Unpaid Care, Ritual Healing, and Structural Transformation in the Lives of Women in Malabar Kerala

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Abstract: Processes of structural transformation in India, such as the mechanization of agriculture, the expansion of the service sector, and the spread of new household technologies, have reshaped the gendered organisation of work. Although these developments have altered the overall landscape of labour, women in many rural communities, particularly those from marginalized social groups, continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic work and caregiving. This paper examines how these economic and technological shifts intersect with the roles of women who engage in faith based and traditional healing practices in the Muslim communities of Malabar in Kerala. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork combined with an integrated analysis of time use, the study investigates how women who serve as ritual healers and caregivers allocate their time across unpaid care responsibilities, healing practices, and emerging opportunities for paid work. The paper addresses three central questions. First, it explores how technological changes in household production, including access to improved water supply, modern cooking facilities, and digital tools, influence the amount of time women can devote to healing and community support. Second, it considers how evolving labour markets, including the rise of care related employment, digital micro work, and small scale self employment, shape women's perceptions of healing work as labour, social service, or religious duty. Third, it examines the role of social institutions, such as school schedules, religious practices, and the availability of child care and elder care services, in organising the daily and seasonal rhythms of women's time allocation. The analysis reveals a continuing tension. While structural transformation has eased some forms of domestic drudgery, community expectations concerning gendered care and spiritual responsibility remain largely unchanged, thereby limiting women's participation in paid work. By integrating time use data with ethnographic insights, the study demonstrates that women's healing work, although valued within the community, remains unrecognised in official economic measurement. This invisibility contributes to persistent gender disparities in recorded labour force participation. The paper concludes by outlining implications for strengthening time use surveys, recognising non market labour within health systems, and developing policies that enhance women's autonomy and economic opportunities in rural areas undergoing change.

Keywords: Ritual Healing, Structural Transformation, Time Use, Unpaid Care Work, Women's Work