



Novel Insights, *An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Research Journal

ISSN: 3048-6572 (Online) 3049-1991 (Print)

Impact Factor: 4.25

Volume-I, Issue-V, August 2025, Page No. 364- 371

Published by Uttarsuri, Sribhumi, Assam, India, 788711



Website: <http://novelinsights.in/>

DOI: 10.69655/novelinsights.vol.1.issue.05W.041



Invisible Labour, Visible Care: Grandparents and Child Rearing in India

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Received: 27.08.2025; Accepted: 30.08.2025; Available online: 31.08.2025

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Abstract

Family as an institution has always remained an epitome of importance in India. The collectivist culture has nurtured the concept of joint family for a long time, which embodies bond, interdependence, care and harmony. In this family structure, elders, especially the grandparents, have played a pivotal role in child rearing with unconditional love and care. With the passing of time, the family structure has undergone significant changes, witnessing the rising number of nuclear and double-income families. With this altered scenario, the role and responsibilities of grandparents have elevated from mere care to serious child care on a daily basis, ranging from accompanying the child in various activities to preparing food for them. The matter of great surprise is that the untiring efforts of grandparents are seldom recognised by the family and State, leaving them in a zone of obligatory duty and unpaid labour.

It is time to revive and reassess the situation. This study aims to examine the matter from both theoretical and practical viewpoints to reveal its true nature. It will explore the mental, moral, ethical, and legal aspects of this valuable care, which often lacks formal recognition, even from the State. The study will investigate what measures the State is taking to recognise the contribution of grandparents. Although it is not appropriate to compensate their care with money, it is equally important to acknowledge that their efforts should not remain unappreciated. If the fundamental right to care at home is not secured, senior citizens' schemes will lose their significance, and exploitation in the form of invisible labour will continue. Striking a balance is the greatest challenge this study seeks to address.

Keywords: Invisible labour, grandparents, child rearing, care work, gender, ageing, India, social policy

Introduction:

Child rearing has always been a matter of shared responsibility in India, and especially nowadays, parents are not regarded as the sole persons responsible for this vital task. Multiple factors have contributed to this shift in outlook, including the rise of the nuclear family and the increasing number of dual-earner households. Dependence on grandparents is increasing day by day. Beyond unconditional love and care, grandparents also perform various routine responsibilities for the children, such as accompanying them to school, preparing meals, helping with homework, taking them to the doctor when needed, and, most importantly, creating a supportive emotional atmosphere. In spite of all this, a paradox

revolves around grandparental care. While on one hand, this care is treated and considered as a blessing, strengthening family bonds across generations, on the other hand, there is a dearth of recognition for such pious care. People consider this a natural duty of the grandparents, but this oversight raises multiple questions. Instead, they are often seen as voluntary and inevitable tasks, remaining invisible in family discussions and policy debates. This lack of recognition raises many questions - why does society view this untiring effort from the angle of natural love and care only? Why has the invisible and unpaid labour never caught the attention of policymakers? Why even the family members, do not feel the need to appreciate and recognize the service rendered by these elderly citizens? How to take a proper approach which will create a balance between the care provided by grandparents and at the same time recognise their effort with respect?

The study will try to explore the reality by thoroughly examining the issue of childcare, the politics and policies revolving around it, from the spectacle of the grandparents' care in India. The unrecognized work of care cannot simply be explained in terms of economy only as it involves a greater perspective. The matter of care is often seen as a matter of affection, love and joy by many grandparents; they themselves find mental peace through spending time with their grandchildren, and it nurtures their mental health in a positive way. Therefore, the debate between love, care, versus unpaid, invisible labour becomes difficult to situate. (Bhattacharya, 2017). The study tries to view the issue of unpaid labour from feminist and sociological angles too (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016). In order to understand the practise of grandparental care in India it is necessary to focus on the historical and cultural background, which the study has carefully done. The study focuses on the existing legal and policy frameworks on grandparental care. Finally, it exhibits the dilemma of grandparents who are not ready to make their care be treated as a commodity and get paid for the same which makes tracking the balanced policy even more difficult.

Invisible Labour and Care Work:

To understand the dichotomy of grandparental care, a detailed theoretical understanding is essential. Debates on invisible labour and care work might be helpful in revealing why grandparents' care is always considered an act of love and care and seldom gets recognized as labour. A theoretical perspective can be framed from these debates through which the part of grandparents in India can be scrutinized.

Feminists have used the term "invisible labour" to define the unpaid, unrecognised work that takes place in the home and society (Hochschild, 1983; Federici, 2012). Scholars like Arlie Hochschild and Silvia Federici have shown that most domestic work, like cooking, cleaning, or childcare, has habitually been considered as the sole responsibility of women, which is at the same time compulsory. Astonishingly the patriarchal structure of society has blatantly imposed all the burden on women without recognizing their effort and paying them the logical remuneration. Grandparental care, though not falling under this category, often follows a similar pattern of negligence and carelessness from the family and state whenever the matter of recognition of their labour comes into the scene.

In a broader sense, care work encompasses activities that sustain and support life, such as caring for children, looking after the elderly, attending to the sick, and managing households. Feminist political economists argue that care work is vital to capitalism's functioning, yet it remains largely unrecognised and unpaid. Nancy Fraser describes this as the "crisis of care," where societies increasingly depend on unpaid labour while devaluing

it. India's care economy is mostly feminised and privatised within families. When both parents work, daily childcare duties often fall to grandparents. This shifts social reproduction costs from the State and market onto the unpaid labour of older family members (Hochschild, 1983; Federici, 2012). Subsequently, grandparents play a vital role in social reproduction, yet they lack recognition or support from public institutions.

Grandparental care also has a connection with ageing and gender. Although both grandmothers and grandfathers contribute, it has been observed that grandmothers bear most of the load in terms of accompanying grandchildren in various activities and caring for them. This made them caged, as even after a lifetime of service in rearing their own children and maintaining all the family's responsibilities, they now, in old age, had to look after their grandchildren, forgetting about their own desires. Meanwhile, the idea that older adults – especially women – should be available for caregiving is rooted in deeply ingrained cultural norms in India. The concept of *seva* (service) and the moral obligation of duty reinforce the assumption that grandparents will naturally assume this role. However, when this moral expectation becomes compulsory, it can weaken grandparents' autonomy, clouding the line between voluntary love and forced labour.

Although feminist theories of invisible labour provide a helpful perspective, grandparents' care cannot be seen as unpaid domestic work. It has unique features needing recognition. To many grandparents, the act of looking after their grandchildren and taking their daily care is a matter of immense joy and satisfaction. They are not ready to treat other household chores with this care work at present. Often, the relationship between two different age groups is emotionally and mentally beneficial for both. While the younger generation receives uninterrupted attention and company, learning moral and ethical values from the elders, the seniors enjoy the bliss of remaining attached to their third generation, which creates a new meaning, value, and notion of belonging in their lives that would otherwise be lonely or inactive in many situations. Thus, it is critical to problematize the issue; if considered from the standpoint of love and duty, the non-acknowledgement and exploitation are ignored, while if seen from the spectacle of labour, keeping aside the affection, then it becomes voluntary. In the case of India, the situation becomes more complex. The absence of a proper *creche*, lack of initiative from the government, makes it troublesome for working parents of nuclear families to keep their children in appropriate custody. At this time, the grandparents appear as saviours and act as safe hands that can hold the needs of childhood with extreme care. The State does not leave a little chance to praise the act as heavenly to veil its failure to provide the necessary infrastructure for child care.

Historical and Cultural Background of Grandparental Care in India:

India's socio-cultural background plays a significant role in understanding how grandparental care of grandchildren is treated in society and family. Culture, tradition, and family equation all determine the notion of grandparents' care in India. Over the years, how grandparents have devoted their time in rearing their grandchildren will be helpful in understanding why the debate is spinning around between love, care and unpaid and invisible labour. Since time immemorial, grandparents have played the key role in grandchildren's care within the structure of the joint family, where this care was viewed as normal and natural by other family members. It was kind of an implied thought that affection will flow downward from elders to children, while obedience and respect will flow

upward to make the position of elders strong in the family. In between, the notion of invisible labour or unpaid labour got covered under the cloud of morality, as hardly anyone has thought of recognizing the habitual practise something to be treated with additional attention. With the growth of urbanization and migration the scenario changed, as grandparents became the central support system in the nuclear families. Therefore, their role also shifted from one of the major caregivers in the family to the prime caregiver to the grandchildren and they became responsible for ensuring the overall development them. Earlier, to some extent, the care was a matter of choice, but in the shifting situation, this work has become a compulsion. Sometimes the grandparents have to leave their own ancestral house and stay with their children where they reside for a job or other purposes, and to provide all essential support to the grandchildren. This situation augments the debate between love and work, as grandparents have to sacrifice their comfort for the benefit of other family members.

In this unseen and non-recognized work patten, gender has always played an interesting role. Elderly female members, the grandparents always take up the role of prime caregiver, ensuring proper food, nutrition, and comfort to the children, while the grandfathers love to perform the role of authoritative patriarch, dictating matters and issuing moral verdicts to teach the children discipline. Though exceptions are definitely there in the 21st century with grandfathers sharing load of household chores, but the overall scenario is yet to be brightened up.

Empirical Dimensions: Practices and Experiences:

The historical and cultural traditions mentioned above have shown that grandparents' care is a common practise throughout India. Their care and contribution shape the family life in numerous ways. In order to understand the various sides of unseen labour, we have to know how grandparents work, how they perceive caregiving and how their role changes in different situations.

As we have already discussed, grandparents are involved in multiple activities of the grandchildren daily, which sometimes makes them tired, but they seldom express their problems to their children to ensure an uninterrupted flow of family life. Children also often forget to ask their parents whether they are enjoying the care work or if it is becoming taxing on them. Grandparents' roles vary across social classes, also. In a middle-class family, the main task of grandparents is to teach morals to the children, assisting them in their education, while in low-earning families, the duty is to ensure basic needs like preparing food and supervising the children when their parents are away from home for work. Despite variation in roles, two factors remain persistent: non-recognition and unpaid labour. Grandparents' role cannot be defined in a unilinear way; rather, it is a mutual one. Unlike professional caregivers, they provide care from love and, in return, sense a stronger family tie. Parallely, like other voluntary work, their duty is not actually optional, but somewhat obligatory on a daily basis. This complexity of care makes the matter political, obscuring the line between voluntary care and invisible labour.

Socio-Political Implications of Invisible Labour in the Context of Grandparents' Role:

Historically, the Indian welfare state has depended on family networks to assume caregiving responsibilities (Sekher & Hatti, 2010). Childcare, elderly care, and women's employment policies inherently presume that families serve as the primary safety net. In practice, this has

resulted in grandparents becoming an unseen layer of welfare provision, diminishing the state's direct involvement in childcare infrastructure. For example, while ICDS and Anganwadis offer early childhood education, the daily demands of care—such as feeding, supervising, and emotional nurturing—are borne by families, with grandparents often stepping in to fill this role. This situation aligns with what feminist scholars refer to as the “outsourcing of state responsibility to households” (Fraser, 2016), which places grandparents at the centre of social reproduction but without recognition or compensation. There is another aspect to consider—intergenerational justice. The assumption that older people will automatically care for their grandchildren often neglects their own needs, aspirations, or health. Many grandparents, who may be struggling with chronic illness or financial insecurity, are usually pushed into caregiving roles without proper discussion. This highlights a structural imbalance in rights: while children and working-age adults benefit from grandparental care, the elderly's right to leisure, autonomy, or state-supported services is often overlooked. As a result, invisible labour not only masks gender inequality but also intergenerational inequality, raising a crucial question: to what extent should elderly citizens be expected to shoulder the burden of reproductive labour when state systems are inadequate?

When examining how grandparental labour indirectly supports capitalist production, the political economy aspect becomes evident. By caring for grandchildren, grandparents enable younger adults, especially women, to participate in the labour market, thus supporting economic productivity. However, the value generated through this unpaid labour remains unrecognised and is not redistributed. Nancy Fraser's (2016) concept of a “crisis of care” is pertinent here: capitalism depends on unacknowledged, unpaid care work to survive, yet it fails to invest in or recognise this sector. In India, the absence of universal childcare policies and the rising costs of private nurseries intensify the reliance on grandparents, effectively exploiting their unpaid contributions as a hidden subsidy to the market economy.

Grandparents' labour often goes unnoticed in policy debates, which significantly affects how they are portrayed. Public narratives around “active ageing” and “family values” usually depict grandparents' involvement as natural, without recognising the hard work, exhaustion, and sometimes coercion involved. For this attitude, there remains a large gap in policy issues.

Grandparents' role differs from that of formal child care workers like Anganwadi staff or domestic workers, as they are not formally enrolled to do this job, which in turn affects their bargaining power. If any grandparent is unwilling to do this job regularly, he or she has no legal platform or forum to discuss the problem, and thus their voice remains suppressed in social policy debates and discussions. Non-recognition leads to a serious political consequence as it avoids the matter of care from the social platform and tries to situate it within the four walls of private life only. This, in turn, creates a sense of hesitation in grandparents as they do not become vocal about their problems and needs and start to believe in destiny rather than seeking justice. Their well-being depends on the charity work or the mood of their family members, especially children, although they are entitled to enjoy all their rights as legal citizens.

Finally, this approach supports neo liberal policies which believe in transferring responsibilities to the community and family by glorifying their roles as the natural welfare providers.

Comparative Perspectives:

The grandparents' care is not unique to India only, as across the globe, in many countries, grandparents play a positive role in the upbringing of their grandchildren. However, according to culture and political situation, the matter of recognition, both social and economic and institutional support varies. In India's position can be compared in the global context, then the likenesses and variances will help to frame a better innovative policy.

In Western welfare states like Sweden, Germany, and the UK, grandparents are often recognised in social policy, though indirectly. Some countries offer financial allowances or tax credits for grandparents providing significant childcare when parents cannot. In Germany, grandparents can access state-funded parental leave if they are primary carers. In the UK, "grandparental childcare credits" help boost pension entitlements when they care for grandchildren. Despite these policies, caregiving roles remain gendered: grandmothers tend to provide more emotional and physical support, while grandfathers engage more in leisure care (Attias-Donfut & Arber, 2000). Thus, Western models partially acknowledge grandparents' contributions, but gender inequalities in care persist, similar to India's patriarchal divisions of labour, though in different contexts.

Across East Asia, especially in countries like China, South Korea, and Japan, place grandparents at the core of childcare. In rural and migrant Chinese households, grandparents often serve as primary caregivers while parents work in cities. This 'left-behind childcare' highlights how economic modernisation relies on intergenerational care transfers. Asia, unlike the West, focuses on a culture that naturally treats grandparents as worthy of respect, and their contributions are considered extremely important for the welfare of the family. Legal frameworks are vital too, but they come behind societal and cultural norms, which in turn result in the implementation of formal policies like pensions or healthcare linked to caregiving. India is also trapped in this condition.

In many African and Latin American countries, grandparental care is also found due to migration, work of parents or outbreaks of HIV/ Aids epidemics. Reliability on family covers the dearth of infrastructure to be provided at the institutional level. In Brazil, grandparents support mothers who work in the informal sector by taking care of their children. Absence of recognition of work and the instability of the informal sector make the life of both grandparents and mothers difficult, indicating the deficiency of a strong institutional policy.

The overall situation indicates that in spite of cultural, social, economic and political differences, grandparents' care work is mostly unacknowledged and invisible all over the world. Even when gratitude is acknowledged, it is very partial or secondary in nature, like tax credits or pension adjustments. Keeping in tune with Asian countries, India's picture shows that cultural obedience over legal framework in terms of grandparents' care is not very fruitful, as mere respect cannot ensure economic and social protection. India must maintain equilibrium between culture and legal-institutional support to do justice to grandparents' untiring work.

Policy Gaps and Legal Dimensions:

India's delayed approach to implementing policy measures for grandparents' care creates an uncomfortable state. Despite a strong cultural belief and practice in delegating the responsibility of child care to the elderly members of the family with the expectation that

grandparents will do best for their grandchildren, there is hardly any legal effort to acknowledge the contribution of these persons. This proves the disinclination of the state to implement appropriate measures in this regard.

In Indian law, both statutory and constitutional, an unintended and incoherent approach to caregiving is visible. The Directive Principles of State Policy mention protecting children, ensuring their education, and safeguarding the elderly (Article 41), but do not connect these two in policy issues. The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act (2007) offers care for the elderly but does not acknowledge their role as caregivers. Consequently, grandparents are often seen as dependents despite their hard contributions to society. Moreover, the Guardians and Wards Act (1890) and personal laws seldom recognise the involvement of grandparents in child care, instead seeing them as substitutes in the absence of parents. This omission displays those Indian legal frameworks function with a narrow and adult-centric ambience of family, which disregards the intergenerational support. Welfare programmes like Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) or the POSHAN Abhiyaan (Government of India, 2017, 2023), highlight nutrition, early childhood education, and maternal health. These programmes assume the mother as the prime caregiver to the children and do not take into account the role of others. Therefore, Grandparents remain ignored and excluded in these policy-related programmes also.

Towards Recognition and Reform:

The exclusion of grandparents from policy issues and legal frameworks puts their role under the scanner. It is essential to recognize and reform their effort and labour to create an inclusive policy and construct our socio-political scenario responsive to the needs of the all strata of society. It is essential to rethink the Indian society beyond the perspective of duty and care and realizing that every care and duty is associated with a broader spectrum called labour, service and contribution. It never asks to keep aside the emotions, love and care present within the family structure, but to understand that the efforts of elders are related to economic survival and gender issues. The outlook is changing relating to domestic work, which was once considered as unpaid and invisible; similarly, a new regulation is required where hours, intensity and opportunity costs of childcare given by the grandparents should be measured. Collection of such data might enable the government to exhibit the actual labour delivered by the grandparents as part of the national economy, enabling discussions on Universal Basic Income, social pensions, or matters related to family benefits.

Once reforms are in place, they can be implemented through welfare systems. For instance, in India, pensions for the elderly under schemes like the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS) often fall short, failing to cover even basic living costs. If grandparents are the primary caregivers for children, the pension system needs to be restructured. A tiered pension system, indexed not only to age and poverty but also to care responsibilities, could lead to a fairer distribution. One area for reform is childcare credits. Countries such as Germany and Sweden have introduced pension credits for parents, mainly women, who take time off work for childcare. A similar approach in India could offer pension credits to grandparents who step in for parental labour, which would acknowledge invisible labour as part of conventional wellbeing assistance.

Any drastic change through reform may seem implausible, but once it is legally acknowledged, it may bring an everlasting impact on the mindset of family and society together. The state alone will not be able to bring this change unless the attitude of people

changes. Civil society, media, and literature all have a significant role to play. Awareness programmes in cities and villages are highly required in the presence of the grandparents, because they need to realize also what exact role and responsibilities they are supposed to perform and in turn what treatment and legal support they are entitled to get. Grandparents must not play passive roles; rather, they should be active participants in constructing intergenerational solidarity.

Roads ahead:

The discussion on various aspects and levels of grandparental care in India reveals that the issue needs to be viewed from a wider spectrum. Crossing the boundary line of love, care, unconditional support, the society must appreciate and acknowledge their contribution to economy and nation building. Standing together firmly to take this oath of acknowledging the tireless works of care may make our society empathetic and sensitive to the hands that once raised us. Love and care never get overshadowed by explicit recognition; alternatively, the acknowledgement and gratitude fill the grandparents' hearts with joy and contentment. The State has a massive role to play by ensuring the establishment of a just ambience, bringing necessary changes in policy matters and legal frameworks to repair the loopholes in the law. The world is focusing on integrity, cohesion, and gender equality in search of a better future. India has joined this bandwagon of justice and transformation; therefore, the journey must embrace the efforts of the Grandparents who are busy building the character of future generations who will carry the movement forward in the coming days.

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