

WHO PRODUCES THE WORKERS?

The hidden cost of cutting women's working hours

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In the days following the election, as we found ourselves drifting through the familiar routine of scrolling endlessly on Facebook, we began noticing posts from friends and colleagues reflecting on the results. Some of them joked, half in satire and half in frustration, that it was unfortunate Jamaat had not won the election. Had the party come to power, they quipped, perhaps the eight-hour workday might have disappeared. The remarks carried the tone of political dark humour, perhaps even a hint of wishful thinking. Yet behind the jokes lies a serious question: what would it actually mean if women's working hours were reduced?

Within the domestic sphere, women's work is often dismissed as "non-economic," yet it is central to the reproduction of the labour force. In mainstream society, this role has been viewed as a charitable yet mandatory contribution by women and is therefore treated as unpaid domestic work.

Recently, policymakers have attempted to calculate the economic value of this unpaid labour. According to a Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) report, women spend around 4.6 hours a day on household work while men spend only 0.6 hours. Unpaid household and caregiving labour was valued at Tk 5.3 trillion in 2021.

In a capitalist labour market built on cost minimisation and efficiency maximisation, attempts to reduce work hours rarely unfold as intended. Instead, they risk reinforcing the very structures of inequality they claim to challenge.

In a system where employers evaluate workers by output per unit of cost, a policy that formalises women as "five-hour workers" inevitably labels them as less productive. No matter how wages are paid by the company or the state, employers will see women working fewer hours for the same monetary cost. Over time, this incentivises employers to quietly avoid hiring women, especially in competitive, low-margin industries such as garments, where profit depends on maximising every labour minute. Women become economically "risky hires". This solidifies the idea that women's "real duties" remain at home. Instead of challenging the burden of unpaid work, it validates the assumption: if women are expected to work fewer hours outside, who is expected to cover the rest? Women themselves, through a repackaging of domestic confinement.

Even more troubling is the potential for long-term exploitation through

informalisation. Employers may offer temporary or under-the-table contracts, or piece-rate, home-based work. If wages are partly subsidised by the state, women's economic security becomes vulnerable to political cycles and austerity cuts. A policy masquerading as "relief" actually deepens vulnerability. Instead of reproductive justice, it offers reproductive containment. Instead of empowerment, it cements women as a secondary, subsidised, and easily discardable labour force.

To understand why talk of reducing women's work hours reinforces inequality, we turn to Social Reproduction Theory (SRT), which begins with a fundamental question: "Who produces the workers?" It focuses on life after 5 pm and before 9 am as something that sustains the structure outside the formal workspace. In the capitalist system,

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the family, as the basic unit of society, functions as the space of reproduction of both the existing structure and, in a literal sense, the workforce.

This leads to the question: who actually does the work of reproduction? It is the women in the family who are disproportionately impacted, as their efforts sustain the capitalist labour supply, yet remain unseen in the economy and dismissed as "unpaid" work. Social reproduction occurs through three processes: regenerating workers for the next day's work by looking after the family, cooking and feeding them, and managing the household; preparing and caring for non-workers, such as children and students, to function within the existing system; and producing future workers through childbirth.

We need to address the unpaid labour behind this reproduction of labour, challenging the invisibility of

this work and the disproportionate burden placed on women.

Furthermore, recognising the unpaid work of women highlights the magnitude of their workload, but does it benefit women economically? The answer is no. Recognition in documentation or statistics is ineffective unless it results in tangible improvements, such as economic independence, social protection, or a reduction in the persistent double burden.

Here, the government can play a crucial role. Instead of subsidising institutes for the five-hour workday, it can initiate comprehensive policy reform. A sustainable approach would be revisiting labour regulations and policies to redistribute care infrastructure, alongside universal social protection and enhanced childcare and public transportation systems.

Care work in households should not be seen only as a woman's responsibility, but rather as socially necessary work to be shared, supported, and mitigated by the state.

The state can redistribute the workload by building infrastructure that supports these efforts, including affordable childcare (e.g., public or community childcare), community kitchens to reduce the burden of cooking and feeding, and the enforcement and incentivisation of paid parental leave for both parents.

Without acknowledging and addressing the unpaid

burden placed on women within the existing structure, reducing work hours merely re-establishes existing inequality by banishing women to the house and the kitchen, sustaining the social reproduction of the workforce and the system, and failing to challenge the structures that invisibilise women's labour.

Social Reproduction Theory ultimately reveals a paradox: capitalism survives on women's unpaid labour, yet refuses to value or redistribute it. Recognition without redistribution cannot bring justice. Whether through policy proposals to reduce women's work hours or through government initiatives to include unpaid care work in GDP, these measures do not challenge the fundamental logic that sustains gendered economic inequality.

True liberation of women requires dismantling the system that profits from women's unpaid work, not decorating it with

new incentives. Instead, new policies need to redistribute care work, expand public services, and restructure labour markets. Otherwise, such proposals will merely preserve the status quo under a veneer of progress, creating a reserve army of labour in which women become part-time workers and full-time caregivers, while employers continue to pursue control over the supply-demand dynamics of the labour market.

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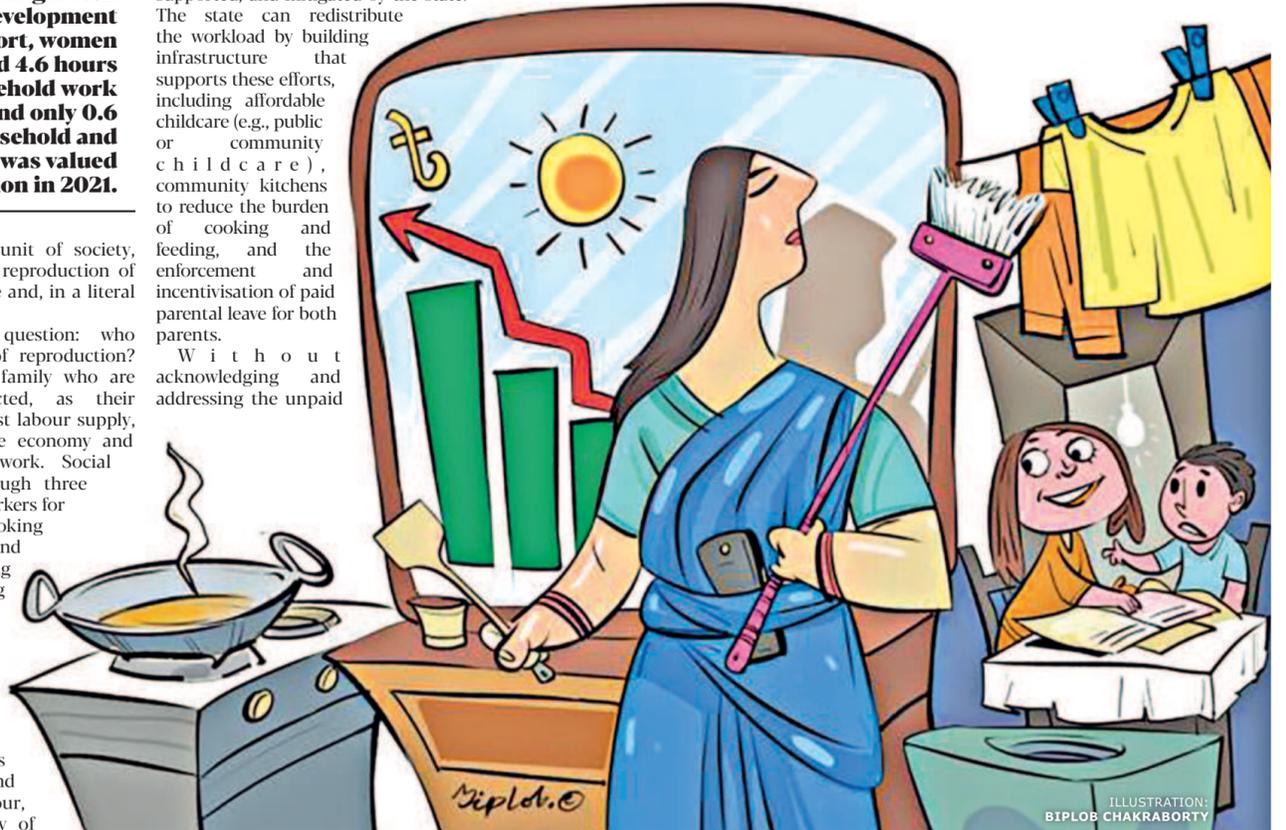


ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKRABORTY

The last echo of Kui



Ashwini Kondo and his 110-year-old uncle.

"Only four elderly people, including my uncle and aunt, still know Kui," says Pankaj. "Even they now mostly speak Bengali or regional dialects. The younger generation does not speak the language. I barely know a few words that I learned from my grandmother."

MINTU DESHWARA

In the tea garden villages of Sylhet division, a language is breathing its last.

The Kondo community, one of the smallest indigenous groups in Bangladesh, is facing the near extinction of its ancestral language, Kui. Recent studies suggest that less than one percent of the community can speak the language fluently.

According to local accounts, only four elderly individuals still retain the ability to converse in Kui. With their passing, the language may disappear entirely from Bangladesh.

The international linguistic organisation SIL International has identified Kui among the country's most endangered languages. In a recent survey of four indigenous languages, SIL found that all are at risk, but Kui is among the most critically threatened.

According to the Society

for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), most Kondo families in Moulvibazar, Habiganj and Sylhet districts are descendants of labourers brought from present-day Odisha and Jharkhand by British colonial authorities around 150 years ago to work in tea plantations.

In 2016, SEHD documented 539 Kondo households across 30 tea estates in Sylhet division.

At Kalighat Tea Garden in Sreemangal upazila of Moulvibazar, 67-year-old Shyamoli Kondo says opportunities to speak Kui are almost nonexistent.

"I only speak a few words of the Kui language when I meet my elder brother," she says. "Outside that, we have to speak Oriya, Jangli (a mixed dialect), or Bengali. Many people do not even recognise our language anymore."

She dreams of returning to Jharkhand. "There, I could speak freely

in my own language. Here, once you leave the village, Kui disappears."

SIL research shows that 76 percent of the Kondo community identify Oriya as their mother tongue, though only 42 percent actively use it. While 11 percent claim Kui as their mother tongue, fewer than one percent can actually speak it. The language now survives mainly among elderly speakers in a few tea gardens of Moulvibazar.

Within the community, Oriya is commonly used, while Bengali dominates communication with other groups.

Pankaj Kondo, 50, vice president of the Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union, calls the situation an identity crisis.

"Only four elderly people, including my uncle and aunt, still know Kui," he says. "Even they now mostly speak Bengali or regional dialects. The younger generation does not speak the language. I barely know a few words that I learned from my grandmother."

He recalls how his grandmother once gathered children in the evenings to tell stories of Kondo heroics, myths, riddles, harvest festivals and folk

anymore." As the language fades, so too do traditional customs, oral histories and lifestyle practices. Community leaders fear that ethnic identity itself is weakening.

Researcher Porimol Baraik points out that Article 30 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child — to which Bangladesh is a signatory — guarantees minority communities the right to use their own language. The International Mother Language Institute Act (2010) also emphasises preserving and documenting ethnic languages.

Yet implementation remains limited.

Cornelius Tudu, Country Director of SIL International Bangladesh, says the assessment used the internationally recognised Fishman Criteria, formally known as the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), which measures language vitality across eight levels.

"When a language falls beyond Level 6, it indicates severe disruption in intergenerational transmission," he

"A dominant language like Bengali becomes associated with education, employment and social mobility. Minority languages are confined to private spaces, then to the elderly, and eventually to memory."

He warns that documentation alone will not save Kui.

"Recording vocabulary can preserve data, but not a living language. Revitalisation requires community will, institutional support and meaningful opportunities for children to learn and use the language."

Each language, he adds, carries unique ecological knowledge, oral literature and collective memory. When a language dies, humanity loses an irreplaceable worldview.

Samar M. Soren, Indigenous Language Technology Specialist, Head of the Language Resource Hub (LRH), and Global Taskforce Member of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL) at UNESCO, said the Kondo language of the Dravidian language family is critically endangered in Bangladesh.

"This language is going extinct before our eyes in Bangladesh. According to recent field reports, only two fluent speakers remain in Sreemangal — one over 100 years old and his nephew, Ashwini Konda, 78."

Ashwini can still speak Kui, though his elderly uncle is now ill and unable to converse.

In a moment of regret, Ashwini reportedly said, "Grandfather, forgive me. I could not teach my children the Kondo language."

That regret echoes far beyond one family. It signals the possible end of a language that once carried the history, identity and memory of a people.

Unless urgent steps are taken through community-based initiatives, mother-tongue education and institutional recognition, Kui may vanish within a generation.

And when the last fluent speaker falls silent, revival may no longer be possible.

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The Kondo community's traditional festival, Jangol Puja.



Children of the Kondo community.

PHOTOS: MINTU DESHWARA

traditions. "That has stopped," he says quietly. For many young Kondo people, the cultural disconnect is already complete.

Sukhen Kondo, 26, a degree student, says he does not clearly know what distinguishes Kondo culture. "We speak the same mixed language at home and outside. I do not even know if we have a separate language

explains. "In such cases, children are no longer learning the language at home."

According to SIL's findings, Kui has crossed that threshold.

Anthropologist AFM Zakaria, professor at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, says the decline follows a familiar pattern.

"It begins with bilingualism, then gradual language shift," he says.