The Recognition and Redistribution of Unpaid Care Work

a Case Study from Bangladesh
Introduction

This case study looks at the situation regarding Unpaid Care Work (UCW) in Bangladesh. Selina Begum and Lucky Begum, both from Gaibandha district of Bangladesh, share two different ways of life that reflect different realities of a woman’s role in Bangladesh, how this is changing over time and ActionAid’s role in this. The case study uses as background context the findings of ActionAid’s POWER Project Baseline Survey on Unpaid Care Work. Through this survey, we see a difference between women and men’s roles in family and society, as well as looking at how women could gain more time, by reducing Unpaid Care Work, to make a financial contribution to their family. The case study also considers women’s demand for their labour rights, particularly demanding recognition by government of Unpaid Care Work and its value in Gross Domestic Production (GDP).

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1 To learn more about POWER project visit http://powerproject.actionaid.org/
The Whole Day is Occupied by the Burden of Unpaid Care Work

Selina Tells Her Story

“Will a man cook? It is a job of a woman” said Selina Begum. Selina Begum (22) lives in Purbo Kanchipara village in Gaibandha district. She looks after her 3 young children, father and mother in-law and her husband, who is an auto-rickshaw driver. This is a joint family and Selina Begum is the only person who does all the household chores from dawn to dusk, seeing it as her duty.

Selina Begum got married when she was only 12 years old. She has six sisters and one brother. She came from a poor family, where the only person earning money was her father. Immediately after her father died in 2005, her education stopped. She had to get married to Md. Labhlu of nearby village, though she was still a girl. This is a common scenario in Bangladesh, where poverty is the main reason behind early marriage.

Selina Begum gets up early in the morning, when others are still sleeping. She washes the dishes from last night’s supper. Then she prepares the breakfast...
and helps her children to get ready for school. She serves them breakfast, along with her husband and in-laws. In the meantime, she cleans the yard, makes the bed and takes care of her father in-law and mother in-law. Her husband goes to take a shower in the homestead pond. She helps him by laying out his clothes and towel. After the children and husband go out, she manages to have her own breakfast and again washes the dishes. Now it’s time to prepare lunch. She goes out to collect fuel (jute stick) for cooking, makes a spice paste for cooking, feeds the hens and ducks. She cooks rice, a curry, a dal and any fried item for lunch. At the same time, she also sorts the laundry. There is a small garden in her homestead. She seldom gets time to look after the plants and make the garden bigger. But somehow, she tries to manage a little time for that. One of her children comes back from school by this time and she helps him to take a bath. After finishing cooking, she takes away all the cooked items to her room from the kitchen or stove. By this time all the family members

Selina Begum is collecting firewood

Before cooking Selina has to look after many household chores
come back home for lunch. She serves them food. Sometime her mother-in-law helps her to take care of the children. After lunch, she goes to do the laundry and takes her own bath. It is not until 3-4 pm when Selina can find time to take her ‘noon’ meal.

This is not the end. After taking her meal, she again feeds the hens and ducks, takes care of the children and sends them to study. Then she starts preparing dinner. Her husband then returns home for the evening. She gives him water and towel, checks on the needs of her children and in-laws, puts the hens and ducks back in their hut, finishes cooking, serves the family their dinner. Then she helps the children to prepare their school bag for the next day at school and then prepares the bed for sleeping. She then tidies everything away, goes to her in-laws room to help them with preparing their bed, switches off the lights in every room. Finally, she goes to sleep.

Thus, Selina Begum spends her whole day without a break from Unpaid Care Work. Routine work continues from waking up until night time. She spends 10 hours every day on Unpaid Care Work while her husband, who contributes only occasionally, does 3 hours. Sometime she feels exhausted in doing all this. No one is there to help her. Ever since she came into this house as a bride, she has been passing her days in this way.

Majeda Begum (60), Selina’s mother in law, says, “This is the work of the daughter-in-law. It is her duty to take care of us all and do all the household chores.”
Occasionally Selina’s husband tries to help her. But if he does, people around them make fun of it. The elderly people take it for granted that women will do all the care work. They cannot imagine that men would do cooking or clean the house.

Dosijol Munshi, Imam of Purbo Kanchipara village mosque and father-in-law of Selina said, “Sweeping house, washing clothes, washing dishes, taking care of children, taking care of in-laws are the work of women. Why would man do that?”

Alam Mia, a neighbor of Selina Begum said, “We have seen from our ancestors practice, all the household chores are done by the women.”

A farmer of this village Ayjol Uddin thinks, “Women should stay at home. Why would they need to go outside?”

Selina shared with sorrow that her role is not appreciated, not even recognised as a work. Moreover, she has to listen to scolding and complaints about her role. Her husband says that she does not do anything at home. He has to work all the day for money. Instead of getting help from other family members, she gets such treatment.

She thinks doing work like vegetable gardening could be a way to generate some income, but it is difficult as she does not get any time. The burden of Unpaid Care Work means no opportunity for economic empowerment for Selina Begum.
Background Context:

Research and Baseline Findings

These activities, especially family care work, are essential for living. They are usually done by women and have no economic and social recognition. They are known as **Unpaid Care Work**. This work includes: cooking; child care; collecting firewood; fetching water; household work (including cleaning, washing, feeding etc.); and caring for the elderly and sick family members.

Patriarchy, stereotypical social norms and long-lasting practices are all reasons behind this situation. This role has been imposed upon women since ancient times and our accustomed views prevent us seeing how it is the women only who are doing these tasks. Moreover, it has been taken for granted that these are women’s tasks only.

Like Selina Begum, women in Bangladesh spend most of their time in household care work, though it has no recognition in the family, society or country. It has no economic value. This scenario is more or less the same everywhere in all the villages and cities in Bangladesh.

Usually men are involved in the economic sector which makes them more empowered. And women are disempowered as they remain stuck in the day-long household work, which means no opportunity for them to get involved in...
productive work and contribute to the economic sector. For this reason women are dependent on the male members in the family. The importance of women’s household work is not even discussed in case empowerment. Moreover, women lose the right to freedom of expression because they have to depend on men even for fulfilling basic needs like food and clothes. The idea of being self-reliant seems far-fetched.

Unpaid Care Work is one of the main obstacles to achieving women’s economic empowerment. This work often remains invisible in National Accounting Systems much to the disadvantage of women who spend much of their waking hours doing such work throughout their lives. Nor is it incorporated in the National Labour Force Survey. However, the demands are increasing to recognize this labour and to include it in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In addition, campaigns are ongoing to inspire men to recognise and participate in Unpaid Care Work. ActionAid Bangladesh’s Baseline Survey under POWER Project reveals that 75% of policy makers at local and national level are agreed on this point. However, due to a lack of concerted initiatives and coordination, this issue is yet to be implemented.

A survey conducted by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in 2012 also shows that women over the age of 15, who are not employed, spend 6.2 hours a day on Unpaid Care Work, while men spend 1.2 hours a day.
ActionAid Bangladesh has been working on the issue of Unpaid Care Work since 2013. A survey from 2013 to 2015 using the ‘Time Diary’ conducted by ActionAid Bangladesh shows that, if she lives to 70, a woman spends almost 12 years of her life in the kitchen.

ActionAid Bangladesh research on “Changing Patterns of Time Use Results from Women’s Collectives in Bangladesh, 2015” shows that child care and cooking are the areas of Unpaid Care Work that take most time. On average, women still engaged 6.3 hours in Unpaid Care Work out of a total work time of 15.3 hours, which is 41.4% of their total work time. On the other hand, men spent 1.1 hours on Unpaid Care Work which is only 7% of their total work time (15.3 hours).

In 2016, ActionAid Bangladesh carried out another research on “Time Use of Women and Men under Promoting Opportunities for Women’s Empowerment and Rights (POWER) Project”. It was found that women spent on average around 8 hours in Unpaid Care Work which was more than men, who spend approximately an hour and a half on it daily. On the other hand, women spend around an hour in paid work whereas men spend more than 5 hours in work they get paid for. It is also to be noted that, whereas men and women spend almost the same hours in productive work (women 3.23 hours and men 3.42 hours), men spend more time in non-productive work i.e. 5.19 hrs for men compared to 3.92 hours for women.

According to the Baseline Survey done by POWER Project in 2016, it categorised women and men’s work in the following table

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2 Time Diary is a useful tool in analysing comparative studies between men-women, rich-poor, rural-urban people. The Time Diary keeps the hourly note on time spent in several works. Using the tool, time spent in Unpaid Care Work by a person can easily be measured. Generally, there are two types use of Time Diary, such as- Grid Time Diary (illiterate people can use it) and Tanzanian Time Diary (only literate people can use it). ActionAid Bangladesh uses the Grid Time Diary. Find the Time Diary at http://powerproject.actionaid.org/
The major categories of work are Productive Work and Reproductive Work. The term reproductive work has been used in the Baseline instead of Unpaid Care Work. Productive work includes income-generating activities, such as employment, self-employment, farming, livestock, fishing, post-harvest, weaving, sewing, textile care and travelling and commuting. Unpaid Care Work includes cooking, fetching wood, fetching water, domestic work, care of children, care of adults, and eldercare. It also includes shopping and obtaining services such as healthcare.

The survey tells us that, ideally, both women and men were comfortable in sharing Unpaid Care Work equally, but this agreement then broke down when the research team asked about concrete tasks and who should do them. Unpaid Care Work is considered “low status” and yet both women and men report high levels of satisfaction with traditional roles. A complicating factor is that men often overestimate their own contributions to care work, while also underestimates women’s labour. Focus groups also significantly overestimated men’s time devoted to economic activities when compared with Time Use Diaries.

The POWER Project Baseline Survey covered 500 families with 1000 Respondents (both husband and wife, if a woman headed family, then a male member of that family responded) including 500 women of Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat districts in 2016. It reveals that the majority of people in this area do not consider these household chores as ‘work’. 52% of men against 39% of women expressed agreement with the statement that women should stay home instead of engaging in economic work. 45 men and 35 women out of 100 think that these works do not sit with a man. Half of the male interviewees think that women should not step out from the home. 39% of women support this view and typical gender norms. 50% of men and women believe that Unpaid Care Work is the duty of women only (Figure 1; Page 9).
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The Baseline Survey also shows that, during a typical day, women do approximately 2.8 times the amount of Unpaid Care Work that men do. There are gender differences in the perceptions of who contributes to domestic chores. Men tend to underestimate women’s labour contributions. Redistributing Unpaid Care Work will require a cultural shift among both women and men. On the whole, women reported in focus groups and in key informant interviews that they welcome and enjoy the age-old gendered division of labour in Bangladesh. Just as men regard some work as feminine and 'low status,' many women regard earning money as ‘masculine’. It is common for both men and women to view Unpaid Care Work as ‘women’s duty’.

Women and men spend about 40 minutes a day on social, cultural, and religious activities, according to Baseline Survey data. Men spend an hour a day and women spend 25 minutes on mass media use. Women now participate in NGO meetings and in social gatherings, but only to a very limited extent. Engaging more women in group activities means more women can gain a better understanding of their rights, their opportunities and their role in the household, thus creating a virtuous circle.

The Baseline Survey recorded how men and women allocate their time among productive work, leisure time, and personal activities in the last 24 hours (Table 1; page 10).
Table 2 presents the percentage of respondents that said whether the number of hours they worked during the previous 24 hours was more than usual, the same as usual, or less than usual.

In addition to redistributing the work in the family, particularly with male members, the burden of Unpaid Care Work can be relieved by initiating community level low cost Child Care Centres, which has been demonstrated through ActionAid Bangladesh project interventions. In addition, increasing availability of improved or environmentally friendly cooking stoves (which helps to reduce time use and is more healthy) can also be a good option to reduce Unpaid Care Work for women in rural areas.

Figure 2 demonstrates how men and women respondents described a typical day. Total work is the sum of Productive Work and Reproductive Work.

Figure 2  Time allocation in minutes/day

Women spend 10.4 hours and men spend 9.7 hours on total work comprising of the sum of Productive and Reproductive Work.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than usual</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the same as usual</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than usual</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>522</td>
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### Law and Policy: Bangladesh Situation

Unpaid Care Work done by women is not counted as labour in the legislation and policy of Bangladesh. There is no mention of such work in any economic statistics. However, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs recently included Unpaid Care Work as third in the ‘Priority Development Agenda 2015’. Section 23.10 of the ‘National Action Plan 2013’ of the `Jatio Nari Niti 2011 (National Women Development Policy) included the need for valuation of women’s household work (unpaid care work)’ and its inclusion in GDP. But there is yet to be an initiative to implement this action plan. On the other hand, the Government needs to take steps to value and redistribute Unpaid Care Work to achieve the target 5.4 of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.
Change Story:
Where The Typical Norm Has Been Shifted

Despite the challenges raised in Selina’s story and ActionAid’s baseline and research findings, we can also look at an example of the shifting role of women from one of the ActionAid project implementation areas.

Lucky Begum is very popular as ‘Netri (Leader)’ because she comes forward first when anyone in her region has a problem. Lucky Begum from Purbo Chandia village of Gaibandha district is leading the Fulchori Women’s Federation. As Chairperson, she maintains networking and linkages with different government and non-government service providers at Upazila and District level. She also lobbies with government service providers and ensures different services are available for the members of women groups and others.

Lucky is the chairperson of a women’s group called Ujjol Upahar Women’s Group consisting of 25 members. She has been engaged with the group since 2006. ActionAid continued supporting the women of the group to organise and mobilise through partner organisation. Now, the members of the Ujjal Upahar have become the participants of POWER project, as well as Lucky Begum.

However Lucky’s path to this was not easy. Lucky Begum (36) came to Purbo Chandia village as a bride when she was 17. Now she is the mother of three children. Her husband, Md. Anarul Islam is a day labourer. With only the income from her husband, it was very difficult for them to bear all the family expenses. Sometimes, it was not possible to manage three meals per day for the family. It was in this situation that she joined Ujjol Upahar women’s group: to try to make changes in her life.
Over a period she received training from ActionAid interventions. Through these sensitising initiatives, she learnt about so many issues such as Unpaid Care Work-UCW, Rights, Women Rights, Violence against Women, etc. Through these interventions she enriched her knowledge, developed her capacity and increased her confidence. Different awareness meeting were also organized with traditional and religious leaders, men, and boys about the redistribution of care roles to sensitize the community. Spouse meetings were arranged to change husbands mindset on Unpaid Care Work. After these activities, the changes began to manifest slowly. Women members started getting support from the community as well as husbands. Lucky’s husband was convinced and now plays a supportive role in her work and appreciates her engagement with the group.

Now, Lucky Begum’s daily life is not like most other women’s. Her ‘to do list’ consists of tasks including outside and household chores. In the morning, she and her husband, Anarul, prepare breakfast together. After that Anarul goes for his shower. He also takes the younger child with him and helps him with his shower. Besides cooking, this couple shares the care work for children among themselves. After preparing it, the family takes their breakfast together.

The support from her husband for doing the Unpaid Care Work is very important. Otherwise, Lucky Begum would not manage time to go to the weekly meetings with Ujjol Upahar group. Since then, group members started making savings with their limited contribution. When they had enough capital, they invested in a business.

Anarul Islam’s says, “As I could support my wife doing all the Unpaid Care Work, she could manage time to engage with income generating work. Now
she is an honorable person in the community and she secured a position here. She can take decisions on her own and became a member of different committees.

Through her work in this group, Lucky’s leadership capabilities and ability to solve problems became visible to everyone. She is one of the first to protest when there was a case of early marriage or sexual harassment. People started calling her to local arbitration meetings and she was elected as the Federation President. She got involved in various local decision making structures as School Management Committee, Social Development Committee etc. She is also the Cashier of Kanchipra Union Women’s Federation.

She is continuously working to reduce the burden of Unpaid Care Work and improve the economic empowerment of women in her community. In 2016 she ensured the following services for her group members: 5 old-age allowances, 4 widow allowances, 2 disabled persons allowances, 12 VGF cards, 32 people of her village including group members got enlisted for the 100 days working scheme, 3 people got enlisted with the agricultural subsidy. Likewise, in 2017 her group members also receive agriculture inputs.

To change the women’s position in the family and society, the women’s group and federation members mobilised the whole community and established the ‘Dhanar Para Day Care Centre’. Children from 6 months to 4 year old are
enrolled in the centre and it helps mothers to keep their children in a safe place while they engage in productive work. The federation takes care of the centre.

When Lucky and her husband are busy with work, their children spend time in the Dhanar Para Child Day Care Centre. In this place, children enjoy themselves and learn from morning to evening. They only go to home for lunch. Due to this centre Lucky gets some time to engage with income generating works like tailoring, cow fattening etc. By doing so, Lucky made changes in her life and livelihood.

Amena Begum, mother in-law of Lucky says, “Now I help my daughter-in-law with household chores so she can get engaged with income generating activities and contribute in family and taking decisions.”

In addition to that, due to Lucky’s leadership and contribution, Fulchori Women’s Federation became a member of two farmer’s network- Kendrio Krishok Moitree (KKM) and Prantojon, which are working across the country. Lucky is maintaining regular communication with the forums and networks. Lucky has been able to establish herself as an independent and responsible leader. In 2017 she was elected as Executive Member of KKM consisting of more than 15,000 farmers across Bangladesh.
In addition, she also made her own identity as a leader for her contribution to women’s welfare and development. Now she is a member of the Social Development Committee of Union Parisdhad (the lowest tier of the local government in Bangladesh). She received ‘Joyita Award’: a government award provided to women activists at community level who have made a significant contribution to bringing changes in their own and others lives.

Kanchipara Union Parishad member Sadekur Rahman said, “I think all that more women should step ahead like Lucky Begum and advance themselves. Lucky has been engaged with different community structures as she became more confident on her own and received the skills development training from ActionAid.”

Lucky is a successful woman. As her husband participated in all the household chores, she was able to do this and to get involved with income generating activities. Lucky wishes to share the experience she gained with other women.

Lucky says, “I do not want any other woman to pass such a miserable life like I did before. That is why I am working for other women. I will not let anyone torture any women in my area. I have stopped so many early marriages. A daughter of a group member was being dragged to such a situation. I stopped them with the support of all the women members of our group.”
Now Lucky is busy with the income generating work of the Ujjol Upahar group. Earlier, they made paper bags but collecting raw material became a challenge here, so they searched for alternatives. Now they have cow rearing as their income generating activity.

This way she contributes to her family and changes her role in her family. Their engagement (she and her husband) with POWER and previous ActionAid projects creates scope for such change. But Lucky says, “Still there is long way to go to bring such change in the whole community and we are working for that. I will continue my journey for the betterment of the women of my community and beyond.”
Concluding Remarks

Over the last year, ActionAid Bangladesh has scaled up work, focusing on activities which aim to increase understanding and reduce the burden of Unpaid Care Work on women. This has included: supporting women members of the groups to mobilise on Unpaid Care Work, women’s rights and human rights and supporting sensitisation meetings with religious and community leaders, market management committees, and local men and boys to raise awareness around the issue. The community was also mobilised to challenge social norms which caused an unfair distribution of unpaid care work. Men and women filled in ‘Time Diaries’, which showed how much Unpaid Care Work was done each day by women versus men, making the community aware of the disparity of this burden.

Member of the Women and Child Welfare Committee of Purbo Chandia Union Parishad Mr. Liton Mia said, “If Unpaid Care Work is redistributed in the family and the household chores are distributed with male members, women can utilise the extra time to become involve with economic and productive work. They can get engaged with different structures.”

Because of the sensitisation work on unpaid care, male community members have become more aware about women’s roles and contribution to the family. They are much more supportive to their spouses, supporting them by...
taking on some of the Unpaid Care Work such as washing, cooking, collecting firewood and water. The social stereotype of it being only women doing Unpaid Care Work is slowly changing, with the community realising that this is also ‘work’ and that it is both valuable to the community and causes a barrier for women engaging in other activities.

As a result of the paradigm shift, women in the community have more time to do income-generating work and to engage socially. But changing embedded social norms takes a long time.

Selina is still burdened with the duty of care work and not getting any opportunity to make any changes to her life, although POWER project started to work with her recently. For Lucky, in comparison, years of engagement with ActionAid and the support of her family, along with the community as a whole, have enabled her to become a strong advocate for women’s empowerment. And this, in turn, has caused her to flourish and grow in confidence. Previously the community’s’ perception about her was as a caregiver only. Now she has gained respect among her peers.
Acknowledgement

2017 ActionAid France and ActionAid Bangladesh

This paper is written by Noore Jannat Proma with Md Helal Uddin and Jane Lennon

We are grateful to Zehra Simeen Islam Rahim and Sheikh Manjur -E-Alam for their inputs, Selina Akhter of SKS Foundation for her support.

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