



**CIPRIANI COLLEGE**  
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES



**WORK-LIFE BALANCE ISN'T A LUXURY -  
IT'S THE ENGINE OF DECENT WORK**

# **WORK MATTERS**

**COLUMN**

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# Work-Life Balance isn't a luxury – it's the Engine of Decent Work

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Across Trinidad and Tobago, thousands of women start their workday long before they reach the office, cooking, caregiving, and coordinating. The ILO's report on Decent Work and the Care Economy (2024) states that care work “involves meeting the physical, psychological and emotional needs of adults and children, whether or not they have disabilities or are ill” (p.5). The report also highlights that, “three quarters of unpaid care work worldwide is performed by women. Globally, women spend on average 4 hours and 25 minutes each day on unpaid work, compared with an average of 1 hour and 23 minutes for men”. Additionally, care work requires relational work and emotional investment which makes it different from other forms of work. Therefore, the high demand on women's time, energy and emotions may contribute to overwork and burnout which will adversely impact productivity. Work-life balance and a strong care economy are not social niceties – they are productivity investments and essential pillars of decent work.

In Trinidad and Tobago the world of work is now characterized by remote work, traffic, long commutes, rising cost of living, and caregiving demands which are reshaping the conversation around work-life balance. Globally, women account for “two thirds of the paid care workforce”. Therefore, women find themselves in a challenging position of working a “double shift” of paid and unpaid work. There is a cultural expectation that women always “make it work,” even at personal cost. However, a poor balance of these ongoing demands leads to absenteeism, stress, mental health burdens and lower performance which impact productivity.

Workers with access to reliable childcare and adequate rest are more productive and less prone to burnout, absenteeism, and turnover. However, workers in the informal care economy face heightened job insecurity,

low earnings, and poor work-life balance, often juggling multiple jobs in the absence of childcare and other support systems. Care work (whether paid or unpaid) is consistently undervalued, with wages remaining low even when compensated. This undervaluation suppresses labour force participation and reinforces gender inequalities. Investing in the care economy is therefore a critical macroeconomic strategy, as it reduces women's time constraints, increases workforce participation, and enables higher income generation.

The quality of terms and conditions in the workplace is also an important consideration related to care workers. The ILO deems decent working conditions as a “prerequisite for quality care”. These decent working conditions offer workers dignity, occupational health and safety, fair wages, personal protective equipment and a life outside of labour. A care-responsive workplace ensures that staff are not overworked, nor are they physically and emotionally drained because of their working conditions.

Paid care workers enjoy a care-responsive workplace via adequate remuneration, support such as insurance, paid time-off and training which facilitate economic resilience. On the other hand, when organizations are not care-responsive, care workers are underpaid, engage in precarious work, experience burnout, stress, and high turnover. Particularly in domestic or home-based care, workers may lack contracts, social protection, labour rights and limited career opportunities and are therefore at risk of being exploited. A workplace that ignores care needs cannot claim to offer decent work. Thus, a care-responsive workplace must provide fair labour standards and worker well-being.

In Trinidad and Tobago, unpaid care for family members reflects shared values such as responsibility, reciprocity and respect for elders. The unpaid care

reduces the need for paid services which lowers household expenses. One of the major disadvantages of unpaid care work is that it is excluded from the GDP and labour statistics despite its substantial economic value. Unpaid care responsibilities are mainly borne by women which further supports gender roles. This limits women's access to paid employment and reduces their earnings which widens the wage gap.

Given that women are managing both paid and unpaid work responsibilities, employers can be supportive by providing flexible scheduling or remote work supported by clear boundaries on working hours to help to prevent overwork. Organizations can also institute mental health days and wellness policies which will aid women in managing burnout, depression and anxiety. Fair wages for domestic and care workers are necessary to ensure decent working conditions exist. Organizations that adopt these practices improve output and retention.

Protecting worker wellbeing is a national responsibility, not merely a workplace concern. A comprehensive national childcare strategy would reduce the burden on working mothers, ease mental stress, and improve productivity and earning potential - an approach successfully implemented in countries such as Senegal and India. Strengthening labour laws to recognize domestic work, incentivizing business investment in care, and expanding eldercare and disability support would further enable women to balance paid work and care responsibilities. Care is essential economic infrastructure; without valuing those who perform paid and unpaid care work, high productivity and decent work cannot be achieved.