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# Honey, How Can I Help? Gender and Distribution of Unpaid Labour during COVID-19

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**Abstract:** Societies' ideologies on the distribution of unpaid labour seem to have remained stagnant despite dramatic shifts in the worlds of work and society. The distribution of unpaid labour has implications for the wellbeing of individuals and the sustainability of their various personal and professional relationships. Our study addressed the less-researched "what" and "why" of the distribution of unpaid labour among dual-earner couples during the COVID-19 pandemic. We used a qualitative approach, conducting 32 semi-structured interviews with individuals belonging to dual-earner couples in Sri Lanka. Interview data were thematically analysed using social role theory. Six major findings emanated from our study; (1) the pandemic did not drastically change the distribution of unpaid labour in most dual-earner couples, confirming traditional gender norms; (2) there was a change in the contribution of men towards unpaid labour when the woman was at home (working from home or during maternity leave), or had other means of support from domestic aid or extended family; (3) three clusters of men were identified as "sharing", "chipping-in", and "not-my-problem" types, depending on their involvement in unpaid labour; (4) "chipping-in" and "not-my-problem" type men reinforced the notion of gendered distribution of unpaid labour; (5) three clusters of women were identified as "sharing", "asking-for-help", and "bearing-the-cross" types; and (6) these couples, and women specifically, endured the unequal division of unpaid labour with the assistance of parents, in-laws, or paid domestic help. Our study has implications for the sustainability of individuals, as well as their wellbeing, families, organisations, and society.

**Keywords:** wellbeing; work-life; COVID-19; gender roles; unpaid labour; gender; dual-earner couples



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## 1. Introduction

The distribution of unpaid labour (household and childcare) among couples is contentious worldwide. The various components of unpaid labour have been discussed by many, and include, for example, collecting water, shopping, preparing meals, washing dishes, washing and ironing clothes, cleaning the house, and caring for children and the elderly [1,2]. These tasks are labelled as "women's" tasks (e.g., cooking, laundry, and housecleaning) and "men's" tasks (e.g., yard work and auto maintenance), where each party tends to primarily attend to the tasks associated with their specific gender [2]. However, there is common agreement that a vast majority of the forms of unpaid labour listed above are performed by women [3–6].

Sharing, and not-sharing, unpaid labour among couples can affect the wellbeing of individuals. Physical and mental wellbeing are essential for the sustainability of an individual's relationships, such as those with their spouse, children, extended family, and friends. In addition, wellbeing can spill over to work life as well. Such spill over can affect an individual's performance, productivity, and relationships at work, as well as the sustainability of the workforce, in terms of intention to remain or leave [7].

Past research on unpaid labour focused on how men and women share unpaid labour in normal, everyday circumstances [5,8–10]. We used the COVID-19 pandemic as an ideal

context in contrast to normal, everyday circumstances in studying this phenomenon. New forms of gender and inter-gender solidarity are emerging, making the COVID-19 pandemic an important time for gender-related research [11]. The majority of the literature related to COVID-19 and unpaid labour is from the Western context [9–12]. However, there is a lack of research on the impact of COVID-19 on women and men in South Asia regarding gender issues, especially unpaid labour. We believe that exploring the cultural context of South Asia [13] will enhance our understanding of the similarities and differences in the distribution of unpaid labour among dual-earner couples during normal and not-normal times, as well as the Western and South Asian contexts. Thus, our research objective was to explore whether a living situation which is not considered normal would have any implications on the distribution of unpaid labour among dual-earner couples in Sri Lanka, a South Asian country.

This study could assist in broadening our understanding of the reinforcement of traditional gender roles [12], re-defining traditional gender roles or new forms of gender, and growing our knowledge of inter-gender solidarity [11] during a time of non-normalcy, such as COVID-19. We were therefore interested in studying *what* differences in the distribution of unpaid labour occurred, and *why* they occurred, during the pandemic. In doing so, we used the theoretical lens of social role theory to better understand the data we collected. We attempted to record gender, household structure, family interaction, and their impact on the distribution of unpaid labour during the pandemic.

Thus, this study contributes to gender and family studies, as well as the wellbeing literature. Firstly, we illustrated the challenges and nuanced nature of the distribution of unpaid labour faced by dual-earner couples during the COVID-19 pandemic in a less-researched non-Western context. Secondly, our exploration enabled us to identify typologies of men and women based on their contribution to unpaid labour. Thirdly, we revealed the important role played by extended families in the distribution of unpaid labour, and how this acted as an enduring mechanism in the management of unpaid labour. This support was a culture-specific element related to unpaid labour, which seldom emerged in previous studies in the Western context [9,14–16]. Finally, our study reiterated the influence of the distribution of unpaid labour on the wellbeing of individuals and couples.

This article proceeds as follows; the next section discusses the literature on gendered unpaid labour and unpaid labour during COVID-19. This is followed by the methodology adopted in this study. The results and discussion are presented before the study's theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research, followed by the conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### *2.1. Gender and Unpaid Labour*

Unpaid labour consists of the household and childcare tasks that individuals engage in [9]. The various components of unpaid labour are agreed by many to be: work on the household plot or family business, collecting water, shopping, preparing meals, washing and ironing clothes, washing dishes, cleaning the house, performing outdoor tasks, paying bills, auto maintenance, driving other household members to work and school, and caring for infants, children, elders, the ill, and disabled individuals. All these tasks could be performed for one's self, one's child, other family members, or neighbours [1,2].

The tasks included in unpaid labour are traditionally categorised as masculine and feminine. Tasks related to caring and nurturing are considered stereotypically feminine, and to be engaged in by women. The tasks requiring strength and financial provision for the family are considered stereotypically masculine, and are for men [17]. In societies around the world, regardless of culture, it has been found that unpaid labour is performed by women and men, but is not always equally distributed among them [3,18]. The phenomenon of women engaging in more unpaid labour than men could be due to societal customs and norms that consign women to their homes [19,20]. Further, popularly-assigned feminine attributes, such as submissiveness, passivity, attention to others, and

selflessness [21], may also compel them to place more value on caring and sharing than on pursuing individual self-interest [22].

During the last many decades, there has been a surge in women's participation in paid work and the labour market [9,17,23]. This increase in participation was partly due to education, partly to the availability of household services, products, and technology, which reduced women's housework obligations, and partly to the increased demand for women's labour in the market [24]. Consequently, this has led to a decrease in inequality on several fronts. However, though women's labour-force participation rates have significantly increased, men's contributions to household work have not increased enough to compensate for this change [9,10]. Therefore, the division of unpaid labour seems to have not changed significantly, remaining highly gendered [3,9,10]. For example, a time-use survey in Sri Lanka found that, on a daily basis, women spent four hours more on unpaid labour than men [5]. This unequal distribution tends to be true regardless of the level (and direction) of income inequity between men and women [23]. Women still do the "lion's share" of unpaid labour within households [17] (p. 791). They struggle with double (second shift) and triple burdens, taking on responsibility for more and different tasks than men [25]. From a time orientation, most women who engage in employment allocate their time to work and childcare, while men allocate time to paid work and leisure activities [26]. This has led to several implications concerning women's physical, emotional, and financial wellbeing [27]. For example, women face more significant challenges in balancing work and life commitments than men, whilst also creating challenges for women's economic participation [28,29].

### *2.2. Unpaid Labour during COVID-19*

The COVID-19 pandemic can be identified as a natural disaster and health crisis having gendered dimensions [3]. The repercussions of the pandemic have had a more significant bearing on women, making them a vulnerable group for several reasons [27,30,31]. Firstly, there is an overrepresentation of women among low-wage workers (including home health aides, nurses, and nursing assistants) and in the supply chain (including those in logistics and the packing industry) [27], providing services as essential workers and participating in more face-to-face interactions. Secondly, during crises, women may face increased pressure to substitute unpaid labour for lost income [3], leading to an increased aggravation of unpaid labour [32]. Finally, during crises of this nature, overload and distress may occur beyond certain limits when the number of roles becomes too many (e.g., a woman adds care of an elderly and ailing parent to her roles of wife and mother) [19].

COVID-19 is a long-term health crisis characterised by uncertainty, which altered daily living and had the ability to disrupt social norms, including gendered distribution of unpaid labour [3]. However, interesting scenarios could be witnessed in counter-normative breadwinning situations, factoring in the "stalled revolution" [33] of men being slow to change when it comes to unpaid labour. There could also be instances of positive or negative spill over from work to home, and vice versa, and the blurring of the work–home boundaries during the pandemic affecting the distribution of unpaid labour.

### *2.3. Social Role Theory*

Sex is based on biology, and gender is socially constructed. Gender is the socialisation of sexually different humans. "Socialisation facilitates these sex-typical role performances by enabling men and women to develop appropriate personality traits and skills" [20] (p. 458). Social role theory describes the roles assigned to males and females by society. Gender roles are the division of household and childcare labour, segregation of jobs, and the role men and women play in society, politics etc. [20]. Women have been assigned the caretaker role and men the provider role [20]. These assigned roles are referred to as agentic (assertive, forceful, and dominant) and communal (warm, caring, and socially skilled) [20]. These lead to task specialisations. Although many men and women are steeped in traditional gender role ideology, there are individuals in any society who, due

to various reasons, are more egalitarian and/or androgynous [34]. Social role theory has been used in different research fields, such as politics, voter behaviour [34], leadership [20], sports [35], and gender system justification [36].

In our study, we expect women and men to perform their traditional socially-expected roles and behaviours, even during COVID-19. That is, caring, nurturing, and communal behaviours from women, and the caretaker/provider role from men. In other words, we expect a gendered division of unpaid labour (task specialisation) among dual-earner couples in Sri Lanka due to social- and self-regulations.

## 3. Methodology

We used the case of Sri Lanka in studying this phenomenon. Though ample studies have been performed in the West, we still know little about unpaid labour division in countries outside the USA, Europe, and other developed nations [37]. Sri Lanka provides a unique context as it is difficult to label Sri Lankan culture. There is contradiction in the literature in characterising Sri Lankan culture as masculine vs. feminine, patriarchal vs. a non-traditional gender role ideology, or individualistic vs. collectivistic [38–40]. We believe that this cultural context will provide a rich landscape to examine the distribution of unpaid labour among dual-earner couples.

We adopted a qualitative approach and interviewed 32 individuals comprising 15 couples and two husbands from 17 dual-earner heterosexual couples. Each of us used our contacts to identify suitable participants for this study. The age of the participants ranged from 30 years to 50 years. Most participants worked in the private sector (see Table 1). All interviewees belonged to two occupational groups, managers/senior managers and legislators, and professionals. Except for one participant, all had children, either one or two. One couple had three children. Interviewees had been married for 4–16 years. The age of the children ranged from 2 months to 15 years. Of the 17 couples, 14 had parents and/or in-laws living with them or close by to help with childcare and household work. Further, eight couples had a daily, regular, or live-in domestic helper to assist with the childcare and/or household work. Considering the two types of support, all except one interviewee had either parents and/or in-laws and/or paid domestic help.

Ethics clearance was obtained for this research from our institution. Further, informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview. All interviews were conducted online between September 2021 and March 2022. Each interview lasted an average of one hour, and was conducted by at least two of the authors. Of the interviews, 15 were conducted in Sinhala (one of the local languages), and the rest were in English. With permission, each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Sinhala interviews were transcribed into English.

We conducted in-depth analyses of the data at the individual and the couple level using a combination of NVivo 10 and manual techniques. When coding manually, we made notes on the text and inserted comments for further collaborative discussion. Open coding was used, taking into account the language used by participants (in-vivo codes), resulting in first-order codes (e.g., commitment for work by male, career goals of the male, etc.), which were then further analysed to identify second-order categories (e.g., justification by female for lack of support by male). The broader themes around the research question (*what* and *why* change in the distribution of unpaid labour occurred during the pandemic) were subsequently identified with the help of the theoretical lens used in this study (social role theory; gender role beliefs, socialization, internalisation, self-regulation, social regulation, and task specialisation). We also captured any other emergent codes (e.g., stress, wellbeing, etc.). After the primary cycle of coding, all three authors engaged in secondary-cycle coding [41], where we organised, synthesised, and categorised the codes into interpretive concepts suitable for reporting our findings. This ensured agreement among the varied and rich interpretations that we had of the data.

**Table 1.** Description of respondents.

| Interview No. | Name (Pseudonym) | Industry | Sector | Age | Gender | Years Married | Children | WFH * or at Office during Pandemic | Language of Interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Ahamed | Communication | Private | 42 | M | 8 | No | WFH | English |
| 2 | Kanthi | Financial | Private | 44 | F | 16 | 2 | Office | English |
| 3 | Malmi | Public Administration | Public | 35 | F | 7.5 | 1 | Both | English |
| 4 | Gehan | Manufacturing | Private | 35 | M | 10 | 3 | WFH | English |
| 5 | Eshan | Education | Public | 33 | M | 6 | 1 | WFH | English |
| 6 | Hiranthi | Education | Public | 31 | F | 6 | 1 | WFH | English |
| 7 | Amal | Public administration | Public | 45 | M | 16 | 2 | Both | English |
| 8 | Punya | Financial | Private | 39 | F | 10 | 3 | Both | English |
| 9 | Camil | Public Administration | Public | 36 | M | 7.5 | 1 | Both | English |
| 10 | Wasanthi | Health | Public | 36 | F | 7 | 2 | Office | Sinhala |
| 11 | Kamal | Trade | Private | 33 | M | 7 | 2 | Both | English |
| 12 | Methsiri | Manufacturing | Private | 40 | M | 7 | 2 | Both | Sinhala |
| 13 | Irangani | Information | Private | 35 | F | 7 | 2 | Both | Sinhala |
| 14 | David | Trade and Professional service | Public and Private | 40 | M | 5 | 2 | Both | English |
| 15 | Rehan | Public Administration | Public | 35 | M | 8 | 2 | Office | Sinhala |
| 16 | Nirmala | Public Administration | Public | 35 | F | 8 | 2 | Both | Sinhala |
| 17 | Ramesh | Manufacturing | Private | 35 | M | 10 | 2 | WFH | Sinhala |
| 18 | Nuwani | Public Administration | Public | 35 | F | 10 | 2 | Both | Sinhala |
| 19 | Piumali | Trade | Private | 35 | F | 7 | 1 | Office | Sinhala |
| 20 | Shamala | Education | Public | 48 | F | 15 | 1 | WFH | English |
| 21 | Rizna | Education | Public | 40 | F | 7 | 1 | WFH | English |
| 22 | Yamini | Education | Public | 31 | F | 6 | 1 | WFH | Sinhala |
| 23 | Sandeep | Trade | Private | 31 | M | 6 | 1 | Both | Sinhala |
| 24 | Manori | Financial | Private | 35 | F | 9 | 2 | Both | Sinhala |
| 25 | Banu | Education | Private | 50 | M | 15 | 1 | WFH | English |

**Table 1.** *Cont.*

| Interview No. | Name (Pseudonym) | Industry | Sector | Age | Gender | Years Married | Children | WFH * or at Office during Pandemic | Language of Interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 26 | Rohini | Hospitality | Private | 32 | F | 5 | 1 | Both | English |
| 27 | Ranmal | Manufacturing | Private | 30 | M | 4 | 1 | Both | Sinhala |
| 28 | Aruni | Financial | Private | 30 | F | 4 | 1 | Both | Sinhala |
| 29 | Illiyas | Financial | Private | 40 | M | 7 | 1 | Office | English |
| 30 | Waruna | Professional Service | NGO | 38 | M | 5 | 1 | Both | English |
| 31 | Janaka | Trade | Private | 35 | M | 7 | 1 | Office | Sinhala |
| 32 | Thivanka | Financial | Private | 35 | M | 9 | 2 | WFH | Sinhala |

* WFH—working from home.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### *4.1. Distribution of Unpaid Labour—Before and during COVID-19*

We found that the distribution of unpaid labour among men and women did not change drastically during the pandemic. It was common for women to handle a higher share of unpaid labour among dual-earner couples. These findings are similar to some research in Sri Lanka [42] and some Western contexts (e.g., USA and Italy) [9,10]. However, they contradict the results of studies in some other Western contexts (e.g., Spain and UK) [43,44], which found that, though women handled a higher share of unpaid tasks, the contribution of men towards these tasks showed an increase during the pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic period.

> "*Except for the cooking, other things actually remained the same because we both were working so we have to share things and do together.*" (Ahamad)

We also observed that the share of unpaid labour handled by men was further reduced in special situations. For example, in situations such as having paid help for household work (e.g., domestic aide), receiving the assistance of extended family (e.g., mother/mother-in-law), and the wife working from home, or if the wife was on maternity leave during the pandemic. In such situations, men prioritised paid work, regardless of whether they were working from home or on-site, and engaged in unpaid labour only when "time permitted'. For example, Sandeep stated,

> "*On the days I had to go to office, I got ready and went to office but on the days, I stayed at home, at about 8.15 I used to sit in front of the laptop . . . I could not do anything for both of them* [wife and baby] *but whenever . . . time permits, I swept the house and did some cleaning . . . , I washed the bathroom . . . , dusting but apart from that I did not support them in the cooking or other duties.*"

According to David,

> "*During the pandemic, because we had two domestics* [aides] *and my wife was also at home* [on maternity leave], *it was interims, like maybe in the morning one hour and then in the night.*"

Our study revealed that unpaid tasks that are categorised as stereotypically "feminine" tasks were often taken care of by women, and stereotypically "masculine" tasks were often the responsibilities of men. This finding confirms past studies [17] and social role theory. While stereotypically "feminine" tasks (communal tasks) included cooking, cleaning the house, and taking care of children, stereotypically "masculine" tasks included grocery shopping, car maintenance, gardening, and staying in queues to collect items (agentic tasks) during lockdowns. Tasks such as collecting items from lorries during lockdowns and handling the purchasing of groceries were often performed by men. This was because they identified such tasks as risky, as there was a possibility of contracting the virus, and wanted to protect their spouses and children. The division between stereotypically "masculine" and "feminine" tasks existed before and during the pandemic. As Manori explained,

> "*When the lorries used to come,* [he] *used to do the purchasing, he is very health-conscious, so he used to do that. The online purchasing used to be done by me but when the goods arrived,* [he] *used to take them in. I cut the vegetables, scrape the coconut etc... Cleaning, washing of clothes, putting them out to dry, taking them inside, folding and putting them away, ironing all that was handled by me.*"

### *4.2. Men and Unpaid Labour*

Our study revealed that men could be divided into three clusters based on their engagement in unpaid labour (the frequency of engaging in unpaid labour and the type of unpaid labour they engaged in). We labelled these clusters as the "sharing" type, the "chipping-in" type, and the "not-my-problem" type.

4.2.1. The "Sharing" Type

The "sharing" type included men who equally engaged in, or shared, unpaid labour with their spouses. They were characterised as dependable, generally helpful, neat, supportive, and understanding by their spouses. With the "sharing" type of men, the division between stereotypically "feminine" and "masculine" tasks was minimal. They handled stereotypically "feminine" tasks, which included ironing clothes, cleaning the house, cutting vegetables, and planning meals. The involvement of "sharing" men in unpaid labour remained constant before and during the pandemic, regardless of whether they worked from home, on-site, or both. For example, Methsiri explained,

> "*I usually don't wait until someone else does the work, I do it myself. Also, we don't divide the work,* [as] *I don't expect my wife to do certain things. If something hasn't been done, I do it. So, therefore during the weekend, I am usually occupied with household chores. On weekdays, once I get home from work, I do whatever needs to be done.*"

It seems that the men in this cluster considered unpaid labour as a shared responsibility that should not be performed solely by the wife. This belief is contrary to the traditional gender role values that we commonly observe. This highlights that there are individuals who are non-traditional or egalitarian, possibly due to socialisation and adoption of diffuse gender roles [34]. In most instances, sharing of unpaid labour was achieved through discussion and assignment of tasks.

> "*We had a discussion as to what work . . . I should take care of, and what work my wife would take care of.*" (Eshan)

In addition, there were "sharing" type men who engaged in unpaid labour because they empathised with their spouses when they struggled to juggle paid and unpaid labour.

> "*What I try to do is to understand . . . and to help her . . . to make her life easy...I feel that my wife also must be feeling frustrated at times when she is also not in a position to deliver the way she used to do.*" (Eshan)

We found that some of the "sharing" type men took on new unpaid labour tasks during the pandemic that they usually would not perform (e.g., cooking). This change was mainly due to a new interest they formed because of the spouse's nature of work during the pandemic (e.g., healthcare workers), or because the spouse was away from home. Some of them intended to continue such tasks, as they had the desire and interest to continue learning about those tasks. They also found them to be stress relievers from their paid work.

> "*When you start learning something you should not let that to go . . . it's an interesting thing because sometimes you prepare your own meal, and you prepare it for yourself and you try to explore different things, so I think that is an interesting area to learn.*" (Ahamad)

Further, we found that, due to this shared responsibility, Eshan had an impact on his paid work, which indicates that men's paid work could also be affected by engaging in unpaid labour.

> "*When I was at office . . . , I try to respond* [to emails] *promptly but with household work . . . , I didn't have time, at times, to respond promptly . . . I have . . . a kind of guilty feeling . . . with this* [household and childcare] *work I had to schedule meetings and there were delays in that as well at times . . . I sometimes feel the preparation that I do before the* [paid work], *has also got affected. So, I also feel a bit bad about it but anyway I try to manage the situation . . . updating* [knowledge] *. . . sometimes gets affected.*"

However, it was interesting to note that men's "sharing" behaviour often led to experiences of positive wellbeing among men and women.

4.2.2. The "Chipping-in" Type

The "chipping-in" type included men who regularly performed, or helped with, unpaid labour. However, they were mostly engaged in stereotypically "masculine" tasks, such as car maintenance, gardening, and purchasing groceries, which reflected task specialisation as per the social role theory. "Chipping-in" type men acknowledged that they had a role to play in unpaid household tasks and participated in the same in certain instances. However, most of the "chipping-in" type men prioritised paid work over unpaid tasks. This behaviour reinforces the "ideal worker culture" where men prioritise work over everything else, including their family [18]. Explaining how he prioritised paid work but "chipped-in" when possible, Ranmal stated,

> "*I was able to only devote about an hour or two and on some days, I could not do that as well because during month end, we had tight deadlines so we had to get involved and do our work. On those days I could not get involved in housework or childcare work at all . . . I painted . . . cleaned and dusted the room, did some vehicle maintenance.*"

It is noteworthy to highlight that, unlike the "sharing" type, "chipping-in" type men reinforced the notion of gendered distribution of unpaid labour. In other words, this type of men seemed to avoid taking responsibility for unpaid labour whenever possible, and left the primary responsibility of unpaid labour to the wife.

> "*I used to wash the vehicles also which I usually give to a washing place. I used to wash both our vehicles at home and clean them.*" (David)

Similar to most "sharing" type men, a few "chipping-in" type men also distributed unpaid labour through discussion and assignment. This often led to experiences of positive emotional and mental wellbeing among men and women. As Rehan explained,

> "*When we got married, we were both employed. Since we had very little time for ourselves, we both discussed this and planned to work according to a schedule. At the beginning of the month, we used to draw up a schedule and discuss what we were going to do during the month so that arrangement continued.*"

4.2.3. The "Not-My-Problem" Type

The "Not-my-problem" type men never, or rarely, contributed to unpaid labour. These men avoided taking responsibility for any unpaid labour. They engaged in unpaid labour only if they were compelled to, and most of the tasks they performed were stereotypically "masculine", such as in the case of the "chipping-in" type (again reflecting task specialisation). In general, the women in such families handled both stereotypically "masculine" and "feminine" tasks. However, even if these "not-my-problem" men attended to unpaid labour, it was limited to their personal tasks, such as ironing or folding only their clothes. This finding is in line with Gunasekara et al. [45] regarding the *self-centric* nature of most men. The reasons, or excuses, provided by the men and women for men being in this cluster included, firstly, some men not perceiving that they had a role in unpaid labour.

> "*The problem with me is, sometimes if she doesn't ask me to do anything, I also might just wait and do my own work. I will think that okay she can manage on her own.*" (Kamal)

Secondly, some men were traditionally raised not to engage in unpaid labour by their mothers.

> "*The problem is my mother doesn't allow me to, because whenever I take the initiative to do something, she jumped the gun and say no, that's okay, I have it already. So don't worry about it . . . she won't allow me to do anything not even . . . plant a vegetable.*" (Amal)

Thirdly, the wife, mother, mother-in-law, or domestic aide taking care of the unpaid tasks.

> "*The birth of the baby didn't create a very big change in my lifestyle . . . .* [My wife] *shouldered most of the responsibility with the able support of her mother.*" (Sandeep)

Fourthly, demanding paid-work schedules and prominence placed on men's career by most of women and men.

> "*On a normal working day, I don't get involved in household chores in any way. My full time was spent on office work.*" (Ramesh)

Finally, a few women were reluctant to share specific unpaid tasks, such as childcare, with any other party, including the spouse. This reluctance may be due to the fear of traditional patriarchal norms stigmatising married women who do not engage in their "wife" and "mother" tasks [46].

> "*I can say like my child's work, I don't know whether I didn't allow anybody else to handle it, . . . but it was most of the time with me, I kept it to me.*" (Rizna)

We interestingly noted that a few of the "not-my-problem" type men only supported their spouses or family financially, and did not engage in any unpaid labour. This type of men maintained and reinforced the traditional gender role of "breadwinner" of the family, even when the women earned more.

> "*But when we have to buy things online, he would give me his credit card or the debit card and I have to order everything, I have to check what is there and not there and then the grocery list I have to prepare and all that. He'll just give me the card.*" (Malmi)

Overall, the "chipping-in" type and "not-my-problem" type men often depicted general South Asian men who demonstrated unequal gender norms in terms of sharing unpaid tasks [47]. Further, this behaviour of "not-my-problem" type men led to experiences of frustration and exhaustion among women, negatively impacting their mental and emotional wellbeing, as reflected in Iranganie's case,

> "*I used to get very angry for small things also. I used to shout at the kids, at my mother-in-law, my husband and finally both my husband and I went for counselling as well.*"

### *4.3. Women and Unpaid Labour*

Our study revealed that, similar to men, women could be divided into three clusters based on the frequency of sharing unpaid labour, and the type of unpaid tasks handled. The clusters are the "sharing" type, the "asking-for-help" type, and the "bearing-the-cross" type.

#### 4.3.1. The "Sharing" Type

The "sharing" type includes women who were open to sharing unpaid labour. They expected their husbands to engage in unpaid labour regularly, irrespective of stereotypically "masculine" and "feminine" tasks. For example, explaining how they shared unpaid labour, Rohini stated,

> "*Washing clothes, putting them out to dry, it's a 50/50 thing, me and my husband used to do it. It depends on who is free at that time. Ironing, majority of the ironing I do. If it's not possible, my mother or my husband will help me. Cleaning is also a 50/50 thing, me and my husband, whoever is free will make sure that it's cleaned.*"

In addition, these women engaged in "masculine" tasks, especially when their husbands were out of the home due to paid work. As Wasanthi said,

> "*I got used to doing things on my own, things that my husband used to do when we were together.*"

In our study, we observed that "sharing" type women often enjoyed more peace of mind, were relaxed, and were better at successfully balancing paid and unpaid labour (compared to "asking-for-help" or "bearing-the-cross" type women). They hardly felt that unpaid labour was stressful, a burden, or their sole responsibility that they were expected to fulfil. This feeling improved their performance as employees and concentration on paid work. Further, it influenced their personal lives positively through improved relationships

with their spouses and children. These findings indicated that "sharing" type women enjoyed positive mental and emotional wellbeing due to the support they received from their spouse in unpaid tasks.

> "*Actually, because we share the household chores, I don't have that stress of worrying about doing everything alone.... Even if I wake up late, we somehow manage because both of us get together and share the work. I therefore don't have to worry about the home when doing my office work, which makes me concentrate better.*" (Nirmala)

#### 4.3.2. The "Asking-for-Help" Type

The "asking-for-help" type included women who took responsibility for unpaid labour but asked husbands to help regularly in unpaid tasks irrespective of whether they were stereotypically "masculine" or "feminine". As Shamala explained,

> "*Always I have a sharing nature with him. Whatever I ask, today if I say I want to finish* [paid work] . . . *then he agrees and he helps me. So, in hard times definitely he helps, then I reduce my housework and he takes that over. That type of alternative adjustments we have.*"

Some women "asked-for-help" by venting their stress on their spouses, explaining how much they needed support, even to the extent of obtaining external support such as counselling. Others had peaceful discussions and agreements on how unpaid labour needed to be assisted. There were similar results found, in terms of negotiations with their spouses to contribute to unpaid labour, in pre-pandemic Sri Lanka [48]. More recently, in the USA. during the pandemic, negotiations with regard to sharing space and time during working from home were observed [49]. Regardless of the way these women "asked-for-help", we observed that some spouses responded to this request positively. However, there were others who continued their "not-my-problem" type behaviour. Additionally, some spouses simply focused on their personal activities, such as washing and ironing their clothes, and perceived this as assisting with unpaid labour.

> "*Actually, I let out steam when he comes home, and while he is washing the baby, then I say that I am tired and cannot go on like this...We don't usually argue, we have peaceful discussions... Actually, they don't realize how much we do because everything is done for them, but when you speak to them like this, they begin to realise how much we do and will try to help a little more. I think we can reduce this stress if our husbands help out more, they may have reasons for their lack of help but at least they will begin to realise what a lot we do.*" (Yamini)

Similar to the "sharing" type women, the "asking-for-help" type women enjoyed positive mental and emotional wellbeing when their spouses were willing to help with unpaid tasks when requested. However, the "asking-for-help" type women experienced stress and frustration when their spouses refused to assist with unpaid labour, despite requests. These feelings indicated a negative impact on their mental and emotional wellbeing.

#### 4.3.3. The "Bearing-the-Cross" Type

The "bearing-the-cross" type included women solely responsible for unpaid labour even though a few husbands occasionally "chipped-in". Some women in this category did not even realise that tasks such as spending time with and attending to children constituted unpaid labour. This depicts the extent of self-regulation and task specialisation demonstrated by women that is described in the social role theory. This category included two sub-groups. Firstly, some women believed they were better in handling unpaid tasks. Further, they also perceived that it was easier for them to do it themselves rather than getting their husbands to assist.

> "*There were times I used to get angry because I had to attend to the business, do the child's work and housework, everything. Actually, rather than getting him to do something in the house, I feel it is better if I do it myself. Therefore, it's not a big thing for me if he does not do any housework . . . ..My husband is only good to mess the place.*" (Piumali)

Secondly, women who did not ask for help or reveal their hardships to their husbands. They believed there was no point in explaining the hardships they experienced in balancing their paid work and unpaid labour to their spouse.

> "*That was a stress period because I had to do the housework . . . Actually, I just felt like that, because it's pointless telling my husband and father. I have to somehow manage so I used to keep that pressure within me and somehow manage the situation . . . I used to make up my mind like that. Actually, I didn't even tell my husband that I felt like leaving my job.*" (Aruni)

As indicated by Piumali and Aruni, women in both these sub-groups were often stressed and emotionally exhausted because of the minimal assistance received from their spouses in unpaid labour. The statement by Aruni also indicates the possible impact on women's paid work and professional career. This finding is similar to the findings of Hennekam and Shymko [12], who revealed that a lack of change in traditional gender roles created feelings of stress, struggle, and frustration. Such feelings indicated a negative impact on these women's overall wellbeing.

We also observed that, regardless of the sub-group women belonged to, they often justified their spouses' limited involvement in unpaid labour. They explained that their husbands were either work or career-oriented, or that it was simply their nature. Such beliefs and justifications by the wives highlight their internalisation of gender stereotypes around unpaid labour, career salience of men over women, and the breadwinner role of men, reflecting social role theory. Such wives' thoughts reflect the continued acceptance of traditional social roles and patriarchal social structures [20]. Malmi, who herself was ambitious and had career goals similar to her spouse, justified her spouse's lack of involvement in unpaid labour,

> "*He focuses a lot on his office work because he is very committed to his work, and he is actually a very ambitious person, and he has like career goals. These days . . . he is focusing on* [career related activities] *. . . so much of his time is spent on those areas . . . so he doesn't focus a lot on housework.*"

In summary, clusters of men and women did not always match (Figure 1). We found that not all "sharing" men have "sharing" type wives. Instead, a few had "asking-for-help" type spouses. This is because such men started to contribute towards unpaid tasks (sharing) due to requests by, and negotiations with, the wife. Further, "chipping-in" men had "bearing-the-cross" or "sharing" type wives. This was due to either having a "sharing" type wife compelling them or negotiating with them to at least contribute by "chipping-in" (attending to stereotypically masculine tasks), or having a wife who did not ask for help, attempt to negotiate, or have the confidence to delegate tasks to their husbands. In the case of "not-my-problem" men, not all had "bearing-the-cross" wives. Instead, a few had "asking-for-help" wives. The is because such men did not positively respond to requests for help from their wives.

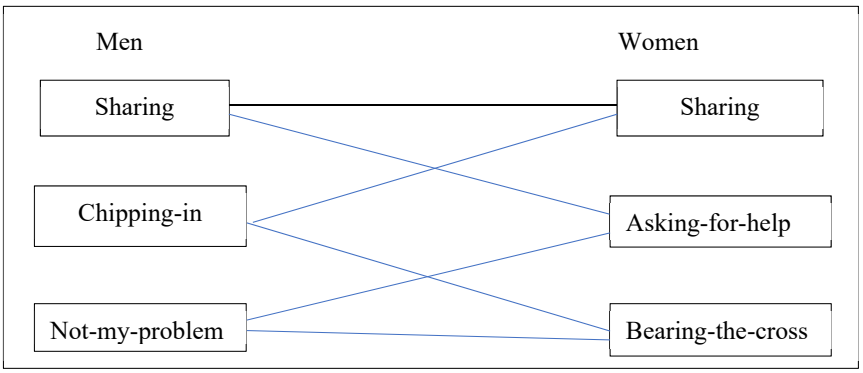


**Figure 1.** Relationships between clusters of men and women.

Whilst a few men remained *work-centric* and *self-centric* [45] throughout, there were others who made an attempt to move purely from being *work-* and *self-centric* to somewhat *family-centric*. This finding challenges society's traditional gender role beliefs, portraying a positive move towards egalitarian individuals.

### *4.4. Enduring Unpaid Labour*

Sri Lankan urban and sub-urban families are moving towards becoming nuclear families [50]. However, we found that most couples in this study, and women specifically, whichever cluster they belonged to, endured unpaid labour with the assistance of their parents (especially mothers), in-laws (especially mother-in-law), and/or domestic aide, as found in a previous study in Sri Lanka [48]. This assistance from extended family and paid domestic aides was present even before the pandemic. However, the importance of this assistance was felt more by women during the pandemic. Interestingly, these women received support from extended families on a daily or regular basis. This reflects the attributes of the collectivistic culture of Sri Lanka [51], still prevalent even among urban families. We did not see such findings in other research conducted in Western countries during the pandemic, such as Ireland [14], the Netherlands [16], and Italy [9], or in pre-pandemic studies [17]. This enabled most women to balance their paid and unpaid labour successfully. In the case of some couples, the support they received from their parents and/or parents-in-law was so high that they were left with very few unpaid tasks to engage in.

> "*My mother-in-law wakes up early in the morning and cooks the rice and the meat item. Even if I ask her not to do it, she somehow does it. On some days if I tell her that I want to try out something special, she asks what she has to do and she keeps bothering me asking what she could do to help.*" (Iranganie)

Nuwani said about her mother,

> "*From the day we got married, we lived in my home with my parents. My mother helps out a lot. Even before the children came, my mother used to cook and do our laundry so we didn't have a need for a maid . . . At that time* [during lockdown] *my youngest son was 9 months old. So, he was taking solids at that time. Usually, my mother used to feed him but since they don't eat quickly, my mother used to spend a lot of time to feed him . . . My mother never complains.*"

In addition, most couples preferred to live close to their parents' or in-laws' houses, primarily to receive support for their unpaid labour. These were signs of the high dependence of dual-earner families on the support they received from parents/parents-in-law. Dual-earner couples being overly-dependent on extended families is often a consequence of limited day-care facilities and a lack of affordable and reliable childcare services in Sri Lanka [48,52].

Further, we interestingly observed that unpaid labour among dual-earner couples was gendered, and the support they received from parents and/or parents-in-law was gendered as well. Fathers and fathers-in-law engaged and supported in stereotypically "masculine" unpaid tasks, such as gardening or vehicle maintenance, whereas, mothers and mothers-in-law were of more significant assistance when carrying out stereotypically "feminine" unpaid tasks, such as childcare, household cleaning, and laundry. We further noted instances where some couples moved to their in-laws' home to obtain more assistance in unpaid labour from mothers and/or mothers-in-law, when only the father and/or father-in-law was living with them.

> "[Father is] *not much* [help with childcare or household work] *because he is not very much comfortable still because the reason is we were not here for a long period. On and off we shifted to in-laws' place because we needed some help for work and everything, so he was not with the baby for a long period. So, that was the issue. Still, he is not very much comfortable with the baby but now he is getting accustomed. So, even today in the*

*morning I gave the baby to him, and I took care of some work for 15 to 20 minutes. Like that slowly he will progress.*" (Eshan)

Confirming other studies conducted in Western [30,31,43,44] and non-Western countries [32], our study further revealed that the load of unpaid labour increased during the lockdown for most women. The reasons for increased unpaid labour during the pandemic were similar to those in the literature; for example, closure of schools and day-care centres [43,44], restricted availability of paid domestic aides, and working from home [49].

"*There were days when* [my husband] *used to work from home . . . even when he stayed at home there was no difference because he used to focus on his office work. During those days it was very stressful for me maybe because I was always with the child and I had to do his work as well . . . I used to make him cups of tea, cook his meals etc which was time-consuming. When he goes to office, they get their lunch.*" (Yamini)

On the one hand, this was because families expected women to engage in more unpaid labour when they were working from home during the pandemic. Even the unpaid tasks that were handled, or could have been managed, by other family members often became women's responsibilities when working from home. This expectation portrays the culturally driven traditional gender role ideology that demarcate who is responsible for what.

"*If I too had to go to office and work, I don't think I would have felt it* [unpaid tasks] *that much because when I am not there, my parents would have done something, they would have even kept a servant.*" (Aruni)

On the other hand, some women felt it was their responsibility to engage in a higher share of unpaid labour when working from home. They often believed that they should give more attention to their children or elderly parents as they were available at home. This resulted in less time to complete their employment-related tasks.

"*I felt that it's not right not to attend to them* [children], *sin* [feeling sympathetic] *for them, they would grow up and then they would go, so I would have missed. So, I used to keep the work aside but at the end of the day I had to put more work, in the night I had to sit and complete that.*" (Kanthi)

The higher workload women engaged in affected their mental and emotional wellbeing. However, the support they received from their parents and in-laws often positively impacted their personal and professional wellbeing. Further, there were times when paid work assisted women in lessening their stress and exhaustion experienced from unpaid labour, which improved their overall wellbeing, as also found by Barnett and Hyde [21].

"*I used to like going to* [workplace] *because I had some time to myself away from the home and baby, I felt very free. Then once I return to my parents' place, my mother would have fed the baby.*" (Yamini)

### *4.5. Practical Implications*

Our study has implications for individuals, families, organisations, and society. Gendered distribution of unpaid labour can impact the wellbeing of individuals, especially during not-normal circumstances. Wellbeing is significant, as it can affect the sustainability of the various roles played by individuals, such as employees and family members. Hence, we suggest the need for a society where men are more empathetic and sympathetic towards a working spouse. Further, we believe that it is necessary to systematically challenge society's perception of task specialisation, as well as social- and self-regulation, in the distribution of unpaid labour. We believe this can be accomplished through education, communication, and by raising young children to view and perform unpaid labour from a gender-neutral perspective. Further, dual-earner couples can negotiate the arrangements of the share of unpaid labour so that a fair share of the work is distributed among both. Organisations should factor in their employees' unpaid labour-related responsibilities when

designing their employee wellbeing programmes and when defining an "ideal worker'. For example, as the state is not providing affordable childcare facilities, organisations could do so. Further, organisations should adopt strategies that provide flexibility and support to individuals who are working from home.

### *4.6. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research*

The interviews were conducted in late 2021 and early 2022. During the interviews, the respondents had to recall their experiences in 2020 and 2021. Having to recall the past is a common limitation in qualitative research. However, it may have impacted our understanding and explanations. Future research can utilise the diary method to collect some unpaid labour-related information.

Our interviewees were from urban and suburban areas, and were professional and managerial dual-earner couples. Future research could focus on blue-collar and informal sector workers from rural, urban, and suburban areas. Researchers could also focus on the strain experienced by the extended family due to sharing of unpaid labour of others.

## 5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic was an abnormal circumstance. It disrupted our lives. It was predicted that changes due to the COVID-19 crisis would bring about favourable changes in the unequal distribution of unpaid labour [31]. However, we found that there was mostly no change in the distribution of unpaid labour among dual-earner couples. Our study revealed typologies of men and women based on their contribution to unpaid labour. "Chipping-in" and "not-my-problem" type men, and "bearing-the cross" type women, reinforced the notion of gendered distribution of unpaid labour. We found that, due to gendered distribution of unpaid labour, some women's paid labour was impacted. We also found evidence for men's paid work being affected by their sharing of unpaid labour. Through these findings, we highlighted the challenges and the nuanced nature of the distribution of unpaid labour of dual-earner couples in a less-researched non-Western context during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most women endured the unequal division of unpaid labour with the assistance of others. Our study highlighted the important role played by extended families in the distribution of unpaid labour in the context of our study, which is not observed in most Western contexts. As our findings revealed differences in unpaid labour across cultures, we emphasise the need for nuanced cross-cultural comparative research. Our study results also highlighted that changing gender roles and movement towards egalitarianism takes time, even among educated individuals. We hope our research will reignite the "stalled revolution" [33] in a much-needed movement toward non-gendered unpaid labour by overcoming the "immunities to change" [53] for better wellbeing of individuals and society.

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