

**VIVEKANANDA COLLEGE  
THAKURPUKUR  
KOLKATA-700063  
NAAC ACCREDITED 'A' GRADE**



**Topic:** Concept of Household Work  
**Course Title:** GE4  
**Paper:** Women Labour and Economy  
**Unit:** 4  
**Semester:** iv  
**Name of the Teacher:** Sonamoni Kunti  
**Name of the Department:** Women's Studies

# CONCEPT OF HOUSEHOLD WORK

As the Industrial Revolution altered the economic landscape, productive work moved from homes into factories, and the character of housework changed. Men and unmarried women left home in increasing numbers to work in the waged labor force, while housewives found themselves doing less productive and more family-related labor. This unpaid work also referred to as *social reproduction*, included bearing and raising children, as well as preparing other family members for work in the paid labor force by cooking, cleaning, and tending to their physical and emotional needs.

As men began to specialize in paid work, housework became increasingly linked to women. In the early nineteenth century, the ideology of separate spheres, associating men with the **(public)** workplace and women with the **(private)** home, became popular. According to this ideology, the home was viewed as pure, serene, and secure, as opposed to the impure, unsympathetic, and uncertain work world. Women, perceived as pious, virtuous, and submissive, became the rightful guardians of the domestic haven, even as their role in productive labor declined. Although more fantasy than reality, particularly in poor and working-class families, the "cult of true

womanhood" linked women's "nature" with the performance of family work.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, many chores previously performed in the home had moved into the public sphere. Fabrics, soaps, candles, and other household items formerly manufactured in the household were increasingly factory-made and purchased by women for use in the home. By the late nineteenth century, households that once produced their own goods had begun to consume the products of U.S. industry (Strasser 1982). In the process, women's unpaid housework came to be seen as less important than men's paid labor, which financed this burgeoning household consumerism.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, the declining importance of housework was countered by the rise of home economics, which advocated industrial-like efficiency in running households. Technological developments, including the spread of electricity and running water, encouraged invention of a number of "labor-saving" household appliances, including electric irons and washing machines. However, these appliances actually saved little time because the early twentieth century also saw a substantial increase in standards of household care (Cowan 1983). Since then, continuous innovation in household appliance technology

has increased the efficiency of many tasks, but these innovations have also promoted higher standards of cleanliness, hygiene, and fashion, which in turn have encouraged women to perform selected household tasks more frequently (such as bathing, laundry, ironing, vacuuming, and dusting). Newer market-based "conveniences"—such as fast-food restaurants, supermarkets, and Internet shopping—have reduced the time that women spend on housework, but only slightly. In the modern era, labor markets and economic conditions have increased women's paid labor force participation and reduced the time that they have available to perform domestic labor. At the same time, cultural expectations that housework is "women's work" have persisted.

### **Domestic work and the *invisibilisation* of women's work in India:**

The traditional Indian imagination of a household almost takes it for granted that certain jobs within the household are to be performed only by women. These tasks can include domestic upkeep, cooking, cleaning and childcare, while a broader definition would also include the hours of emotional labour that goes into holding families together and putting up with patriarchal constructions of what women are expected to tolerate and expect.

However, regardless of the hours of the day women put in to this domestic labour, the work is often dismissed as a set of daily chores and not accounted for in either the GDP or the employment metrics. Since the work done at home doesn't necessarily generate products and services for the market, economists often ignore it in their calculations and the result is that a massive portion of the work done by women in India goes unrecognized as labour and is treated as a duty.

"While much of this imbalance is explained by the discrepancy in care-giving and unpaid work, institutional and policy inertia, outdated organizational structures and discrimination, one additional explanatory factor is the skills differentials in the types of degrees women and men seek out in their education," says the **World Economic Forum (WEF)**.

India particularly, is a country where this phenomenon is at its worst, with women putting in 352 minutes a day into domestic work while men put in only 51.8. While to the common observer, this might not seem like a problem, the fact that 49 per cent of women in a country of 1.3 billion people don't have their work accounted for in the annual GDP, throws up several problems.