Women and invisible work

Questions that we need to ask ourselves:

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- Can we consider household work or what is called as unpaid care work performed by women/girls, as an optional service? And which could be forsaken at will, without having an alternative in place?
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- Can we have **women's liberation without questioning the fundamental division of labour** that drives patriarchy?
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- The threat is that in the guise of breaking the public/private binary, the resistance against a male-dominated world is co-opted by women being offered a slice of the pie.
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- In this process, what is problematic is not women losing "feminine" traits of long hair, but the erasure of female labour, and contribution to sustaining human life.
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What is 'invisible labour'?

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- This labour is looked down upon in the world, and is **not part of national accounting or GDP**. But ironically, it is what sustains the economy.
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- In material terms, women's unpaid care work is huge. It is estimated that women perform 75% of the world's unpaid care work. In India, women perform 10 to 12 times the unpaid care work of men.
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- It is because women cannot give up unpaid care work that their access to paid work is severely limited, leading to a vicious cycle.
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- **Even when they find paid work, it does not necessarily liberate women** for often they are now saddled with both paid and unpaid work, leading to

what is called as “double burden”.
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What are some of often overlooked facts?

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- In the developing world, women constitute nearly half of the agricultural labour force — 60% in Asia and Africa. Despite this, women own less than 20% of the world’s agricultural land.
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- Women and girls also constitute 60% of the world’s chronically hungry. The FAO estimates that if women farmers had the same resources as men, it would have led to 150 million fewer hungry people.
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On what ‘women’s liberation’ must be based on?

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- Women need to access all arenas, including sport. **Participating in sport, especially in gender iniquitous societies, is liberating for women.** Further, it overturns established gender norms, particularly when women enter hitherto male-dominated sports.
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- But it is also not a straightforward story of women’s liberation. As sports researchers tell us, women are faced with the female/athlete paradox – Even when they become athletes, they are forced to conform to dominant notions of femininity.
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- This is because the larger society is still perfused with patriarchal values, and sport, while liberating for women, still operates within this larger culture.
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- That is why **women’s liberation has to be based on concrete material foundations.** It is women’s unpaid care work which makes work and sport outside the home possible.
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- Even when some women break out of the private sphere and enter the public sphere, the unpaid care work falls upon lowly-paid women domestic help from the most marginalised backgrounds.

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Concluding remarks:

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- Women’s empowerment is not merely about women becoming wrestlers or fighter pilots, which are, of course, important symbolic gestures.
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- But for real equality, it is imperative that women’s care work be given its due material recognition. It would also mean a thorough reordering of gender norms, not by a few women entering the men’s turf, but by men entering women’s turf, and taking on “feminine” unpaid care work.
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- Ironically, despite economic and educational growth, **female participation in the labour force of India fell to 24% in 2011, from 31% in 2004.** India is 11th from the bottom in the world in women’s labour-force participation rates.
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- For the real equality for women, along with the Mahavir Phogats, we need the likes of **Arunachalam Muruganantham,** the man who revolutionised women’s health by inventing cheap sanitary napkins.
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