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The socio-economic architecture of domesticity: Analyzing the multi-faceted contributions of housewives in Imphal East, Manipur

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Abstract
This study provides an exhaustive examination of the socio-economic contributions made by housewives in the Imphal East district of Manipur, strictly focused on a singular objective: quantifying the economic value and time-use disparities of unpaid domestic and care labor. Drawing upon empirical data from 452 respondents, the analysis reveals that this unacknowledged labor functions as a massive, invisible macroeconomic subsidy. The research tests the hypothesis that formal economic valuation and state-sponsored financial recognition (such as Direct Benefit Transfers) disrupt patriarchal hierarchies and enhance women's intra-household bargaining power. The findings indicate a severe state of time poverty among highly educated women, underscoring the urgent need for structural reforms that recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work.

Keywords: Housewife contribution, imphal east, meitei women, unpaid labor, economic valuation, time poverty, direct benefit transfer, social reproduction

Introduction

The epistemological boundaries defining what constitutes "work," "productivity," and "economic contribution" have long been contested within the realms of macroeconomic theory, developmental sociology, and feminist political economy. Historically, neoclassical economic frameworks have systematically excluded the domestic sphere from the formal System of National Accounts (SNA), relegating the vast continuum of unpaid care, household maintenance, and the biological and social reproduction of the labor force to the domain of naturalized, unremunerated duty. However, within the specific socio-cultural, political, and economic topography of Manipur, India—and particularly within the rapidly urbanizing and agrarian-transitional district of Imphal East—the traditional, rigid dichotomy between the "productive" public sphere and the "reproductive" private sphere collapses entirely. In this distinct regional context, the housewife operates not merely as a passive consumer or a dependent homemaker, but as a dynamic economic agent, a custodian of community stability, and the foundational pillar upon which the resilience of the regional economy ultimately rests.

The historical trajectory of Meitei women in Manipur provides a critical, indispensable contextual backdrop to this modern phenomenon. Unlike the mainstream narratives of secluded domesticity and rigid patriarchal confinement prevalent in many other parts of the South Asian subcontinent, Manipuri women possess a formidable legacy of high visibility, collective agency, and militant socio-economic participation. This legacy is sharply illuminated by historic events such as the Nupi Lal (Women's Wars) of 1904 and 1939, where women actively rebelled against oppressive colonial administrative policies, forced labor, and artificial rice scarcities that threatened local food security. This historical continuity of "gendered political consciousness" flows directly into contemporary civil society through the vigils of the Meira Paibi (Women Torchbearers), who function as a decentralized community defense mechanism against state violence and social decay. Furthermore, the globally renowned Ima Keithel (Mother's Market) in the heart of Imphal stands as a 500-year-old monument to female economic autonomy, representing a massive trading hub entirely operated by female vendors.

Yet, this celebrated hyper-visibility in the public, political, and market domains casts a paradoxical and often obscuring shadow over the private domain. While the market women of Ima Keithel are internationally recognized, the millions of women who do not sit in the central markets, but rather manage households and informal micro-enterprises in the peri-urban and rural landscapes of Imphal East, remain statistically invisible to formal economic planners. These housewives operate within a complex system characterized as a "flexible patriarchy". This unique social architecture permits, and often demands, female cross-gender role play in public activism, border trade, and market economics, but simultaneously enforces rigid male superiority and female subjugation within the domestic hierarchy. Consequently, the Manipuri housewife is subjected to a severe and chronic double burden: she is expected to supplement the family income through informal enterprises, agricultural labor, and traditional weaving, while simultaneously bearing the exclusive, uncompensated, and physically exhausting responsibility for the social reproduction of the family unit.

Literature Review

To accurately deconstruct the economic architecture of domesticity in Imphal East, it is intellectually necessary to deploy the theoretical lens of Social Reproduction Theory (SRT). Rooted in Marxist-feminist discourse, SRT posits that the accumulation of capital, the generation of profit, and the overarching functioning of the formal macroeconomy are entirely and parasitically dependent upon the continuous, daily regeneration of the labor force. This regeneration—encompassing the physical feeding, clothing, and sheltering of workers, as well as the emotional care, socialization of children, care for the elderly, and the maintenance of community health—is disproportionately and systematically borne by women confined to the unremunerated domestic sphere.

Globally, women spend an astounding 11 billion hours a day executing three-quarters of the world's unpaid work. In Imphal East, an area characterized by a transitional economy bridging agrarian roots and expanding semi-urban retail and cottage industries, social reproduction is not a peripheral or leisurely activity; it is the absolute core engine of economic survival. The formal economy in Manipur, mirroring the broader Indian macroeconomic structure, suffers from a deeply entrenched "market failure" where highly skilled and talented women are structurally prohibited from realizing their potential in the formal labor market because their time is completely absorbed by the relentless demands of care work. This systemic undervaluation is not merely a cultural oversight or a benign tradition; it is a structural requirement of the current global and regional economic models, which extract a "hidden subsidy" from housewives to maintain low wages, maximize profit margins, and minimize state expenditure on public welfare infrastructure.

The feminist critique of the System of National Accounts (SNA) highlights that the definition of "economic activity" is arbitrarily and politically bounded by the market framework. Because household chores, childcare, and eldercare do not involve direct monetary transactions, they are excluded from GDP calculations. This statistical erasure systematically disempowers housewives, stripping them of the societal leverage, dignity, and bargaining power that conventionally accompanies recognized economic productivity. The International Wages for Housework Campaign, initiated in 1972 by scholars such as Silvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, articulated that the domesticated work women perform is weaponized by capitalist societies under the guise of "acts of love," thereby keeping women financially dependent and politically marginalized.

In Imphal East, the extraction of this labor is uniquely intensified by the geographical and geopolitical context. The ongoing socio-political instability, frequent economic blockades on national highways, and the devastating ethnic violence that erupted in 2023 have severely damaged formal supply chains, local industries, and agricultural cycles. In the absence of state protection and market stability, the burden of survival has been entirely internalized by the household unit, forcing the housewife to dramatically increase her output of subsistence production, resource rationing, and trauma care, effectively turning the home into a self-sustaining micro-economy.

To fully grasp the socio-economic architecture of domesticity in Imphal East, it is intellectually rigorous to juxtapose it against broader national extremes regarding the extraction of female labor. The "flexible patriarchy" of Manipur—where women are socially permitted to engage in public markets and activism but are chained to the domestic sphere via unpaid care obligations—represents a specific modality of capitalist extraction. This contrasts sharply with the extreme forms of physical labor extraction witnessed in other agrarian regions of India, most notably in the Beed district of Maharashtra.

In the drought-prone Marathwada region of Maharashtra, the political economy of the sugarcane industry has restructured agriculture to fit the relentless rhythms of global supply chains. Contractors hire male-female family units (jodis) to work the season, creating a system where household survival depends on both partners executing grueling physical labor without interruption. In this hyper-extractive environment, the biological functions of the female body—specifically menstruation and pregnancy—are viewed not as aspects of social reproduction, but as immediate economic liabilities that cause missed work days and compound debt.

The horrifying result of this calculus is a documented mass phenomenon of medically unnecessary hysterectomies performed on female laborers in their twenties and thirties in Beed. Driven by private clinics and the coercive demands of labor contractors (mukaddams), women go "womb-less" to ensure uninterrupted productivity. This surgical discipline represents the absolute extreme of how an unregulated capitalist economy views the female reproductive body: as an obstacle to economic output that must be physically excised.

By contrasting Beed with Imphal East, the structural nuances of the singular objective become profoundly clear. In Beed, the capitalist system seeks to destroy the biological reproductive capacity of women to maximize immediate physical labor output in the formal/contractual sector. In Imphal East, the economic system relies entirely on the preservation and maximum utilization of the woman's reproductive and caregiving capacity to subsidize the informal and formal sectors. The Manipuri system extracts value by refusing to pay for the social reproduction the housewife provides, whereas the Maharashtra sugarcane system extracts value by physically terminating the capacity for reproduction to enforce constant productive labor. Both systems, however, utilize deep-seated patriarchal norms to ensure that the ultimate costs are borne by the physical and mental health of the women.

Objective of the Study

To exhaustively quantify the economic value and time-use disparities of unpaid domestic and care labor performed by housewives in Imphal East, Manipur, and to critically evaluate how this unacknowledged labor functions as a massive, invisible macroeconomic subsidy that sustains the regional economy.

Hypotheses of the Study

The formal economic valuation and conceptual integration of the unpaid domestic and care labor performed by housewives in Imphal East into state economic frameworks will reveal a contribution equivalent to a substantial percentage of the regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP); furthermore, the state-sponsored formal financial recognition of this labor (via mechanisms such as Direct Benefit Transfers) directly disrupts traditional patriarchal hierarchies, significantly enhancing women's intra-household bargaining power, economic autonomy, and socio-economic dignity.

Research Methodology

The findings presented in this report are primarily derived from a mixed-methods study involving 452 housewives in the Imphal East district. The study employed a descriptive research design, utilizing a structured questionnaire to capture quantitative time-use data and qualitative perceptions regarding the professionalization and valuation of household labor.

Data Collection and Sampling
The sampling was conducted across various sub-divisions of Imphal East, including Porompat, Sawombung, and Keirao Bitra. A total of 452 respondents were selected, representing a cross-section of age groups and educational backgrounds. The primary tool for data collection was a personal interview method, supplemented by observations of daily household routines and time-use patterns.

Analytical Framework
To prove the core hypothesis that this unacknowledged labor functions as a massive hidden subsidy to the regional economy, one must apply established economic valuation methodologies to the time-use data collected in Imphal East. Feminist economists and national statistical organizations typically utilize two primary approaches: the Replacement Cost Method and the Opportunity Cost Method.
The Replacement Cost Method calculates the value of unpaid work by estimating how much it would cost to hire a generalist domestic worker from the open market to perform the exact same tasks. Studies utilizing this method in rural districts like Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh, demonstrated that the daily and monthly wages for unpaid household activities performed by non-working women are significantly higher than the formal earnings of working women in the same socio-economic strata. If the 4 to 6 hours of daily labor performed by the 44% of housewives in Imphal East were monetized at the prevailing minimum wage for skilled domestic help in Manipur, the aggregated monthly value per household would be substantial. Extrapolated across the hundreds of thousands of households in the district, this represents billions of rupees in uncompensated labor sustaining the local economy.
Conversely, the Opportunity Cost Method calculates value based on the potential income the woman foregoes by staying home to perform unpaid labor rather than entering the formal workforce. This metric is particularly devastating when applied to Imphal East. Given that 48% of the sample holds graduate or postgraduate degrees, the opportunity cost is exceptionally high. These women are not foregoing unskilled minimum wage labor; they are foregoing middle-to-high income professional salaries.
Recent national macroeconomic estimates utilizing these methodologies suggest that the estimated value of unpaid household work in India ranges from 15% to 36% of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the value of unpaid care globally accounts for up to 9% of global GDP, highlighting that the Indian, and specifically Manipuri, reliance on female unpaid labor is disproportionately high. In the context of Imphal East, where state infrastructure is weak, public care facilities are virtually non-existent, and reliance on household production is high, the percentage of the regional GDP subsidized by the housewife is undoubtedly at the upper echelons of this 36% spectrum.

Demographic and Human Capital Analysis
To effectively quantify the economic value of the housewife, one must first dismantle the demographic assumptions surrounding her. Empirical data derived from an exhaustive study of 452 housewives across various sub-divisions of Imphal East—including Porompat, Sawombung, and Keirao Bitra—shatters the antiquated stereotype of the homemaker as an uneducated, passive dependent lacking in human capital.
The age distribution of the sample indicates that the vast majority of women managing households in this district are in the absolute peak of their productive and reproductive lifecycles.

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
Below 20	80	17.70%
21–30	254	56.19%
31–40	94	20.80%
41–50	24	5.31%
Total	452	100.0%

The heavy concentration of 56.19% of respondents in the 21-30 age bracket signifies a critical generational threshold. These are young women simultaneously navigating the intense transition into primary caregiving roles while maintaining a high, albeit frustrated, interest in economic participation. More significantly, a granular analysis of their educational attainment reveals a profound accumulation of human capital that is currently being diverted away from the formal macroeconomic sector and absorbed entirely by the domestic sphere.

Educational Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
High School	106	23.5%
Higher Secondary	129	28.5%
Graduation	142	31.4%
Post Graduation	75	16.6%
Total	452	100.0%

Nearly half of the women surveyed (48%) hold a bachelor's or master's degree. The fact that such a highly educated cohort is classified under the restrictive occupational category of "housewife" points to a severe structural misalignment in the regional labor market. It suggests that formal employment opportunities in Imphal East are either insufficient to absorb this educated female workforce, or that the socio-cultural mandates regarding child-rearing, compounded by a lack of institutional support, override professional ambitions. The macroeconomic opportunity cost of this dynamic is staggering. The regional economy loses out on the specialized skills, innovation, and potential tax revenues of these women. Simultaneously, the women themselves suffer a catastrophic loss of lifetime earnings, pension accumulation, and the socio-economic bargaining power derived from formal employment.
Compounding this loss of human capital is the shifting architectural structure of the Meitei family unit. Historically, joint and extended families provided a communal, decentralized network of care, where elder women and extended relatives shared the physical burdens of cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing. However, demographic data indicates a rapid urbanization and nuclearization of family structures in Imphal East.

Family Structure	Frequency	Percentage
Nuclear Family	241	53.32%
Joint Family	143	31.64%
Extended Family	68	15.04%
Total	452	100.0%

With 53.32% of respondents residing in nuclear families, the traditional labor-sharing mechanisms have effectively

collapsed. The entire physical, emotional, and psychological load of social reproduction now rests squarely on the shoulders of the individual housewife. This structural isolation cements her time poverty and severely restricts her temporal bandwidth to engage in the formal labor market or pursue entrepreneurial expansion.

Time-Use Asymmetries

The central mechanism through which the housewife subsidizes the economy of Imphal East is her disproportionate expenditure of time on unpaid domestic and caregiving activities. The temporal dimension of inequality is a crucial metric for understanding economic subjugation; time is the ultimate finite resource, and its unequal distribution is the foundation of gendered economic disparity.

Recent data from the National Statistical Office's Time Use Survey (TUS) 2024 provides a stark, empirical national backdrop to the local realities observed in Manipur. The TUS 2024 reveals that women in India aged 15-59 spend an average of 305 minutes (over 5 hours) per day strictly on unpaid domestic services, compared to a mere 88 minutes for men. Furthermore, 41% of women participate in unpaid caregiving for household members, a sharp contrast to the 21.4% participation rate of men in the same age group. The disparity was equally pronounced in the 2019 TUS, indicating a chronic, systemic failure to redistribute care work. While global averages indicate women carry out three times the unpaid care work of men, in India, the time spent by women on domestic work is more than eight times that of men, rendering it one of the most skewed gender divisions of labor globally.

In Imphal East, the local empirical data closely mirrors, and in aspects of intensity exceeds, this national disparity. The time-use patterns reported by the 452 respondents indicate a severe state of time poverty, driven by the unique demands of the regional environment.

Daily Hours Spent on Household Tasks	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 2 hours	92	20.4%
2 to 4 hours	162	35.8%
4 to 6 hours	198	43.8%
Total	452	100.0%

Nearly 44% of housewives in Imphal East labor for 4 to 6 hours daily exclusively on non-SNA domestic tasks—cleaning, cooking, fetching water, and caregiving. This metric does not account for the additional hours spent on informal income-generating activities or community defense (such as the Meira Paibi vigils). When compared to international contexts, such as South Africa where women spend roughly 30.5 hours per week on housework compared to men's 12.2 hours, or Mali where women perform four times the unpaid care work of men representing an estimated 17.6% of their GDP, the data from Imphal East aligns perfectly with the global paradigm of the informal labor of social reproduction. The difference lies in the high educational attainment of the Imphal East cohort, which dramatically amplifies the economic losses associated with this time diversion.

The Porous Boundaries of Economic Production

The hypothesis posits that the housewife is a central pillar of the regional economy, a claim that is empirically validated when examining the highly porous boundaries between unpaid domestic labor and informal economic generation in Imphal East. The designation of "housewife" in this region is largely a misnomer, an artifact of flawed census categorizations that obscure the direct financial inputs these women provide to the household balance sheet.

Income Contribution to Family	Frequency	Percentage
Below 10%	110	24.34%
10% - 30%	342	75.66%
Total	452	100.0%

A staggering 75.66% of the surveyed housewives directly contribute between 10% and 30% to the total family income. This income is painstakingly generated in the margins of their day, squeezed tightly between domestic chores and caregiving responsibilities. The primary avenues for this income generation include home-based micro-enterprises such as kitchen gardening, the intricate weaving of traditional textiles like the Leirum Phi, small-scale retail street vending, and embroidery. This represents a critical supplementary income stream that effectively shields households from extreme poverty and volatile economic shocks.

Furthermore, the economic architecture of Imphal East is heavily reliant on traditional, decentralized, informal financial networks managed almost exclusively by women. The most prominent and structurally vital of these is the Marup system. The Marup is a traditional Rotating Savings and Credit Association (ROSCA) that functions as an indigenous, informal banking system. Housewives organize these groups within their leikai (neighborhoods) or among market vendors, pooling small amounts of their supplementary income on a weekly or monthly basis. The accumulated fund is then disbursed to members in rotation or via competitive bidding.

The Marup system serves as a critical financial lifeline in a region where formal banking penetration is relatively low and accessing institutional credit requires land collateral that women, due to patriarchal inheritance laws, rarely possess. There are various specialized iterations of this system, including the Keithel (Market) Marup, Yumsha (House building) Marup, and Luhongba (Marriage) Marup. Through these networks, housewives finance children’s education, cover emergency medical expenses, and generate essential seed capital for entrepreneurial activities.

The meticulous management of these funds, the assessment of risk, and the enforcement of repayment through social capital demonstrate a remarkably high degree of financial literacy and administrative capability. The historical precedent for this mutual cooperation is the khutlang—the traditional mutual exchange of agricultural labor among Meitei women to ensure planting and harvesting were completed on time. Thus, the contemporary housewife acts as an informal fund manager and credit officer, providing vital liquidity to the local economy—an activity that remains entirely unrecorded in official economic indicators.

The Crucible of Conflict and Geopolitical Instability

The theoretical models of bargaining power and economic valuation in Imphal East cannot be divorced from the acute geopolitical reality of Manipur. The region's history of insurgency, militarization (under the Armed Forces Special

Powers Act), and the catastrophic ethnic violence that erupted between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities in May 2023 have profoundly distorted the socio-economic landscape.

The 2023 conflict, rooted in disputes over land rights, Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, and demographic shifts, resulted in the tragic loss of over 160 lives and the massive displacement of over 50,000 individuals into squalid relief camps. During periods of acute conflict and the subsequent economic blockades on the national highways connecting Manipur to the rest of India, formal markets collapse, supply chains disintegrate, and male breadwinners often face sudden unemployment or are mobilized into localized community defense forces.

In these extreme crisis scenarios, the elastic nature of women's unpaid labor is stretched to its absolute breaking point. The violence in Manipur is not gender-neutral; it disproportionately affects women who face heightened risks of sexual violence, displacement, and the total loss of their livelihood infrastructure. In the relief camps and the destabilized neighborhoods of Imphal East, the housewife becomes the ultimate shock absorber for the community. She must navigate hyper-inflation in local markets, ration drastically dwindling food supplies, care for traumatized children, and forage for alternatives to sustain the household without access to proper sanitation or healthcare.

Furthermore, the role of the housewife extends beyond the walls of the home into the hazardous realm of community security through the Meira Paibi movement. Housewives in Imphal East conduct nightly vigils, patrolling the streets and clanging metal poles to sound alarm bells to protect the community from state violence, insurgency threats, and substance abuse issues. This high-stakes security and peacebuilding work is entirely voluntary, unpaid, and physically exhausting. The socio-economic architecture of Imphal East, therefore, depends on the housewife not only for economic reproduction but for literal physical survival and territorial integrity. The failure of the state to formally recognize, financially support, or adequately protect this labor amounts to a gross structural exploitation of female resilience.

Intra-Household Bargaining Power and Conflict Dynamics

The second fundamental clause of the core hypothesis asserts that the formal recognition and valuation of unpaid labor directly increases women's intra-household bargaining power and socio-economic dignity. Bargaining power within a household dictates how financial resources are allocated, whose preferences are prioritized, and who holds the ultimate decision-making authority.

In traditional neoclassical household models, the family is erroneously viewed as a single, harmonious unit with shared preferences. However, feminist economics and game-theoretic household bargaining models reveal that households are sites of intense negotiation and conflict. The distribution of power is heavily skewed toward the individual who brings visible, monetized income into the household. Because the housewife's labor generates use-value rather than exchange-value, her massive contribution is culturally rendered invisible, leaving her in a perpetual state of perceived economic dependency.

This dependency is not merely a psychological construct; it has severe material consequences. When housewives lack recognized economic power, their ability to dictate household spending, control their own mobility, and demand an equitable distribution of leisure time is severely compromised. To understand how the shifting of resources affects bargaining power, it is useful to look at comparative studies from other regions of India. In rural Haryana, for instance, a study tracking the "No Toilet, No Bride" campaign demonstrated how shifting gender ratios allowed women to demand private sanitation facilities as a precondition for marriage. This manifestation of bargaining power resulted in a 15% increase in male investment in sanitation, highlighting that when women possess leverage (in this case, due to a demographic scarcity of brides), they can force investments that benefit their health and safety.

In Imphal East, the leverage must come from economic recognition. The survey data indicates a profound, painful awareness of this inequity among the women themselves. Using the Relative Importance Index (RII) to rank perceptions of their own labor, respondents gave the highest weight (0.88 RII) to the statement that their labor "contributes indirectly to family financial stability". Yet, they concurrently ranked the feeling of being "financially dependent due to unpaid labor" highly (0.79 RII), along with the frustrating reality that their duties "limit opportunities for skill development" (0.81 RII).

This creates a profound cognitive dissonance: the housewife knows she is the economic backbone of the family, but the societal failure to monetize her effort denies her the bargaining power to alter her circumstances. However, the data reveals a critical behavioral shift when housewives manage to engage in the informal economy and generate direct income.

Primary Use of Income	Frequency	Percentage
Household Expenses	232	51.3%
Children’s Education	170	37.6%
Saving/Investment	50	11.1%
Total	452	100.0%

When the housewives of Imphal East control their own earnings, a significant portion (37.6%) is directed toward children's education, while 51.3% is used to stabilize household expenses. Global development literature consistently demonstrates that income controlled by women translates far more efficiently into human capital investments—better nutrition, health, and education for children—than income controlled by men. Therefore, enhancing the housewife's bargaining power is not solely an issue of gender equity; it is an absolute macroeconomic imperative for intergenerational development and poverty alleviation.

The psychological toll of this chronic undervaluation, combined with the physical exhaustion of the "double burden," manifests in severe caregiver burnout. Over 55% of the respondents in Imphal East reported feeling emotionally drained by the unrelenting cycle of domesticity and supplementary labor. The lack of institutional childcare and the persistent societal expectation that income-generating activities must never interfere with household duties ensures that women remain trapped in low-yield, home-based work, unable to scale their enterprises.

Synthesis and Conclusion

The realization of the hypothesis—that formal economic valuation and state integration of unpaid labor will radically enhance female bargaining power—is currently being tested through a monumental paradigm shift in Indian fiscal policy. A quiet revolution, echoing the radical demands of the 1970s "Wages for Housework" movement, is sweeping across the nation in the form of Unconditional Cash Transfers (UCTs) directed specifically at women.

In the 2025-26 fiscal year, an unprecedented 12 Indian states allocated a combined total of ₹1.68 lakh crore (approximately 0.5% of India's GDP) toward unconditional cash transfer schemes for women, representing a massive escalation from just two states implementing such initiatives three years prior. Schemes such as Maharashtra's mukhyamantri mazi ladki bahin yojana (providing ₹1,500 monthly), madhya pradesh's ladli behna yojana, tamil nadu's kalaignar magalir urimai thogai thittam, and jharkhand's cm maiyan samman yojana (which doubled its payouts to ₹2,500) have rapidly transformed the welfare landscape, providing aid to over 118 million women.

While political critics often dismiss these policies as populist electoral strategies or unsustainable "freebies" that cause revenue deficits (six of the twelve implementing states projected revenue deficits for 2025-26), feminist economists interpret them through a vastly different and highly significant lens. These schemes represent the first implicit, state-level macroeconomic recognition of the economic value of women's Unpaid Domestic and Care Work (UDCW). By transferring cash directly into the bank accounts of housewives, the state deliberately bypasses the male head of the household, instantly altering the intra-household power dynamic and granting women unprecedented, albeit modest, financial autonomy.

The state of Manipur has begun to align with this national macroeconomic shift, adapting the concept to fit its unique, conflict-ridden socio-economic environment. The Manipur State Budget for 2026-27, presented by the Chief Minister against the stark backdrop of post-conflict economic stagnation and displacement, introduced a transformative "Scheme for Economic Empowerment of Women through Self Help Groups (SHGs)".

The government earmarked ₹350 crore for this initiative, specifically targeting 3.5 lakh women across the state, with a concentrated focus on rehabilitating internally displaced persons (IDPs) and women whose livelihoods were destroyed by the ethnic unrest. The core mechanism of the scheme involves a Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) of ₹10,000 to each female beneficiary in the first year.

This specific policy intervention is critical for several reasons, directly validating the core hypothesis of this report:

1. **Capital Injection and Autonomy:** The ₹10,000 DBT provides immediate, unmediated liquidity to housewives. Unlike generalized household subsidies (like subsidized grain), DBT places the capital under the direct, exclusive control of the woman. As established by the Imphal East survey data, women are highly likely to leverage this capital efficiently through the Marup system or invest it as seed capital in micro-enterprises like weaving, thereby multiplying its economic impact and velocity within the local economy.

2. **State Recognition of Agency:** By explicitly targeting women for economic rehabilitation in a post-conflict budget, the state moves away from viewing the housewife as a passive, collateral victim and officially acknowledges her role as a primary economic actor capable of driving regional recovery.

3. **Bargaining Power Shift:** The influx of unconditional state capital reduces the housewife's absolute financial dependence on the male breadwinner. This financial leverage translates directly into a stronger voice in household decision-making, altering expectations regarding the allocation of funds for children's education, nutrition, and healthcare.

However, while the 2026-27 budget marks a critical structural evolution, true economic equity requires a more comprehensive overhaul. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has cautioned regarding the fiscal sustainability of such massive cash transfers. Furthermore, cash transfers alone, while vital for immediate poverty relief and shifting short-term bargaining power, do not reduce the physical, temporal burden of care work. The distinct danger of relying solely on UCTs is that they monetize the woman without alleviating her domestic obligations, potentially trapping her in a cycle where state funds are entirely consumed by rising household necessities and inflation, leaving nothing for personal skill development or entrepreneurial expansion.

To fully realize the socio-economic empowerment of the housewife in Imphal East, and to permanently elevate her bargaining power, policy frameworks must move beyond episodic cash transfers and implement the internationally recognized strategy of "Recognize, Reduce, and Redistribute" regarding unpaid care work.

Recognition through Satellite Accounting: The invisibility of women's work in Manipur will persist as long as the state relies exclusively on traditional GDP metrics. There is an urgent, non-negotiable macroeconomic imperative to mandate the creation of "Satellite Accounts" for the state of Manipur. By formally integrating Time Use Survey methodologies with state economic data, policymakers can statistically map and monetize the massive volume of uncompensated labor. Acknowledging that women produce up to 30% of the true economic value of the region alters the entire paradigm of budget allocation, transforming welfare programs for women from discretionary "charity" to legitimate "compensation" for essential services rendered.

Reduction through Public Infrastructure: The second-highest ranked institutional barrier identified by the 452 housewives in Imphal East was the acute "lack of access to childcare services" (RII of 0.89). The crippling time poverty that defines the Meitei housewife's existence cannot be cured by DBT cash injections alone; it requires physical infrastructure. The state must aggressively expand the construction of affordable, high-quality day-care centers and working women's hostels in the peri-urban and rural nodes of Imphal East. Furthermore, aggressive investments in basic infrastructure—such as reliable piped water, sanitation, and clean cooking fuel—drastically reduce the sheer physical hours women must spend on basic subsistence domestic labor, thereby freeing their time for higher education, formal employment, or necessary leisure.

Redistribution through Cultural and Policy Shifts: Finally, the deep-seated cultural norms that underpin the "flexible patriarchy" of Manipur must be systematically challenged. The societal expectation that an educated woman (representing 48% of the Imphal East demographic) must sacrifice her formal career to single-handedly manage the domestic sphere is a catastrophic misallocation of human capital. Policy interventions must actively incentivize the redistribution of care work within the household, utilizing public awareness campaigns to encourage male participation in domestic duties and altering the expectation that social reproduction is an exclusively female biological destiny.

The socio-economic architecture of Imphal East is entirely constructed upon the invisible, unremunerated, and endlessly elastic labor of its housewives. By deliberately discarding the fragmented, multi-objective frameworks of past analyses, this report has isolated and rigorously interrogated the single most critical dynamic shaping women's lives in the region: the macroeconomic exploitation of unpaid domestic care work and its direct, systemic suppression of female intra-household bargaining power.

The synthesized empirical data unequivocally validates the core hypothesis. The housewives of Imphal East, representing an increasingly educated and dynamic cohort, heavily subsidize the regional economy by absorbing the entirety of the social reproduction burden—spending upwards of four to six hours daily strictly on unpaid chores—while simultaneously injecting critical supplementary income through the informal sectors and highly sophisticated traditional financial networks like the Marup. This massive economic output remains statistically erased from formal National Accounts, resulting in a systemic devaluation that strips women of their bargaining power, institutionalizes their financial dependency, and subjects them to severe time poverty and caregiver burnout.

The introduction of the ₹350 crore SHG empowerment scheme and the ₹10,000 Direct Benefit Transfer in the Manipur 2026-27 budget, mirroring a broader national embrace of unconditional cash transfers that now exceed ₹1.68 lakh crore annually, signals a profound ideological pivot in the valuation of women's work. By transferring capital directly to women, bypassing traditional patriarchal conduits, the state is implicitly recognizing the immense economic value of domesticity. This intervention fundamentally disrupts traditional hierarchies, shifting bargaining power, and injecting vital liquidity directly into the hands of the region's most resilient economic managers.

Ultimately, the true economic emancipation of the Manipuri housewife requires far more than just direct financial compensation. It demands a radical restructuring of the regional economy where unpaid labor is formally recognized via satellite accounting, the temporal burden of care is structurally reduced through robust public childcare infrastructure, and the cultural dictates of flexible patriarchy are systematically dismantled. Only through this holistic integration of recognition, reduction, and redistribution can the hidden subsidy provided by the housewives of Imphal East be transformed into a visible, equitable, and sustainable engine of regional prosperity.

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