BEHAN BOX

What is *care* work?

And why it matters.

Written by: Anjali Illustrations by: Urvi Sawant

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Feeding *a newborn.*
Cleaning *the streets.*

Listening *to someone's grief.* ***Nursing*** *care.*

Cooking.

Managing ***medicines*** *for the elderly.* ***Surrogacy.***

This is *care*

- some paid, ***most not.***

It is essential to the economy and society – yet it remains **invisible, undervalued** and **feminised**.

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Women spend at least **7.1 hours** a day on unpaid care work.

Men spend just **2.71 hours**.

(Time Use Survey, MoSPI, 2024)

But this data, shaped by gendered and methodological biases, barely captures the true **scale, value, or labour of care.**

Care work is exhausting.

During COVID, Rutuja Shelke, an ASHA worker, walked door to door in 40°C heat while pregnant, raising vaccine awareness.

*"**I had to feed my baby** every hour, doubling the distance I walked... We advise pregnant women to rest, **but we ASHA workers don't get that care or rest.**"*

–Rutuja Shelke, 25

Illustration by: Bao

Care as caste-based work

Kavita Khomane, a toilet operator in Mankhurd, Mumbai, provides care where the state has stepped back.

"I spend money from ***my pocket*** *to repair... newly constructed toilets. The toilet has deep links with our health...* ***It's my responsibility to keep it hygienic for my basti.***"

– ***Kavita Khomane***

She works over ***15 hours/day*** without a contract, security, or benefits. Yet, her work is ***excluded*** from labour laws.

Care as a source of dignity and community

Sanish, a young Pardhi activist, runs 'Majal' - an informal space for Pardhi community members seeking mental health support in Karond Basti, Bhopal.

Such care can be **life-saving** in communities facing chronic debt and state violence, and where public systems have **failed** to provide **essential mental health support.**

Care isn't a 'women's issue'

Yet **male-dominated professions** resist centering care infrastructure – seen as a feminised issue, say experts.

*"**Safety, childcare, mental health, washrooms**... traditional unions have long dismissed these as women's issues,"*

– **Sai Amulya Komarraju**, scholar

As automation, inequality, and climate crises grow, care work will only become more urgent.

"***The market may not be interested in [care-based] sectors...*** *but that's where* ***the State*** *has to pitch in... It has to tax capital, mobilise enough resources, and prioritise care at the social and community level."*

– **Neetha N**, an economist at Centre for Women's Development Studies

Illustration: Urvi Sawant

Help us build our Care Vertical.

What voices, issues and stories would you like to see centered?

Write to us at editor@behanbox.com.

Read our full reportage on care behanbox.com

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