

The Poverty Penalty of Rights-Claiming Work: A Hidden Barrier in Public Services and Public Goods

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Poverty is exacerbated by the invisible labor of rights-claiming, disproportionately borne by women due to exclusionary bureaucracies. This "administrative penalty" perpetuates inequality. Recommendations include systemic reforms (universal services, inclusive digitization), recognition of this labor, and transforming gender norms. Three questions this brief answers to, (i) why is rights-claiming a genuine form of work?, (ii) why does this burden fall disproportionately on women?, (iii) what can be done to address this inequity?.

Introduction

Poverty is often framed as a lack of income, yet for millions — particularly women — it is equally a consequence of **systemic administrative exclusion**. Rights-claiming work, the invisible labor required to navigate bureaucratic systems, functions as a **hidden poverty tax**, consuming time, resources, and resilience

from those least equipped to bear its costs. This note argues that eradicating poverty requires dismantling the structural and gendered barriers embedded in public administration. Drawing on ethnographic research from India and secondary data, we demonstrate how rights-claiming work perpetuates inequality and propose actionable reforms for the UN's *Roadmap for Eradicating Poverty Beyond Growth*.

The Nature and Burden of Rights-Claiming Work

Rights-claiming work encompasses the myriad tasks individuals undertake to translate legal entitlements into tangible resources — from securing welfare benefits to enrolling children in school. Its burden falls disproportionately on women, who invest hours each week navigating bureaucratic hurdles and engaging in collective mobilization, often at the expense of income-generating activities or education. In Bangalore's resettled slums, for example, women's unpaid labor — organizing protests, negotiating with officials,

and resolving community conflicts — was instrumental in securing basic infrastructure [1]. Yet this labor remains unrecognized and uncompensated, reinforcing cycles of gendered poverty. Similarly, in Barrio Soldati, Buenos Aires, women engage in everyday struggles to claim their rights to housing, social aid, healthcare, education, and justice [2].

Types of Rights-Claiming Work

Rights-claiming work pertains to various domains:

- **Public goods:** Advocating for the rehabilitation of slums, maintaining schools, or protecting natural resources like water and land.
- **Common goods:** Managing collective kitchens, community crèches, and shared gardens.
- **Publicly financed private goods:** Securing welfare benefits, obtaining access to water and electricity, enrolling in schools and universities, or navigating public healthcare systems.

This work involves time-consuming, repetitive activities requiring specific skills and producing tangible value. Unlike market-driven labor, its ultimate objective is to ensure access to essential goods and services necessary for survival and social inclusion.

This work can also be described as “political work” insofar as it is shaped by power relations and involves various forms of struggle, negotiation and compromise with different actors, whether they are local elected representatives, state repre-

sentatives, politicians, henchmen, association or union activists and NGO staff.

Forms of Engagement

- **For public goods:** Demonstrations, protests, petitions, strikes, participation in local assemblies, negotiations with state representatives, and information dissemination.
- **For common goods:** Self-managed collectives that maintain shared resources.
- **For publicly financed private goods:** Understanding eligibility criteria, assisting with paperwork, navigating administrative barriers, and identifying reliable service providers.

Given the arbitrary nature of legal systems, rights-claiming work also includes negotiating with police and courts in cases of disputes over inheritance, property, fraud, or wrongful expropriation.

Multiple Causes

Right-claiming work reflects the **multiple dysfunctions of public administrations** (opacities of schemes, eligibility rules that are too rigid, unclear and sometimes contradictory, insufficient budgets in relation to the stated objectives, various forms of corruption). Right-claiming work also reflects the insufficiency of rights and the absence or disappearance of public and common goods.

Added to this is administrative violence, which inflicts **physical, psychological or social suffering** on citizens, particularly the most vulnerable; and adminis-

trative abuse, which refers to the **humiliating, negligent or arbitrary behaviour** of public officials or services, creating a **relationship of domination and dehumanization** of users.

Digitalization, which is supposed to improve access, can in certain circumstances **create new barriers**: exclusion of those who do not have digital access or do not have a good command of it (this is more often the case for women, the poorest, the elderly); technical malfunctions; errors; new forms of corruption.

A female work

Women's overrepresentation in rights-claiming work stems not only from its framing as an extension of domestic labor but also from **active administrative encouragement of gendered stereotypes**. Officials preferentially delegate bureaucratic tasks to women, whom they perceive as **more patient, less likely to demand accountability, and socially “free” to wait indefinitely** [3, 4, 5]. Conversely, men are often barred from collective mobilizations under pretexts of preventing violence — a dynamic that forces women into frontline advocacy while denying them male allies.

Right-claiming work is likely to improve the status of women, giving them a better bargaining position within the household and a leadership role in their community. However, it is unfair that this work is not recognized for its true value and takes up women's time.

Men's participation in rights-claiming work is both **instrumental and transactional**. While women shoulder the

daily grind of paperwork and protests, men are mobilized as **gatekeepers to higher-level officials** or as **political brokers** — roles that rarely come without compensation. In Bangalore's resettlement struggles, male “leaders” negotiated with politicians while women organized grassroots protests; the former gained party positions, the latter only in collective gains like roads or schools [1]. This reflects the broader **“breadwinner” paradox**: men are expected to monetize their time, making unpaid advocacy a threat to their social standing. Men avoid welfare queues to avoid being seen as “dependent,” delegating the task to wives or daughters. Male unemployment fuels stigma, making unpaid advocacy socially untenable. Cultural norms frame unpaid bureaucratic labor as incompatible with masculinity. Reforming these dynamics requires dismantling the idea that care labor — including bureaucratic labor — is inherently feminine.

The Ambiguous Role of Civil Society

Civil society organizations (CSOs) — including NGOs, unions, and grassroots collectives — occupy a paradoxical position in rights-claiming work. While they may act as very useful bridges between marginalized communities and the state, helping them to “learn the state” [6], their involvement can inadvertently **reinforce the very inequalities they seek to address** [7].

CSOs frequently provide essential support, such as daily support in the administrative maze, legal aid or advocacy training, yet their interventions some-

times introduce **new layers of bureaucracy**. This may include **conditional assistance** (some organizations require excessive documentation or adherence to rigid project frameworks, mirroring the states exclusionary practices). This may also include **knowledge asymmetries** (by centralizing expertise, CSOs may foster dependency rather than empowerment, leaving communities vulnerable when external support ends).

As states increasingly outsource public services to CSOs, these organizations face pressure to align with government agendas, blurring their role as independent advocates. This can lead to **silenced dissent** (self-censorship to maintain funding or operational licenses) or **elite capture** (leadership disconnected from the communities they purport to represent).

Recommendations

Transforming masculinity norms

With regard to the gendered dimension of right-performing work, we suggest compensating for this work and recognizing it as real work, compensate womens rights-claiming labor via stipend, quotas for women in bureaucracy, stipends for male allies; and above all, in the long term, a transformation of masculinity norms, valuing care work (including right-claim work) as being just as masculine as it is feminine.

From Bureaucracy to Proximity: A Paradigm Shift

The poverty penalty of rights-claiming work cannot be solved by more controls or digitization alone. As proven by various local examples (for instance France ser-

vices in France), rebuilding trust requires putting human interaction at the core of public services. These measures are not luxuriesthey are the bare minimum to halt administrative violence against the poor.

Systemic Reforms for Frictionless Governance

To transform rights-claiming work from a poverty trap into a pathway for inclusion, national governments must prioritize systemic reforms that **eliminate bureaucratic friction** while safeguarding equity. This presupposes a profound reform that goes beyond this note and our expertise, but we can nevertheless suggest legislating **automatic approval of uncontested applications** after reasonable deadlines, eliminating **redundant document** requirements through secure **interagency data-sharing**, and embedding **gender-sensitive design into all public service workflows**. Anti-corruption measures should focus on **decent wages for state agents, real-time transparency tools**, complemented by emergency **fast-track mechanisms** for marginalized groups. These reforms share a common thread: reducing administrative violence not through punitive controls, but by re-designing systems around the realities of users lives and decent working conditions for state agents.

Universal Basic Services: A Systemic Alternative to Rights-Claiming Work

The concept of **Universal Basic Services (UBS)** proposes that essential rights — food security, healthcare, education, housing, transportation, and legal aid — should be guaranteed by default, eliminating the need for individuals to navigate complex bureaucracies to

access them. Unlike means-tested welfare systems that require extensive rights-claiming work, UBS shifts the burden from the marginalized to the state, ensuring services are **automatically** available rather than conditionally granted.

At the global level: A Global Administrative Justice Fund

A Global Administrative Justice Fund would catalyze systemic reforms by financing three pillars of change: (1) **innovation** (piloting proximity services, AI-assisted case tracking, and anti-corruption tools), (2) **accountability** (independent audits of public service delivery, with civil society oversight), and (3) **compensation** (stipends for women's rights-claiming labor, tied to participation in co-designing reforms). Unlike traditional aid, the Fund would prioritize multi-stakeholder governance — with UN agencies, grassroots groups, and affected communities jointly allocating resources — and mandate transparency through real-time spending dashboards. By targeting the bureaucratic roots of poverty, it would complement fiscal policies like universal basic services, ensuring no one is forced to work for rights their governments are already obligated to provide.

Before reaching this long-term objective, we suggest in the short term **adding rights-claiming work to SDG indicator 5.4** and classifying **administrative violence as a poverty driver** in the UN guidelines.

Conclusion

Rights-claiming work is an overlooked yet critical dimension of poverty. By addressing bureaucratic inefficiencies, recognizing the gendered labor it entails, and implementing systemic reforms, we can transform rights-claiming work from a poverty trap into a pathway for inclusion. Through global initiatives and local interventions, the UN and its partners can play a pivotal role in ensuring that access to public services is a right, not an unpaid job.

References

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	Level of governance	Time horizon		
		Short-term (2-3 years)	Medium-term (5 years)	Long-term (10 years)
Policy actions	Local	Watchdog groups on administrative malfunctions and maltreatment Train officials to reduce malfunctions and maltreatment	Local One-Stop Shops with Mediators Mobile Units for Remote Areas Dedicated Case Officers for Vulnerable Users Real-Time Transparency Boards Emergency Social Crisis Teams Quotas for Women in Bureaucracy	Universal Basic Services
	National (please specify, eg. High-income country / Low-income country)	Document right-claiming work and the skills it requires Train women and men Compensate women's rights-claiming labor via stipends Stipends for Male Allies: Pilot programs compensating men for community advocacy	Systemic reforms in state administrations Legislating automatic approval of uncontested applications after reasonable deadlines, Eliminating redundant document requirements through secure interagency data-sharing Embedding gender-sensitive design into all public service workflows Decent wages for state agents, real-time transparency tools, Emergency fast-track mechanisms for marginalized groups Replace means-testing with automatic enrollment Challenge Masculinity Norms: UN awareness campaigns on "Care Work, including right-claiming work, as Masculinity	Universal Basic Services
	Global (please specify the institution(s) concerned, eg. OECD / WTO)	Add rights-claiming work to SDG indicator 5.4	UN guidelines to classify administrative violence as a poverty driver	Launch a Global Administrative Justice Fund

Table 1: Matrix of policy recommendations

- [5] Blandine Destremau and Isabel Georges, eds. *Le "Care", Face Morale Du Capitalisme: Assistance et Police Des Familles En Amérique Latine*. Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2017.
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Observatory of Rural Dynamics and Inequalities in South India (ODRIIS)

The *Observatory* analyzes over the past 15 years how structural changes in India are reshaping the organization of work, migration, social hierarchies, and household livelihoods. The *Observatory* also observes, measures, and understands inequalities to contribute to the theoretical renewal of the concepts of agriculture and ecology; labour and knowledge; money, debt, and finance. To achieve these objectives, the *Observatory* collects longitudinal data in rural and peri-urban areas of South India using a multidisciplinary approach; shares quantitative data and survey tools; contributes to academic debates and policymaking through publications; and trains social sciences students in research.

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