



DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS

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End the exploitation

Child trafficking needs concerted action from government and civil society

The Indian government's slavery, child trafficking, and the Supreme Court of India has issued a stern wake-up call about the prevailing situation in India. In a December 19 judgment, it observed that child trafficking is a "deeply disturbing reality" in the country, which has exploded out of control by organised cartels, continues to flourish despite protective laws. It was hearing a case regarding a minor who was forcibly exploited sexually by a gang of traffickers in Bengaluru. The Court upheld the conviction of the gang members under the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act. The offence, it said, struck at the very foundations of dignity, bodily integrity and the state's constitutional promise of protection to every child against exploitation. A Bench of Justices Manoj Misra and Jaynayaka Bagchi drew attention to the complex and layered structure of organised crime networks which operate at various levels of society, targeting, harassing and exploiting minor victims. The Bench laid down guidelines to follow in child trafficking cases, particularly the need for "sensitivity and latitude" while hearing the child's testimony. It may not be possible to ascertain the exact nature of the crime and clarify the nature of the crime, it said, pointing out that courts must not disbelieve her testimony because of minor inconsistencies in her evidence.

A victim of sex trafficking, particularly a minor, is in a unique place, it said. The sufferer's deposition is to be given dignified and credentialed as that of an injured witness". The Court's observations must not go in vain and the onus is on the government and civil society to do what is necessary to protect children. The net must be spread wide to end other forms of exploitation as well such as forced labour, bonded labour. Such laws may be in place, but on the ground, much more needs to be done like giving teeth to anti-trafficking units or passing an anti-trafficking Bill. Last year, the Ministry of Home Affairs told Parliament that India had recorded as many as 10,659 cases of human trafficking between 2012 and 2013. Out of the persons arrested for the crime in the same period, the conviction rate was just 4.8%. The issue of rehabilitation after rescue also has to be thought through; mere compensation is not enough. The focus must be on prevention and protection, and one way to ensure this is to keep children in school till they are 14 as per the Right to Education Act promised. With the advent of the digital space, trafficking is a shape-shifting evil, and government and social entities must be prepared to tackle all its forms.

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The upskilling gap: why women risk being left behind by AI

With 10 hours less per week for self-development than men, India's working women need flexible learning and "time-saving" policies to compete

DATA POINT

Shravani Prakash
Tanu M. Goyal
Chellsea Laubka

As 2025 ends, Indians are consumed by two anxieties – whether artificial intelligence (AI) will take over their jobs, and whether the future belongs to 80-hour work weeks or the right to disconnect after 40 hours. But the millions of working women in India's 80-hour work week is already a lived reality, as their workday continues long after office hours, filled with unremunerated and unpaid labour. Unfortunately, AI or algorithms has yet threatened to end the world's "unpaid work" or rescue them from the long hours spent on cooking, cleaning, caregiving, planning, and emotional management. India's latest Time Use Survey (TUS) makes it clear that while a remarkable 40% of women now participate in the labour force, they are not simply leaning into paid work; instead, they are working a relentless second shift. As women take on more paid work, their unpaid responsibilities, which used to be instead of substitution, are stacking. This results in working women being left with limited time for personal development, leisure, or adequate rest.

Chart 1 highlights work undertaken by women and how women divide their working hours. On average, working women spend around 9.6 hours a day on combined paid and unpaid work. A substantial share of this time is, however, spent on unpaid work that includes unpaid work for childcare, activities, domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning; and other voluntary work and subsistence production. This burden peaks when women are in their prime ages (25-39 years), leading to their total working hours exceeding 70 hours a week. In contrast, men record lower

total hours of work. On average, they spend about 8.6 hours a day on combined paid and unpaid work, with more than 80% of this time devoted to paid activities (wage/salaried work, remuneration, self-employed, and hours of goods and services for sale). Across the working life cycle, men's total work hours typically fall within the range of 54-60 hours per week, largely because their unpaid workload is minimal and stable across life stages.

Women's work hours exceed men's across nearly every age group. The gap is widest in the 25-39 age range, when women spend double the time on unpaid caregiving than men, with childcare forming the largest share. Even in old age, while men's unpaid contributions rise marginally (often to care for ageing parents), the broader unequal contract at home remains intact, regardless of age, occupation, or income level.

Women, on average, also spend 10 hours less than men every week on self-development activities, including learning, skill enhancement, building self-awareness and personal growth, and emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. Once again, this gap is widest (around 11-12 hours per week) during the prime age group. These figures matter immensely in an AI-disrupted economy, since time for upskilling is often the difference between essential to transition from low-skilled to higher-value work.

Women contribute a mere 17%

of India's GDP, not because they do too little but because much of their essential labour is unpaid and invisible, which does not get added in national income calculations. The Periodic Labour Force Survey shows that nearly 40% of women outside the labour market cite household responsibilities as the reason. Even the recent rise in women's workforce participation is driven largely by unpaid family work, and low wages.

The AI era could make this worse, as women's jobs are more automation-prone, and AI-driven performance metrics risk penalising caregivers whose time constraints remain invisible to algorithms.

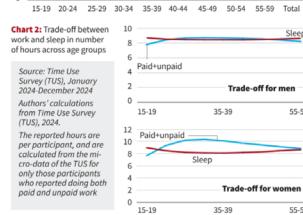
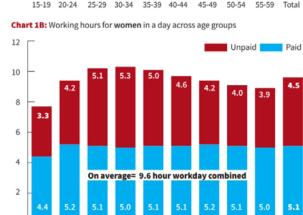
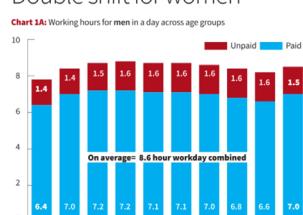
The empowerment cannot mean merely adding jobs, unless paid employment replaces women's drudgery instead of compounding it. Policy, technology, and workplaces must be redesigned to support women's underutilised resources that underpins both care and productivity.

This means shifting towards an outcome-based approach that explicitly uses time-use data to free women from unpaid work and redirect it to higher-value, remunerative activities.

The gender budget can be a key tool to enable this by integrating time-use metrics. Budgets must prioritise and sustain outlays to time-saving infrastructure such as accessible public transport, safe, piped water, clean energy, and safe public transport. Simultaneously, to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world of work, women must have access to lifelong and flexible upskilling opportunities that are gender-sensitive, mobile, and digital constraints. This calls for sustained gender budget allocations to expand programmes that build locally relevant vocational capabilities, strengthen technology and digital skills, and expand opportunities such as the India AI Mission and AI Careers for Women programmes.

Until women's time is valued,

Double shift for women



Maternal mortality dropped as institutional deliveries rose to 89%: Health Minister

Nadda lays foundation stone for two medical colleges in Madhya Pradesh; says health benefits provided to mothers and children through 1,81,000 Ayushman Arogya Mandirs across the country

The Hindu Bureau
 Bhopal

Union Health Minister J.P. Nadda said on Tuesday that the country's institutional delivery rate had gone up to 89%, leading to a significant reduction in the maternal mortality rate (MMR) during childbirth.

Mr. Nadda made the statement after laying the foundation stone for a medical college in Madhya Pradesh's Dhar district. He laid foundation for another medical college in Betul district. The two colleges will be operated on a public-private partnership (PPP) model.

"The rate of institutional deliveries in the country has increased to 89%, which led to a significant reduction in the MMR. The Narendra Modi government is striving through its healthcare services to ensure that citizens remain healthy and do not fall ill in the first place," Mr. Nadda said.

He said the two medical colleges would also be the first of its kind in the coun-



Union Health Minister J.P. Nadda with Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav at an event in Dhar on Tuesday.

try that would function through the PPP model.

"The establishment of the medical college would provide better healthcare services to the people of Betul and the surrounding tribal areas," he said, claiming that a "radical transformation" had taken place in the health sector under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"Until the end of the 20th century, there was

only one All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Delhi. Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee opened six AIIMS during his tenure. Now there are 23. In 2014, there were 387 medical colleges. Today, there are 819 medical colleges. Including those in Dhar and Betul, the number of medical colleges has reached 821," the Health Minister said.

"Health benefits are be-

ing provided to mothers and children through 1,81,000 Ayushman Arogya Mandirs [health and wellness centres]. Today, keeping in mind the health of everyone in the country, not only is the benefit of the Ayushman Yojana being provided, but 12 types of vaccines are also being administered to protect the life of every child through immunisation," he added.

The medical colleges in Dhar and Betul are going to be constructed at an estimated cost of ₹260 crore and ₹300 crore respectively, as per a State government statement.

Medical colleges

The State currently has 33 medical colleges, including 19 government institutions.

"In 2003, there were only 1,250 seats [in the State]. In 2023-24, this increased to 4,875, and in the 2025-26 academic session, it further rose to 5,550 [government: 2,850, private: 2,700]. The total number of PG (MD/MS) seats has also increased to 2,862," the government said.