of care in the absence of alternative arrangements.

There have been some interventions by NGOs aiming towards redistributing unpaid care work at the household level. A recent study of BRAC's 'Gender Quality Action Learning' (GQAL) programme shows that such interventions may have a positive but uneven effect (Mahmud *et al* 2012). In their most successful intervention areas, men were found to bring water for cooking, sweep and tidy, do laundry, help with cooking, house repairs and

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<sup>15</sup> Cash, shelter, clothing, food, medical expenses.

<sup>16</sup> Getting up from bed, dressing, undressing, moving outdoors, taking medicine and household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing, etc.

maintenance, and livestock care. Men in these areas also cook, particularly when their wife is away or ill. Men also take care of their children in terms of bathing and dressing children, taking them to school, taking their wife and children to the doctor when they are ill. In the less successful areas of the GQAL programme, men performed fewer of these tasks, mostly when wives were unable to, and they never took on the cooking. These findings were all in stark contrast to non-intervention areas, where focus group discussions with male and female community members revealed that not only was all household work done by women, women's work was unvalued by men. Participants claimed that in those areas, men would not do housework even if their wife was ill, and would prefer to bring in another woman from outside than do it themselves, or do it in ill temper. Women also noted that not only do men not do household work, they also forcibly take whatever money their wives earn through their income generating work.

Finally, the expectation that women are exclusively responsible for unpaid care work seems to be held even by Bangladeshi diasporas and is thus an issue that transcends national borders. A report commissioned by OXFAM UK's Poverty Programme explored the relationship between caring, earning and poverty and how it is affected by ethnicity (Robson 2012). The aim was to increase understanding and evidence of barriers to paid work, tailor services to their needs and to promote economic independence among black, Asian, minority and ethnic women in the north-east of UK. This report found that there were clear gender role expectations in these communities. But whereas African women received support from husbands for childcare, Bangladeshi and Pakistani women bore the entire responsibility of childcare, care of adults and housework. Lack of access to adequate or affordable childcare was identified as the main barrier to paid employment, education and training. While African families had networks with 'foster families' to support them with childcare, it was found that Bangladeshi women were far more isolated and could only rely on relatives or friends once in a while. It also found that for Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, caring for adults (usually in-laws) was their responsibility and for this they received neither support nor recognition despite undergoing considerable strain in doing so. Further there was an expectation that they would provide care for the family without any kind of external support.

## 4 Conclusion

In Bangladesh, the discourse around women's empowerment and rights and gender equality has largely been linked to women's engagement with paid work, with good reason. Given that strong patriarchal norms, socially entrenched gender roles and lack of economic opportunities collude to exclude women from participating in the workforce and confine them to household, women's economic participation is seen as a conduit to their empowerment. As a result unpaid care work has been more or less ignored or seen as an obstacle and not generally perceived to be a contribution to the economy. If it has been addressed at all in policy or in research, the issue of unpaid care work has mostly been raised as a background to or in relation to paid work.

This review reveals that the full extent of women's economic activity is only partially recognised in policy. Perceiving and including even women's unpaid labour (work in the family enterprise, expenditure-saving work, etc.) as an economic activity is an ongoing struggle. In terms of care work, paid care work has received some recognition with regard to international migration but not with regard to domestic labour policy. Unpaid care work is primarily unrecognised, except in a minimal way in relation to facilities that accommodate women's caregiving responsibilities so they can engage in paid work. That, too, is limited to women employed in the formal sector, excluding the vast majority of women in the informal sector. A few initiatives such as child care facilities, crèches and old age homes have the potential of redistributing unpaid care work. There is however very little, if any understanding

of the cross-cutting nature of unpaid care work with the issues that are of major concern to the government, for example, the various MDGs. Furthermore, while some policies do reflect the need to change the gendered division of labour within the household, patriarchal attitudes persist among the policymaking actors and institutions themselves.

Research plays a vital role in generating evidence to change the perception and understanding of policymakers regarding unpaid care work. The dearth of research on unpaid care work evident from this review provides a strong case for new research to be conducted on this issue. However, another approach to gathering information about unpaid care work could be to ask questions on the implications on unpaid care work when doing research on migration, health, demography, rights, children's work/child labour, elderly, social protection and a whole range of other issues which all have cross cutting concerns with unpaid care work. Researchers in diverse fields can then contribute to the discourse of unpaid care work while pursuing matters of their own interest. The trick is to ask the right questions. Recent research on the impact of food price volatility, for example, finds that rising prices mean that paid work becomes more essential for many women. The researchers note that those reacting to this news will be more likely to ask questions about women's empowerment and labour force participation, than to ask questions about unpaid care work.

It is less likely to raise questions about who does the unpaid care work that keeps families fed, clothed, clean, and generally looked after when they are young, old, or sick, because such activities are still largely invisible to development policy. However, care work draws on time, effort, resources, and relationships, usually of women, and rapid food price rises tend, on average, to increase the level of care work required to achieve the same level of human development and wellbeing (Hossain, King and Kelbert 2013: 9).

There is a need to train ourselves to see through the lens of unpaid care work. It is being able to recognise links with unpaid care work that can impel research to contribute to its acknowledgement and therefore to policy formulation.

Nevertheless, spaces have opened up in the policies for unpaid care work to be recognised and addressed. The government has been responsive to demands to produce sex-disaggregated data, which can provide the raw material needed to bolster arguments for bringing unpaid care work into the policy arena. Institutions such as the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics have been influenced to conduct a time use survey, which can enable the measurement of women's engagement in unpaid care work. Thus international discourses and reports have proved to be effective in creating the scope for the discourse of unpaid care work to emerge locally. Furthermore, the consultative processes with citizen groups, women's rights groups, NGOs, etc. by which the government has undertaken certain policy formulation or action plans for implementing policies, has played an important role as we have seen in the case of The National Action Plan 2012 for women's development.

The efforts to date have been piecemeal, but the changing social, economic and demographic context of Bangladesh is going to force a comprehensive policy on unpaid care work. This will require greater awareness of how unpaid care work cuts across developmental agendas. It will also require an understanding of child time-use, given that women's unpaid care responsibilities are often substituted by girls' time, which can have a lasting negative impact on gender equality and empowerment. Time use studies should be incorporated into household surveys to assess the importance of unpaid care work. Schemes should be tested to see whether they recognise, reduce or redistribute care work, and whether they increase or decrease the drudgery involved in women's unpaid care work. Policymakers should identify and support the needs of substitute caregivers. Furthermore, there has to be a change in patriarchal attitudes that dominate how women's work is perceived and valued both at the societal as well as the policy level.

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