

Women & The Care Economy (The 'Unpaid Work' Policy)

Context: The Ministry of Women & Child Development released the *Draft National Policy on Care Economy* in January 2026. **Key Theme:** *Recognizing the Invisible Work*. **Keywords:** *Time Poverty, Care Credits, The 3Rs (Recognize, Reduce, Redistribute), Motherhood Penalty*.

1. The Concept: The "Iceberg" Analogy

Imagine the Indian economy as a giant **Iceberg**.

- **The Tip (Visible):** This is what we see—factories, offices, IT parks, and stock markets. This is the "Formal Economy" where people get paid salaries and it counts towards the GDP.
- **The Base (Invisible):** This is the massive underwater section that holds the tip up. It includes cooking, cleaning, fetching water, looking after children, and nursing the elderly.
- **The Problem:** In India, this underwater base is **90% women**. They work 24/7, but because no money changes hands, economists call it "Unproductive." The January 2026 Policy aims to fix this by acknowledging that *without the base, the tip would sink*.

2. The Data: The 'Time Poverty' Trap

The policy is based on the shocking findings of the **Time Use Survey (TUS) 2024** (Factsheet released Jan 2026).

- **The 5-Hour Gap:** An average Indian woman spends **5 hours/day** on unpaid care work. An average Indian man spends **88 minutes**.
- **Time Poverty:** Because women spend 5 hours on unpaid work, they have no time to learn a skill, look for a job, or even rest. They are not just "Income Poor"; they are "Time Poor."
- **The "Motherhood Penalty":** The data showed that after the first child is born, a woman's earnings drop by **40%** in the long run, while a man's earnings often increase (the "Fatherhood Bonus").

3. The Solution: The January 2026 Draft Policy

The draft policy proposes a revolutionary framework called the **3Rs**:

A. RECOGNIZE (Making it Visible)

- **The Proposal:** The government will now calculate the "Satellite Value" of unpaid work.
- **What it means:** If a mother cooks a meal, it will be valued at the market rate of a chef/cook. This value won't be added to the GDP directly (to avoid inflation), but it will be published as a separate "**Care GDP**" figure to show women's contribution.

B. REDUCE (Technology as Justice)

- **The Proposal:** Reducing the *drudgery* of care work.
- **Example:** A woman spends 2 hours fetching water. If the **Jal Jeevan Mission** gives her a tap, she saves 2 hours.

- **Jan 2026 Initiative:** The policy proposes tax cuts on "Time-Saving Appliances" (Washing Machines, Dishwashers) to make them affordable for middle-class homes, shifting them from "Luxury Items" to "Essential Goods."

C. REDISTRIBUTE (The 'Care Credits' Idea)

- **The Innovation:** The policy moots a pilot project for "**Care Credits**" (similar to Carbon Credits).
- **How it works:** If a daughter takes care of her elderly parents today, she earns "Credits" in a government app. Decades later, when *she* is old, she can "cash in" these credits to get free care from a government-assigned caregiver. This turns "Seva" (Service) into a quantifiable asset.

4. Critical Analysis: Is it Practical?

- **The "Double Burden" Risk:** Critics argue that "Recognizing" work is fine, but if men don't share the load, women will just do *both*—work in an office (Paid) and cook at home (Unpaid). This is called the "**Second Shift.**"
- **The Creche Failure:** The policy mandates Creches (Day Care Centers) in all offices with 50+ employees. However, the January 2026 audit found that **70% of MSMEs** ignore this rule because it's "too expensive."
- **Conclusion:** The policy is a great *start*, but Social Justice requires a "**Cultural Shift,**" not just a policy shift. We need to normalize men changing diapers and cooking dinner as "Life Skills," not "Helping the Wife."