

**FROM LOVE TO LABOR: NEGOTIATING PAID CARE WORK WITHIN SRI LANKA’S CULTURAL CONTEXT**HMSC Wijerathna<sup>1</sup> and WSA Wanniarachchi<sup>2</sup>**Abstract**

Care work, encompassing child-rearing, eldercare, and domestic labour remains systematically undervalued and feminized across societies, yet its cultural and economic marginalization takes on distinct dimensions in Sri Lanka. This study explores the barriers to recognizing and remunerating care work as formal labour in Sri Lanka, where religious ethics frame caregiving as a moral duty and merit-making rather than an economic activity. Drawing on feminist economic theory, particularly Nancy Folbre’s “love’s labor” and Arlie Hochschild’s “emotional surplus value”, the paper highlights that care work is rendered invisible through the interplay of religious ideology, neoliberal policy paradigms, and gendered norms. Through qualitative content analysis of scholarly texts, policy documents, and feminist critiques, the research reveals how Sri Lankan women disproportionately bear unpaid care burdens, a disparity exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite care work’s foundational role in sustaining society, efforts to integrate it into labor protections or social security systems face resistance, often dismissed as culturally incompatible or economically unfeasible. The study identifies an epistemological failure in dominant economic frameworks that treat care as a private responsibility rather than a public good. It critiques neoliberal development models for prioritizing market productivity while relying on unpaid care labor to subsidize gaps in public services. The findings underscore the need for discursive shifts, advocating for policy interventions that engage religious leaders, feminist economists, and caregivers in redefining care as collective infrastructure. Recommendations include public awareness campaigns and inclusive policy design that challenges the moralization of women’s self-sacrifice. By situating Sri Lanka’s care economy within global feminist debates, this research contributes a culturally specific lens to broader struggles for recognizing care work as essential labour, asserting that its equitable compensation is both a feminist imperative and a prerequisite for socioeconomic justice.

**Keywords:** care work, feminist economics, unpaid labour, Sri Lanka, gender justice.

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## Introduction

In the global economy, care work, comprising tasks such as child-rearing, elder care, and emotional support, is indispensable to the sustenance of households and societies. Yet, this labour remains grossly undervalued, both economically and socially. Globally, care work is heavily feminized, disproportionately unpaid, and often invisible within formal labour statistics. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that women perform 76.2% of the total hours of unpaid care work, with cultural norms reinforcing its relegation to the private, domestic sphere (ILO, 2018). These dynamics are not merely economic but are embedded in a web of ideological and cultural practices that position care work as a natural extension of women's identities, rather than a service deserving of remuneration.

In Sri Lanka, this obscure is compounded by religious, historical, and socio-political contexts. The dominant Theravada Buddhist tradition in the country constructs care work as a moral and spiritual obligation. Scriptural injunctions, such as those in the Maha Mangala Sutta, extol caring for parents and family as a supreme blessing, framing it as sacred duty rather than labour. This spiritual valorization, while seemingly benevolent, becomes a barrier to recognizing caregiving as economic work. As Kottegoda (2019) explains, the deep intertwining of religion and governance in Sri Lanka contributes to a national ethos in which caregiving is seen less as a service and more as a moral act of *dāna*; selfless giving.

This religious framing aligns with feminist theorist Nancy Folbre's (2001) concept of "love's labor," where caregiving is rendered invisible by its emotional and affective associations. Similarly, Hochschild's (2000) idea of "emotional surplus value" highlights how women's affective labour is appropriated without compensation in both familial and institutional settings. In Sri Lanka, this manifests in the normalized expectation that women shoulder caregiving responsibilities without question or support. These ideologies not only sustain gendered divisions of labour but also foreclose the possibility of formalizing or professionalizing care work through policy.

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the critical but underappreciated role of care work across the globe, and particularly in countries like Sri Lanka, where systemic support for caregivers is minimal. Lockdowns magnified gender disparities in domestic labour, with women absorbing the shock of school closures, elder care, and increased household duties, often while maintaining professional responsibilities (Abeysekara, 2021). Despite this increased visibility, policy discourse in Sri Lanka remains largely silent on the issue of compensating care work or investing in care infrastructure.

This silence is not merely a policy gap but an epistemological one. Dominant development paradigms in Sri Lanka continue to operate within a neoliberal framework that prioritizes measurable productivity and formal employment, thereby excluding reproductive labour from economic accounting. As Fraser (1997) argues, the "male breadwinner" model foundational to most welfare states renders women's unpaid labour as economically irrelevant. These frameworks not only distort the reality of gendered labour but also obscure the potential of care work as a site of policy intervention and feminist struggle.

This paper seeks to address this epistemic and policy blind spot through a culturally grounded desk research study of paid care work in Sri Lanka. It aims to unpack the religious, cultural, and socio-economic barriers that prevent the recognition and remuneration of caregiving as formal labour. Drawing from feminist economic theory, Buddhist ethics, and development literature, the study critically explores whether and how care work can be framed, understood, and compensated within the Sri Lankan context.

The core research question driving this study is 'can care work in Sri Lanka be recognized and compensated as formal labour, given the prevailing religious, cultural, and gender ideologies?' To investigate this, the study is guided by the following objectives: (1) to examine how socio-cultural and religious norms shape perceptions of care work; (2) to analyze the gendered assumptions underpinning unpaid care labour; and (3) to explore the feasibility and public perception of introducing policies for paid care work. It further seeks to answer the following sub-questions: How is care work culturally and religiously constructed in Sri Lanka? What socio-political and

economic challenges exist in recognizing and remunerating care work? What policy interventions are possible or advisable in this setting?

By situating the Sri Lankan case within broader global conversations on care economies and feminist development policy, this study contributes to the urgent rethinking of how societies value, support, and sustain the labour of care.

### **Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative desk research design, relying on secondary data sources to analyze the socio-cultural, religious, and economic dimensions of care work in Sri Lanka. The population for this study encompasses academic scholars, feminist economists, religious ethicists, and policy analysts whose works address the intersections of gender, labour, care, and cultural ideologies in South Asia, with a specific focus on Sri Lanka. Rather than a statistical sample, this study employs purposive sampling to select texts and data sets that are rich in analytical insight and cultural relevance. Key sources include reports by the International Labour Organization (2018), feminist analyses by scholars such as Nancy Folbre (2001) and Arlie Hochschild (2000), as well as Sri Lankan based studies like those of Kottegoda (2019) and Abeysekara (2021).

The analytical strategy used in this study is thematic content analysis. By coding and categorizing the literature into themes such as religious constructions of caregiving, gendered labour divisions, and policy responses to care work, the study identifies recurrent patterns, contradictions, and silences in the discourse. The analysis is guided by a feminist political economy lens, which interrogates how power, gender, and ideology structure economic practices and social norms. By leveraging secondary data through a culturally grounded, feminist lens, this research provides a nuanced understanding of why paid care work remains a contentious and underexplored issue in Sri Lanka, and what pathways might exist for its recognition and reform.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### ***Cultural Perceptions of Care Work***

Care work in Sri Lanka is not merely an economic function but a deeply moral and religious obligation. As Jayawardena (1986) argues in her foundational text *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, postcolonial states often embed patriarchal values within nationalist and religious discourses. In Sri Lanka, the state and religion are closely linked, and Buddhist principles serve as moral guidelines for social behaviour.

In Theravada Buddhist thought, the act of caring, especially for parents and elders, is a form of merit-making (*puñña*) that transcends material value. The Maha Mangala Sutta declares “Mata pitu upatthanam” (supporting one’s parents) as one of the highest blessings. As such, asking for remuneration for fulfilling a religiously and therefore culturally, or even ideologically sanctioned duty is likely to be met with disdain or moral reprimand. This aligns with Hochschild’s (2000) theory of the “economy of gratitude,” where the expectation of emotional labour from women is normalized and unreciprocated. This moral framing not only suppresses demands for compensation but actively delegitimizes any discourse that questions the unpaid nature of such work.

The concept of *dāna*, or almsgiving, reinforces the idea that offering one’s time, energy, and labour without expectation of return is virtuous. This has deep ramifications for how society perceives care work. As Folbre (2001) notes, when labour is seen as an act of love rather than economic production, its value is morally acknowledged but economically ignored. Paid care work is thus seen as transactional and therefore lacking in moral virtue.

Moreover, the recently popularized Sinhala poetic phrase “ගැහැණු වැඩ ඇරි වැඩට යනි”, which, loosely translated, means that women go to work after work, captures the normalization and trivialization of women’s dual burden. Such proverbial sayings not only reflect societal attitudes but also reinforce them. Public perception, shaped by religious, cultural, and linguistic norms, often views demands for compensation as selfish or ungrateful. Hochschild’s (2000) concept of the “second shift” is particularly relevant here, as Sri Lankan women, even when

employed full-time, are expected to return home to a “second job” of caregiving. Moreover, it reflects what Fraser (1997) terms the “male breadwinner model,” where domestic labour is excluded from economic policy and analysis.

Changing these perceptions requires cultural re-education, public awareness campaigns, and the strategic use of media to shift narratives around care. As International Women’s Rights Action Watch (IWRAP) Asia Pacific (2020) notes, public discourse is a crucial arena where gender norms are contested and redefined.

### ***Gendered Division of Labour***

Care work in Sri Lanka is heavily feminized, rooted in gender norms that define caregiving as a natural extension of womanhood. From a young age, girls are socialized into roles that prioritize empathy, nurturing, and self-sacrifice, traits historically coded as feminine. These entrenched gender roles not only influence individual behavior but also shape societal expectations and institutional practices. As a result, care work, both paid and unpaid, is undervalued economically and culturally, reinforcing the perception that it is a private responsibility rather than a collective or state-supported function.

The COVID-19 pandemic starkly exposed the dependency of the formal economy on unpaid care work. During lockdowns, schools were closed, elders needed protection, and healthcare systems were overwhelmed. The burden of these intensified care needs disproportionately fell on women. Abeysekara (2021) details how Sri Lankan women navigated the “everyday” during lockdowns, juggling professional work-from-home obligations while also managing increased domestic and emotional labour. This simultaneous juggling of multiple unpaid and paid responsibilities revealed not only the scale of invisible labour performed by women but also how critical such labour is for the survival of both households and economies. In many households, women became the shock absorbers of crisis, ensuring continuity of care and education while managing heightened emotional stress.

The result was a magnification of the gender gap, with many women reducing work hours, declining promotions, or exiting the workforce altogether. The pandemic thus served as both a crisis and a revelation, highlighting the structural fragility of care systems and the urgency of compensating care work. These outcomes have long-term implications, potentially reversing decades of progress toward gender equality in the labour market. The economic cost is not only borne by individual women, but also by society as a whole, through reduced productivity, talent loss, and greater social inequality. The crisis underscored that care work is not peripheral to the economy, but foundational to its functioning.

The normalization of female caregiving results in structural disadvantages for women. As UN Women (2019) argues, unpaid care work is the primary barrier preventing women’s equal participation in the labour force. In Sri Lanka, this is compounded by limited childcare facilities, lack of eldercare infrastructure, and minimal state intervention, further entrenching gender inequality. These institutional gaps signal a policy failure to recognize care work as a public good deserving of investment and regulation. The absence of supportive frameworks leaves women to individually bear systemic burdens, limiting their opportunities for professional advancement and financial independence.

Globally, scholars such as Razavi (2007) argue that unpaid care work must be re-evaluated as a central component of the economy. The ILO (2018) also calls for comprehensive care policies that recognize the dual burden placed on women. Such calls for reform emphasize the need for integrated care systems, including paid family leave, public childcare services, and support for eldercare. Recognizing and redistributing care responsibilities—across genders and between households and the state—is essential for building more equitable and resilient societies. Sri Lanka's experience during the pandemic can serve as a critical case study in understanding the vulnerabilities created by care deficits and the transformative potential of care-centered economic policy.

### ***Policy Resistance and Public Perception***

The IWRAP Asia Pacific (2020) report discusses the international push for care income campaigns as a form of reparative justice for historically unpaid labour. However, in Sri Lanka, such campaigns are met with ridicule or

viewed as anti-cultural. The State has yet to initiate discourse on compensating care workers beyond domestic work done for elites.

Moreover, the integration of religious values into governance makes secular labour reform complex. As Kottegoda (2019) argues, the absence of a formal care economy infrastructure, such as care centres, state-run elder care, and childcare programs, reinforces the expectation that women should shoulder this responsibility at home.

One of the most significant challenges in implementing paid care work policies is the quantification of care. Unlike formal employment, care work often lacks clear metrics of productivity, outputs, or deliverables. As Razavi (2007) points out, the invisibility of care work in national accounting systems stems from its association with emotions and affective labour, which are seen as unquantifiable.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The undervaluation of care work in Sri Lanka is not merely a policy oversight but a deeply entrenched cultural and ideological phenomenon. Rooted in Theravada Buddhist ethics and patriarchal norms, care work is framed as a moral and spiritual obligation rather than an economic activity, making the notion of compensation culturally contentious. This moral economy, while appearing to honor caregivers, ultimately contributes to their economic disempowerment by masking the material and emotional costs of caregiving under the guise of virtue and duty. Drawing from feminist economic theory and qualitative evidence from both Sri Lankan and global contexts, this study has highlighted how care work remains trapped in the realm of “love’s labor”, seen as immeasurable, feminine, and sacrificial and is thus systematically excluded from labour rights, wages, and social protections.

This ideological framing creates a paradox: care work is essential yet systematically undervalued. While it sustains households, communities, and even national economies, its association with spiritual fulfillment and moral virtue renders it invisible within economic metrics like GDP. Feminist economists such as Nancy Folbre and Silvia Federici have long argued that the romanticization of caregiving masks exploitation. In Sri Lanka’s context, the intersection of religion, nationalism, and patriarchy further cements this erasure, leaving caregivers without formal recognition or institutional safeguards.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the precariousness of this system, as women bore the brunt of increased care responsibilities with little institutional support. Yet, despite the heightened visibility of caregiving, the Sri Lankan policy framework has remained largely inert, constrained by neoliberal development models and cultural ideologies that dismiss reproductive labour as non-productive. Public perceptions, shaped by religious doctrine and popular proverbs, continue to trivialize or romanticize care work, rendering it invisible in economic and legal discourse.

The pandemic functioned as both a magnifier and a mirror, revealing the systemic neglect of care work and the heavy reliance on women’s unpaid labor to keep society functioning. While global discourse began to acknowledge care as critical infrastructure, Sri Lanka’s policy apparatus lagged behind, demonstrating the persistence of neoliberal frameworks that privilege market productivity over human well-being. This inertia is compounded by cultural narratives that uphold self-sacrifice as a virtue, discouraging demands for recognition or compensation. As a result, even in times of crisis, care remains undervalued and unsupported.

Given this context, it is imperative to rethink care not just as a private burden but as a public good, essential to the functioning of the broader economy and deserving of state support. A shift in discourse is the first step, one that reframes care work as labour, rather than as love. Public awareness campaigns, educational reforms, and media interventions should challenge dominant narratives that normalize unpaid caregiving. Religious leaders and cultural influencers must be engaged in this dialogue to reinterpret spiritual teachings in ways that empower rather than exploit caregivers.

Such a discursive shift is foundational. Changing how care is *spoken about* and *represented* paves the way for changes in how it is *valued* and *resourced*. Interventions must begin early, embedded in school curricula and

popular media, to deconstruct the myth that caregiving is a woman's "natural" role. Crucially, involving religious and cultural leaders in this reframing process offers a pathway to reconcile feminist demands with local traditions, ensuring that cultural legitimacy supports rather than hinders transformation. These allies can help bridge the gap between progressive policy and community acceptance.

From a policy perspective, Sri Lanka must invest in infrastructure that supports caregiving, such as accessible childcare centers, eldercare services, and caregiver allowances. The inclusion of feminist economists, care workers, and marginalized communities in policy formulation is vital to ensuring justice-oriented and inclusive reforms. Ultimately, recognizing and compensating care work is not just an economic necessity, it is a moral imperative, a feminist demand, and a step toward a more equitable and compassionate society.

Investment in care infrastructure must be understood not as welfare expenditure, but as economic stimulus with long-term returns. Such investments free up women's time, allow for greater participation in the labor force, and improve overall social resilience. Equally important is democratic policy design, those who provide care, particularly women from low-income and rural backgrounds, must be centered in reform processes. When care work is recognized and supported through thoughtful, inclusive policies, it not only uplifts caregivers but reconfigures the economy to prioritize human well-being, solidarity, and equity.

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