

# The Economic Contribution of Women in Bangladesh Through their Unpaid Labour

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## Highlights

- ❖ Women in Bangladesh work on average 16 hours a day at various unpaid household tasks.
- ❖ While about half of men are reported to help women with household work, the extent of that help is not mentioned.
- ❖ Throughout the country, women work about 771.2 million hours a year at household work, with an estimated value of somewhere between US\$69.81 and \$91.03 billion. If this work were added to GDP, then GDP would more than double.

## Background

In Bangladesh, as elsewhere, men are considered to be the head of the family and its most important member, since it is most often men who earn the income that houses, feeds, and clothes the family. Men also have a far easier time than women in seeking paid employment. Work is typically divided along gender lines, with men being responsible for “outside” work and income earning, and women for housework and child care.

Women generally have no choice but to be economically dependent on male relatives (first the father, then the husband, then the son), due to their relatively lower educational levels and fewer marketable skills, the resultant lack of available employment opportunities, and a lack of social acceptance of women earning a living. Meanwhile, even those women who have paid jobs must continue to bear responsibility for household work, with its many time-consuming tasks. As a result, many women spend most of their time on housework. Women also perform paid labour within their homes, such as taking in piece work or assisting in family productive activities, such as farm work or assisting with a family business, though often they do not receive any pay directly for their contribution.

Some research has been done on the issue of the value of household work in Bangladesh, particularly by Shamim Hamid (Hamid 1996). Hamid found that the average woman in Bangladesh contributes 4,765 taka (US\$133.14<sup>1</sup>) annually to the

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<sup>1</sup> Using an estimated exchange rate for 1996 of 35.79 taka to the US\$. Calculations in this paper use the exchange rate of 70 taka to the US\$.

economy through her unpaid work, of which 3% is from subsistence production and 95% from housework<sup>2</sup>. For men, the figure is 219 taka (US\$6.12), 29% from own-account subsistence production and 71% from housework. Nationally, Hamid calculated that annually over 188 billion taka (US\$5.25 billion) worth of work, uncounted in national statistics, is contributed through annual subsistence production, of which 95% is contributed by women and the remaining 5% by men. Hamid further calculated that Bangladesh's GDP in 1989/90, calculated at 638 billion taka (US\$17.83 billion), would increase by 29% to 825 billion taka (US\$23.05 billion) if unpaid work were included.

Similarly, Hamid calculated that the percentage of national production attributed to women would increase significantly, from 25% to 41%, if unpaid work were included in the national economy. Meanwhile, the proportion contributed by men would fall from 75% to 59%. Further findings of Hamid include:

- ✚ Conventional GDP estimates capture 98% of men's production but only 47% of women's production.
- ✚ Under the present United Nations System of National Accounts (UNSNA) production boundary definitions, 95% of non-market production is excluded.
- ✚ Of the total time spent on work in rural areas, women contribute 53% and men 47%.
- ✚ Of the total time spent on non-market work, women contribute 89% and men 11%.

The treatment of women's daily work in Bangladesh has also

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<sup>2</sup> She does not account for the remaining 2%.

been affected by international trends that fail to account for the importance of household work. According to Waring (1998), under the 1961 census women's work was defined as "productive economic activity". By the 1974 census, that had all changed: women's work was defined as "housewife". This was clearly not because Bangladeshi women suddenly changed their activities but rather due to a change in definition.

Islam (2006) cites an estimate of the Bangladesh Home Workers Women Association (BHWA) that the annual contribution of home-based workers to the GDP is about Tk 150 billion (US\$2.59 billion<sup>3</sup>). "But unfortunately, this contribution is not reflected in the government statistics. The BBS [Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics] data shows that the contribution of the industrial sector in GDP in FY 2002-03 was Tk 462.37 billion (US\$7.99 billion). Of the amount, the contribution of large-scale industry was Tk 325.58 billion (US\$5.62 billion), while small scale contributed Tk 136.80 billion (US\$2.36 billion). The statistics show that the contribution of home-based workers is larger than that of the small-scale industry" (Islam 2006).

According to the *2004 Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh*, there are a total of 123.85 million inhabitants of Bangladesh, consisting of 63.9 million men and 59.9 million women. According to these government statistics, 53.2 million people are engaged in housework full-time, consisting of 0.9 million men and 43.3 million women (Table 1). In addition to full-time housework, the 9.8 million employed women are likely to spend a significant amount of their time on housework as well.

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<sup>3</sup> Using an approximate exchange rate for 2002-03 of 57.90 taka to the US\$ (fluctuations in the exchange rate make accuracy difficult).

**TABLE 1: Population engaged in full-time household work or paid employment**

<b>Employment category</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
Urban housewives/household work	24.5	0.5
Rural housewives/household work	18.8	0.4
<i>Total housewives/household work</i>	<i>43.3</i>	<i>0.9</i>
Urban employed	2.5	8.2
Rural employed	7.3	26.3
<i>Total employed</i>	<i>9.8</i>	<i>34.5</i>

**Source: BBS 2005; numbers in millions**

Prior to this study, there was no existing research that the authors were aware of that calculated an economic value for the time spent on housework by full-time and part-time housewives in Bangladesh. While it would also be interesting to know more about the almost one million men estimated to be engaged in full-time housework, such an examination was beyond the scope of this study and in any event represented only 2% of the number of women engaged in housework full-time.

## Methodology

This research utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods, consisting of in-depth interviews (IDIs) and surveys. The surveys were conducted through purposive sampling to include people of different classes, occupations, and age. A total of 315 women and 315 men, almost all married, were interviewed. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 55 married women and 55 married men. The research was conducted by trained researchers working for eleven NGOs, coordinated by WBB Trust, in ten areas of the country. In order to gain an understanding of the nature of women's work in both rural and urban areas, given expected

large differences between them, both rural and urban areas were included, with five NGOs collecting data in urban and six in rural areas.

All research was conducted from 10 February to 25 February 2006. SPSS software was used for data analysis.

Limitations of the research include limited time and budget that caused the sampling frame to be smaller than might otherwise have been desirable. Further, although WBB trained the researchers, WBB staff was not able to go to the field and thus were not able to monitor the quality of the research.

Finally, some of the activities that women engage in are not suitable for economic analysis, such as mother's affection, love, breastfeeding, the feelings that accompany care of the sick, and so on. It is by nature impossible to assign an economic value to such activities and any attempt to do so would undervalue the genuine contribution women make through them. Furthermore, the authors do not believe that it is only those activities that come with a price tag that have value; in some senses, assigning an economic value to work can belittle it. However, avoiding assigning a value suggests a value of zero rather than of a great but untold sum. Thus while avoiding the absurd exercise of assigning an economic value to women's love and care, the authors attempted to calculate fair market rates for other tasks performed by women in order to gain approximate figures of women's economic contribution to their families, to society, and to the country.

## Results: Survey

### Age and marital status

Of the 315 women and 315 men, 96.2% of the women and 98.8% of the men were married. Among the remaining women, 2.9% were widows, 0.6% separated, and 0.3% divorced.

In most families interviewed, there were one to five members (husband, wife, and children), indicating that most people live in nuclear families.

Almost all men (95%) and women (93%) said that the head of their household was male. That is, men, whether by earning an income or simply being male, are the *de facto* household heads.

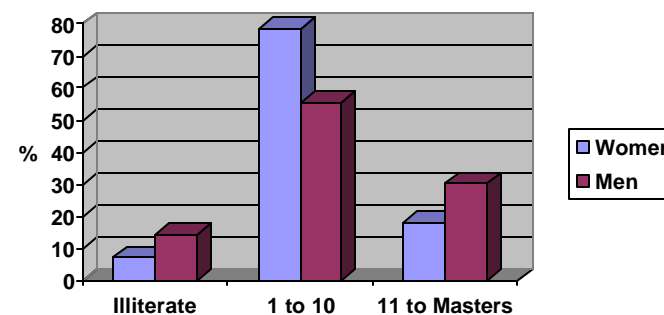
Not all men and women interviewed were husband-wife pairs. Nevertheless, the difference in age seen between the male and female respondents is likely due to the fact that women in Bangladesh typically marry at a younger age than men. Thus while 47% of female respondents are 26-35 years old, 40% of men are 36-45 years, for a difference in average age of about ten years (Table 2).

**TABLE 2: Age of the respondents**

Age	Women		Men	
	No.	%	No.	%
16-25	83	26.5%	11	3.5%
26-35	147	46.7%	109	34.6%
36-45	69	21.9%	126	40.0%
46-55	15	4.8%	50	15.9%
56-75	1	0.3%	19	6.0%
Total	315	100%	315	100%

### Education levels

In terms of school enrolment, more girls than boys had enrolled in primary school (Figure 1), and more men (14.3%) than women (7.3%) were illiterate. Women had higher school enrolment levels through high school, but after class 11, women's enrolment was lower than men: 78.6% of women and 55.6% of men finished Level 10, but 18.1% of women and 30.2% of men finished higher-level education.



**FIGURE 1: Respondents' educational level**

Families may have seen little benefit to continuing girls' education, as girls would be unlikely to find a decent job and were likely simply to marry and move in with their husband's family, so that their future earnings would not be perceived as a benefit to their parents. As soon as girls ceased going to school, their families often arranged their marriages. Even for girls with high ambitions it is very difficult to find a decent job, so they are forced to accept household work as their sole or main occupation.

The reason for higher illiteracy rates among men may be that from a far earlier age, they are seen as an economic asset by their families and are sent to work rather than to school.

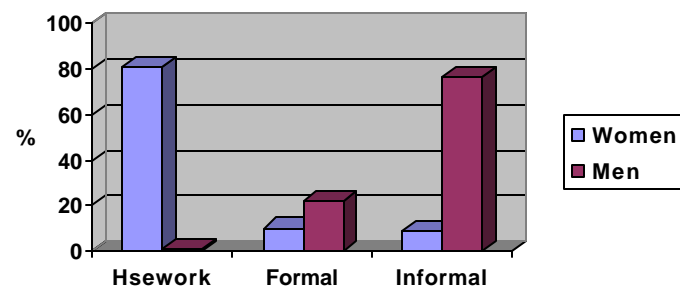
Meanwhile, for those boys who did stay in school, families perceived a benefit of keeping them in school for longer because the longer they stayed in school, the greater the likelihood that they would find higher-paying employment when they graduated.

### *Employment status and income*

Women reported having few chances to gain paid employment. The paternal nature of Bangladeshi society means that men dominate the formal working world and often resist the idea of women entering the paid labour force, perhaps at least in part because of expectations that women will assume the full burden of housework and childcare. Most women (77%) earned only 0-500 taka (US\$0-7.14<sup>4</sup>) per month, while most men (28%) earned 3,000-5,000 taka (US\$42.86-71.43) per month. No woman earned more than 15,000 taka (US\$214.29) a month, but men earned up to 25,000 taka/month (US\$357.14). That is, men's highest earnings were far higher than women's highest earnings, presumably due to the lower educational level of women and women's lower job skills as well as to discrimination in pay.

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<sup>4</sup> Based on an approximate exchange rate at the time of the research of 70 Bangladesh taka to the US\$.

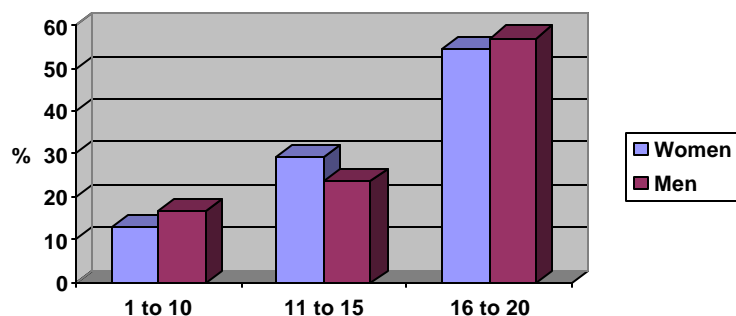


**FIGURE 2: Involvement in housework and employment**

Since women have only low levels of education, they are not qualified for higher-level jobs. They are restricted both by family and social expectations that prevent them from reaching a higher level in education or employment. As shown in Figure 2, while 81% of women were involved only in housework (no paid employment), only 1.3% of men were unemployed. While 10% of women had formal paid employment, 22% of men did. The rest of men were involved in various forms of work, such as business (24%), rickshaw or rickshaw van pulling (9%), and farming (8%).



### Time spent on household work



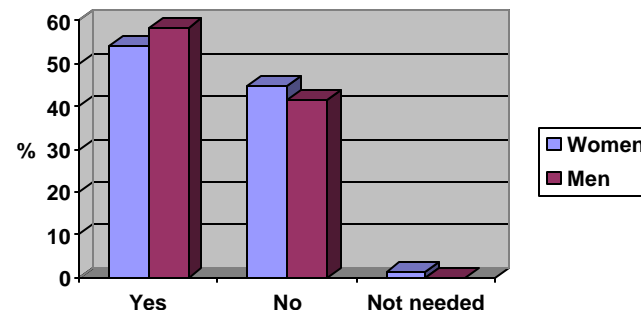
**FIGURE 3: Hours per day spent daily on household work**

Women work a very long day. Most women (54%) and men (57%) said that women work 16-20 hours a day (Figure 3), suggesting — given at least an hour a day for personal care and activities (praying, bathing, etc.) — that they only sleep 6 hours or less a night. From waking up in the morning to going to sleep at night, women are involved in a wide range of activities. Given that there are 43.3 million full-time housewives in Bangladesh (BBS 2005), working about 16 hours a day on average, full-time housewives throughout the country work a total of 692.8 million hours each day. Employed women, if they spend on average 8 hours a day on housework, contribute a further 78.4 million hours each day, for a total of 771.2 million hours.

It is interesting to note that there was very little difference in the time spent on household work, or the exact activities constituting “housework”, in different parts of the country. The main difference in terms of specific tasks carried out was between urban and rural areas, with rural women being engaged in a wider variety of tasks than urban women.

However, urban women in different cities, and rural women in different parts of the country, engaged in similar tasks, and women everywhere spent a large amount of time on housework, regardless of whether they also had a paying job.

### Male involvement in household work



**FIGURE 4: Whether men help women with household work**

Just over half of women (54%) and slightly more men (58.4%) report that men help women with housework; 44.8% of women and 41.6% of men report that men do not help with housework. In Bangladesh it is common for men to do much of the shopping due to restrictions on women’s movement; most other domestic tasks are considered the domain of women.

### Perceived importance of household work

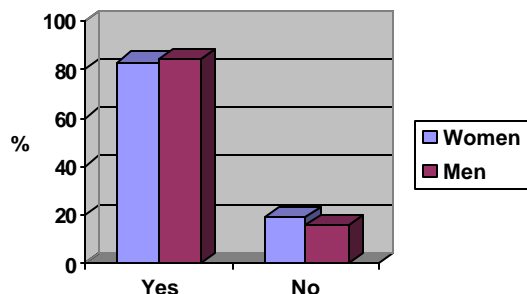


FIGURE 5: Is women's work important?

When asked whether women's household work is important, most women (82.9%) as well as men (84.4%) responded that it is important. It is, however, important to note a major caveat about this result: the importance of women's work was the last question asked after a long set of questions about the many jobs performed by women. Findings of other research (Efroymsen et al. 2006) suggest that men undervalue women's household work.

### Results: in-depth interviews

During the in-depth interviews women talked about their use of leisure time, the tasks they and their maids performed and what an appropriate "price" for those tasks might be, and other issues. For some questions, responses were also measured quantitatively, though of course with a smaller sample size than for the survey.

Most women (74.6%) reported getting up very early in the morning — between 4:30 and 6:30 a.m. Most women (61.8%)

report going to bed between 9 and 11 p.m., though almost 13% report going to bed between 11 p.m. and 12 a.m., and a further 7% between 12 and 1 a.m.

Discussions with women and men revealed that while men usually do the food shopping in the rural areas, in the city the responsibility tends to fall on women who either go to the bazaar or buy from itinerant vendors who pass through their neighbourhood.

Women bear essentially full responsibility for cooking. In both rural and urban areas, women cook twice a day, eating leftovers for the third meal. Women also tend to prepare a snack in the afternoon for children and husbands. The preparation of these three meals takes up about six hours on average per day.

#### Case Study: A day in the life of a Dhaka housewife

Rehena (not her real name) is a 35-year-old housewife living in Dhaka. She has a bachelor's degree, but no salary. Rehena's day begins at 6 a.m., and she goes to sleep between 12:30 and 1 a.m. Every day she puts in 18-19 hours on family-related work.

Early mornings, between 6 and 8 a.m., Rehena prepares breakfast, wakes up her son, washes his face, feeds and clothes him, and takes him to school. She prepares her husband's breakfast, and feeds it to him when she returns from leaving her son at school. She also prepares necessary items for her husband to take to his office and packs him a lunch.

Once Rehena's husband has left for the office, she has her own breakfast. At this time her maid also arrives. She explains to the maid what she needs her to do that day and then Rehena herself begins cleaning the home (making the beds, putting clothes away, etc.).

Rehena again leaves the home at 11 a.m. to fetch her son home from school. At this time the maid finishes her other work and begins preparing for lunch by cleaning fish and vegetables, etc. Rehena

returns home with her son, bathes and feeds him. While she helps him with his homework, she also prepares lunch and dinner.<sup>5</sup> She first serves everyone lunch, then bathes, prays, and finally eats.

When her husband returns home from work, she serves everyone a late afternoon snack. If she finds some free time, she does some sewing. While the maid washes most of the clothes, Rehana herself also irons some of the clothes.

At the moment there are no elderly people in the home. Not long before, her mother-in-law was unwell and was living with them. At the time, her family had to pay a nurse 500 taka a day to look after her. Three months previously another sick relative came to live with them. It was Rehana's responsibility to look after the patient.

Rehana also looks after any guests who come. Sometimes she goes shopping for household items. She pays the bills, such as her son's school fees, electricity, water, gas, and others. She must look after her son and husband, performing various small tasks such as serving them food and bringing them sandals.

Rehana explains that females have no free time. Whenever she might think of relaxing there is always more work to do, or as she says, "When I'm done helping my son study, the time is up." She either goes to bed or does some sewing late at night. While she had previously had time to study, this is no longer possible for her.

Rehana says that all housework has economic value. But she feels that it is neither possible nor right to put an economic value on the work. For instance, it is not possible to put a price on the affection she gives her husband and son. She says that what is most important to her is not a price, but her husband's appreciation.

In 42.9% of the households included in the in-depth interviews,

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<sup>5</sup> Maids usually are only allowed to provide help such as with cleaning vegetables and fish, while the employer does the cooking herself.

there is a servant, but the household help is temporary, not permanent. The tasks assigned to servants generally include dish washing, cleaning the home, washing clothes, grinding spices once a week, and preparation for cooking (such as cleaning and cutting of vegetables). The household help receives 100-200 taka (\$2.79-\$5.59) per task per month — that is, 100-200 taka each month for washing clothes, a further 100-200 taka per month for cleaning the home, etc., with the amount fluctuating by area (urban/rural and from one part of the country to another).

Meanwhile, the women who perform housework for pay in another woman's house are also themselves housewives, performing the same work in two places but only paid in one. Women with any paid employment still are responsible for most housework, meaning that they must essentially work two full-time jobs. Since most women work about a 16-hour day, we can estimate that women with full-time paid employment (8 hours a day) still work about 8 hours a day at housework, likely also putting more hours in during the weekly holiday.

Women also take the main responsibility for helping children with their school work, including arranging outside tutors and escorting their children to all appointments. Women are the ones who ensure that children do their school work properly. Women also get their children ready in the morning, prepare their snacks, and take their children to school. In some cases, women sit outside the school and wait for their children to finish to reduce the rickshaw or bus fare that is required to go back and forth to their homes. Women are also responsible for keeping track of every family member's needs, from the smallest baby to the elderly relatives who live with them.

Caring for domestic animals (feeding, cleaning, and other care)

is also the responsibility of women, in both urban and rural areas. Despite having taken full responsibility for taking care of the chickens, ducks, goat, or cow, when women sell livestock they give the money to their husbands for the family's use. Thus the income earned is counted as part of the husband's contribution to the family, rather than the wife's.

*Case Study: The life of a rural housewife*

*Shiuli (not her real name) is a 40-year-old housewife living in the countryside in Khulna. She studied through class 7 and then got married. Her husband Shamol (not his real name) is a farmer. They have one son and two daughters.*

*Shiuli gets up very early every morning, as the morning is a very busy time. After sweeping the home, she goes out to prepare food for the ducks. Afterwards she continues sweeping and mopping<sup>6</sup> the floors. She is fortunate that they have a pond and a well near the home so she does not have to travel far to get water.*

*Shamol does the farmwork himself. He gets up very early to go to the fields. Ever afternoon he prepares food for the cows. Shiuli feeds this to the cows every morning, then begins cooking lunch. In breaks in the work, she tutors her little daughter. She straightens up the home (makes the beds, puts clothes away, etc.). When the food is ready, she feeds her children. After her daughters eat, they go to school.*

*In the mornings, after everyone else has eaten, Shiuli takes the cows out and cleans their shed; sometimes her husband comes home and takes the cows out himself. She uses the cow dung to prepare fuel, which she stores for use in the winter and sometimes sells. Sometimes Shamol comes home for lunch; other days Shiuli sends her son with*

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<sup>6</sup> "Mop" is a bit of a misnomer, as it involves kneeling on the ground and using a wet cloth to clean the floor (if it is tile or cement). Dirt floors are cleaned by smoothing them with wet dirt, again while on hands and knees.

*his lunch, and other days she carries it to him herself. She also takes the chickens and ducks out to feed. There is always work to do on a farm, with some land always under cultivation and many other tasks to tend to, and she and Shamol are always busy.*

*Before evening she finishes her cooking, in order to save on lamp fuel. They eat early. She does the cooking and serves the family herself, though sometimes her older daughter helps her. Before she can cook, she must first carry in water and prepare the vegetables and other items. While there is a machine in the village to process rice, people must carry the rice there themselves to do so, which takes time. The husks from the rice are brought home to feed to the cows and ducks.*

*Shiuli's elderly mother-in-law lives with them. Shiuli also must take time to give affection to her husband and children. She says that women have no free time; all time is occupied with work. But if she does find a free moment, she sleeps or sews. She also feels that all housework has an economic value, but like Rehana, she believes that it is neither possible nor right to try to put a monetary value on it.*

In sum, virtually all housework is performed by women. As a result, many women said they had no free time; "We get no vacation; even when we're sick we have to work," said one woman when explaining her lack of free time. While 69.2% of women and 67.6% of men said that women have free time, 30.5% of women and 31.2% of men said that women do not have free time. For those who said they did have leisure time, their explanations of how they spend it make it clear what leisure time means to women. For instance, women said they spend their free time helping children with homework, taking them for tutoring, ironing clothes, putting clothes away, visiting sick friends and relatives, sewing clothes, making cushions or wall hangings, and doing whatever other tasks they were not able to complete during the day. A few women also said that when they had some free time after lunch they

took a nap.

This is not to suggest that men are lazy or unoccupied. Like women, they have many important activities that occupy their time; like women, they often spend their free time in activities that more resemble work than rest. When asked what their husbands do with their free time, the responses included working in the vegetable garden, watering trees, weeding, going to market, watching TV at a tea shop, sleeping, taking everyone in the home out for fun, helping with family work, fishing, preparing feed for cattle, chatting, playing cards, and tutoring students for pay.

Despite all the work that women do, they find no change in the family power structure. The only women who said they were the head of the household are divorced, widowed, or otherwise living without a husband.

Most women (69.8%) and even more men (77.1%) say that husbands and wives have a discussion before making an important decision. Still, a significant percentage of both say that they do not discuss decisions. The types of issues they mentioned discussing together before making a decision include whether to plant a vegetable garden, schooling for their children, selling of land, taking a job, the raising of ducks and chickens, whether to join credit and savings groups, and their daughter's marriage<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Marriages, especially in rural areas, are typically arranged by the parents.

## Calculating the economic value of women's work

As we see from our research, women perform a large number of tasks each day, and most men and women — at least after being walked through the considerable number of tasks women perform — recognize that the work performed by women is important. The next step is to assign a monetary value to that work.

When looking for an appropriate way to assign value, many questions arise in terms of what price to assign to different tasks, how to deal with tasks that women engage in simultaneously, or whether to assign women a wage based on the number of hours they work, and in that case, using which wage as a baseline.

Some ways of addressing this issue include:

- ❖ Examining opportunity costs: what women could earn if they performed paid work during the time they spend on housework;
- ❖ The cost of paying household help to do the tasks otherwise performed by housewives;
- ❖ The cost of attaining the services performed by housewives on the market, that is, of washing clothes at a laundry, eating in a restaurant, hiring a tutor for one's children, etc.;
- ❖ The salary received by men for a fairly standard job, prorated according to the number of hours full-time housewives typically work each year.

Each of the methods has its advantages and drawbacks. The opportunity cost method is discussed at length in the Vietnam paper in this series. As discussed there, the method tells more about discrepancies in wage rates than in the value of the

household work actually performed. Urban men earning high salaries have high opportunity costs even for engaging in small amounts of household work, while women, particularly in rural areas, have very low opportunity costs. But this does not mean that high-paid jobs always deliver more important benefits to society than does household work, nor that men should be excused from all housework on the basis of the high salaries they can earn while in the office.

This report involves three calculations: using market prices for various tasks; a shortcut method based on the value of one task and the number of tasks women perform; and comparing women's work to government salaries. It is important here to remember that the point of the calculation is not to arrive at an "accurate" figure of the value of women's work, as no such figure exists. Rather, the attempt is to arrive at a reasonable estimate, or range, of the contribution women make through their unpaid work. When using market figures or opportunity costs, the likely result is an under-valuing of the work, since those figures (especially when the amount paid to a maid as opposed to a shop, e.g. a hired cook in a restaurant or a laundry service) are based on current ideas that the work performed by women is less valuable than that done by men. The third calculation, utilizing government salaries (as described below), is meant to address that bias on the assumption that household work is at least as important as much of the work performed by civil servants.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This is not to suggest that civil servants perform unimportant work; on the contrary, it is to point out that such work, similar to household work, is of vital importance and thus deserves a decent pay scale.

### *Method One: Payment by task*

This calculation involved first separating urban and rural women and listing some of the major tasks they perform and the amount of time spent on each. A "wage" for those tasks was then assigned based on market rates. Complications arise in terms of assigning a market wage, which varies greatly depending on the context of the task: for instance, hiring a woman to wash clothes in the home versus taking clothes to a commercial laundry, or paying a servant to cook versus what a restaurant cook earns, depending on the type of restaurant.

Due to this complication, for rural women a shortcut method was used involving applying the wage of a day labourer for most tasks. For tasks where it was easier to make specific calculations using typical wage rates, for instance what one pays a nurse or a tutor or how much one can earn sewing clothes, those figures were used instead. It is important to note that many tasks were excluded from the list, for both rural and urban women, due to difficulties in assigning both time and value, such as managing the household finances and accounts and paying bills.

As shown in Table 3, the value per hour for tasks for rural women ranges from a very low 2.5 taka an hour for sewing and mending clothes to 75-81 taka for nursing the sick and tutoring children. The research revealed that women spend on average from 30 minutes to 6 hours a day on specific tasks, adding up to the average workday for a full-time housewife of 16 hours. Given the estimated value per hour for each task and the average amount of time spent on each task, an average daily wage was calculated of 213 taka (\$3.04), or 6,479 taka (\$92.55) per month or 77,745 taka (\$1,111) per year. Multiplying the yearly "wage" by the 18.8 million full-time rural housewives

results in the figure of 1,461,606 million taka, or US\$20.88 billion per year.

**TABLE 3: Estimate of value of rural women's work**

<b>Work done by rural women (full-time housework)</b>	<b>Hrs./day</b>	<b>Value/hr</b>	<b>Value/day</b>
Cooking (3 times/day, including preparation)	6	10	60
Clothes washing and ironing (2 days/week)	1	10	10
Animal nursing	1	10	10
Raising chickens, etc.	0.5	10	5
Educating children (help in homework, etc.)	0.5	75	37.5
Sewing, mending clothes	2	2.5	5
Vegetable gardening	1	10	10
Washing dishes	0.5	10	5
Cleaning house and yard	0.5	10	5
Nursing the sick	0.5	81.3	40.7
Child care	0.5	10	5
Fuel collection	0.5	10	5
Water collection	0.5	10	5
Working in the field	1	10	10
<i>Total</i>	<i>16</i>		<i>213.15</i>

In addition to the full-time rural housewives there are 7.3 million rural women who engage in paid labour as well as look after their households. Assuming that these women work half the hours at unpaid work as full-time housewives, and using the same figures for the value of their work, the total figure for part-time housewives is estimated at 283,769 million taka, or US\$4.05 billion.

A similar calculation was then performed for full-time urban housewives (Table 4). Again, complications arose in terms of assigning values for the various jobs that women carry out. For instance, if a servant in a family only washes clothes and

performs no other tasks, s/he receives 200 taka/month. However, at a commercial laundry, the cost is 12-30 taka per item (the price varying by the item washed and the venue). A separate, additional charge is incurred for ironing. If a woman washes and irons 20 items of clothing per week, then at the rate paid in a laundry, the work would be worth approximately 420 taka/week, or 1,680 taka/month, or more than eight times as much as a household servant would earn.

Women also bear chief responsibility for caring for the sick. If a family were to hire a trained nurse, they would have to pay 500-800 taka/day for the service. While a nurse obviously has additional training, she will not perform her tasks with the same affection and loving care as would most relatives.

Rates for cooking vary widely, but a cook in a small restaurant might earn 20-30 taka a day, working approximately 6 days a week (closures for holidays), for about 8 hours a day. This amounts to about the same amount of time over a month as a woman cooking 6 hours a day every day (no holidays), or 24 days/month x 25 taka a day = 600 taka/month.

Day care centres for the care of young children are extremely rare in Bangladesh. As with other tasks, caring for children falls almost entirely on women. Many middle class and wealthy families hire young girls to look after their small children. In addition to providing housing, clothing, and food for her, the families generally pay the girl 1,000-2,000 taka/month. Once again, as with nursing, no paid servant will look after a child with the same love and care as a mother. This is particularly true in terms of the many things a parent wishes to teach her or his child to prepare the child for the future.

**TABLE 4: Estimate of value of urban women's work**

Work done by urban women	a	b	c	d	e
	Hrs./day	Value/month	Hrs./year (a x 365)	Value/hour (est)	Value/year <sup>9</sup> (c*d)
Cooking (3 times/day, including preparation)	6	600	2,190	3.13	6,844
Clothes washing / ironing	0.5	1,680	182.5	13.81	2,520
Taking children to/from school	1	600	365	15.00	5,475
Educating children (homework)	2	2,500	730	83.33	60,833
Child care	2	1,500	730	6.16	4,500
Sewing, mending	1	250	365	8.22	3,000
Washing dishes	1	200	365	6.57	2,400
Cleaning	0.5	200	182.5	3.29	600
Nursing	0.5	19,773	182.5	81.25	14,828
Gardening, shopping	1.5	3,500	547.5	38.35	20,998
<i>Total</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>30,803</i>	<i>5,840</i>	<i>259.11</i>	<i>121,996</i>

Finally, in terms of educating children, school plays only a partial role in the process. Many parents also send their children to a private tutor for further education. Many mothers

<sup>9</sup> Numbers are rounded, so total does not entirely match.

also spend time every evening helping their children with homework and ensuring that they finish their school assignments on time and properly. A private tutor would receive 2,000-3,000 taka a month for tutoring a child for 1-2 hours a day. The work a mother does to help her child with his/her education often amounts to far more than two hours a day, suggesting that the value of that work is even higher than the amount paid to tutors.

Since most urban workers are paid on a monthly rather than daily basis, monthly wages for different tasks were used, which range from 200 taka/month for washing dishes and cleaning house to almost 20,000 for taking care of the sick.

Calculations were then made in terms of hours/year (hours/day x 365) spent on each task, value/hour (given the amount paid per month and the approximate number of hours per day), and value/year (hours per year x value per hour). For example, the salary paid to someone to take children to and from school and tutors is 600 taka/month. Assuming that such trips are made 20 days per month and occupy 2 hours per day, the hourly wage is (600 taka/month)/40 hours or 15 taka/hour. Adding all these amounts results in a "wage" of 121,996 taka/year (\$1,742.80) for one woman, equivalent to a monthly wage of 10,166 taka (\$145.23). Multiplying that figure by the 24.5 million urban women who are full-time housewives yields the figure of 2,988,902 million taka or US\$42.7 billion per year for all full-time urban housewives in Bangladesh.

For urban women with formal employment, as with rural women, half of the "wage" figure for a full-time housewife was used, on the assumption that most women with formal employment still put in on average about eight hours a day of housework. This amounts, for the 2.5 million urban women

with formal employment, at half the “wage” of a rural full-time housewife (61,000 taka), to a figure of 152,495 million taka or US\$2.18 billion each year.

Adding all the above figures, as shown in Table 5, yields a total of **US\$69.8 billion**. This figure is likely an underestimate, given the very low rate at which traditionally “women’s” work is currently valued and the many tasks which were excluded from the analysis.

**TABLE 5: Total calculation of women’s unpaid contribution**

Category	Value of work in taka (millions)	Value of work in US\$ (millions)
Full-time rural housewives	1,461,606	20.88
Full-time urban housewives	2,988,902	42.7
Formally employed rural women	283,769	4.05
Formally employed urban women	152,495	2.18
<i>Total</i>	<i>4,886,772</i>	<i>69.81</i>

### **Method Two: Shortcut method**

Given the complications of Method One and the difficulty of applying it in other countries, a shortcut method was also attempted. Yet again, as no accurate result exists for the calculations and these attempts are simply to arrive at a reasonable range of magnitude, reducing complication is both desirable and acceptable so as to increase the possibility of such research occurring in more countries.

For this method, consider that women on average spend six hours a day cooking. The rate of payment for cooking for

bachelors in a joint living arrangement is 200 taka per person per month for one meal a day. Of course when someone (usually male) cooks for pay in a restaurant, he will receive a far higher salary.

If the tasks women do for themselves (such as bathing and praying) and leisure time are excluded, it appears from the research that women still engage in about 45 different tasks each day (see Appendix 2). If the rate mentioned above for cooking (200 taka/month, or US\$2.86) is applied across all 45 tasks that women perform, they would receive 9,000 taka/month (US\$129). While it is true that women spend more time cooking than on most other activities, the rate of 200 taka/month is for cooking only one meal a day for one person. Thus the actual time difference between cooking and other tasks should not be so great as may first appear, and as shown above, other tasks pay far more than cooking. In any case, the figure of \$3/month per task is far from exorbitant.

Since all women perform virtually all housework, this figure could be applied across part- and full-time housewives. For the total of 53.1 million women engaged in housework for 12 months a year at 9,000 taka/month, this yields 5,734,800 million taka or about **US\$81.93 billion** per year.

### **Method Three: Using a government salary**

In the interests of both expediency and fairness, it might be appropriate in addition to use a government salary to calculate the value of women’s work. This approach assumes that, given the vital nature of housework and childcare for the functioning of society, it should be paid not at the low rates currently paid for most work done by women but at a rate for work that is considered more valuable. Of course, this ignores

the fact that most women work far more hours per day and more days per year than government workers, which would help balance considerations about an exaggeration of wage for skilled government workers versus “unskilled” housewives<sup>10</sup>. With 53.1 million women in Bangladesh doing housework, at a mid-range government wage of 10,000 taka (\$143) per month, this adds up to 6,372,000 million taka or **US\$91.03 billion**.

## Discussion

“If women’s work has no value, then why do we pay maids?” responded one woman when asked whether women’s household work has value. Yet it is unlikely that either men or women are aware of the magnitude of the contributions women make through their unpaid work.

Each method of calculation used above has its advantages and disadvantages, and there is no escaping the fact that it is impossible to generate a precise, accurate value of women’s unpaid work. It should equally be clear that typical wages do not necessarily reveal the actual worth of the work. Some of the highest-paid people include fashion models and sports stars, and the lowest-paid include social workers and child care workers. Throughout the world, farmers and women, who engage in the tasks most necessary to our survival, earn a fraction of that earned by executives of soft drink or tobacco companies or ad firms, or of arms dealers. Somewhere along

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, housework involves a wide range of skills that women begin to learn as small girls and only master through extensive practice. Housework is no more “unskilled” or housewives “uneducated” than farming and farmers.

the line the value of work to society and the amount people earn have widely diverged, making it extremely difficult to place an *accurate* figure on the worth of work.

Trying to gain an exact understanding of the time women spend on each task is thus in a sense unimportant, as the amount of time will not result in any accurate figure of their worth. Once again, the point of this research is not to arrive at the correct figure but rather to give a sense of the magnitude of women’s contributions by presenting a reasonable range of estimates. That magnitude will vary considerably depending on whether the work performed by women continues to be undervalued or whether it begins to be assigned value based on its essential nature to the functioning of society.

The reasonableness of these estimates may be a source of debate, but a few facts cannot be denied. Women work many hours a day and rarely if ever get a vacation, even when sick. Women perform multiple tasks simultaneously. While these calculations are based on a 16-hour workday for full-time housewives, many women, particularly those with a young baby, work far more hours than that. Many of the jobs women perform cannot be given an economic valuation, such as breastfeeding and teaching children values, and others were left out of the calculations due to complications, yet are jobs worth high pay, such as managing of household accounts and other affairs. Finally, no family or society could function without the work that women perform — something that cannot be said of many of the jobs that receive a far higher salary on the market.

In the case of Bangladesh, a range of methods resulted in very different — yet similar — figures: US\$69.81, \$81.93, and \$91.03 billion. That is, even when undervalued, women’s unpaid

work is worth *at least* US\$69.8 billion per year to the nation. Compare this figure (4,886.77 billion taka) to the comparatively paltry sum of 24.8 billion taka contributed by the tobacco industry from taxes and employment (WHO 2005). That is, women contribute at least 197 times more to the economy than does the tobacco industry — yet while one hears much more about how tobacco is important to the economy and how the tobacco industry pays huge sums in taxes, little if anything is ever mentioned of the contribution of women through their household work.

The figures above are also quite substantial in relation to total GDP for the country, estimated by the International Monetary Fund at US\$60.8 billion for 2005. The estimates for the value of women's domestic work represent 1.1 to 1.5 times GDP. While it might at first seem implausible that women contribute more in household work than all other productive factors, it is helpful to remember that, among other issues, a) GDP excludes most of women's work, so if women's work overall were valued at the same rate as men's, GDP would double; b) women on average work 16 hours a day, which is presumably more than the average figure for men, so their production could well greatly exceed that generated by men; and c) women are responsible for providing some of the most basic and essential goods and services, which should be valued at a higher rate than unnecessary or harmful activities.

Although the authors do not consider GDP a particularly realistic or helpful measure of social or economic well-being, it is significant to note that in Bangladesh, according to these estimates, GDP would increase from US\$60.8 billion to either \$130.6, \$142.7, or \$151.8 billion, depending on the calculation used to estimate the value of women's work.

In the end, the issue is not how to arrive at an accurate figure but rather how to begin to appreciate the magnitude of women's contribution to families, society, and the nation's economy through their unrelenting hard work at the tasks most basic to survival.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The household work performed daily by women without pay is absolutely essential to family, society, and the nation. The very fact that women cannot go on strike should serve as a reminder of the essential nature of their tasks. Men are able to engage in paid labour because of all the work that women do in the home: cleaning the home, washing clothes, preparing food, washing dishes, and engaging in all the tasks involved in bearing and raising children and caring for others.

The above figures illustrate that women make a contribution to the economy at least as large as GDP. Yet the work women do has no visible return: it is considered their responsibility, unskilled work for which they deserve no credit. Looked at differently, women's unpaid work represents a subsidy to the entire economy. Without this work, companies and other employers would have to pay a far higher salary to men to allow them to hire someone to do the domestic work without which they could not go to work, and families — and hence society and the nation — would not function. Women's work is invisible, not valueless.

The Government of Bangladesh has acknowledged in its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) that the contribution of women through their unpaid work should be calculated and properly credited (see Appendix 1), yet nowhere in the PRSP is there any mention of *how* such a calculation could occur. The

calculation of the economic value of women's work is complicated and difficult, as demonstrated above. In this research an attempt was made to calculate the amount that women's work may be worth in monetary terms. This first attempt need not necessarily be considered sufficient or adequate. Further research and analysis would help to arrive at a better figure and to understand more thoroughly the various issues involved in considering how women contribute to the economic wellbeing of the nation through their unpaid work. For instance, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) could elaborate a list of tasks that women perform, by location, age, class, and other variables; that list could then be used to calculate an estimate of the economic value of women's work.

Some additional research and advocacy activities that should be conducted include:

- ❖ Raise people's and policymakers' awareness of the importance of women's contribution, and that spending money on women is an investment in the economic wellbeing of the country rather than an expense;
- ❖ Convince government officials to include women's work in economic measurements of the nation (such as GDP), and to incorporate an understanding of women's value when looking at programs to assist women (such programs representing a tiny return on women's contribution to society, rather than a net cost);
- ❖ Work to involve men in domestic tasks in order to reduce the burden on women;
- ❖ Replicate this research study in other countries, to broaden international understanding of the issue in different contexts.

Calculating the economic value of the unpaid work performed

by women, and adding that value to measures of national wealth such as GDP, would not only significantly increase the sum represented by GDP (in this case, GDP would more than double), but would increase the *value* or meaning of the figure, by including a long-neglected element, the unpaid work of women. It would also contribute to making visible the currently invisible work performed by millions of women throughout the country. As a result, the status of women would likely increase and the treatment of women by their family members and by officials would likely improve, contributing to a more gender-equal society as well as a wealthier nation. It would also help people to understand that government's expenditures on women are not an expense but in fact an *investment*, resulting in both significant financial and other yields to individuals, families, society and the nation. It is hoped that this research will contribute to an increase in the perceived value and the status of women, to the benefit of all.



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## Appendix 1: Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)

The importance of women's unpaid work is mentioned in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) of many countries. In Bangladesh, under the Policy Matrix "Women's Advancement and Rights (Mainstreaming economic activities", the following appears:

- Strategic goal: "Improve women's efficiency (reduce time use) in household & reproductive roles"
- Key Targets: "Raise awareness to improve men's contribution in household activities; ... Attempt to calculate women's household contribution in National Income Accounting by 2007."
- Actions Taken/Underway: "Social auditing initiatives"
- PRSP Policy Agenda: "...Include women's contribution in the National Income Accounting by developing mechanism of shadow price/opportunity cost analysis; Promote equal sharing of household and productive works..."

That is, government policy may state directly, as in Bangladesh, that it is necessary to include women's contribution through household work in national income estimates. Goals of increasing men's contribution to household activities can also be addressed through highlighting the large number of tasks which women undertake, to suggest specific areas in which further sharing could occur. Here again, the greater enjoyment of leisure time by men than women highlights the need, as already stated in government policy, for men to assume more household tasks, thereby reducing the burden on women.

## Appendix 2: List of tasks regularly performed by women

Note: Although we mention 45 tasks, the figure is somewhat arbitrary, as various tasks can be further sub-divided. Naturally, not all women engage in all tasks, and tasks involving childcare of course vary by the age of the child. It is mostly rural women who engage in agriculture-related tasks and animal husbandry, and some of the handicrafts are performed more commonly by rural than urban women. Some tasks are seasonal or occasional, including certain agriculture work and taking care of the sick; some tasks take far longer than others, e.g. cooking is one of the longest. The figure of 45 tasks is thus a rough estimate.

### Agriculture-related

1. Preparing soil, planting seedlings, weeding, etc. for rice paddy
2. Managing daily workers for rice paddy
3. Preparing plot, etc. for vegetable gardening
4. Growing vegetables (watering, weeding, etc.)
5. Managing daily workers for gardening
6. Harvesting
7. Food processing
8. Collecting and drying seeds

### Animal husbandry

9. Caring for ducks and chickens (cleaning, feeding, etc.)
10. Medical care of small animals
11. Collecting and selling eggs
12. Caring for larger animals (cows, goats): cleaning, feeding, etc.

13. Milking cows
14. Taking milk to market

### Handicrafts

15. Making baskets, mats, nets, holders to hang pots, pottery
16. Embroidery
17. Making clothes
- 18. Mending clothes**

### Housework

19. Cleaning the home (sweeping, washing the floors, dusting, putting things away)
20. Cleaning around the home
21. Tending mud floors to keep out dust
22. Making beds, hanging and taking down mosquito nets
23. Washing dishes (3-4 times/day)
24. Hand-washing clothes; hanging clothes out to dry
25. Ironing, folding, and putting clothes away
26. Preparing food for cooking: cleaning rice, preparing and washing vegetables, grinding spices, cleaning fish, etc.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> These activities are very labour-intensive. Cleaning the rice involves sifting it for small stones, then washing it. Many green leafy vegetables require painstakingly peeling strings off the stalks and pulling off the leaves, sorting through for leaves that are spoiled. Chickens and fish generally begin in the whole state; chickens must be killed, plucked, etc., and fish must be scaled. All spices are ground in the home, and everyday this involves cleaning and smashing garlic and ginger as well as grinding spices with a mortar and pestle or a board and sort of rolling pin.

27. Cooking, making bread (3-4 times/day)
28. Tending to and lighting lamps
29. Collecting firewood or other materials for fuel
30. Making fuel from cow dung
31. Carrying water
32. Supervising household help
33. Helping with family business, piecemeal work
34. Preparing various foods for sale (puffed rice, pounded rice, etc.)
35. Caring for family members
36. Caring for children (bathing, dressing, tending, feeding, putting to bed, etc.)
37. Caring for the sick
38. Caring for husband
39. Teaching children, helping with homework
40. Taking children to and from school
41. Feeding, looking after guests
42. Paying bills
43. Shopping for food
44. Shopping for clothes and other household items
45. Managing the household (organizing activities and expenses)
46. Taking the ill to the doctor