Unpaid, Unseen, Essential:

Care Work in Informal Settlements

Dhoke Hassu, one of Rawalpindi's most densely packed informal settlements, wakes before dawn. The first sounds moving through its narrow lanes, hidden behind the muezzin's call to prayers, are not street vendors selling their wares or people leaving for work, but the low clatter of utensils, the soft thuds of water cans taken down, and the soothing smells of women preparing breakfast for their families as they welcome another day. Long before the city stirs, the women's care economy is already in full motion, held almost entirely in the hands of women.

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Lubna is one such woman. Her day begins well before dawn. By 5 am, she shakes herself awake, sorting out the breakfast meal. As she rolls out parathas and ladles piping hot tea, her mind drifts to the tasks that lie ahead. Unlike her own childhood, when school wasn't a regular feature, she pushes her children to go every day. From bed to uniforms, it's a daily fight of reasons to go to school while ignoring the many excuses to miss it. The fight ends at the table, where the children eat breakfast, sometimes sulky and sometimes rushed. Her husband, Nasir, joins in, tired and weary. He is the last to be disturbed in the house. He'd spent another restless night with aching legs, courtesy of his laborious job lifting seed bohris onto trucks for long hauls across Pakistan. Life is not easy for him as he steps out to first walk the children to their school, and then moves onward to another day of the same grueling work.

For Lubna too, the workday is just as endless.

In wealthier neighborhoods, this labor is offloaded to domestic helpers, women and men who keep rich homes running. For Lubna, that is not an option. Like millions of the invisible poor, her neighborhood has limited public services, scarcity of tap water, and crowded homes and transport. Every choice is assessed according to two pertinent questions: Is it urgent? And is it affordable? Those extra ten rupees may mean the difference between a child's smile or sulky glare at missing a chip snack. These daily negotiations do not just determine how families survive, but in such a milieu, whether women can assemble a sense of dignity and afford to work outside the home.

Interviews reveal how deeply the invisible labor of home management is embedded in everyday life. Women describe kneading dough twice a day because electricity is unpredictable and the fridge may not work in

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90-degree heat. The food to be cooked, the cleaning, the elderly care, and on it goes. The thoughts are the same: "If I'm not there, the kids would just be sitting… the tasks cannot be accomplished." It is within these sentences that the unacknowledged infrastructure of home becomes visible.

Moving Through Constraint

Research on informal settlements across South Asia shows that women do not simply "stay home"; they function across multiple spaces to keep their households functioning. Scholars call this the "unbounding" of home: domestic life spilling beyond a single structure into neighboring markets, public water spots, side streets, and employers' homes. In Dhok Hassu, this unbounding begins as soon as the day breaks.

After morning chores, women step into the lanes with purpose. Some carry water containers in rusty wheelbarrows to fill at the neighborhood water bore that opens from 11 am to 2 pm, the long lines a chance for catching up with other women on their lives. Friendship and laughter interweave with the daily grind, moments of brevity that make life easier. Mothers and older sisters walk young children back from school, dodging the water splashes from the open drains and keeping their feet safe from motorbikes that share these narrow passageways.

Mobility, however, is never straightforward. Lubna's husband is not as domineering as some men are. When Lubna speaks of decisions made in the household, she constantly references their joint agreements. In moments of anger, Lubna feels more confident in speaking her mind. That confidence, however, is not persistent and often flags when it comes to her ability to traverse through different spaces. Unable to read, Lubna relies on a literate sister-in-law or her children to aid her in movement. Street names are ignored. Labels are barely glanced at. Bartering is conducted by mouth, and when money is exchanged, notes were initially recognized by color more than by their numbers.

For many other women, mobility is even more constrained. As studies show, a woman walking alone invites questioning and raised glances. In Dhok Hassu, already densely packed, those glances are multiplied extensively. And yet, despite these concerns, households rely on women stepping out. It is this contradiction between social norms and the necessity of daily life that shapes how, when, and where women move in societies still clinging to honor cultures.

Attiya, a young woman who "just works at home," explains that girls in her family are allowed to study "but not allowed to work… they say the girls shouldn't go out," capturing this contradiction clearly. Even in natal homes, boundaries are rigid, driven by what society or the neighbors will say, reinforcing the small circle of the care economy that women must abide within.

Labor and Dignity Intertwined

As the day hums to its close and everyone is already in bed, Lubna cleans up the kitchen, laying out the items for the next breakfast tomorrow at dawn. Rawalpindi, like all cities, relies on the labor of women in the households. Without them, the underbelly of homes would stop functioning; foodless kitchens, dirty rooms, unkempt children. Yet policy dialogues talk of bringing women into the labor force without recognition of the gaps their absence (if that were to happen) would create. How do we begin to shift the dialogue to the invisible care economy, where its importance is hidden in the mundane day-to-day?

For policymakers, the ask is simple: if we are serious about women's work, we have to stop pretending care is free. Urban policy can start small but decisive: plan affordable childcare, elder-care, and safe transport into neighborhoods, not as afterthoughts but as a part of core infrastructure—like water and roads. Recognize home-based and care work as economic activities, and design part-time, flexible, nearby jobs that fit women's real lives. Bring policymaking to the local and district level so that planning becomes realistic and relevant to the lives of women and their families.

Invest in community-run care cooperatives, paid and professionalized, so the care economy creates formal jobs instead of unpaid exhaustion. Most importantly, shift the dialogue: care is not a private burden; it is a public good that keeps our homes and cities alive.

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