



No Time Left: The Emotional Cost of Unpaid Labor

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Time Is the First Thing Women Lose

In neighborhoods like Dhoke Hassu, women's time is scarce. Rationed. Invisible. Hidden behind chaddar and chardiwari. (the shroud and walls). Long before sunrise, the day is a hopscotch of activities. Breakfast is made, children sent to school, floors scrubbed, water stored, clothes stitched, quick market runs, visits to elderly parents. Each task is timed against scarcity: cooking before the gas runs out, washing clothes while sunlight pours onto the shared roof, finishing errands before husbands return from work. By mid-morning, half the day is gone, and none of it was the woman's choice.

This is often described as women being “busy.” That word misses the point. What is really happening is time poverty: when nearly every waking hour is consumed by survival, care, and obligation, leaving no room for rest, learning, paid work, or self-driven choice.

Across South Asia, time poverty is one of the least acknowledged barriers keeping women and girls out of education, decent work, and public life. In low-income urban settlements, women's unpaid labor quietly replaces missing infrastructure. When water does not flow, women fetch it. When childcare is unavailable, women stay home. When healthcare is distant, women delay their own treatment. Paid work, if it exists at all, is squeezed into the margins, never replacing unpaid labor, only layering on top of it.

This pattern is not unique to Pakistan. In India, women spend two to three times more hours on unpaid care and domestic work than men spend in paid employment. Many are forced out of school or formal jobs simply because there are not enough hours in the day. In Bangladesh, climate stress intensifies time poverty: floods and salinity destroy nearby water and fuel sources, forcing women to walk farther and work longer to keep households running. In Pakistan, early marriage and caregiving norms compress women's lives early, turning temporary scarcity into a lifelong condition.

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The Cost of a Crowded Day

Time poverty reshapes women's inner lives as much as their daily routines. Every day, monotonously. Health decisions are governed by the needs of others. Women delay medical care because a clinic visit means abandoning a day's worth of responsibilities. Illness is endured quietly so others are not inconvenienced.

Exhaustion builds through constant mental calculation: If I rest, what will happen? If I stop, who will fill the gap? Women describe feeling anxious and perpetually behind. There is no sense of completion, only the day ending and beginning again. Researchers studying South Asian cities describe this as a divided self, the tension between duty and desire, between who women must be and who they might have been.

Leisure is not only absent but actively discouraged through verbal abuse, and in some cases, physical as well. Wanting time for oneself is framed as selfish in households that rely on women's constant availability. Personal ambitions are postponed, treated as luxuries for a future that never arrives. Fatima recalls being asked to give up her handmade jewelry business to manage household chores. Her mother-in-law promised she could return to it once things settled down. Eight years later, the promise is denied ever having been made.

"No one bought from you anyway," Fatima was told. "Don't waste time on useless things."

Why Time is a Policy Issue

Across urban poor households, women act as shock absorbers for failed public services and unaffordable private alternatives. In Bangladesh, climate shocks stretch women's workdays beyond daylight. In India, the absence of affordable childcare pushes mothers into unstable informal work, where flexibility comes at the cost of income and security. In Pakistan, economic shocks accelerate school dropout and early marriage, shifting domestic labor onto adolescent girls and reproducing time poverty across generations. What is often praised as resilience is, in reality, endurance under unfair conditions.

Time poverty is a systemic failure. Childcare, water, energy, transport, and nearby health services function as time-saving infrastructure. Recognizing unpaid care work, designing jobs around real lives, and measuring time poverty alongside income poverty are essential if women are to participate fully in economies and communities.

Until women's time is treated as finite, valuable, and worth protecting, development will remain lopsided, quietly borrowed from women who can no longer afford to give it.