"It's Like I'm Carrying the Whole Load Alone": Time Use, Support Networks, and the Burden of Reproductive Labour Among Young Mothers in Urban India

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Abstract

In urban India, young mothers face significant time poverty as they navigate paid work, household responsibilities, and childcare. This study uses time-use data from 193 women with children under five in Delhi-NCR to examine how support from husbands, kin, and community resources shapes the time women spend on reproductive labour. Multivariate linear regression shows that while the husband's involvement modestly reduces women's housework time, support from female relatives and community-based domestic workers has a significantly greater impact. Structural equation modelling further reveals that husband's participation indirectly influences women's employment by reducing their domestic workload, highlighting the mediating role of time availability. However, even with spousal support, women continue to perform a larger share of unpaid work. Qualitative accounts reinforce these findings, with many employed mothers reporting emotional and physical burnout due to insufficient household support. The results underscore the need for multi-level interventions that go beyond individual households to include kin-based networks and accessible community support. By highlighting these inequalities in time use, the study advocates for policy shifts that recognise and redistribute reproductive labour to enable women's fuller participation in the labour market.

1. Introduction

The unequal division of unpaid domestic and care work is a persistent barrier to gender equality and women's full participation in economic and social life. Across the world, women continue to spend significantly more time on unpaid reproductive labour than men. This imbalance has been documented in over 90 countries and is particularly stark in the Global South, where traditional gender norms and weak care infrastructure leave women with little support to redistribute domestic responsibilities (Ferrant et al., 2014; Charmes, 2015). In India, recent time-use surveys show that women spend over 300 minutes per day on unpaid domestic and care work, compared to just 50–60 minutes for men (MoSPI, 2019). This gendered disparity is amplified for mothers with young children, who face greater time constraints during the early years of caregiving.

Unpaid reproductive labour, while essential for the functioning of households and economies, has historically been excluded from economic valuation and policy discourse (Folbre, 2006). Feminist scholars argue that the invisibility of care and domestic work perpetuates structural inequalities and constrains women's agency and autonomy (Fraser, 1994; Benería, 2008). In response, time-use research has emerged as a powerful tool to empirically document the distribution of unpaid labour and its consequences. The concept of "time poverty," in particular, has gained prominence as a way to measure individuals' deprivation of discretionary time due to overlapping responsibilities in paid and unpaid work (Antonopoulos & Hirway, 2010; Budlender, 2010).

Within this literature, the role of support systems has received increasing but still limited attention. Most research tends to focus on women's burden of care, often treating the household as a closed unit rather than a node within broader kin and community networks. In patriarchal

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societies like India, where women's roles are often circumscribed by marriage and motherhood, support from husbands, mothers-in-law, and extended female kin can critically shape how time is allocated to domestic responsibilities (Desai & Jain, 1994; Ramu, 1989). However, empirical studies show that even in urban, dual-earner households, husbands' participation in housework remains limited, and when present, often takes on a "helper" role rather than a shared one (Chopra & Zambelli, 2017).

The lack of robust state-sponsored childcare in India has also made women's labour force participation highly contingent on the availability of informal support, including from domestic workers and relatives (Ghosh, 2009; Neetha, 2010). Yet, not all women have equal access to such support. Women in nuclear families or those living away from kin networks often shoulder the burden of care alone, leading to fatigue, reduced life satisfaction, and curtailed employment opportunities (Madgavkar et al., 2020).

The intersection of time use, care work, and gender inequality is further compounded by class. Middle- and upper-class women may outsource housework to domestic workers, but this dynamic reproduces hierarchies of gender, class, and caste, as poorer women take on undervalued care labour in exploitative conditions (Ray & Qayum, 2009). Meanwhile, lower-income women often have no choice but to work for pay while simultaneously managing a full load of unpaid work at home, resulting in acute time stress (Hirway, 2017).

Although spousal support is often viewed as a solution to gendered time burdens, its actual impact on redistributing labour within the home remains modest. Studies suggest that while husbands' involvement in care work can reduce women's domestic time burden, the effect is often marginal and highly variable across households (Sayer, 2005; Gupta, 1999). Moreover, occasional or symbolic help may not translate into real time savings unless the support is regular, high-intensity, and embedded in equitable gender norms.

2. Global Perspectives on Mothers' Time Use and Social Support

Globally, young mothers' time use is shaped by cultural norms, institutional structures, and available support networks. Despite regional variation, a persistent gendered division of unpaid labour reflects inequalities in the domestic sphere. Studies show mothers spend more time than fathers on housework and childcare, often under time pressure, multitasking, and emotional strain. In Australia, employed mothers face severe time poverty, balancing intensive care work with emotional exhaustion (Rose, 2017). Craig (2006) finds that mothering involves more multitasking, solitary care, and rigid schedules than fathering. Craig (2007) further highlights how the "second shift" remains a reality, with mothers bearing significantly more of the unpaid workload than fathers. Offer and Schneider (2011) show that maternal multitasking worsens emotional strain and work-family conflict, while fathers do not typically experience these pressures.

Multitasking represents a distinct form of gendered inequality, with mothers spending around ten more hours per week multitasking than fathers, mostly on domestic and childcare tasks, which creates an emotionally draining load (Offer & Schneider, 2011). Although men and women multitask at similar rates during domestic work, women spend more total hours doing so, and this imbalance persists even in higher-income households (Sullivan & Gershuny, 2013). Mothers of infants not only spend more time on childcare but also multitask more across daily activities (Irani & Vemireddy, 2020). The presence of young children intensifies these demands:

in dual-earner households with preschoolers, women's total workload exceeds men's by several hours weekly, particularly when multitasking is included (Sayer et al., 2009). Many mothers respond by shifting to part-time work or leaving the labour force to prioritize care (Bianchi, 2000), while non-employed mothers provide more primary and secondary care than those who are employed. This contrast is not observed among fathers (Zick & Bryant, 1996).

Economic factors also shape maternal time use. Mothers' caregiving time varies with the number and age of children and the cost of childcare (Kimmel & Connelly, 2007). As women's wages rise, they devote more time to caregiving while reducing leisure and domestic tasks. Among self-employed mothers in Spain, flexible work allows for less market work and more time for personal care and leisure (Gimenez-Nadal et al., 2011).

Marital status and household structure also matter: married mothers spend more time on housework and less on sleep than never-married or divorced mothers, though childcare time remains similar (Pepin et al., 2018). Never-married and cohabiting mothers enjoy more leisure than married ones, while a U.S. study found that on non-workdays, fathers had significantly more leisure time than mothers, even when mothers were busy with chores or childcare (Kamp Dush et al., 2018). When roles were reversed, mothers had far less leisure during fathers' caregiving or chore time. Despite similar time availability, mothers still provide more childcare than fathers (Chesley & Flood, 2017). Support systems help ease maternal time strain. In Italy, as women's paid work increases, fathers or other household members step in as caregivers (Pasqua & Mancini, 2011), a pattern also seen in Mexico (Marcos, 2023), India (Bhattacharya, 2023; Khanna & Pandey, 2023), China (Shen et al., 2016), Brazil, and Peru (Aragao & Villanueva, 2021). This redistribution can ease maternal constraints. Booth et al. (2002) challenge the prevailing belief that maternal employment significantly compromises mother-infant interaction, suggesting that the quality of interaction remains intact, even if time together is limited. Outsourcing domestic tasks has also emerged as a coping mechanism for time-constrained, higher-income families with children, yet it does not significantly reduce the overall domestic workload for either partner, leaving women's unpaid labour largely unchanged (Sullivan & Gershuny, 2013). Thus, economic resources do not necessarily alleviate women's unpaid labour burden.

Comparative studies underscore the impact of policy and cultural norms on the division of unpaid labour. Craig and Mullan (2011) find that mothers consistently perform more care work across Australia, Denmark, Italy, and France than fathers, regardless of household type or national context. Hook (2010) shows that countries with shorter work hours, generous parental leave, and public childcare achieve more equitable divisions of domestic labour. Despite gradual change, women continue to perform at least twice as much routine housework as men (Coltrane, 2000). Single mothers are particularly vulnerable to time poverty, juggling employment and domestic responsibilities with limited support (Harvey & Mukhopadhyay, 2007; Strazdins et al., 2011). Overall, the global evidence demonstrates that motherhood remains a key determinant of women's time use, with persistent inequalities shaped by entrenched gender norms and uneven institutional support.

3. Time-Use Patterns in India

Time-use studies in India highlight the stark gender inequality in household domestic and care responsibilities. The Indian Time Use Survey (2019) shows that women spend an average of

299 minutes per day on unpaid domestic work, compared to just 97 minutes for men, underscoring the cultural undervaluation of women's time and labour in the household. These disparities are most evident in women's daily routines, where they carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid reproductive labour. National data also reveal that mothers perform nearly eight times more daily childcare than fathers (Thakur & Reimeingam, 2022), reinforcing the deeply gendered division of care work.

Family structure plays a pivotal role in shaping time-use patterns. Women in nuclear households bear a greater burden of unpaid work compared to those in multigenerational families, where the presence of other adult women, particularly mothers-in-law, can help redistribute domestic responsibilities (Ali et al., 2024). Bhattacharya (2023) finds that daughters-in-law in such households report more time for leisure and childcare, suggesting that senior female kin may offer some relief. However, this redistribution is often unequal; daughters-in-law still perform significantly more domestic labour than mothers-in-law, reflecting persistent hierarchies and power imbalances (Hasnain & Srivastava, 2018). Moreover, daughters-in-law also spend more time on housework than unmarried daughters, with marriage often marking a retreat from paid work and public engagement (Singh et al., 2023; Gupta & Negi, 2021). Ali et al. (2024) contrast this with the more supportive role of natal families, where parents are more likely to help ease women's unpaid care responsibilities. These transitions underscore a sharp divide between the reproductive roles expected of wives and the relative autonomy of unmarried women. Support beyond the immediate nuclear family also matters: Alcaraz et al. (2020) show that adolescents with a non-resident parent spend more time with siblings, highlighting how non-parental kin can play key caregiving roles in contexts of parental absence. This dynamic is increasingly becoming relevant in India's shifting familial landscape.

These internal household dynamics are further stratified by class and caste. In upper-class households, daughters-in-law are held to stricter norms of domesticity and obedience, resulting in heavier workloads (Srivastava, 2020). Among marginalised caste groups and poorer households, women often take on more unpaid labour due to limited access to outsourcing and formal employment opportunities (Rajeev & Sinha, 2023). This unpaid work also restricts access to social networks that facilitate labour market entry, compounding exclusion (Antonopoulos & Hirway, 2010). Urban women face higher employment declines post-childbirth than rural women, possibly due to heightened time pressures, intensive (*good)* mothering norms, or weaker kin-based support (Gautham, 2022). Extended family structures may offer some task-sharing in rural areas, though often unevenly. In these contexts, reproductive labour becomes both a necessity and a constraint, limiting time for employment, education, leisure, and self-care.

Technology and material conditions also influence women's time use. Access to time-saving household appliances is linked to increased employment among married women, enabling transitions into more productive and better-paid jobs outside the home (Bhargava & Kerr, 2022). Though often seen as mere conveniences, such appliances carry important sociological weight by reducing women's reliance on unpaid family labour or paid domestic help. Despite these shifts, male participation in unpaid care remains minimal. When men do engage in reproductive labour, their involvement is typically sporadic and symbolic rather than consistent or substantial.

Our study contributes to this body of literature by empirically examining how different forms and intensities of support – from husbands, kin, and the community – shape the time young

mothers in urban India spend on reproductive labour. By combining time-use data with structural equation modelling, the paper not only quantifies these relationships but also explores how household dynamics and social networks mediate women's employment opportunities. It responds to a growing call within time-use research to move beyond individual-level analysis and incorporate social context, kinship structures, and care infrastructure into our understanding of gendered time inequalities (Craig & Mullan, 2011; Elson, 2017). The study is guided by the hypothesis that higher levels of support, from either co-resident family members or external kin and community, are associated with reduced time spent by mothers on unpaid domestic and care work. The study first presents a descriptive profile of how time is spent across key activity domains and then moves into assessing how different forms and sources of support may alter these patterns. This approach offers insight into not only *whether* support matters but also *which* kinds of support make the most difference in alleviating women's time constraints.

4. Data and Methodology

4.1 Study Area: Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR)

This study focuses on Delhi and the surrounding National Capital Region (NCR). Due to the close economic and social ties between Delhi and its neighbouring cities, the study includes the NCR along with Delhi as the study area. The NCR, as defined in the 2013 boundaries used by the Center for the Advanced Study of India (CASI), comprises the entire National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi as well as the urban populations of 18 adjoining districts from Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan, including cities such as Gurugram, Noida, Ghaziabad, and Faridabad (Chakravorty & Sircar, 2021). Though it is a rural-urban continuum, this study, like CASI, restricts its focus to urban areas as defined by the 2011 Census. The original purpose of developing NCR was to create a metropolitan cluster to relieve the demographic and infrastructural burden on Delhi and ensure balanced, planned development across the region. The residents of the NCR frequently commute to Delhi and share socio-economic characteristics, lifestyles, and access to services similar to those within the city. Thus, including NCR in the sampling frame allows for a more accurate and representative understanding of urban women's experiences in the capital region while maintaining the focus on urban realities.

Furthermore, Delhi-NCR offers a compelling urban context for the study of women's reproductive labour. Despite being a relatively well-developed region with high literacy, access to digital infrastructure, and diverse employment opportunities, the urban female labour force participation rate remains significantly lower than the national average for women. While recent years have seen a gradual increase in FLFPR, the gap between urban and total female employment remains persistent. This paradox of urban advantage coexisting with restricted female employment makes Delhi-NCR an ideal case to explore how unpaid work, particularly the dual burden of housework and childcare, constrains young mothers' workforce participation and life satisfaction.

4.2 Sample Design and Framework

A mixed-method approach (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003) was followed, and both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from young mothers in Delhi aged 25-35 with at least one

child aged 5 or below. Before the main survey, a qualitative and quantitative instrument pretest was conducted. The results from the pretest were used to develop quantitative and qualitative instruments further to explore the research problem in the study area.

Sampling

This study focuses on young mothers in the National Capital Region (NCR) aged 25-35 years. According to NFHS-5 (2019-21)(IIPS & ICF, 2021), the proportion of employed women aged 25-35 years with at least one living child aged 5 or below is 15.24%. This proportion is used to calculate the sample size for the study. Using Cochran's formula (1977),

$$n = \frac{\left(z^2_{1-\frac{\propto}{2}}\right) * \ p \ * \ (1-p)}{d^2}$$

Here, n = sample size

p = proportion of employed women aged 25-35 in Delhi with at least one living child aged 5 or below (15.24%)

d = level of error allowed in the study

At 5% level of significance, $z_{1-\frac{\propto}{2}}$ = 1.96. Allowing a 5% error in our study, the calculated sample size for our study is 199. However, after accounting for incomplete responses and interrupted interviews, the final effective sample consisted of 193 women. While Cochran's formula is traditionally used for estimating population proportions, in this study, it served as a methodological foundation to ensure that the sample size was sufficiently large and statistically robust for analysis rather than for prevalence estimation.

Sampling Framework

A two-stage random sampling design was used to ensure representativeness while focusing on middle-class urban households settings where both caregiving and paid employment frequently intersect.

Stage 1: Selection of Housing Societies

Sampling began with the construction of a district-level sampling frame using the *National Cooperative Database* maintained by the Ministry of Cooperation, Government of India. This database lists registered cooperative housing societies. Three housing societies were randomly selected from each district: nine districts of Delhi (as per the 2011 administrative division) and four districts of NCR (Ghaziabad, Noida, Faridabad, Gurugram). Where permission was denied by a Residents' Welfare Association (RWA), the society was replaced with another randomly selected one from the same district.

Stage 2: Selection of Households

After gaining access to each selected housing society, RWAs were requested to provide a list of households with at least one mother aged 25–35 and at least one child aged 5 or below. This list served as the sampling frame for the second stage. From each list, five households were selected randomly for interviews. Due to high non-response rates, eight households were initially selected to ensure that at least five interviews were successfully conducted per society. The two-stage random sampling strategy was chosen over purposive sampling to minimize selection bias and enhance the representativeness of findings. The first stage ensured spatial and socio-economic diversity across districts, while the second stage allowed for randomness at the household level. Although access constraints required occasional substitution of housing societies, the systematic approach at both stages preserved the integrity of the sampling design.

The sample's composition reflects real-world heterogeneity in employment within this population and offers the analytical advantage of allowing subgroup comparison. While an ideal stratified sampling design would require separate sample sizes for employed and non-employed women, the resource-intensive nature of data collection made this infeasible. Nonetheless, having a near-balanced representation across employment categories enables robust comparative analysis even within a modest total sample.

4.3 Data Collection

The procedure used to gather data from survey respondents (young mothers) was a face-to-face interview conducted with the help of a questionnaire. The questionnaire included questions on the respondent's socio-demographic characteristics, natal family background, division of labour in the parental household, pregnancy and childbirth, current work status, workplace characteristics (for employed mothers), homemaker characteristics (for stay-at-home mothers), time use, household work and support systems, expectations, emotional support, marital attributes, and subjective life satisfaction. Data collection was conducted over a period of six months, from June to November 2023, across thirteen districts of Delhi-NCR, including all nine districts of Delhi and four districts of NCR – Ghaziabad, Gurugram, Faridabad, and Noida.

To complement the quantitative insights generated through survey data, thirty in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with a sub-sample of women drawn from the larger respondent pool. These interviews were designed to delve deeper into women's subjective experiences, especially in relation to their caregiving responsibilities and decisions around paid work. While the survey provided patterns and correlations, the IDIs allowed for an exploration of meaning-making, context, and nuance, capturing the "why" and "how" behind the "what". The selection of these thirty women was purposive but grounded in variation. Participants were chosen to reflect diversity across key dimensions such as employment status (employed and non-employed), household type (nuclear or joint), presence or absence of domestic help, and levels of spousal or familial support in housework and childcare. Care was taken to ensure that voices from different districts and housing societies were represented.

4.4. Methods

Time-use research relies heavily on the methods employed to collect data, as these shape both the quality and depth of insights that can be derived. Broadly, time-use data is collected using

three primary methods: time diaries, 24-hour recall, and stylised survey questions. Among these, the time diary method is considered the gold standard globally, as it allows for a sequential, near real-time recording of all activities over a 24-hour period, usually in short intervals (Juster & Stafford, 1990). This method offers granular insights into time use patterns, making it especially valuable in analysing gendered patterns of unpaid labour. However, the time diary method poses significant challenges in the Indian context, especially when administered in low-income or low-literacy settings. Hirway (1999) and Samantroy (2022a, 2022b) note that the method is often time-consuming, burdensome for respondents, and difficult to execute with high accuracy due to recall issues and cultural taboos surrounding certain types of labour, particularly for women. In India, women often mix paid, unpaid, and care work in their daily routines, so asking them to separate these tasks by time can lead to unreliable data or respondent fatigue.

The 2019 Indian Time Use Survey (TUS), a landmark national exercise, employed a 24-hour recall method where respondents reported their main and secondary activities over each half-hour slot of the day. Following the International Classification of Activities for Time-Use Statistics (ICATUS), these were post-coded into a detailed list of paid and unpaid activities. The TUS followed a personal interview method and captured time allocation from 4:00 A.M. on the day before the interview to 4:00 A.M. on the day of the interview. While the TUS offers valuable national-level insights, it presents two key limitations for this study. First, the lack of unit-level data prevents analysis of mothers' time use specifically or how specific household members shape it. Second, pretesting revealed that replicating the TUS format caused significant fatigue among young mothers, leading to irritation and dropout. The method proved too lengthy and demanding to be practically viable within our broader survey design.

Several researchers have attempted to adapt time-use instruments for low-literacy or high-burden contexts. For example, Field et al. (2023) piloted a "hybrid" method in Madhya Pradesh that used fewer activity categories and broader time intervals. This approach reduced survey duration by 33%, was easier for both respondents and enumerators to manage, and in some cases, yielded results more closely aligned with gold-standard diary data. Inspired by such innovations, we turned to the Consumer Pyramids Household Survey (CPHS) by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), which captures time use in a more aggregated and respondent-friendly format. The CPHS groups activities under broad categories like work for employer, family work, volunteering, leisure (including both indoor and outdoor activities), learning, travel, and religious involvement. This method provides a fairly detailed yet manageable snapshot of how individuals allocate their time and, importantly, distinguishes between paid and unpaid labour.

Following this approach and in line with our research objective, which is to assess how time-use patterns and kin/community support affect young mothers' time spent on reproductive labour, we asked them to estimate the average number of minutes they spent on various activities per day. These activities included housework, paid work or employment, childcare, travelling, learning, religious activities, outdoor activities, indoor entertainment, time for self, and sleep. This simplified recall method yielded better response rates and lower respondent fatigue, while still enabling a nuanced understanding of time-use allocation.

The study proceeds to analyse these time-use patterns to assess how spousal and community involvement in housework and childcare impact women's time availability and employment status. First, bivariate analysis was conducted to show the distribution of unpaid work among

young mothers. Margin plots were then used to visualise predicted changes in housework time in response to husbands' involvement in domestic tasks. To further explore these associations, we employed a multivariate linear regression model where the dependent variable was young mothers' time spent on housework. Independent variables included the husband's involvement in housework, support from female relatives, and access to community childcare services. The model controlled for key sociodemographic factors such as the respondent's age, number of children, type of family, and type of marriage.

Finally, we used a Structural Equation Model (SEM) to assess whether husbands' participation in housework and childcare indirectly influenced women's employment status. The SEM model accounted for mediating variables like time spent on housework and included controls for family type, number of children, and other sociodemographic variables.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Time Use of Young Mothers: Delhi-NCR vs. India

Figure 1 presents the average time (in minutes) that stay-at-home and employed mothers spend on various unpaid activities in a day. Stay-at-home mothers spend significantly more time on housework (284 minutes) and childcare (288 minutes) than employed mothers, who spend 189 and 234 minutes on these tasks, respectively. The time available for self-care and leisure, such as indoor entertainment and personal time, is markedly lower for employed mothers, suggesting a trade-off between paid work and rest. These patterns underline the dual burden of employed mothers, who balance paid employment with substantial unpaid domestic responsibilities, often at the cost of their own rest and leisure.

Using data from the Indian TUS (2019), Figure 2 illustrates the average daily time Indian women spend on housework and childcare, disaggregated by employment status and family context. Stay-at-home women consistently spend more time on both housework and childcare across all groups. On average, they spend 345 minutes on housework and 148 minutes on childcare, while employed women spend 221 minutes and 95 minutes, respectively.

Figure 1: Time spent on unpaid work by stay-at-home and employed mothers (in minutes)

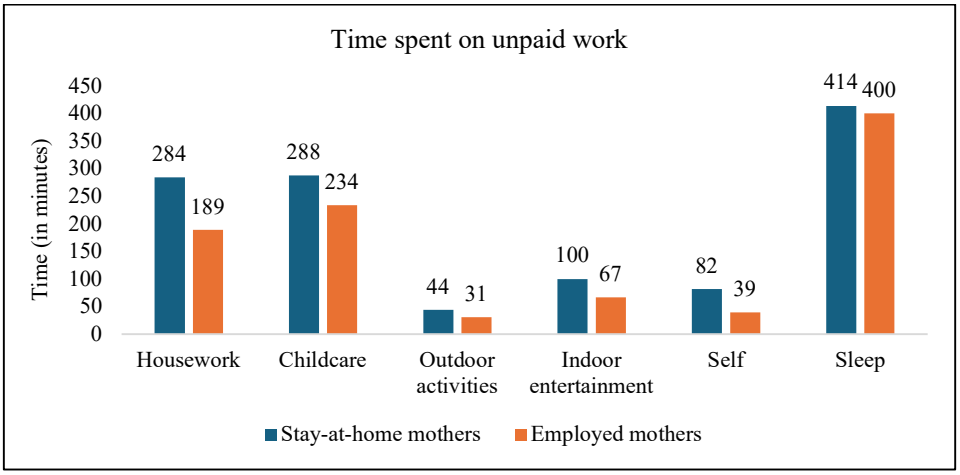
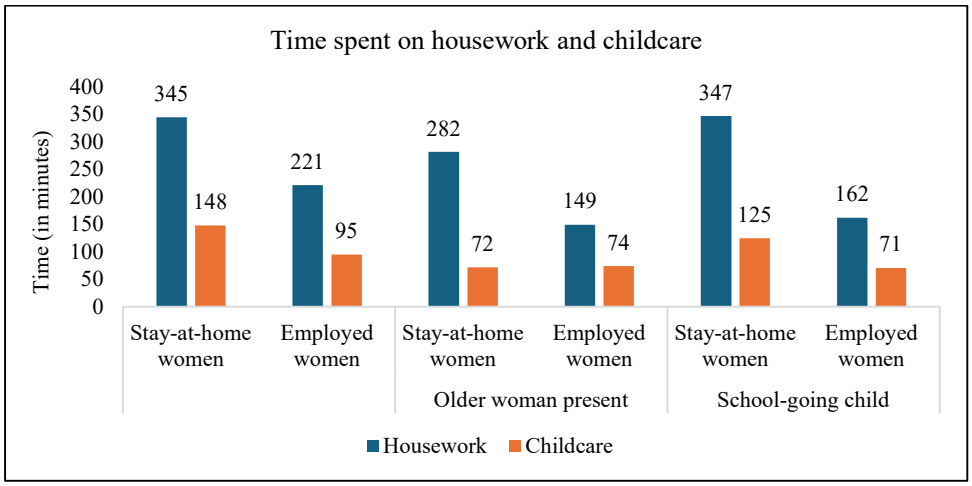


Figure 2: Time spent by Indian women on housework and childcare, disaggregated by employment status and family context.



Source: Time Use Survey (2019)

When an older woman is present in the household, both housework and childcare time reduce for employed women (149 minutes and 74 minutes, respectively), suggesting a supportive redistribution of tasks. However, while housework time decreases to 282 minutes for stay-at-home women, childcare time drops more sharply to 72 minutes, likely because older women help with direct care. Among women with a school-going child aged 6-14, housework remains high for stay-at-home women (347 minutes), while childcare time (125 minutes) is slightly reduced, possibly due to school hours. Employed women in this group spend the least time on childcare (71 minutes), indicating significant constraints in balancing paid work with caregiving.

A key convergence point between these surveys is the moderating role of family support. According to the national data, the presence of an older woman significantly reduces the time spent on both housework and childcare, especially for employed women. This aligns with our own findings, where women with kin support, particularly help with direct care tasks, tend to experience some relief in their time burden. International literature lends support to these observations. Liao and Paweenawat (2022), examining data from Thailand, find that the presence of young children increases the likelihood of intergenerational co-residence by over 30%, boosting female labour supply by 21% and extending women's working hours by 10 hours. Similarly, Ta et al. (2018) show that co-residence enables women to shift time from household duties to employment in China, contributing to greater gender equality in household labour and narrowing the gender gap in employment time. Indian studies also point to similar dynamics: Bawdekar and Ladusingh (2012) find that time support is more frequent and intense when parents reside in the same city. However, such arrangements are not without complexity. Rabindranathan (2004) notes that daughters-in-law in India often juggle multiple roles, leading to time conflicts and role strain due to overlapping domestic expectations and paid work responsibilities. Our data adds further nuance to these findings. We observe that the impact of co-residence can vary depending on the kind of help received.

5.2 Role of Husband and Social Ties in Women's Time Use

Figure 3: Predicted change in time spent on housework by young mothers based on husband's involvement in housework

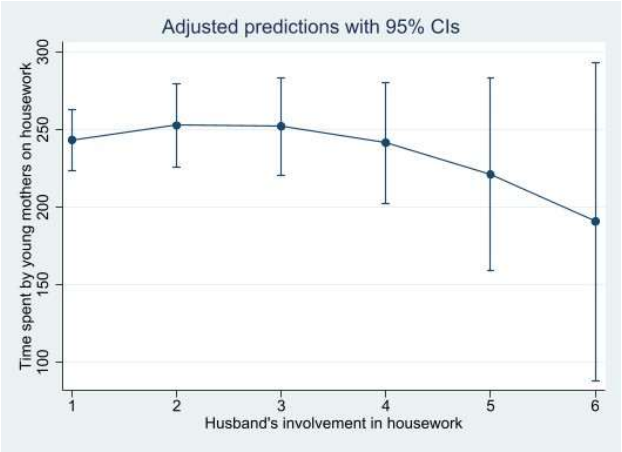


Figure 3 illustrates how husbands' participation in housework influences the amount of time young mothers spend on household chores. This figure aligns with the broader theme of time poverty and gender inequality by showing that increased involvement from husbands reduces women's housework burden. Here, the x-axis represents the number of distinct housework activities that husbands participate in, ranging from just one task (such as laundry) to as many as six (including cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, etc., in addition to laundry). The predicted values indicate that when husbands help with only one or two tasks, women's time on housework remains high, around 240-250 minutes. However, as husbands take on more activities, women's time spent on housework drops significantly, reaching approximately 180 minutes at the highest level. This change highlights that even modest involvement in housework by husbands can make a substantial difference in the distribution of unpaid domestic labour. Nevertheless, the decline is not strictly linear, implying that women continue to shoulder a larger share of unpaid domestic labour even with greater male involvement.

We employ multivariate regression to examine the unique effect of each type of support, family, community, and husband, on women's housework time while controlling for other influencing factors. This allows us to identify which forms of support are most effective in reducing women's unpaid labour burden (Table 1).

Table 1: Multivariate linear regression assessing the effect of support network factors on the time spent (in minutes per day) by young mothers on housework in Delhi-NCR, India

	Coefficient	**95% CI**
Current Work Status		
Homemaker®		
Employed	-71.52***	[-106.74,-36.29]
Support Density		
Lower support density®		
Higher support density	-4.99	[-48.57,38.59]

Source of Support		
Housework		
Not receiving support®		
Receiving support from community	-4.55	[-41.81,32.70]
Receiving support from kin	-16.49	[-55.28,22.29]
Childcare		
Not receiving support®		
Receiving support	-34.90	[-93.16,23.37]
Intensity of support		
Housework - Husband		
Lower intensity®		
Higher intensity	-29.42	[-64.68,5.83]
Housework - Mother-in-law		
Lower intensity®		
Higher intensity	-5.71	[-59.78,48.36]
Housework - Female relatives		
Lower intensity®		
Higher intensity	-13.54	[-88.94,61.85]
Housework - Male relatives		
Lower intensity®		
Higher intensity	-23.49	[-80.82,33.85]
Housework - Community		
Lower intensity®		
Higher intensity	-54.42**	[-97.26,-11.57]
Childcare - Husband		
Lower intensity®		
Higher intensity	-20.84	[-55.69,14.02]
Childcare - Mother-in-law		
Lower intensity®		
Higher intensity	-2.67	[-53.19,47.86]
Childcare - Female relatives		
Lower intensity®		
Higher intensity	-148.46**	[-296.51,-0.40]

Unstandarized coefficients; 95% confidence intervals in brackets

Model controlled for the age of respondent, type of family, type of marriage, number of children

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Employed mothers spend 71.52 ($p<0.01$) minutes less on housework compared to homemakers. This reflects a trade-off between time spent on paid employment and unpaid domestic work. Receiving high-intensity support for housework from the community (domestic workers) reduces women's time burden by 54.42 ($p<0.05$) minutes per day. This emphasizes the importance of external support systems. Support from female relatives significantly reduces housework time by 148.46 ($p<0.05$) minutes, highlighting that kin-based networks remain critical sources of support, particularly in extended family structures. Although husbands' participation in housework reduces the time spent by women, the effect size is smaller compared to community or kin-based support and is not significant. This indicates that while male involvement is beneficial, wider support networks are more crucial for alleviating women's burden.

This model highlights how the presence of external systems, whether from the community, kin, or spouse, affects the time-use patterns of young mothers. However, it also suggests that support intensity matters; occasional help from a husband or community member may not be as impactful as consistent and high-intensity support. This model supports the argument that reproductive labour cannot be managed by women alone and that multi-level interventions are required to enable women to balance employment and family responsibilities effectively.

5.3 Robustness Check

While the multivariate linear regression (OLS) provides valuable insights into how different sources and intensities of support influence women's time spent on housework, we acknowledge the importance of validating our findings using alternative modeling approaches. To ensure the robustness of our results, we also estimate a Generalized Linear Model (GLM) using a Gamma distribution with a log link function (Table 2). This approach is more appropriate for modeling skewed, positive continuous outcomes and serves as an additional check to verify that the associations observed in the OLS model remain consistent under a different statistical specification. By including the GLM, we aim to strengthen the reliability of our conclusions and confirm that the patterns observed are not driven by the choice of model.

Table 2: Generalised Linear Model (GLM) with gamma distribution and log link estimating the effect of support factors on time spent on housework (in minutes per day)

	Log Coefficients	**Exponentiated Coefficients (exp(β))**	**95% CI**
Current Work Status			
Homemaker®			
Employed	-0.29***	0.75	[-0.45,-0.14]
Support Density			
Lower support density®			
Higher support density	-0.01	0.99	[-0.22,0.20]
Source of Support			
Housework			
Not receiving support®			
Receiving support from community	-0.01	0.99	[-0.16,0.14]
Receiving support from kin	-0.08	0.92	[-0.24,0.07]
Childcare			
Not receiving support®			

Receiving support	-0.13	0.88	[-0.35,0.10]
Intensity of support			
Housework - Husband			
Lower intensity®			
Higher intensity	-0.12	0.89	[-0.29,0.05]
Housework - Mother-in-law			
Lower intensity®			
Higher intensity	-0.01	0.99	[-0.27,0.26]
Housework - Female relatives			
Lower intensity®			
Higher intensity	-0.02	0.98	[-0.37,0.34]
Housework - Male relatives			
Lower intensity®			
Higher intensity	-0.15	0.86	[-0.42,0.12]
Housework - Community			
Lower intensity®			
Higher intensity	-0.31***	0.73	[-0.52,-0.10]
Childcare - Husband			
Lower intensity®			
Higher intensity	-0.08	0.93	[-0.23,0.07]
Childcare - Mother-in-law			
Lower intensity®			
Higher intensity	-0.0003	0.99	[-0.21,0.21]
Childcare - Female relatives			
Lower intensity®			
Higher intensity	-1.04***	0.35	[-1.40,-0.68]

95% confidence intervals of log coefficients given in brackets

Model controlled for the age of respondent, type of family, type of marriage, number of children

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

The GLM results reaffirm the conclusions drawn from the OLS model. Employed women report significantly less time spent on housework than homemakers ($\beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that participation in the labour force is associated with a reduction in unpaid domestic labour. The exponentiated coefficient ($\exp(\beta) = 0.75$) suggests that employed women spend approximately 25% less time on housework, holding other factors constant. This finding is consistent with the trade-off between paid employment and time available for household work.

In terms of support systems, two variables emerge as statistically significant predictors of reduced housework time. High-intensity support for housework from community sources, specifically domestic workers, is associated with a significant reduction in time spent on housework ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < 0.01$). The exponentiated coefficient ($\exp(\beta) = 0.73$) indicates that women receiving such support spend approximately 27% less time on housework. Similarly, high-intensity support from female relatives (such as sisters, aunts, or sisters-in-law) also significantly reduces women's housework burden ($\beta = -1.04$, $p < 0.01$). Here, the exponentiated coefficient ($\exp(\beta) = 0.35$) suggests a 65% reduction in expected housework time. These findings are consistent with the OLS model, which also identified these two forms of support

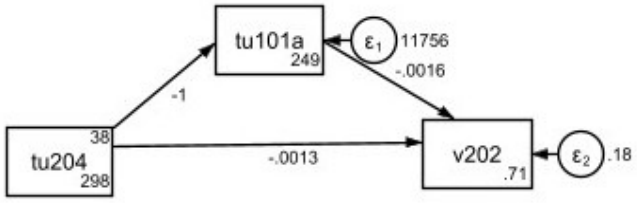
as particularly impactful. The larger coefficient for female relatives suggests that, in extended family arrangements, kin-based support can play a particularly strong role in offsetting women's domestic workload.

Notably, the effects of support from husbands, male relatives, mothers-in-law, or community members (in low-intensity settings) remain statistically insignificant, even though the direction of association is consistent with the theoretical expectation. This further reinforces the argument that intensity and consistency of support matter significantly. Occasional assistance may not translate into meaningful reductions in housework time.

Therefore, the GLM confirms the robustness of the main findings from the OLS regression. The consistency in the direction and significance of key predictors, particularly employment status, community-based support, and kin-based support, enhances confidence in the results.

While both the OLS and GLM models enable us to identify which forms of support reduce women's time burden in housework, they are limited in their ability to capture the broader relational dynamics between unpaid labour and women's employment outcomes. These models estimate direct effects but do not examine whether reduced housework time mediates the relationship between support systems and labour force participation. We turn to Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to address this limitation. This method allows us to explore both direct and indirect pathways between variables, offering a more holistic understanding of how support systems, domestic responsibilities, and employment status are interlinked.

Figure 4: Structural equation modelling to test whether the respondent and her husband's time spent on housework affects the respondent's work status



Note: tu204 = Percent of household chores done by husband (as perceived by the respondent), tu101a = Time spent by the respondent on housework, v202 = Current work status of respondent (Homemaker/Employed)

Figure 4 shows structural equation modelling (SEM) used to examine how the time spent on housework by women and their husbands affects the women's employment status. The model also considers other factors, such as the number of children, family type, and age, to provide a holistic view of the dynamics between unpaid labour and employment. Increased husband involvement in housework significantly reduces the wife's time on chores (β= -1.14, $p<0.05$; 95% CI: -2.05, -0.23), indicating that for every one percentage point increase in the husband's perceived involvement in housework, the wife's time spent on chores decreases by approximately 1.14 minutes per day, holding other factors constant. This suggests that sharing housework allows women to reclaim time, which can be redirected toward other productive activities. More time spent on housework negatively impacts the likelihood of being employed (β= -0.0016, $p<0.01$; 95% CI: -0.002, -.001). This finding confirms the time trade-off between unpaid and paid work, where higher domestic workloads limit women's ability to participate in the labour force.

The structural equation model demonstrated an overall acceptable fit to the data. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR = 0.054) is well below the conventional 0.08 threshold, indicating low residual error. The Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0.130, 90% CI: 0.062–0.207) and comparative fit indices (CFI = 0.868, TLI = 0.604) are somewhat weaker, but these are not uncommon in models estimated on smaller samples with multiple observed variables.

Importantly, the model indicates a *full mediation effect: husbands' involvement in housework indirectly affects women's employment status by reducing their domestic workload rather than impacting employment directly*. This finding underscores how, while shared housework is beneficial, it only alleviates a portion of women's time poverty. Given that men's involvement in housework is often minimal, the limited redistribution of domestic labour may fall short of significantly shifting women's employment opportunities. Thus, while husband's support is valuable, broader institutional or familial support remains essential to effectively address the time constraints that prevent women from fully participating in the labour market.

5.4 Qualitative Insights

For employed mothers, balancing paid work and household responsibilities without sufficient support can significantly diminish their life satisfaction. In-depth narratives reveal that the presence (or absence) of a husband's active participation in childcare plays a critical role in shaping a woman's daily experience and emotional well-being. One 30-year-old mother of a toddler explained the emotional and physical toll of managing childcare nearly alone despite having domestic help for other household chores. She shares, *"I have domestic help for all household chores, and I am able to manage them, but I seriously need help in childcare. It is quite overwhelming for me. Sometimes, I can't even go to the bathroom because my son won't leave me alone. Even small things like bathing the baby and feeding him all become huge tasks together, and it is too much for me. I expected more involvement in childcare – at least that my husband would feed the child, look after him, and simply play with him. But my husband does not look after our son even when he is free. He is free on Sundays, but instead of helping me or spending time with our son, my husband just watches TV."*

Her account illustrates how the lack of spousal support in caregiving, even with access to domestic help, can lead to burnout, isolation, and strained marital relationships. When one parent, usually the mother, is left to manage all the childcare alone, the resulting stress makes balancing work and family life even more difficult.

On the other hand, when a husband helps with childcare, it can be a huge support, making it easier for women to focus on their careers and personal goals. A 32-year-old working mother reflected, *"My husband managed my daughter's childcare very well. He was the pillar of support I needed. After having my daughter, I had to study for promotion exams, and it was a one-year commitment. During that time, my husband encouraged me to study for promotion and managed everything in the house and with my daughter. My husband has his own business, so he would come home if my daughter was sick or anything in the house needed to be taken care of. He completely managed everything, and I only had to take a leave if the situation was too extreme".* This narrative reflects how a supportive partner who actively helps with childcare can ease the pressure on mothers. It also boosts their confidence, gives them more freedom, and increases their satisfaction at home and at work. When housework and childcare are shared more equally, the outcomes are both functional and empowering.

Our study shows that while husbands' participation in housework has a modest effect size, it nonetheless meaningfully reduces women's time spent on unpaid domestic labour and indirectly affects the participation of young mothers in the labour force. Even limited involvement by men can lead to a redistribution of responsibility and ease women's time constraints. However, our data also indicate that the presence of female relatives or domestic workers has a more immediate and substantial effect on women's time use. This points to two overlapping but distinct explanations grounded in gender and care work literature.

First, the *social role theory*, which posits that men and women are socialised into distinct roles with corresponding expectations and behaviours, helps explain the smaller effect of male participation. Deeply entrenched norms around masculinity and femininity continue to define household labour as women's domain, making men's involvement often limited, occasional, or symbolic (Eagly, 1987; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In contrast, support from other women, especially mothers, mothers-in-law, or sisters, fits neatly within established gender expectations, allowing for more direct, routine, and accepted sharing of tasks.

Second, the *social reproduction theory*, which examines how the daily and generational reproduction of labour is sustained through unpaid and often invisible care work, situates our findings within broader gendered structures where domestic responsibilities are redistributed among women, particularly kin and domestic workers, rather than shared across gender lines.

This perspective views unpaid domestic labour as essential to the reproduction of both the labour force and society at large, and highlights how this burden is disproportionately shouldered by women (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006; Federici, 2012). Importantly, our findings resonate with urban contexts where hiring domestic workers is increasingly common. For middle-class women, the ability to outsource care and housework to (mostly female) domestic workers is a key enabler of labour force participation. However, this redistribution does not challenge the gendered nature of care. It simply shifts the burden from one group of women to another, often reinforcing hierarchies of class, caste, and ethnicity.

Groves and Lui (2012) found that while men see hired help as a way to opt out of domestic work, women continue to contribute due to concerns about care quality and feel emotionally responsible for their domestic workers. Domestic work remains a highly personalised and informal form of labour, often characterised by poor working conditions, social devaluation, and limited bargaining power (Neetha, 2008; Neetha, 2017; Ray & Qayum, 2009). While the reproductive labour of domestic workers is beyond the scope of our study, it is critical to acknowledge that this gender–care nexus is sustained by invisible labour that often remains unrecognised in mainstream discussions of gender equity.

6. Conclusion

This study sheds light on the deeply gendered contours of time use in urban India by examining how different forms of support affect the time young mothers spend on unpaid reproductive labour. The findings reaffirm what much of the global literature has already suggested: that while women's access to paid work is increasing, the unequal burden of unpaid care work remains a persistent barrier to their full economic participation (Ferrant et al., 2014; Hirway, 2017; Budlender, 2010).

The multivariate regression results show that employed women spend significantly less time on housework than homemakers, reflecting a time trade-off between paid and unpaid work. However, this is not necessarily due to an equitable redistribution of domestic labour within the

household. Rather, women who are employed appear to reduce housework time out of necessity, not necessarily because their partners or family members take on a proportionate share of that work. This aligns with prior research indicating that time savings in unpaid work are often squeezed out of women's leisure or rest time, rather than enabled through meaningful support (Sayer, 2005; Craig & Mullan, 2011).

Support from kin and community, particularly high-intensity help from female relatives and domestic workers, was found to be far more effective in reducing women's unpaid work time than spousal support. While husbands' participation in housework did reduce the time burden for women, the effect was not statistically significant in the regression model and only modest in the SEM pathway analysis. This supports prior studies that show that male contributions tend to be limited in scope, sporadic, or embedded in symbolic roles (Chopra & Zambelli, 2017; Desai & Jain, 1994).

Importantly, the structural equation model identified a full mediation effect: husbands' involvement in household chores indirectly influences women's employment status by first reducing their domestic workload. This finding illustrates the centrality of time as a resource in women's employment decisions and highlights the structural constraints that limit their labour force participation. Time poverty, in this context, is not merely an individual-level constraint but a relational and systemic one, tied to household power dynamics, care infrastructure, and prevailing social norms around gender and work (Folbre, 2006; Elson, 2017).

The qualitative narratives further illuminate how inadequate support can affect women's mental well-being and their sense of identity. Employed mothers reported feelings of burnout, resentment, and disconnection, particularly when juggling paid work with sole responsibility for housework and childcare. These accounts are a stark reminder that time use is not only a matter of productivity or economic output, but it also affects emotional health, marital relationships, and life satisfaction.

Together, these findings call for a multi-pronged approach to address gendered time inequalities. First, redistributing unpaid care work within households requires challenging entrenched gender norms and promoting active male involvement – not as occasional assistance but as a shared responsibility. Second, investments in accessible, affordable, community-based childcare and domestic support services are essential, especially for women without kin networks. Third, policies such as paternity leave, flexible work arrangements, and recognition of unpaid care in social protection frameworks can help integrate time equity into broader development goals.

In conclusion, this paper underscores that solving the problem of time poverty among young mothers requires going beyond the household to consider the broader architecture of social support. While male participation is important, it is insufficient on its own. Sustainable change will require shifting both cultural expectations and structural conditions that reproduce unequal time burdens. By centering reproductive labour in time-use research and policy discourse, we can move closer to enabling women's substantive freedom to work, care, and live on their own terms.

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