

Gender Inequality- A Comparative Analysis of Gendered Time Inequality in India and Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality in India remains a persistent challenge, manifesting across economic, social, cultural, and political spheres, with significant regional disparities. While India ranks 128 out of 189 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII), states like Kerala present a complex paradox, excelling in social development indicators yet facing entrenched gendered inequalities in economic participation. Gender inequality is not just a social issue, it has profound economic, health, and developmental consequences. Studying gender inequality is essential for understanding and addressing one of the most pervasive forms of human inequality, which affects rights across all societies. This study conducts a comparative analysis of gendered time inequality—the unequal distribution of time spent on unpaid care work, paid employment, education, and leisure—between India as a whole and the state of Kerala. Despite Kerala's high female literacy rates, favourable sex ratios, and robust social welfare systems, women continue to bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic and care work, limiting their labour force participation and economic independence. This shows a time inequality. This article examines the persistence of the rigid gender roles, exploring the concept of "time poverty" and the double burden faced by women in both the national and regional contexts. The study reveals that there exists a gap in gendered time allocation.

Key words: Gender inequality, empowerment, time poverty, Double burden

INTRODUCTION

Every child, regardless of gender, holds the inherent right to fulfil their potential. But gender inequalities act as barriers to this fundamental promise. From the pages of textbooks to the roles portrayed in films and the division of labour among caregivers, girls and boys in India are constantly exposed to unequal norms. While both genders are affected, the data reveals that, girls face disproportionate disadvantages. They are more likely to drop out of school, experience higher mortality rates in early childhood, and encounter greater restrictions as they grow—especially in decision-making, mobility, and access to education and healthcare. This systemic inequity not only limits individual futures but also hinders the nation's progress.

Gender inequality is frequently analysed through the lenses of income disparities, literacy gaps, and political representation. However, one of the most pervasive and defining aspects of inequality is the distribution of time. Time is a finite resource, and how it is allocated between paid market work (employment) and unpaid domestic or caregiving labour reveals the deep-seated structural hierarchies of a society.

This article presents a comparative study between the national average (All India) and the state of Kerala. Kerala is historically celebrated for its high social development indices, particularly in health and female literacy. However, the analysis of time-use data challenges the assumption that high social development automatically translates into gender equity within the household and the workforce. By examining the participation rates and the duration of time spent on various activities, this study highlights the persistent "double burden" faced by women and the rigid gender roles that define daily life in both national and regional contexts.

The "Time Use Survey 2024" provides a critical window into this invisible economy. It quantifies the daily lives of citizens, revealing who bears the burden of household maintenance and who enjoys access to economic

opportunities. This study undertakes a comparative analysis between the national average ("All India") and the state of Kerala.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gumbel (2004) investigated how gender inequality in health, education, and the labor force across 1970s democratic industrialized nations influenced economic growth. The results obtained support the premise of this study indicating that as per capita income rises, gender inequalities decrease.

Joan Garcia-Roman and Arianne Ophir (2024) conducted a study on Housework time and task segregation: Revisiting Gender inequality among Parents in 15 European Countries. The aim of the study is to supply the most recent estimates from time use diaries to address questions about the relationship between total housework investment, gender inequality, and gender task segregation. The objective of the study is to use the harmonized data from the European time use survey. The main results of the study reveal continue to confirm that mothers do more than fathers in doing housework in all 15 countries.

Gender Equity Policy Institute's "The Free-Time Gender Gap" (2024) examines the gender disparities in time spent on unpaid childcare and household work, as well as the free-time gender gap which emerges alongside these imbalances. Analysing data from the 2022 American Time Use Survey, found that women consistently spend more time than men taking care of children and doing household work like cooking, laundry, and cleaning. They also uncover a free-time gender gap; women across almost every group studied have less free time than men to socialize, relax, and pursue their interests and hobbies.

Deepak Malghan and Hema Swaminathan (2021) present a comprehensive study of the intra-household gender inequality trends of different nations by using data from 45 nations for the period 1973-2016. This study contradicts the conventional assumption of equal distribution of income among the members of a family and proves that the failure to account for intra-household earnings inequality leads to the underestimation of inequality. This study has proven that despite a decline of 20% in intra-household gender inequality during the past four decades, the disparity remains significant.

Javier Cerrato and Eva Cifre (2018) through their research aims to check whether the unequal involvement in household chores between men and women is associated with increased work family conflict in women and men. The study results firstly show unequal involvement in household chores by women and men as it is higher in women than in men, and the perception of partner involvement is lower in women than in men. Secondly, those unequal involvements relate differently to men and women on different ways of work-family interaction. They do not increase WFC in women comparing to men, although there are tangentially significant differences in work conflict (WC) and statistically significant in family conflict.

Claire Samtleben and Kai-Uwe Müller made a study on "Care and careers: Gender (in)equality in unpaid care, housework and employment". Results show that both the overall amount as well as the unequal division of housework and care in couple households have detrimental effects on women's labour market participation and actual working hours. Reducing the overall burden from housework and care duties and achieving a more symmetric within-couple distribution improves female integration into the labour market.

Time Use Survey (2012) and the labour force survey (LFS) of 2016-17, an analysis of Bangladesh estimated that the unpaid domestic work done by men accounted for 9% of GDP, while the unpaid household work done by women accounted for 39.5% of GDP in 2016-17. The economic value of unpaid household work done by urban and rural women was 9.9% and 21.5% of GDP, respectively (SANEM 2019).

Significance of the Study

Time is the most fundamental resource available to human beings, yet its distribution across society is rarely equitable. In the discourse of development economics, gender inequality is frequently measured through visible indicators such as wage gaps, political representation, or educational attainment. However, a less visible but

equally pervasive form of inequality exists in the allocation of time—specifically, the division between paid market labour and unpaid domestic and caregiving labour.

A significant portion of the work performed by women—cooking, cleaning, and caregiving—is unpaid and excluded from GDP calculations. This study about the economic value of this invisible labour is relevant. By comparing Kerala (high literacy) with the national average, this study critically assesses whether education alone is sufficient to empower women, or not. If women are too burdened by unpaid care work to enter the workforce, policies must shift from simply "creating jobs" to creating support systems like crèches and eldercare facilities. "Time poverty"—the lack of time for rest and leisure due to excessive work—has direct implications for women's physical and mental health. This study quantifies that burden.

Objective

To examine the participation and time intensity of unpaid domestic and caregiving services, assessing the extent to which women in Kerala and India bear the disproportionate responsibility for household maintenance.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes secondary data derived from the Time Use Survey 2024. The analysis focuses on the population aged 6 years and above. The study utilizes two primary statistical metrics- Participation Rate (%) (The percentage of persons participating in a specific activity in a day) and Average Time Spent (minutes) (The average duration spent on an activity per participant per day).

The comparison is drawn between All India and Kerala. The analysis focuses on three key activity categories: "Employment and related activities," "Unpaid domestic services," and "Unpaid caregiving services."

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participation in "Employment and related activities" serves as the primary metric for economic independence. The data from Table 1 reveals a stark gender gap. Nationally, 60.8% of males participate in employment activities, compared to only 20.7% of females. This indicates that the vast majority of Indian women are excluded from the formal workforce daily. Despite high literacy, Kerala shows no significant advantage in female employment. The female participation rate is 20.1%, which is marginally lower than the national average.

Table 1 Percentage of persons of age 6 years and above participating in different activities in day All India

Activity	Gender		
	Male	Female	Person
Employment and related activities	60.8	20.7	40.9
Production of goods for own final use	13.0	20.7	16.8
Unpaid domestic services for household member	27.1	81.5	54.1
Unpaid caregiving services for household member	17.9	34.0	25.9
Unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work	0.9	1.1	1.0
Learning	22.6	20.2	21.4
Socializing and communication, community participation, religious practice	89.8	90.7	90.3

Culture, leisure, mass media and sports practices	95.3	90.7	90.3
Self-care and maintenance	100.0	100.0	100.0

(Time use survey 2024 Published by Press Information Bureau)

Male workforce participation (Table 2) in Kerala (49.8%) is significantly lower than the All India male average (60.8%). This suggests that while fewer men are working in Kerala, the gender gap remains substantial, and women have not stepped in to fill the economic void.

The category ‘Unpaid Domestic Services’ includes household upkeep, cooking, and cleaning. Nationally, 81.5% of women engage in domestic chores daily, spending an average of 289 minutes (approx. 4.8 hours). In contrast, only 27.1% of men participate, spending just 88 minutes.

Table 2 Percentage of persons participating in a day in activities of major divisions of TUS activity classification as major activities in Kerala

Activity	Male	Female	Total
Employment and related activities	49.8	20.1	34.0
Production of goods for own final use	7.1	9.6	8.4
Unpaid domestic services for household member	39.1	82.1	62.0
Unpaid caregiving services for household member	15.4	28.9	22.6
Unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work	3.5	4.8	4.2
Learning	18.1	19.6	18.9
Socializing and communication, community participation, religious practice	82.8	87.0	85.1
Culture, leisure, mass media and sports practices	96.6	93.2	94.8
Self-care and maintenance	100.0	100.0	100.0

(Time use survey 2024, Published by Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation)

In the case of participation in domestic work, Kerala shows a higher rate of male "participation." 39.1% of men in Kerala engage in domestic work (compared to 27.1% nationally). However, this statistic is misleading without looking at the time spent. Kerala men spend only 94 minutes per day on these tasks. Kerala women, with 82.1% participation, spend 279 minutes per day. While Kerala men are more likely to "help" than the average Indian male, their contribution is marginal (only 6 minutes more than the national average). The core burden of nearly 5 hours of daily domestic labour remains firmly on the women.

Unpaid Caregiving-Caregiving involves looking after children, the elderly, and the sick. Table 1 shows that in all India 34.0% of women participate in caregiving, spending 137 minutes daily (Table 3). Men spend 75 minutes. The time burden for caregiving is notably higher in Kerala. Women spend 154 minutes (approx. 2.5 hours) per day on caregiving, which is significantly higher than the national average

Table 3 Average time (in minutes) spent in a day per participant of age 6 years and above in different activities All India

Activities	Gender		
	Male	Female	Person
Employment and related activities	473	341	440
Production of goods for own final use	137	104	116
Unpaid domestic services for household member	88	289	238
Unpaid caregiving services for household member	75	137	116
Unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work	139	108	122
Learning	415	413	414
Socializing and communication, community participation, religious practice	138	139	138
Culture, leisure, mass media and sports practices	177	164	171
Self-care and maintenance	710	706	708

(Time use survey 2024 Published by Press Information Bureau)

This increase likely reflects Kerala's demographic reality. As a state with higher life expectancy and an aging population, the burden of eldercare is intensifying, and this unpaid labour is being absorbed almost exclusively by women.

Table 4 Minutes spent in a day on an average per participant of age 6 years and above in the activities of major divisions of TUS activity classification as a major activity in Kerala

Activity	Male	Female	Persons
Employment and related activities	492	402	463
Production of goods for own final use	105	74	86
Unpaid domestic services for household member	94	279	224
Unpaid caregiving services for household member	87	154	133
Unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work	159	146	151
Learning	430	418	423
Socializing and communication, community participation, religious practice	150	139	144
Culture, leisure, mass media and sports practices	215	181	197
Self-care and maintenance	722	700	711

(Time use survey 2024, Published by Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation)

Employed women in Kerala work harder than their national counterparts. In "Employment and related activities," a participant woman in Kerala spends 402 minutes per day (Table 4), compared to the national average of 341 minutes. An employed woman in Kerala spends roughly 6.7 hours at her job, yet must still navigate a society where women perform 4.6 hours of domestic work and 2.5 hours of caregiving daily. This results in severe time poverty, leaving little room for "Learning" or "Self-care."

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of the Time Use Survey 2024 data illustrates that gender inequality remains a structural defining feature of Indian society, transcending regional progress. The situation in Kerala highlights a critical realization: educating women without restructuring the domestic ecosystem results in a "stalled revolution."

Women in Kerala appear to be caught in a pincer movement. On one side, they are expected to contribute to the economy (evident in the high intensity of time spent by those who are employed); on the other, they remain the primary caregivers and homemakers. The "Kerala Model" has succeeded in keeping women healthy and literate, but it has not yet succeeded in liberating their time.

To address this, the conversation must move beyond "empowerment" through education to "enablement" through infrastructure. Reducing the time burden on women requires state support for childcare and eldercare, and a cultural shift that views domestic labour not as "women's help" but as a shared human responsibility.

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