

# **Work and Life: Balancing Paid Work, Unpaid Work, and Free Time**

## **The Invisibility of Unpaid Work**

Measures of progress based on the GDP value only paid work. Eating fries at a fast-food take-out is recorded as economic "growth" and progress. The time we spend cooking our own meal has no value in our conventional measures of progress. If we hire someone to clean house, the GDP goes up. Marry our housekeeper, and the GDP goes down. Pay a stranger to look after your child, and the economy grows. Take care of your own child, and it has no value in our measures of progress. In fact, much of what is recorded as "growth" is simply a shift from the unpaid household economy to the market economy.

But this is not just an accounting quirk. The lack of value assigned to unpaid work has serious implications both for policy and for quality of life, affecting the persistent gender wage gap, high poverty rates among single mothers and their children, the decreasing time parents spend with their own children, the decline in home-cooking and its health consequences, and the growing time stress that comes from the struggle to juggle job and household responsibilities.

## **Time Stress on the Rise**

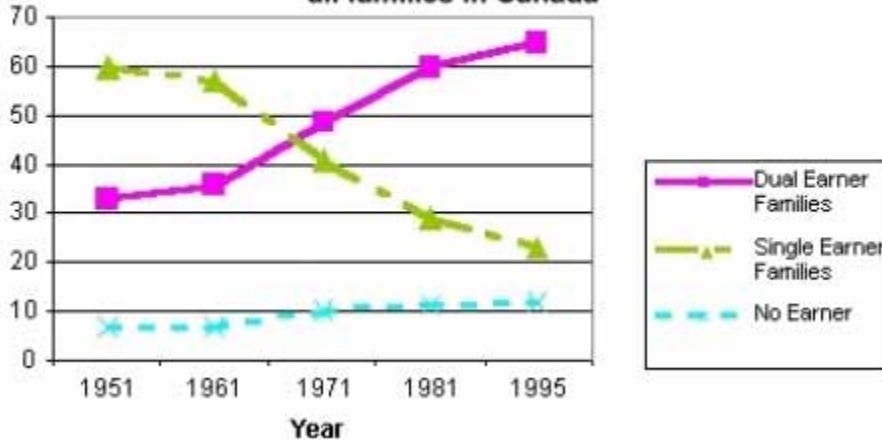
In the last 40 years, women have doubled their share of participation in the paid labour force. But time use surveys indicate that women still do nearly twice as much housework as men, just as they did 40 years ago. While women's labour force participation is rightly seen as a sign of increased freedom in the market economy, women's loss of free time has gone unnoticed in our conventional measures of progress, because unpaid work is unrecorded, invisible and unvalued in the market statistics.

Not surprisingly, Statistics Canada reports that working mothers are the most time-stressed demographic group, with more than one-third reporting "severe" levels of time stress. On average, working mothers put in a 75-hour working week when paid and unpaid work are both included.

**Women's Share of Household Work**  
has remained almost unchanged despite  
dramatic increases in paid work

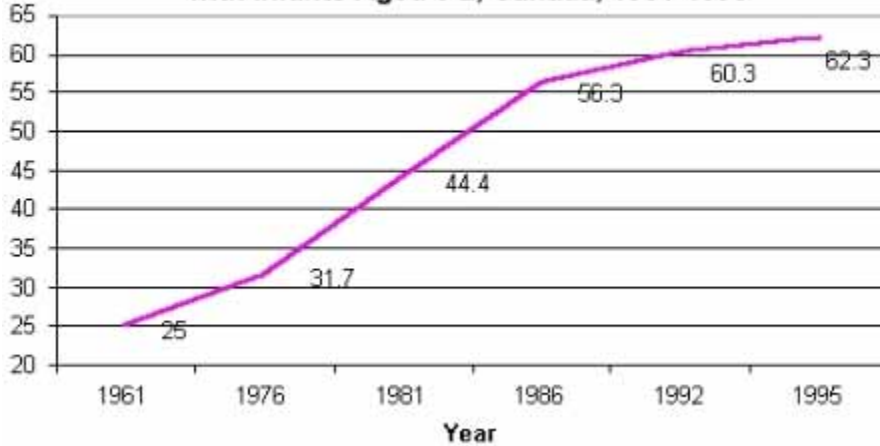


**Working Mothers in Canada**  
Dual-Earner Families as percent of  
all families in Canada



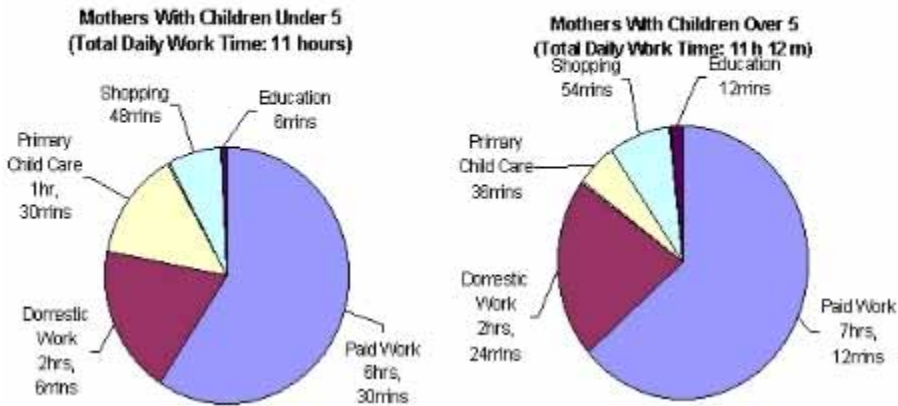
Sources: Statistics Canada, *Characteristics of Dual-Earner Families*, catalogue no. 13-215-XPB; Statistics Canada, *Charting Canadian Incomes: 1951-1981*, catalogue no. 13-581E; Statistics Canada, *Women in Canada*, 3rd edition, catalogue no. 89-503E

**Labour Force Participation Rates of Mothers with Infants Aged 0-2, Canada, 1961-1995**



Source: Statistics Canada, *Canadian National Child-Care Study*, catalogues no.89-A-90, volume II, 89-527E, 89-529E and 89-536-XPE; Statistics Canada, *Labour Force Annual Averages*, catalogue 71-220; historical extrapolations for 1961-1975 from Statistics Canada, *Charting Canadian Incomes: 1951-1981*, on married women in the labour force and dual-earner families, and Statistics Canada, *Caring Communities: Proceedings of the Symposium on Social Supports*, catalogue no. 89-514E, page 113.

**A Day in the Life of a Working Mother  
Average Weekday Work Hours, Employed Mothers, Canada**



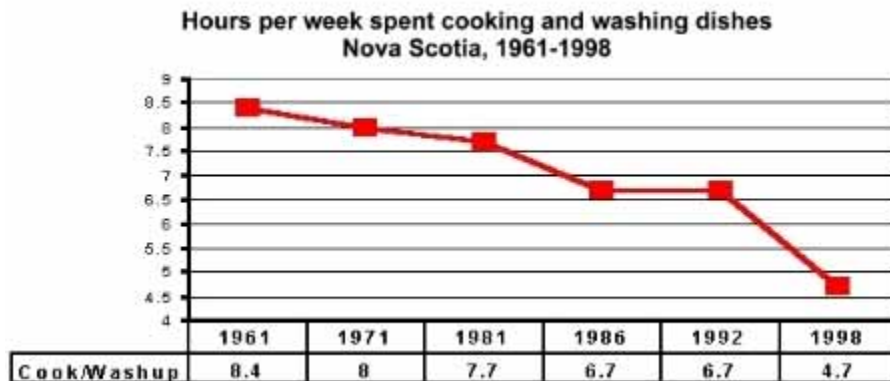
Source: Harvey, Andrew, et. al., *Where Does Time Go?*, General Social Survey Analysis Series, Statistics Canada, catalogue no. 11-612E, #4, table 19, page 117, data from 1986 GSS Time Use Survey.

## Long Work Hours and Health

For the first time, a new Statistics Canada study has definitively linked longer working hours with increased health risks. Women moving to longer hours were more than four times as likely to smoke more than women working shorter hours. They were twice as likely to increase their rate of alcohol consumption, and 40% more likely to decrease their level of physical activity and to experience an unhealthy weight gain.

Longer work hours therefore increase the risks of cancer, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and other serious illnesses. Studies also show more subtle and indirect health consequences from overwork. Time use surveys show parents spending less time than ever with their own children, with potential effects on the psychological and mental well-being of youth. Long hours can also increase anxiety, strain and irritability, and hasten family breakdown. There is a greater likelihood of sleeplessness, fatigue and poor eating habits.

Nova Scotians spend 30% less time in their kitchens than they did eight years ago, and they eat more fast food.



A recent Harvard University longitudinal study found that children eating at home with their parents have healthier diets and health outcomes into adulthood than those who eat out more. In light of the doubling of obesity rates among both adults and youth in Canada since 1985, this invisible shift from the household to the market economy may carry long-term health consequences.

## ***Long Work Hours Squeeze out Community Work and Free Time***

The invisibility of unpaid work has particularly serious consequences for women, who still do most unpaid work. But Statistics Canada time use surveys show ***sharply increased levels of time stress for both sexes and all age groups*** in the 1990's. More Canadians are working longer hours than ever, with the highly educated and highly skilled in particular putting in more unpaid overtime, as firms and governments downsize and expect higher productivity from a reduced staff of their most valued employees.

Interestingly, highly educated Canadians also volunteer at twice the rate of their less educated counterparts. Due to overwork, voluntary work is getting squeezed out, with time use surveys indicating an 8.7% nationwide decline in voluntary work hours per capita between 1992 and 1998, resulting in the loss of \$4.7 billion worth of voluntary services. Invisible in the standard measures of progress, this voluntary work decline had gone unnoticed in the policy arena and was reported for the first time by GPI Atlantic.

Amazingly, as households, most of us are now working longer hours than 100 years ago, when both paid and unpaid work are considered.

Total Work Hours, Working Couple with Children, Canada, 1900-2000

	1900	2000
Male, paid work	58.5	42
Female, paid work	--	36.5
Male, unpaid work	10 (est.)	22.4
Female, unpaid work	56	33.6
<b>Total work hours</b>	<b>124.5</b>	<b>134.5</b>

## ***Overwork and Underwork are Both Stressful***

So long as unpaid household and volunteer work, as well as free time, remain unmeasured and unvalued in our measures of progress, this growing time stress, and its consequences for personal health, family breakdown, and community service, remain masked. And the increasingly intense struggle to balance job, household and volunteer responsibilities will remain a private, domestic issue producing family tensions, blame and recrimination. Once visible and measured, policy attention can shift to total work hours, and both the problem and the solution become social issues. The Genuine Progress Index does assign explicit value to both paid and unpaid work, and to free time.

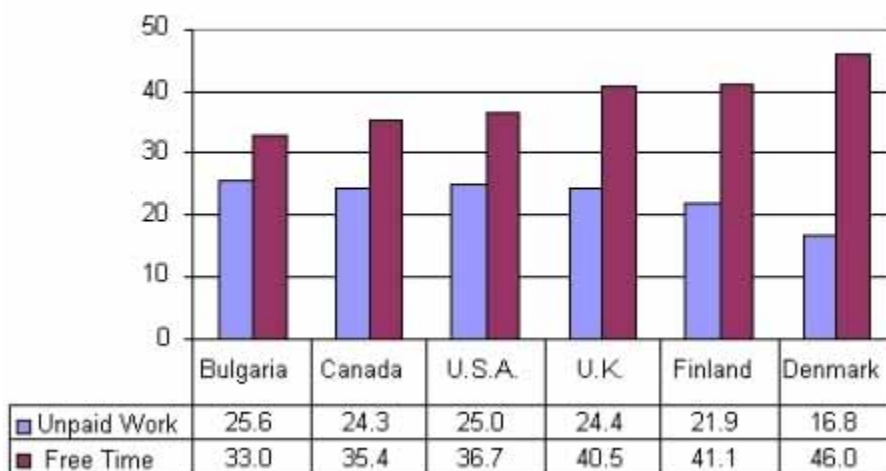
The GPI analysis notes that while more Canadians are working longer hours than ever, an increasing number also cannot get the hours they need to make ends meet. With the growth of insecure, temporary, casual jobs, the rate of involuntary part-time work has risen steadily to nearly 40% in Atlantic Canada. In other words, the standard workweek is declining, with the increasing polarization of hours identified by Statistics Canada as the main source of growing income inequality in Canada. Both overwork and underemployment are stressful. One Japanese study found that the underemployed and the overworked had equally elevated risks of heart attack. The Japanese word "*karoshi*" actually means "death from overwork."

## *A Better Balance: Learning from the Europeans*

It doesn't have to be this way. We can learn from excellent working models of successful efforts to improve the balance between paid and unpaid work, and between work and family life. In the Scandinavian countries, family-friendly work arrangements have become more important priorities in collective bargaining than wages. International time use studies have shown that the Danes now have 11 hours more free time per week than Canadians.

The Netherlands reduced its unemployment rate from 12.2% to 2.7% by reducing overall work hours, and now has the lowest annual work hours of any industrial country. Dutch workers put in an average of 1,370 hours of paid work per year, compared to 1,732 for Canadians, the equivalent of 10 weeks less per year. The USA now has the longest working hours of any industrialized country in the world, having surpassed the Japanese, another factor spurring rapid growth rates in the U.S. at the expense of the quality of life of its citizens.

**Average Weekly Hours, Unpaid Household Work and Free Time: Population aged 20-59, Selected Countries**



Source: Harvey, Andrew, "Canadian Time Use in a Cross-National Perspective", *Statistics in Transition*, November, 1995, volume 2, no. 4, pages 595-610. See Table 3, page 603.

A Dutch law prohibits discrimination against part-time workers, ensuring them equal hourly pay, pro-rated benefits, and equal opportunity for career advancement. A bill is now before the Dutch parliament to give workers the *right* to reduce their work hours, a right already enshrined in most Dutch collective agreements. Holland now has the highest rate of part-time work among OECD countries, but part-time work is considered "good work" in that country, and the rate of involuntary part-time work is just 6%, less than one-sixth the rate in Atlantic Canada. Shorter work hours have been shown to increase productivity dramatically.

In contrast to North Americans who are working longer hours, the Dutch, Danes, Norwegians, French, Italians and other Europeans have actively reduced work hours both in order to spread the work more evenly and thus to reduce unemployment and underemployment as well as overwork, and also to improve work-family balance. Studies show the unemployed have a reduced life expectancy and suffer significantly more health problems than people who have a job. The reduction and redistribution of work hours can therefore improve health for both the under-worked and the overworked.

Canadian federal and provincial governments could begin shifting the focus in this direction in a simple cost-free way -- by giving annual honorary awards to businesses that institute family-friendly work arrangements, including flexible work hours, job-sharing arrangements, and the right to reduce working hours without career penalties. Beyond that, legislation on the Dutch model could provide an alternative to the American pattern of overwork that increasingly dominates this continent.

## ***Voluntary Work Reduction: An Alternative to Layoffs***

In response to Nova Scotia government plans to cut the provincial civil service, GPI Atlantic last year published a 30-page report advocating savings through voluntary work time reduction rather than layoffs. Drawing on successful European and North American work reduction initiatives, the report demonstrates the potential for an 8.3% savings in labour costs without layoffs, while reducing work stress and improving work-family balance for employees.

In fact, shortening work hours would have saved the government money, because layoffs increase taxpayer costs in employment insurance, social assistance payments, a reduced tax base, lost production, high severance and early retirement costs, and range of indirect health and social costs associated with layoffs. Severance payments alone cost the government \$4 million.

Unlike layoffs, voluntary work reduction also retains valued skills in the workplace, ensuring better service delivery, and it improves workplace morale and productivity through reduced stress, absenteeism, lateness, turnover, fatigue and errors. European studies show that 50% of work time reduction is made up in increased productivity, so it is possible, for example, to offer 10% more time off in exchange for a 5% pay cut with no loss to the employer.

**If we begin explicitly to value our free time, the time we spend with family and children, the productive unpaid work done in households, and the voluntary contributions we make to our communities, we will naturally explore policy options that are currently not even on the political agenda. By including these values in our core measures of progress, the Genuine Progress Index can help draw attention to workplace models that can improve our health and wellness, and enhance the quality of our lives.**