

Motherhood and Unpaid Care: An Integrated Review in the Indian Context

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Abstract

Transition to parenthood is a significant life event that often increases the burden of unpaid care work on women, disproportionately affecting their economic independence, career trajectories, and personal well-being. This integrated review examines the global and Indian contexts of motherhood and care by combining a bibliometric analysis of 4,216 studies published between 2000 and 2024 with a targeted content review of 12 Indian studies. Globally, childcare emerges as a central component of reproductive labour with preschool caregiving identified as particularly labour-intensive and demanding. In the Indian context, deeply entrenched cultural norms and patriarchal structures exacerbate the gendered division of labour by ascribing the primary responsibility of caregiving to mothers. Economic constraints further compound these challenges, particularly for low-income households where mothers face a "double burden" of paid work and unpaid care responsibilities. The lack of affordable childcare and flexible work arrangements often forces mothers to exit the workforce, perpetuating economic vulnerability. Policy gaps in India such as the lack of accessible childcare and paid parental leave further hinder maternal employment and well-being. This review highlights the urgent need for systemic interventions, including affordable childcare, flexible work arrangements and policies that recognize and value unpaid care work.

Keywords: unpaid care, childcare, motherhood, India.

I. Introduction

Transition to parenthood is a significant event in a couple's life which brings changes to family dynamics, especially concerning the division of labour within the household. The birth of a child increases the amount of housework and puts pressure on parents to earn more money (Gjerdingen & Center, 2005; Solera & Mencarini, 2018; Zoch & Heyne, 2023). Another major shift for new parents is how they split household work, which usually becomes more traditional with women doing more unpaid work after the transition to parenthood. Studies from the Global North show that parenthood tends to lead to a highly gendered division of time with women spending more on household tasks (Craig & Mullan, 2010; Dribe & Stanfors, 2009; Kühhirt, 2012). Interestingly, in the early 1990s, studies found that women often felt the division of family labour was fair, even when it was clearly unequal (Major, 1993; Thompson, 1991). This raises the question of what influences feelings of fairness around household work after having children. Major (1987, 1993) and Thompson (1991) developed a framework to explain this. Their idea was that perceptions of fairness depend on three things: personal wants and values, standards used for comparison and justifications or rules that make the outcome seem acceptable.

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Most women, whether they work outside the home or not, handle housework alone or with other female family members. A long-term study by Yavorsky et al. (2015) illustrates how household tasks are split between men and women after becoming parents. The results showed that women's total daily work increased by three hours, while men's work increased by about 40 minutes. Over a year, this meant that women's workload increased by around 4.5 weeks of 24-hour days, while men's increased by 1.5 weeks—a difference of three weeks. When childcare was included, the gap narrowed slightly to 2.6 weeks. Additionally, studies suggest that having a baby often pushes partners toward more traditional roles, including who does the housework, paid work and even personal interests (Miller, 2017). Many women find this shift frustrating as it limits their independence in an era that promotes gender equality (Brunton et al., 2011). These frustrations may reflect changing expectations about identity and independence for women.

Becoming parents also brings changes to relationships, often reducing time for leisure and shared activities and leading to lower sexual satisfaction (Huston & Vangelisti, 1995). Intimacy and communication can also suffer as time and energy go into caring for the child (Kluwer et al., 2002). Studies show that, on an average, marital satisfaction tends to decline after the birth of a child, especially for mothers, with more conflict and disagreements reported compared with before the baby arrived or compared with non-parents (Kluwer et al., 2000; Crohan, 1996).

In some cultures, motherhood defines women's roles and limits their independence. For example, in many African cultures, a "perfect wife" is seen through her roles as a wife and mother (Timlin, 2017), meaning that a woman's identity is tightly connected to her home and family. In these communities, this is often the main way women are identified and assigned roles. Demographers and economists have often suggested that having more children reduces the likelihood of women working, a concept called the "motherhood penalty" (Correll et al., 2007; Miller, 2010; Francavilla & Giannelli, 2011). This theory argues that higher fertility makes it harder for women to join the workforce (Adair et al., 2002; Cruces & Galiani, 2007; Bloom et al., 2009). However, research in low- and middle-income countries (LMI) shows that this connection isn't always so clear. In these countries, even though women have gained access to education and jobs and fertility rates have fallen, women's participation in the workforce has stayed the same or even declined (Bongaarts et al., 2019; Kuhn et al., 2018; Sarkar et al., 2019).

India is a good example. Fertility has dropped significantly, economic growth has increased and more women have gained education over the last 20 years, but female workforce participation has still gone down (Chaudhary & Verick, 2014; Desai & Joshi, 2019). This pattern is often due to gender-based challenges, including social norms, beliefs and values that shape men's and women's roles differently. Across the world, men are more likely to work, reflecting traditional views that men are responsible for providing for the family. Having fewer children may improve women's well-being and create more chances for them to work and earn income (Adair et al., 2002). Early marriage and having children at a young age are often linked to higher fertility and less education, which can lower women's workforce participation (Selwaness & Krafft, 2021; Yount et al., 2018).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the field of care work, particularly in understanding the dynamics and challenges involved. However, the specific burden of care following the transition to parenthood remains a relatively underexplored area within this broader field. To address this gap, we conduct a bibliometric review of scholarly literature published over the past two decades. By analyzing the keywords and trends of these papers, we aim to gain insights into the evolving research landscape surrounding the transition to parenthood and the ways in which care responsibilities are distributed and managed during this critical life stage. Through this analysis, we seek to identify emerging patterns, shifts in focus and potential areas for further investigation.

Building on this foundation, a targeted content review was conducted to focus specifically on studies from India with the goal of assessing the current body of knowledge surrounding care work in the country. This review sought to identify key themes and trends in the existing literature, while also pinpointing significant gaps that may warrant further investigation. By examining studies conducted within the Indian context, the review aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of how care work, particularly unpaid and reproductive labour, is conceptualized and experienced in India.

II. Data and Methods

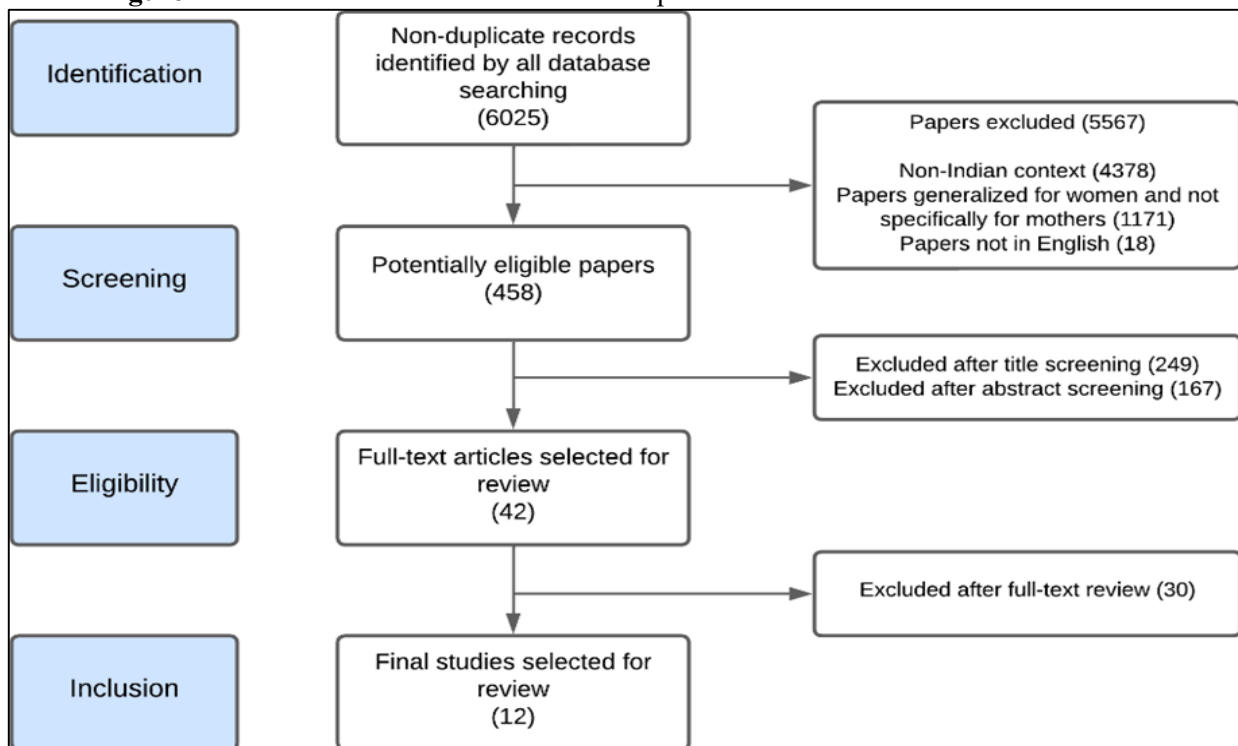
A comprehensive bibliometric analysis was undertaken to examine the primary types of care that have been studied over the past two decades spanning from 2000 to 2024. This analysis aimed to identify key trends, themes and gaps in the literature related to caregiving, with a particular focus on the role of mothers in unpaid and reproductive labour. To ensure a thorough exploration of the topic, searches were conducted across four major bibliographic databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, Science Direct and JSTOR. These platforms were chosen for their wide-ranging collections of scholarly articles, ensuring a diverse and representative sample of the available research.

For the literature search, a specific set of keywords was used to target relevant studies. The terms "unpaid," "unpaid work," "care work," "unpaid care" and "reproductive labour" were combined with the keyword "mother" to capture studies that focus on the caregiving responsibilities primarily shouldered by mothers. These keywords were selected to encompass various aspects of care work from the more general concept of unpaid labour to the specific context of mothering as a form of reproductive labour. By using this combination of keywords, the search sought to identify a wide range of studies that explore not only the economic and social dimensions of caregiving but also the gendered nature of care work and its implications for women's roles in the society.

For the content review, a three-phase methodology was utilized to search the relevant literature, which included a key term search, a title screen review and a content screen review. The study involved searching four major bibliographic databases—Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and JSTOR—using a set of carefully chosen keywords. These included terms such as ("unpaid" OR "unpaid work" OR "care work" OR "unpaid care" OR "reproductive labour") AND "mother" AND "India". This search strategy initially yielded a total of 6025 articles. Figure 1 shows the PRISMA Framework followed for the selection of the articles for the review.

After refining the search, 4378 studies were removed as they did not focus on India and 1171 articles that generalized to women rather than specifically focusing on mothers were also removed. Additionally, 18 non-English articles were excluded, leaving a smaller pool of relevant research. These 458 papers were then stored for a title and abstract screening. Upon reviewing the titles and abstracts, 416 studies were excluded as they did not meet the study's focus on motherhood and care experience. The remaining 42 articles were then subjected to a more thorough content screen, which led to the exclusion of 30 studies that did not align with the study's objectives. This process resulted in a final selection of 12 studies for a detailed review.

Studies were included in this review if they met several key criteria. They had to focus specifically on mothers or parents, be published in English and come from peer-reviewed journals. Studies that were only available in abstract form or those that generalized to women without a specific focus on mothers were excluded. This rigorous process ensured that the studies included in the review were directly relevant to the research question and aligned with the study's objectives of exploring the burden of care after transition to parenthood.

Figure 1: PRISMA Framework for Selected Papers

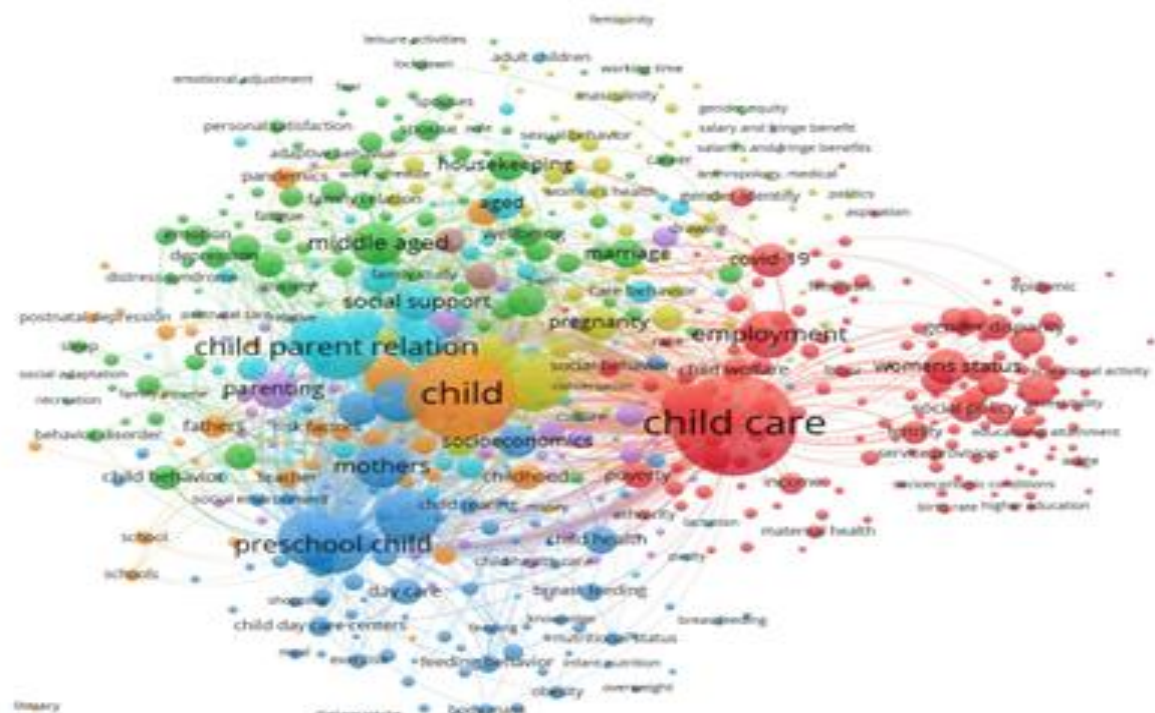
III. Results

Global scenario

The keyword co-occurrence network (Figure 2) from the bibliometric analysis of 4,216 studies (2000-2024) reveals a strong focus on "child care," highlighting it as a central component of reproductive labour. This focus on childcare suggests a sustained research interest in the responsibilities associated with caring for young children, a significant part of unpaid labour often borne by women. As childcare remains a critical responsibility for parents, particularly mothers, understanding the factors influencing its distribution, the burden it creates, and its societal implications is of great interest. This focus raises important questions about the gendered division of caregiving and its broader socio-economic consequences, particularly in terms of economic inequality and women's access to paid work.

Furthermore, the recurring appearance of "preschool child" as a key theme, points to a concentrated exploration of the caregiving needs associated with this age group. The care requirements for preschool-aged children are notably demanding, often requiring intensive time, energy and resources. This focus on early childhood reflects the recognition of this stage as a critical period for child development, making caregiving during this time both labour-intensive and highly significant. However, while this theme is heavily studied, knowledge gaps remain regarding how caregivers—particularly mothers—navigate these demands while balancing employment, mental health and other responsibilities. These gaps also raise questions about the accessibility and quality of early childhood care and the support structures available to families during this stage.

Figure 2: Keyword co-occurrence network in care literature – A bibliometric analysis



The interconnectedness of themes such as "mothers," "employment," and "women's status" further illustrates the complex, multi-faceted nature of childcare's impact on women's lives. This network highlights the significant effects that caregiving responsibilities have on women's labour force participation and economic independence. The challenge of balancing childcare with professional and personal aspirations often results in diminished career opportunities, income disparities and broader social inequities. Despite the extensive research on these connections, critical gaps remain regarding how societal structures—such as workplace policies, governmental support and gender norms—shape the experiences of caregiving and employment for women. More research is needed to explore the ways in which these structures can be improved to alleviate the burden of care and enhance the well-being of both caregivers and children.

Some crucial perspectives remain underexplored in this literature. Few studies account for intersectional differences, for instance, how class, caste, race, or migration status may exacerbate or ease the care burden alongside gender. Furthermore, much of the available research focuses on care within nuclear families, disregarding the role of extended kin, community networks, or state institutions in mitigating these responsibilities. There is also limited comparative work across policy regimes and a dearth of longitudinal perspectives that could illuminate how caregiving pressures evolve over time. This points to a significant opportunity for further inquiry, not just into the persistence of care inequalities but into their transformation in response to policy interventions, cultural change, or growing awareness of gender justice.

While the global literature underscores the significant role of childcare in shaping women's employment, well-being and financial independence, these patterns do not manifest uniformly across all the societies. Cultural norms, policy regimes and socio-economic conditions profoundly influence the experience of unpaid care work, particularly in India. The country's unique combination of strong patriarchal structures, limited state support for childcare and growing economic pressures on families

makes it a crucial context for further investigation. An in-depth exploration of the Indian scenario can illuminate how these factors collectively produce distinct vulnerabilities and inequalities for women, adding depth and specificity to the broader understanding of care responsibilities. The following section focuses on the studies from India, shedding light on women's lived experiences within this complex landscape.

Critical Review: Unpaid Domestic and Childcare Work for Mothers in the Indian Context

Parenthood, particularly motherhood, is a pivotal life event that significantly shapes women's roles, specifically unpaid domestic and childcare work. The 12 papers addressed in this review (Tables 1 and 2) present a comprehensive analysis of women's unpaid domestic work and childcare within the Indian context. These studies encompass rural and urban settings in wide geographical areas, which allow for an in-depth examination of the social and cultural environments. For instance, Saraff and Srivastava (2010) focus on fathers' involvement in childcare in Mumbai, while Shimray (2004) examines women's roles in Naga society. Similarly, Rani (2006) discusses the case of single mothers in Visakhapatnam, whereas Zaida et al. (2017) study the experiences of women in low-income households in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

The studies employ various study designs and approaches, from qualitative research (five studies) such as interviews and focus group discussions to quantitative research based on large-scale surveys and secondary data (five studies). Two of the studies employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. Mazumdar, Sen and Parekh (2022) use qualitative vignettes to explore the challenges faced by mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing detailed, narrative descriptions of their lived experiences. In contrast, Das and Zumbyte (2017), Deshpande and Singh (2021) and Gautham (2022) build their research on quantitative methods, analysing data from the National Sample Survey (NSS), the Consumer Pyramids Household Survey (CPHS) and the Indian Time Use Survey (ITUS) respectively to examine trends in maternal employment, time use and labour force participation.

The research questions addressed in these articles also vary, encompassing the complexity of unpaid childcare and domestic work in India. Some of them including Gautham (2022) and Naidu and Rao (2018) focus on the economic implications, examining the extent to which childcare work and household chores impact the participation of women in the labour market. Others, such as Bedi, Majilla, and Rieger (2018) examine cultural influences, examining how gender roles and social norms influence the motherhood penalty in the labour market. Sengupta (2019) and Mazumdar, Parekh, and Sen (2023) highlight the intersection between state policy, market forces and familial responsibilities, advocating systemic support to alleviate mothers' burdens.

Table 1: Description of included studies

S. No.	Title	Author, year of publication	Objectives	Place	Study design	Sample
1	Pattern and determinants of paternal involvement in childcare: An empirical investigation in a metropolis of India	Saraff and Srivastava, 2010	To study the pattern and level of paternal involvement in childcare and its determinants	Mumbai, India	Quantitative as well as qualitative techniques have been adopted for the present study. Quantitative study has been carried out using semi-structured interview schedules.	The study is based on interviews conducted with 350 couples residing in Mumbai, the largest city of India. The couples in the sample are biological parents to at least one child aged 10 years or below.
2	Child care by poor single mothers: Study of mother-headed families in India	Rani, 2006	To find out the socio-economic characteristics of mother headed families in Visakhapatnam	Visakhapatnam, India	Qualitative study, focusing on the socio-economic characteristics and problems of mother-headed families.	The sample consisted of 214 single mothers, drawn using a purposive sampling method from a stratified sample of 20 slums of Visakhapatnam. These mothers, aged between 20-49 years, with dependent children were the main breadwinners of the household.
3	The motherhood penalty and female employment in Urban India	Das and Zumbyte, 2017	To examine the effects of having a young child on mothers' employment in urban India over the period 1983-2011. To look at household structure and analyze the effects of other household members on women's labour supply.	India	Quantitative study	This paper uses NSS data to study the relationship between mothers' employment, presence of young children and household structure, using six rounds of the employment and unemployment schedules of the NSS: 1983, 1993-94, 2004-05, 2007-08, 2009-10 and 2011-12. There are 25,000 to 29,000 observations for each year in the sample, and the pooled sample has nearly 162,000 observations.
4	Paid unpaid Work Continuum of Women: Home-based workers and self-employed women in the National Capital Region	Sengupta, 2019	To study how women who are home-based or self-employed workers organizing their work in urban poor settings. To explore the gendered	Delhi, India	Qualitative study	The method of sampling is purposive and the criteria on the basis of which these 30 women have been selected are as follows: firstly, they must have experience of at least 2 years of working in the sector; secondly, they are in reproductive age group (between 15 and 49 years) with reproductive

S. No.	Title	Author, year of publication	Objectives	Place	Study design	Sample
			organization of work and the interplay of institutions affecting these women's work experiences.			responsibilities; and thirdly, they agree to give time for interviews. They are residents of slum areas located in south and north of Delhi.
5	Vignettes of mothering through the pandemic: A gendered perspective of challenges and making meaning of motherhood in India	Mazumdar, Sen and Parekh, 2022	To explore the unique challenges faced by mothers during the pandemic and how they navigated these challenges within the Indian socio-cultural landscape.	Mumbai, India	Qualitative study using vignettes	The participants of the study were Indian mothers of children below the age of ten, living with them during the period of the lockdown enforced in India in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and who had completed their higher secondary education.
6	It takes a village: Childcare and women's paid employment in India	Gautham, 2022	To examine why maternal employment is higher in rural than in urban India. To investigate the compatibility of work with childcare responsibilities in both rural and urban settings.	India	Quantitative study	The study used India's first time use survey (ITUS) in 2019 surveyed all persons aged 6 or above in 138,799 households (447,250 individuals), following a time diary approach covering the 24 hours before 4 AM on the day of the interview.
7	Mothering load: Underlying realities of professionally engaged Indian mothers during a global crisis	Mazumdar, Parekh and Sen, 2023	To investigate the lived experiences of professionally engaged mothers in urban India during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the unique challenges they faced in balancing work and family responsibilities.	Multiple cities, India	Qualitative study - thematic analysis	This research engaged with women professionals employed from various cities across India. A call for participation was made through social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, and 21 women were interviewed.
8	Women's work in Naga society: Household work, workforce participation and division of labour	Shimray, 2004	To understand household work, workforce participation, division of labour and women's position in Naga society	Nagaland, India	Qualitative study including focus group discussions (FGD), personal interactions (teachers, headman, church administrators, village elders and	6 FGDs (2 FGDs in each of the 3 villages) 30 households (10 households from each of the 3 villages)

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					students) and time use studies (TUS) in household work	
9	Reproductive work and female labour force participation in Rural India	Naidu and Rao, 2018	To explore how reproductive work affects women's labour force participation in rural India, particularly examining the concept of a "reproductive squeeze" that may raise the opportunity costs of engaging in paid employment.	India	Quantitative study	The study uses data from the NSS employment and unemployment household surveys for 1999-2000, 2009-10 and 2011-12, thus covering India's 'boom years.'
10	Gender norms and the motherhood penalty: Experimental evidence from India	Bedi, Majilla and Rieger, 2018	To quantify the effect of reporting motherhood on the likelihood of receiving job callbacks for female applicants compared with non-mothers. To explore how cultural factors, specifically the differences between patrilineal and matrilineal societies, influence the motherhood penalty in the labour market.	West Bengal, Meghalaya, and Nagaland, India	Quantitative study - Field experiment	The study involved sending out a total of 27 CVs across various job postings. Each community had multiple CVs sent to ensure a robust comparison of callback rates. The experiment targeted job applications in three Indian cities and two industry sectors. The researchers created fictitious CVs for female applicants that varied primarily in their motherhood status (mothers vs. non-mothers).
11	'My work never ends': Women's experiences of balancing unpaid care work and paid work through WEE Programming in India	Zaida, Chigateri, Chopra and Roelen, 2017	To explore the experiences of women in low-income households as they navigate the dual responsibilities of unpaid care work and paid employment.	Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, India	The study design employed in the research is a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and	The study involved a total of 200 women from low-income households (120 women were participants in WEE programmes, 80 were not). From this larger sample, 32 women in each of the four sites were purposively selected for in-depth qualitative case studies.

S. No.	Title	Author, year of publication	Objectives	Place	Study design	Sample
			To assess the impact of women's economic empowerment (WEE) programmes on women's participation in paid work and their management of unpaid care responsibilities.		quantitative data collection techniques.	
12	Dropping out, being pushed out or can't get in? Decoding declining labour force participation of Indian women	Deshpande and Singh, 2021	To provide evidence on the frequent transitions of women in and out of the labour force, highlighting the dynamic nature of their employment status.	India	Quantitative study	The analysis focuses on a panel of more than 150,000 households and approximately 350,000 working-age women (aged 15 years and older). - The study specifically uses data from 12 waves of the CPHS, covering the period from January-April 2016 (Wave 7) to September-December 2019 (Wave 18).

Table 2: Findings of included studies

S. No.	Title	Author, year of publication	Key findings	Conclusion
1	Pattern and determinants of paternal involvement in childcare: An empirical investigation in a metropolis of India	Saraff and Srivastava, 2010	Fathers show moderate involvement in childcare, mainly in educational and functional tasks, but participate less in traditionally female caregiving roles. Nuclear family fathers are more engaged, indicating that family structure influences involvement. Older children, especially daughters, receive more paternal care, while younger ones see less, likely due to fathers' lower confidence in infant care. Maternal education strongly predicts paternal involvement, with higher maternal education linked to greater fatherly participation. While traditional caregiving norms persist, urban and higher-income families exhibit a gradual shift toward more egalitarian parenting, reflecting changing gender roles in childcare responsibilities.	The findings suggest that interventions aimed at changing societal attitudes toward fatherhood and paternal involvement are necessary to encourage greater participation by fathers in childcare.
2	Child care by poor single mothers: Study	Rani, 2006	Single mothers face severe economic hardships due to the absence of a father, limiting their ability to provide essentials like food, clothing and shelter. Many struggle with childcare, often leaving young children unattended while working,	The challenges encountered are compounded by socio-economic factors, leading to a cycle of poverty and inadequate support for single

S. No.	Title	Author, year of publication	Key findings	Conclusion
	of mother-headed families in India		leading to inadequate supervision and emotional issues. Financial constraints hinder children's education with some dropping out or underperforming academically. Behavioral problems, including disobedience, bed-wetting and disinterest in studies are common. Low maternal education further limits job opportunities, deepening vulnerabilities. Anxiety about their children's future affects both mother and child psychologically. A lack of support networks exacerbates these challenges, making single parenting even more difficult.	mothers. The findings underscore the necessity for targeted welfare and support services for mother-headed families, emphasizing that existing resources are insufficient to meet their needs adequately.
3	The motherhood penalty and female employment in Urban India	Das and Zumbyte, 2017	The presence of young children negatively impacts mothers' employment with those having children under six less likely to participate in the labour force. However, women in households with older children or female elders are more likely to work, highlighting the role of family support. While childbearing burdens have lessened, caregiving responsibilities have intensified, limiting women's workforce participation. Normative motherhood expectations continue to shape labour market outcomes, reinforcing gendered caregiving roles. "Maternal role incompatibility" forces women to make trade-offs between work and childcare. Additionally, societal stigma discourages maternal employment, portraying working mothers as neglectful despite no evidence of harm.	The findings highlight the urgent need for policies aimed at increasing women's labour force participation in India, particularly through support mechanisms like accessible childcare
4	Paid unpaid work continuum of women: Home-based workers and self-employed women in the National Capital Region	Sengupta, 2019	Women's work exists on a continuum, blending productive and reproductive labour shaped by gender norms. Beyond formal employment, women perform essential yet unpaid care and domestic work. Socialization reinforces gendered labour divisions, influencing how women balance paid and unpaid responsibilities. Economic vulnerability forces many into precarious jobs like home-based work or street vending. The absence of social agencies worsens their exclusion from labour rights. The State, market and family dictate how women structure their work as a survival strategy. Weak state policies fail informal workers with bureaucratic barriers preventing access to maternity benefits and social security protections.	The paper delves into how women's work is organized and influenced by various institutions, highlighting the complex interplay between state policies, market dynamics and familial responsibilities. This continuum of work is often a coping mechanism for managing poverty in various forms, including income, time and opportunity.
5	Vignettes of mothering through the pandemic: A gendered perspective of challenges and making meaning of motherhood in India	Mazumdar, Sen and Parekh, 2022	The pandemic intensified mothering challenges in India with school closures, remote work and health concerns increasing maternal responsibilities. However, shifting gender roles emerged as spouses took on more household tasks, especially in dual-income families working from home. Mothers also recognized the importance of self-care in managing stress, adopting practices to cope with emotional and physical demands. Despite difficulties, the crisis created new bonding opportunities, allowing families to spend more time together and engage in shared activities. This period reshaped parenting dynamics, highlighting both the burdens and evolving roles within households during unprecedented times.	The study concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened gendered caregiving and household responsibilities for mothers in India, deepening existing inequalities in domestic work. Despite these challenges, families adapted by finding unique ways to manage. The pandemic highlighted the urgent need for inclusive policies supporting unpaid care work typically handled by women. It stressed the importance of self-compassion for

S. No.	Title	Author, year of publication	Key findings	Conclusion
				mothers, contributing to better mental health and coping. The findings advocate for gender-inclusive interventions, considering the amplified pressures women faced during the pandemic.
6	It takes a village: Childcare and women's paid employment in India	Gautham, 2022	Maternal childcare hours are slightly lower in rural areas compared with urban areas, but the flexibility of rural work allows for better management of these hours. In contrast, urban women face greater negative effects on employment due to the lack of job flexibility and longer commute times. Rural women are less impacted by childcare responsibilities as their work is closer to home and more flexible. The presence of adult or elderly women in urban households boosts maternal employment by 7-8 log points, showing that childcare constraints limit urban women's work opportunities. Rural women are more engaged in informal work, while urban women face greater childcare challenges.	The findings indicate that urban mothers face significant employment declines post-motherhood, primarily due to the rigidities of formal sector jobs, while rural mothers experience less impact due to more flexible work environments. The study underscores the importance of childcare support and policies, suggesting that enhancing such provisions could facilitate better employment outcomes for women, particularly in urban settings. Overall, the research highlights the critical need to understand the socio-economic and institutional factors that shape women's labour market participation in the context of childcare, advocating for targeted interventions to support maternal employment across different regions.
7	Mothering load: Underlying realities of professionally engaged Indian mothers during a global crisis	Mazumdar, Parekh and Sen, 2023	The global pandemic has significantly impacted professionally engaged mothers, increasing their domestic and childcare responsibilities due to the absence of domestic help and childcare arrangements. Mothers struggled to balance their careers with heightened household duties, further emphasizing existing gender inequalities and the gendered nature of parenting. The thematic analysis identifies two key themes: the "Triad of work," which includes professional, domestic, and psychological labour, and "Mothering experiences: Burdens and biases," which highlight challenges like parental overload, lack of support and societal biases that reinforce gendered expectations of parenting, creating additional stress for mothers.	The findings emphasize the need for greater recognition of the invisible labour that mothers perform and advocate for systemic changes to support their mental health and well-being. Addressing these issues is crucial for promoting gender equality and ensuring that mothers receive the support they need in both their professional and personal lives.
8	Women's work in Naga Society: Household work, workforce participation and	Shimray, 2004	In Nagaland, women are primarily responsible for managing the household, including cooking, cleaning, childcare and finances, though these essential tasks are often unpaid and undervalued. Their participation in the workforce is influenced by education, economic opportunities, and societal norms. While traditional gender roles have limited women's workforce involvement, more are entering paid labour. Historically, men handled farming, hunting and warfare,	The conclusion of the study emphasizes the need to recognize and value women's work, both within the household and in the workforce. It highlights the dual burden women face and advocates for policies that support gender equality and economic

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	division of labour		while women focused on household tasks and some agriculture. Modern changes, including education and economic pressures, are shifting roles with more women working and men participating in household duties. However, women still face a "dual burden" of unpaid and paid work.	empowerment. The study underscores the importance of acknowledging women's contributions to the society and promoting their full participation in all spheres of life.
9	Reproductive work and female labour force participation in Rural India	Naidu and Rao, 2018	The authors introduce the concept of a "reproductive squeeze" which argues that the increasing burden of household reproductive labour restricts women's ability to join the labour force. This squeeze limits the range of job opportunities for women, making it harder to find suitable employment. The findings suggest that rising non-discretionary spending and the privatization of social reproduction have intensified this squeeze, raising the opportunity cost of women's labour force participation. The authors argue that without adequate state support and policies that integrate reproductive responsibilities with income-generating activities, women's participation in the labour force is unlikely to improve.	The study emphasizes the need for further research to understand the specific mechanisms affecting women's work status and advocates for social policies that can alleviate the constraints faced by rural women in balancing reproductive and economic roles.
10	Gender norms and the motherhood penalty: Experimental evidence from India	Bedi, Majilla and Rieger, 2018	The findings indicate that mothers face a significant disadvantage in job callbacks, especially in patrilineal societies, while matrilineal communities show a more favourable response. Overall, mothers are 14 percentage points less likely to receive job callbacks compared with non-mothers, but this penalty varies across communities. Mothers from patrilineal communities such as the Naga and Bengali, experience a more pronounced motherhood penalty. In contrast, mothers from matrilineal communities, like the Khasi in North-East India, face little to no penalty. In these societies, where women have more empowerment and family support, employers may view mothers as more capable and committed to balancing work and family.	Overall, the study underscores the importance of cultural context in understanding the dynamics of gender discrimination in the labour market, particularly regarding motherhood. It calls for policies that consider these cultural differences to promote fair employment practices for mothers across various communities.
11	'My work never ends': Women's experiences of balancing unpaid care work and paid work through WEE Programming in India	Zaida, Chigateri, Chopra and Roelen, 2017	The findings indicate that care work is predominantly a female responsibility, shaped by gender norms, poverty and the availability of public resources. Women carry the majority of household tasks, with men contributing minimally, mainly in childcare. The study highlights the need for effective Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) programmes that support workforce participation while addressing the structural factors behind women's double burden. Low-income women face a significant strain, balancing unpaid care work and paid employment, leading to chronic stress and health issues. Programmes like MGNREGA and SEWA are crucial in creating a "double boon," offering paid work while supporting unpaid caregiving with accessible childcare and flexible work arrangements.	The study highlights the critical need to recognize unpaid care work as a significant component of women's lives that directly impacts their ability to engage in paid employment. This recognition is essential for developing effective policies that support women's economic empowerment. The research advocates implementation of supportive policies and programmes that not only facilitate women's entry into the workforce but also provide adequate support for their unpaid care responsibilities. This includes access to quality childcare, flexible

S. No.	Title	Author, year of publication	Key findings	Conclusion
				work arrangements and resources that alleviate the burden of care.
12	Dropping out, being pushed out or can't get in? Decoding declining labour force participation of Indian women	Deshpande and Singh, 2021	The study reveals that working-age women often transition in and out of the labour force, challenging the notion that women either stay in or out due to fixed supply-side constraints. It argues that the decline in women's labour force participation is more due to low and declining demand for female labour than supply-side issues. Negative income shocks significantly influence women's decisions to exit the labour force with the lack of steady employment being a critical factor. The paper calls for a re-evaluation of the motherhood/child penalty, suggesting that traditional assessments don't fully capture the challenges women face, especially in developing countries like India.	The paper emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of the factors affecting women's labour force participation in India and the importance of addressing both demand and supply-side issues in policy formulation.

Economic constraints and the double burden

Several studies highlight the steep increase in unpaid work for mothers after the transition to parenthood, reaffirming the woman's role as a primary caregiver in traditional terms. Das and Zumbyte (2017) discuss the "motherhood penalty," showing a direct relationship between having a young child and reduced female labour force participation. Zaida et al. (2017) also refer to the "double burden" of women in poor families, who are required to balance paid employment with unpaid care work, leading to chronic stress and poor health. Mazumdar, Sen, and Parekh (2022) reveal the way the COVID-19 pandemic heightened caregiving pressures such that mothers had to balance extra child-rearing duties with little external help. Rani (2006) also studied the unique case of single mothers, especially in low-income contexts, and observed that they face increased economic vulnerability because they lack access to institutional childcare services, creating difficult conditions for maintaining employment stability.

The concept of the "reproductive squeeze," introduced by Naidu and Rao (2018), is particularly relevant here. As household burden continues to grow, windows of opportunity for women in the labour force shrink, resulting in an economically precarious situation. This could be due to a lack of time or opportunity, as well declining demand for female labour, as shown by Deshpande and Singh (2021). Mothers' participation in the labour force is also limited by a lack of access to cheap childcare and flexible working arrangements, as emphasised by Gautham (2022) who notes that urban mothers see significant declines in work after giving birth due to rigidities in formal sector employment. In contrast to this, rural mothers experience less negative impact due to the flexibility of informal work, but they still bear the double burden of paid labour and unpaid labour.

Gendered division of childcare and cultural norms

A recurring theme of the review is the gendered division of labour, particularly child care, with minimal involvement of fathers. Saraff and Srivastava (2010) observe that while urban Indian dads exhibit moderate childcare engagement, they don't assume traditionally feminine tasks such as feeding the child, cleaning the child, putting the child to bed, etc., reflecting persistent gender norms. Sengupta (2019) also notes that women still carry the bulk of reproductive and domestic work.

Shimray (2004) highlights that women in the Naga community are primarily responsible for household management and childcare, which is often undervalued and unpaid. He states, "The tradition of Naga society expects women to be 'obedient' and 'submissive'. Naga women perform the role of a wife, mother, child-bearer, food producer and household manager." (p. 1704). Bedi, Majilla, and Rieger (2018) further emphasise the influence of cultural norms on the motherhood penalty with mothers in patrilineal cultures facing enormous labour market disadvantages as opposed to matrilineal communities. In their study, Bedi et al. conducted a field experiment of job applications across three Indian cities and two industries. The authors created dummy CVs for candidates that varied mostly based on parenthood status. The study indicates that mothers are extremely disadvantaged in receiving callbacks to the workplace, especially in patrilineal communities, but those of matrilineal culture are more favourably disposed of.

Need for systemic support

The studies under this review collectively highlight the urgent need for policy interventions that support mothers such as paid parental leave, affordable childcare and flexible work arrangements. Sengupta (2019) points out the lack of social security for home-based workers, particularly regarding maternity benefits and childcare support. Gautham (2022) also highlights the importance of affordable childcare in enabling mothers' employment, noting that urban mothers face significant childcare constraints that inhibit them from entering the labour market.

The pandemic also brought these policy gaps to the forefront as mothers struggled to balance the increased caregiving responsibilities with paid work, according to Mazumdar, Parekh, and Sen (2023). The lack of formal childcare institutions and flexible work policies left many mothers overwhelmed, underlining the need for systemic change. Deshpande and Singh (2021) also promote re-evaluation of policies affecting women's entry into the labour force, having noted that demand-side barriers such as the lack of stable employment opportunities are some of the factors affecting women's frequent transitions in and out of the labour force.

IV. Conclusion

The integrated review underscores the profound, gendered impact of the transition to parenthood on women's lives, particularly their employment, financial independence and overall well-being, due to the heavy and persistent burden of unpaid care work. This burden is not simply a private matter but a structural challenge stemming from cultural norms, policy gaps and limited state and market intervention. The global literature shows that childcare, especially for children under five, dominates women's responsibilities, affecting their employment prospects and fuelling gender inequality across societies. The Indian context further reveals how restrictive social norms, financial pressures, policy weaknesses and limited access to affordable, high-quality childcare services compound these patterns. The integrated view brings these perspectives together, demonstrating that the care deficit is not just a matter of fairness or justice for women but a significant policy concern with wide-ranging effects on their financial stability, health, and the well-being of children and families. Importantly, while policy

and structural weaknesses cut across contexts, their forms and severity vary by setting, reflecting the intersection of gender, culture, economics and policy regimes.

Gaps in knowledge remain significant and require further inquiry. Few studies closely examine the immediate period following the birth of a child or account for regional and cultural variations in caregiving responsibilities. The long-term effects of care burdens on women's employment trajectories and well-being are also underexplored. Furthermore, there is limited empirical evaluation of policy interventions such as paid parental leave and affordable childcare, and their actual impact in reducing the care load for women and fostering greater gender equity.

Moving forward, policy and cultural change must go hand in hand. Policymakers should prioritize the expansion of affordable, accessible, and high-quality childcare services and enable flexible employment practices for both women and men. This should be supported by campaigns to transform restrictive gender norms and promote a more equitable division of care responsibilities within families. The 3Rs (Recognize, Reduce and Redistribute) and 5Rs (including Representation and Reward) frameworks, proposed by Diane Elson (2017) and supported by the ILO (2018), offer a way forward by emphasizing the need to formally acknowledge care work, lighten its load through investment in public services, and equitably distribute responsibilities across society. The care diamond framework (Razavi, 2007) further elucidates how the state, market, family and community interact to provide care, highlighting the gaps in India's policy landscape, where the family remains the primary caregiver with minimal state and market intervention. Additionally, the AAQDW framework given by ILO and ADB (Chopra, 2023) underscores the importance of accessible, affordable, quality and decent childcare services, which remain largely absent or unaffordable for many Indian mothers, particularly in lower-income households. A multidimensional approach encompassing policy, workplace accommodations, education and community engagement is essential for dismantling structural inequalities and fostering greater gender justice in both the private and the public spheres.

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