

## Politics of Care: Gendered Citizenship and Reproductive Labour in Neoliberal India

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### Abstract

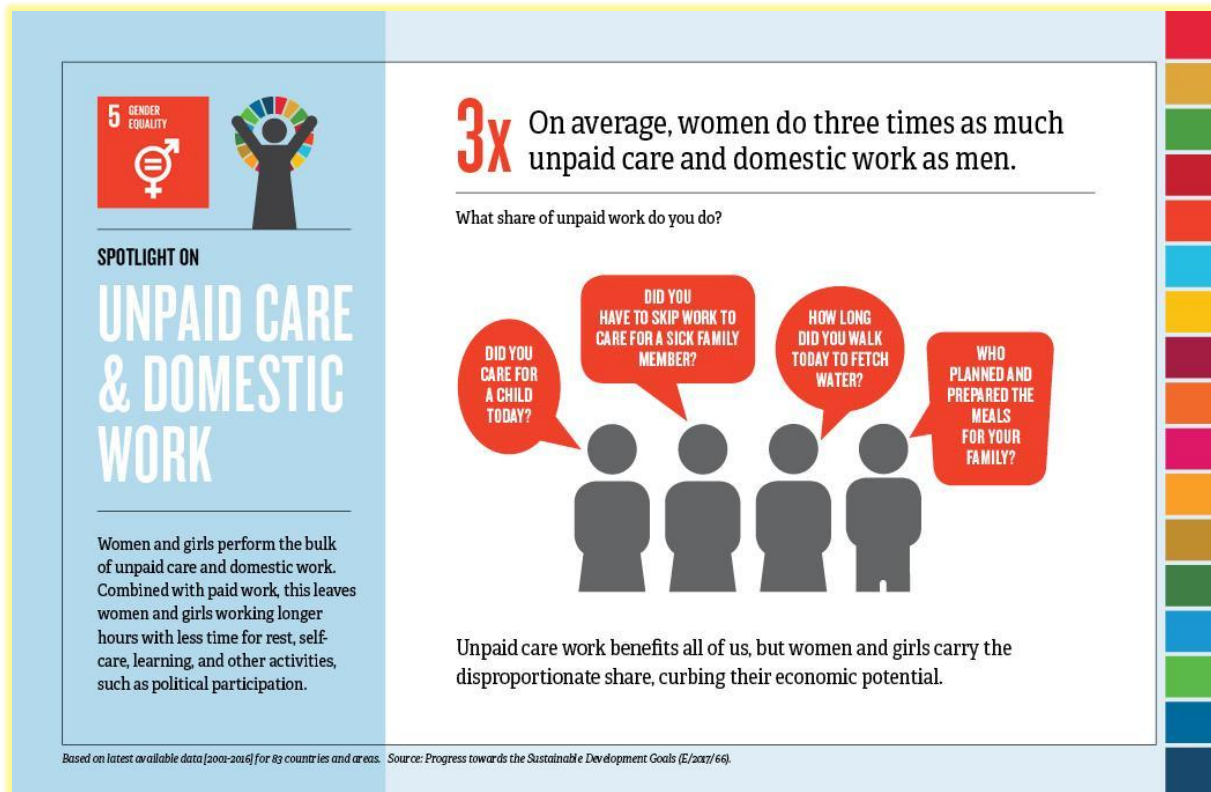
*The politics of care framework is among the most important theoretical tools in analysing the dynamics of gendered inequalities prevailing in modern-day India. In the context of the neoliberal period, reproductive labour, domestic care, emotional labour, and non-compensated household labour have gained significance in sustaining the operation of the capitalist economy, but at the same time have become invisible socially and undervalued economically. Women's labour in the households and communities has continued to contribute to capitalism and development in urban areas in the form of migration and growth of cities, while lacking proper acknowledgement through policies of citizenship or state apparatuses. This research paper will analyse the connection between gendered citizenship and reproductive labour in the context of neoliberal India through an exploration of how women's unpaid and low-paid care labour influences social reproduction, economic survival, and political agency of women. The study will analyse the role of class, caste, patriarchy, and neoliberal governance in restructuring care labour and its implications for women's lives.*

### Keywords

Politics of Care, Gendered Citizenship, Reproductive Labour, Neoliberalism, Social Reproduction, Feminist Political Economy, Care Economy, Women's Labour, Informal Sector, India

### Introduction

The process through which the Indian economy has been transformed since the economic liberalisation measures introduced during the 1990s has brought about changes in the relationship between labour, citizenship, and social relations in Indian society. Neoliberal policies advocated for the privatisation of companies, market-oriented governance, deregulation, and limited involvement of the state in welfare areas such as healthcare, education, nutrition, and social security. Although neoliberal reforms were seen as a means to promote modernisation and economic development in India, their social impact has been highly discriminatory and gendered. More women joined the workforce, but mainly within sectors that were unstable and characterised by temporary contracts with low salaries. At the same time, the role of domestic work remained overwhelmingly dominated by women. The result of this scenario has been that women are compelled to take up jobs within the economy as well as continue performing the tasks expected from women in terms of family management. Therefore, caring was an essential aspect that needed to be taken into consideration as an aspect of neoliberal development in India, where women had to manage the economy as well as provide social reproduction.



Reproductive labour is an important part of the feminist political economy as it shows how reproductive labour done by women, which is generally unpaid, enables the reproduction of labour power and social life itself. Reproductive labour encompasses all those activities done by women in the domestic sphere, like cooking, cleaning, caring, emotional labour, taking care of children, managing the household and ensuring the survival and ability of individuals to come back to work. Reproductive labour expanded in neoliberal India because the public welfare mechanisms were cut down, thus putting more pressure on households, specifically women, to take care of such tasks. The healthcare and educational institutions got privatised, and mothers and caregivers were required to put in more labour that was previously the responsibility of public sector organisations. Poor and low-caste women in India had to enter domestic services or caregiving professions in cities, as they worked as caregivers in middle-class families despite having no caregiver at home for themselves.

Gendered citizenship in India has traditionally been constructed based on patriarchy and certain assumptions about the female identity as a wife, mother, and caregiver, but not as an individual political subject. The distribution of citizenship rights has traditionally been tied to familial structures and relations such as marriage and kinship. In spite of the constitutional guarantee of equal rights under democratic conditions, women's lived realities show continued exclusion in terms of their access to property, movement, employment opportunities, health care, political rights, and control over their bodies. Under the neoliberal system of governance, there is also a trend towards associating citizenship with market activity, productivity, and consumption. Nevertheless, reproductive labour was absent from any economic calculus, even though it is critical for the functioning of capitalist systems. Female domestic labourers have traditionally been treated as people who do not perform wage labour. In other words, the very concept of citizenship came to be gendered because citizenship rights and privileges have traditionally been available only to productive labour.

Neoliberal urbanisation and migration processes have also altered care relations in Indian society. Neoliberal urbanisation processes led to the emergence of newly-formed middle-class families, where women were migrant female workers who worked as housemaids, nannies, cooks, and other forms of care-related employees in the household. Such migrant female workers often originated from rural areas, belonging to poor, low castes, and indigenous people who found themselves in exploitative labour market positions without any benefits or guarantees for a decent life. Through such labour exploitation, women belonging to the middle and upper classes could continue to enjoy their dual-earned incomes and maintain social inequalities among different classes. In that sense, the commoditization of care under neoliberalism did not change patriarchal patterns but just reconfigured them based on social classes and castes. Middle and upper-class women could free themselves from household responsibilities through the employment of poorer women in care jobs, but such an act only shifted reproduction down to more marginal groups in society.

The politics of care is also linked to discussions on welfare, democracy, and social justice in India. Neoliberalism stressed individual accountability and autonomy, cutting down on all forms of welfare. The burden fell on households in dealing with problems like unemployment, inflation, agrarian crisis, and precarious employment. It was women who bore the brunt of keeping their households alive during such times through practices of managing scarcity, taking care of those dependent on them, and maintaining emotional stability in the family. In times of crises, like recessions, communal riots, displacement, and public health emergencies, this burden increased even more. But even then, despite their essential role in ensuring social life, care workers and homemakers remained excluded from state policies and labour rights. Scholars of feminism have accordingly pointed out that true democracy will be impossible to achieve until care is considered a public, collective political matter.

In the current politics of care in India, there is an evident tension between economic development and social reproduction. The neoliberal economy of India relies on the reproductive labour of women that is unpaid and underpaid; however, policies do not emphasise care work over economic productivity. Citizenship in India is conditional on women being able to manage the tensions between productive and reproductive roles effectively, despite lacking institutional resources to support such a task. This results in an endemic care crisis where neoliberal economic changes are experienced by households via gender relations of labour. The analysis of gender citizenship and reproductive labour is crucial for examining how neoliberalism transforms inequality, labour, and citizenship in India. Through analysing the politics of care from a feminist perspective, this paper aims to uncover the invisible basis of economic development and the necessity to rethink citizenship, labour, and social justice in contemporary India.

### **Gendered Citizenship and the Politics of Welfare**

Citizenship in India has never been a purely neutral concept since access to rights, honour, movement, and active engagement in society had traditionally been granted through the mediation of caste, class, religion, and gender identities. In particular, citizenship for women was always linked with their roles within the family structure instead of being based on individual identities. Even when all people became legally equal, women experienced unequal access to property, education, political power, jobs, and personal freedom. Within neoliberalism, citizenship became more and more related to economic activity; however, women's non-economic contributions did not enter that sphere. It led to the establishment of gendered citizenship, where women had to contribute all the time, yet they received insufficient support for this from institutions.

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Empowerment of women was called for by the state through appeals to self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship, whereas their economic contribution continued to take place invisibly behind closed doors and walls of their houses.

Under neoliberalism, the welfare policy was restructured to further impact the link between women and citizenship. The earlier developmental models, at least in principle, accepted some accountability for the well-being of the masses by providing them with subsidised healthcare, food supplies, educational facilities, and employment. But now, under market-driven policies, the burden of welfare is being pushed more and more onto the household or community level. In this context, women played a significant role in making this shift happen as they were meant to shoulder the burden of unemployment, rising prices, food shortages, and dwindling services. Social welfare projects often aimed at women as caregivers who had to fulfil state objectives regarding development at the household level. Maternal health care, nutritional programs, hygiene campaigns, and childcare programs were dependent on the unpaid labour of women without taking into account their economic difficulties.

DID YOU KNOW?

## Women's groups offer both direct and indirect pathways to empowerment

Countries in South Asia have a longer history of women's group activity than in other parts of the world. The typology of women's groups can be categorized either by membership type or primary organizing purpose.

Studies have demonstrated that women's groups are effective at targeting women from marginalized and low-income backgrounds and lead to improvements in household income, livestock ownership, savings and households' ability to withstand economic shocks. In addition, groups also contribute towards increasing women's empowerment, through increased decision-making power, control over household resources, and participation in the public spheres.

While participation is known to improve women's economic empowerment, change social norms, and generate resilience to shocks, studies have shown that the poorest women are often excluded from groups due to socio-economic and cultural barriers in South Asia.



An example of this can be seen in the rise of self-help groups and microcredit schemes. It showed how under neoliberal governance, the idea of citizenship among women was transformed into a notion of financial inclusion rather than structural changes. Women were made to be seen as economic subjects who could survive from their own efforts through self-control, financial management, and active community involvement. Although such schemes gave some economic opportunities to women, they failed to address other forms of inequities in unpaid work, access to property, unequal wages, and social security. Poor women bore the burden

of repaying loans even as they struggled with their household chores and unstable jobs. In this way, the idea of financial inclusion was used in place of welfare provisions.

Neoliberal citizenship in India was also intertwined with morality around femininity, family honour, and caregiving responsibilities. Caregivers who fulfilled their traditional obligations were celebrated as representatives of Indian culture and stability, while women who challenged patriarchal norms were socially ostracised and subjected to intense scrutiny. In political rhetoric, women were presented as custodians of family values and social morality instead of being recognised as citizens with their own rights. This moralistic perspective ensured that women remained obligated to engage in care work even if they had entered the workforce and were earning wages. Care politics is thus a useful lens through which to examine the relationship between neoliberal citizenship and gender, showing how neoliberalism merges economic progress with traditional ideas about women’s roles.

### Care Economy and Informal Labor

The care economy in India is highly dependent on labour relations that are built within informal economies, which rely significantly on the contributions made by socially disadvantaged women. This group includes domestic helpers, caregivers, nurses, sanitation workers, cooks, and other workers who perform their duties in homes. In spite of being the backbone of families and economic activities, they represent one of the most vulnerable segments of the population. Informal care work is marked by low salaries, lack of legal guarantees, absence of medical insurance, and very high levels of exploitation. Domestic servants who are hired to take care of households often work within closed environments, making it challenging to ensure that labour legislation is followed, and they may face insults, caste discrimination, and exploitation at work.

Neoliberal development-driven migration led to an increase in the need for informal caregiving in urban India. The problems faced by rural India, such as distress, agrarian crises, and imbalances in economic development, led many women to migrate from villages to urban areas in search of work opportunities. These women migrated to take up occupations such as housework since such a profession needed no formal education. Middle-class households were forced to use such migrant women workers for cooking, washing, caring for children, and elderly people while they worked for a living. Such a scenario resulted in the creation of a system of care economy whereby affluent households relied on poor women for domestic chores without altering the gendered pattern of caring.

In addition to redefining reproductive labour into commodities, the commodification of care under neoliberalism has reshaped emotional connections in labour systems. Care workers are often required not only to do physical labour but also to demonstrate emotional bonding, patience, loyalty, and nurturing behaviour. For instance, employers of domestic workers claim that “domestic workers are part of the family,” yet they deprive their employees of decent pay and privacy. Emotional requirements make it challenging for individuals to distinguish between labour and love. Women employed in reproductive industries must also engage in emotional labour along with physical labour, developing dependent and trusting relationships while still being economically precarious. According to feminist theorists, such emotional aspects of reproductive labour illustrate the exploitation of capitalism on both physical and relational/affective dimensions of human existence.

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The phenomenon of informalization in the labour market contributed even more to women's economic insecurity in the realm of care production. Flexibility in the workplace was another key element of the neoliberal labour market. In many cases, women were chosen for such forms of employment because employers believed that they were secondary breadwinners who would work for less money and tolerate the uncertainty of employment. Yet in many instances, women's earnings had become crucial for family subsistence, especially those from poorer backgrounds. Thus, informal labour helped capitalism cut costs of production by forcing households to cover the social costs of health care, child care, food preparation, and emotionality.

**Family, Patriarchy, and Social Reproduction**

The family plays an important role in the politics of care because it is the major institution concerned with the social reproduction of society. The patriarchal structure of the family involves a situation where women bear the burden of caregiving while men enjoy more power in economic and social decision-making processes. Women are supposed to undertake all domestic tasks, including cooking, cleaning, taking care of children and older members, and maintaining harmony at home, even when they work outside their homes. This is due to the social, cultural, and religious expectations of women that they should be caring and sacrificing.

The institution of marriage serves to reinforce the unequal distribution of the burden of reproduction via gender-based societal norms surrounding motherhood and house management. Many women may find themselves being pushed into making personal sacrifices with respect to their career goals due to their marital and parental status. Motherhood is glorified as both a moral and emotional obligation, but the real burden of parenthood continues to go unrewarded within society. With inadequate provisions for childcare and a lack of any kind of paid maternity leave or parental rights in general, many mothers are left without any other choice but to stay away from formal workplaces.

Caregiving obligations across generations have also risen owing to changes in demographics and economics. With increased longevity, migration, and deteriorating community support systems, there was more burden on the family to handle elderly care within the domestic sphere. Women are often the main caregivers to their ageing parents, in-laws, and dependents while taking care of children and work. This double duty of being the “sandwich generation” increases the emotional strain and physical fatigue of women. Due to the cultural understanding that elderly care is the family’s duty and not that of society as a whole, there is insufficient public expenditure on caregiving infrastructure within the framework of neoliberal welfare systems.

Social reproduction goes beyond mere biological reproduction and entails the continuation of cultural norms, emotional ties, and the preservation of the community itself. Women are key figures in perpetuating culture, language, morality, and identity from one generation to the next. In times of crisis like migration, unemployment, community strife, and financial insecurity, the nurturing work of women becomes indispensable for maintaining social cohesiveness in their families and communities. Nevertheless, this task frequently involves personal sacrifice, loss of individual freedom, leisure time, poor physical well-being, and economic independence. According to feminist theory, patriarchal societies idealise the contributions of women while overlooking the existing power dynamics that define reproductive work.

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**Women’s Resistance and Feminist Interventions**

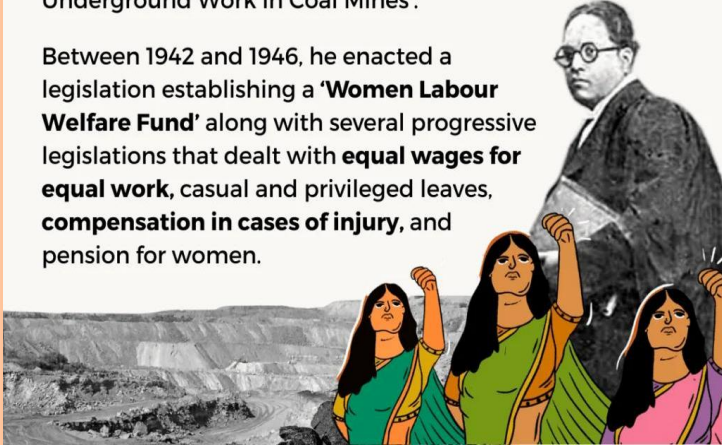
The Indian women's movements have constantly raised issues of reproductive labour and unfair division of care work. In their campaigns for the same rights as men, female activists, trade unions, associations of housemaids, and social movements have claimed the recognition of unpaid labour as an economic issue, not a matter of family life. The struggle for equal pay, maternity allowances, kindergartens and clinics, medical assistance, and labour protection indicated the correlation between inequality and exploitation. Moreover, feminist researchers criticised economic statistics as they ignored unpaid labour despite its major role in economic performance.

Organisations that represent domestic workers have become significant in fighting for better working conditions. Associations representing domestic workers have called for the formalisation of the status of these employees, minimum wages, weekly leaves, respect at work, and social security for them. They challenged the notion that domestic labour was seen as. Furthermore, women workers resisted casteism, sexual harassment, and oppression by employers. Although legislative changes were insignificant, their efforts brought attention to care labour as part of the labour issue.

RIGHTS FOR WORKING WOMEN

Dr Ambedkar as a legislator framed many **laws for women workers and labourers in India** such as 'Minimum Wages Act', 'Women and Child Labour Protection Act' and the 'Restoration of Ban on Employment of Women on Underground Work in Coal Mines'.

Between 1942 and 1946, he enacted a legislation establishing a **'Women Labour Welfare Fund'** along with several progressive legislations that dealt with **equal wages for equal work**, casual and privileged leaves, **compensation in cases of injury**, and pension for women.



Current trends in feminist politics in India are increasingly linked with issues of inequality resulting from neoliberal policies, caste-based oppression, and violence against women. Contemporary feminist scholars and activists have emphasised that gender justice cannot be obtained without altering the very economic system that relies on the unpaid labour provided by women. Thus, the questions of food security, housing, health care, sustainability, and labour relations are now understood as inseparable from the realm of the politics of care. The politics of care is concerned with the importance of social reproduction that lies at the very core of economic relations.

The growth of digital activism and scholarly research into the issue has also brought greater recognition of emotional labour and mental health problems among middle-class families. Modern generations of feminists are actively resisting societal norms concerning marriage, motherhood, and domestic chores. Current discussions around work-life balance, co-parenting, and workplace discrimination reflect greater societal awareness about care politics in contemporary India. Despite the persistence of deep structural inequalities, the contributions of feminism have significantly impacted the understanding of labour and citizenship in neoliberal society.

**Conclusion**

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The politics of care under neoliberalism in India exposes the unseen bases on which the process of economic development, urbanisation, and social stability continues to thrive. The reproductive work done by women supports households, communities, and labour markets, but is systematically devalued in terms of economic policy-making and public debate. Women were burdened with the increased pressures placed on them during the period of neoliberal reforms through the withdrawal of state welfare programs and the shift of caregiving responsibilities to the family. In this way, women emerged as pivotal players in the regulation of social reproduction amidst conditions of economic precarity, informality, and market governance.

In a neoliberal India, women's gendered citizenship is heavily influenced by ideas about the role of women in terms of being care providers and their associated moral obligations. It is assumed that women will make simultaneous contributions to both productivity in the market economy and survival at home, although there is insufficient recognition and protection afforded to them institutionally. The use of women's unpaid labour as an instrument for welfare measures also occurs without acknowledging caregiving as a public concern. The neglect of reproductive work thus perpetuates women's dependence economically and impedes their full exercise of citizenship by depriving them of financial means, participatory politics, leisure, and bodily freedom.

The care economy highlights the uneven flow of labour between different classes and castes even more. The middle-class families in cities now rely on poor and migrant women who work in the care sector, but under very exploitative conditions. This commodification of care ensures that the reproductive burden falls to those beneath them in the social hierarchy, while maintaining patriarchal practices when it comes to domestic duty. However, these women continue to face economic precariousness despite their important role in the economy.

The future of equality in India rests largely on understanding care as a political, economic, and social issue rather than simply an individual or domestic responsibility. Childcare, health care, workers' rights, social safety nets, paid leave, and welfare infrastructure are needed to ensure that the disproportionate burden of care work is not placed on women. Just as crucial is the need to transform patriarchal cultural beliefs that sanctify women's self-sacrifice without placing similar obligations on men. The feminist movement and the working class continue to confront such imbalances by seeking recognition and redistribution of reproductive labour. Ultimately, the politics of care demonstrates that there can be no true equality and justice if care labour remains unacknowledged.

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