

# Spare a thought for 90 hours of unpaid work

*GDP is built on paid work, 90 hours a week or less. But unpaid work, mostly by women, in the care economy is glossed over in a debate on India having to work longer hours. Making the number of working hours the focal point of discussion overlooks the nuances of the labour market which plays a role in restricting the number of women who can take paid jobs. India needs to work smarter, not longer*

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Debates on work-life balance have gained momentum in India following provocative remarks by corporate doyens like Infosys founder NR Narayana Murthy, Larsen & Toubro (L&T) Chairman SN Subrahmanyan and Elon Musk.

The 2024 study of global life-work balance conducted by Remote, a global HR platform, revealed that the world's top 60 countries by GDP have the best work-life balance in 2024. This index is constructed on the basis of statutory "annual leave", minimum statutory sick pay, paid maternity leave, minimum wage, healthcare systems, happiness scores, average working hours per week, and LGBTQ+ inclusivity and safety. New Zealand tops the scale, followed by Ireland, Belgium, Denmark and Canada. India ranks 48th.

## **GDP, Time and Women in India**

In many developed countries, Time Use Surveys are conducted to analyse the work-life balance, which will in turn feed into macroeconomic policies related to labour market dynamics. The market -time (working time) and non-market time have always been a concern for the macroeconomic policy makers. Usually, the 24 hours chronology of time is divided into market time ( which is usually 8 hours, that gets into the Systems of National Income ( SNA) and GDP), non-market time ( which refers to the unmonetised and unpaid economic activities people perform at home and in community) and leisure.

Economic policies affect these three components of chronology of time differently. The statistical invisibility of the non-market time and it's time burden is huge and policy makers have not yet realised the importance of rolling out a comprehensive care economy infrastructure to lessen the stress of this non market time. Men and women experience this time stress differently and authentic macro scale Time Use surveys conducted by National Statistical Offices have statistics showing the disproportionate burden of non-market time burden on women. Given this pressing reality, let us unpack the debates happening in India to increase the market time to a 90-hour work week.

### **A detour to the four-day week world**

Interestingly, some developed countries are moving in the opposite direction, experimenting with shorter workweeks. For example, Belgium has introduced laws allowing workers to work four days a week without a salary reduction. Similarly, some companies in the UK have successfully implemented four-day workweeks, reporting improved employee well-being and productivity.

In 1996, through collective bargaining arrangements, a first attempt was made to establish a case for 4-days working week, with no reduction in payments. This gives three days of rest each week, with daily “maxima” when they rearrange the working hours to four days. French and Belgium are leading such changes in legal working hours to four days a week.

In the post-pandemic period, UK also tried an experiment where 3000 employees, from 60 companies with different activities, only worked four days per week over a six-month period. The experiment was a success as around a hundred companies decided to make the four-day week a permanent fixture without any loss of salary for the employees. Portugal implemented a six-month test in June 2023, in the private sector.

The analysis by Microsoft in Japan or by Perpetual Guardian, a company based in New Zealand, have proven that employees who have experimented with the four-day working week increase their productivity. Microsoft estimates its productivity increase to be 40 percent.

### **Back to Indian ‘breadwinner’ reality**

The debate on increasing the work hours in India is a matter of concern when public and private social protection measures are meagre. If a company increases the working hours to 90 hours work a week, will the employees have the flexibility to leave the firm after five years, with full pensions?

Or, will this 90-hour work week culminate into old stereotype model of men as ‘breadwinners ‘ working all the time and women confined to home stabilising the care economy front? Or will it lead to young women taking decisions not to have babies, and focus on their career, which will in turn affect the fertility statistics of a nation.

Such medieval long working hour models have been challenged and pushed back through collective bargaining models, trade unions and various social movements highlighting the disproportionate burden in the care economy.

Hence the question: Why is India debating a retrograde move related to labour markets? Indian labour markets are already facing immense problems and

there is no sustainable 'feminisation U' (trend in female labour force participation which initially declines with economic development but increases subsequently) model.

### **Smart way to grow GDP is to invest in the care economy**

Economic growth is not about increasing GDP focusing on the top 1 percent of wealthy class at the cost of labour, with stagnant wages and increased work hours. Rather, it's about the overall well-being. Legally changing the labour codes and increasing the work hours to 90 a week can be detrimental to economic growth and development. Rather the fastest and smartest way to increase a country's GDP is to invest in care economy infrastructure, which will ease the burden of men and women in non-market time which, in turn, can increase the female labour force participation. A new industrial policy is necessary for India to understand the nuanced reasons for low productivity and stagnation; and there is no quick fix to such concerns by increasing working hours. Union Budget 2025 provides an opportunity to flag this issue.

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