

Invisible Labor: Office Workers Who are Never Paid — An Assessment of Ramgram Municipality

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Abstract

Work is a significant social determinant of health. Although employment generally benefits health through a variety of material and psychosocial factors, stress-related factors like security, pay, hours, and autonomy vary the health benefits of work. However, employment may only be half the story when it comes to understanding work and health. A lot of attention has been paid to unpaid labor. Some of the well-known factors that contribute to work stress in some industries may also be present in unpaid labor, and unpaid labor may have an indirect impact on health through its effect on employment outcomes and opportunities. In all countries, women continue to perform more unpaid labor than men do, and women continue to be more likely than men to work fewer hours due to caregiving responsibilities and in low-paying and precarious occupations. Gender inequality in the distribution of unpaid labor is thought to contribute to these disparities, as women continue to earn less than men and are underrepresented in decision-making roles.

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Introduction

Work that produces economic value but does not receive direct financial compensation is known as unpaid labor. This includes volunteer work, unpaid professional obligations like internships, “mental load” management, and digital gig economy tasks, as well as domestic and carework (cooking, cleaning, raising children, caring for the elderly). In Every workplace, there is an expectation that office workers will go above and beyond is often seen as a sign of commitment and dedication. This unpaid labor has become a silent burden for hundreds of office workers, a necessary sacrifice to maintain job security or meet workplace demands. Unpaid work in the office is far more prevalent than most people realize, and it has a significant impact. The impact on employees' mental health, career advancement, and overall job satisfaction is just as important as the missed paycheck. Despite labor laws that are meant to protect workers, many have to give up time without getting paid because they are afraid of losing their jobs or getting hurt. Unpaid office labor is a hidden problem in Ramgram Municipality .

This study explores the issue of What happens if extra time spent late at night in the office, attending last-minute meetings, and staying late to complete tasks is not rewarded? Individuals who perform office-related work without receiving fair wages and financial compensation. Many workers, trainees, volunteers, and informal employees, are expected to complete administrative and professional tasks despite being unpaid. This situation raises concerns about labor exploitation, economic inequality, lack of legal protection, and the negative effects on workers' motivation, mental well-being, and career growth. Unpaid office work frequently benefits businesses while putting financial and emotional strain on employees, making the issue significant. Unpaid labor are out of reach from low-income families, denying them equal access to professional development and advancement opportunities. Additionally, this practice is perpetuated by social acceptance of unpaid labor and weak labor law enforcement. The study therefore seeks to examine the causes, effects, and possible solutions to the issue of unpaid office workers in order to promote fair labor practices and protect workers' rights. What happens if extra time spent late at night in the office, attending last-minute meetings, and staying late to complete tasks is not rewarded?

Research Objective

The main objective of invisible labor the Office workers who are never paid is to highlight the exploitation and unfair treatment of workers who perform office-related tasks without receiving proper wages or recognition. The purpose of this piece is to raise awareness about labor inequality, the rights of workers, and the economic systems that benefit from underpaid or unpaid labor. It also encourages readers to think critically about fairness, dignity, and justice in the workplace.

Hypothesis

The main hypothesis of invisible labor the office workers who are never paid are necessary for organizations and society but go unnoticed, undervalued, or unpaid. This is frequently used in workplaces to describe employees who carry out duties that are not listed in their official job descriptions without being rewarded, promoted, or recognized. Invisible labor is defined in sociology and labor studies as: Emotional support ("office mom" roles) arranging celebrations or meetings Informal training for new employees scheduling, taking notes, setting reminders addressing minor workplace issues Performing administrative tasks after hours Digital availability outside paid time

Arlie Hochschild's research on emotional labor and feminist labor scholars' findings that institutions treat a lot of unpaid work as "natural" rather than skilled labor are closely related to this concept. The following could be a hypothesis statement: "Office organizations routinely rely on invisible labor performed by employees whose contributions are not formally recognized or financially compensated," the article states. Inequality was the focus of another version: "Women, junior employees, and marginalized employees are more likely to perform invisible labor without additional compensation or career advancement." Key characteristics of invisible office labor:

Essential for working in the workplace
Infrequently included in performance metrics
Rarely tied to raises in pay difficult to measure
Expected rather than requested frequently
Examples:

An assistant staying late to organize documents without overtime pay a coworker who is always there to help others with software issues Emails are answered by employees

on unpaid personal time. Under the guise of “experience,” interns who produce useful work.

Literature Review

Review: Unpaid Work: Concepts, Evidence, and a Sociolinguistic Research Agenda

Unpaid work—encompassing internships, volunteering, and educationally framed work placements—has become a pervasive feature of contemporary labour markets and warrants multi disciplinary scrutiny. Grant Smith and McDonald’s integrative review (2018) provides a valuable organizing framework by mapping five thematic strands: how unpaid work is characterised; its prevalence and drivers; perceived benefits; experienced costs; and regulatory/structural responses. Their conceptual matrix that positions unpaid work along the axes of purpose of participation and participatory discretion is particularly useful for clarifying otherwise ambiguous terminology and practice. This typology invites social linguists to probe how language constructs and normalizes unpaid labour in organisational and public discourse, and how those framings shape participants’ subjectivities and power relations.

Economic and public health perspectives complement this view. Bell and Hart (1999) offered early economic analysis that distinguishes unpaid activities from market work and foregrounds measurement challenges—issues that remain salient as unpaid work proliferates. Krol and Brouwer (2015) and McMunn (2023) extend the debate: the former interrogates how unpaid labour should be incorporated into health economic evaluations, while the latter positions unpaid labour as a neglected social determinant of health. Both underscore that unpaid work has measurable material and welfare consequences; these consequences are mediated by access,

duration, and the social valuation encoded in institutional language (e.g., “experience,” “service,” “training”).

Empirical work from development and occupational domains provides contextually grounded insights relevant to unpaid or precarious labour in low and middle income settings. Studies from Nepal (Mishra & Shrestha, 2017; Maskey & Mishra, 2018; Mishra & Aithal, 2021, 2022) document safety, productivity, and recruitment dynamics among casual and project based labour. Although these studies primarily address paid casual work and occupational health, their methods and findings are instructive: they reveal how institutional practices, regulatory enforcement gaps, and managerial discourse produce labour conditions that can parallel those of unpaid placements (for example, in task assignment, supervision, risk exposure, and invisibilisation of labour). A linguistic lens would ask how organisational documents, job ads, and managerial talk frame roles in ways that obscure remuneration expectations, legitimize unpaid participation, or naturalize extended probationary and internship periods.

The recent expansion of digital, algorithmic, and AI mediated work (Celestin & Mishra, 2025) adds a new dimension: automation and analytics change work boundary conditions, performance monitoring, and the language of evaluation. AI driven performance metrics and automated recruitment platforms may repackage unpaid or low paid roles as “micro internships,” “crowd tasks,” or “training opportunities,” thereby linguistically reframing labour as skill building rather than compensated production. Such reframing has discursive effects—altering perceived legitimacy, participant consent, and the moral economy of work.

Methodological Concept

Terminology and Definition

Across disciplines there is persistent terminological slippage—"volunteering," "interning," "work placements," and "casual labour" are used with overlapping referents. Grant Smith and McDonald (2018) accurately highlight this ambiguity; social linguistics can contribute precise, usage based taxonomies that track how terms are employed in corpora of job adverts, policy texts, and media discourse.

Measurement and Visibility

Bell and Hart's (1999) early call to improve measurement remains pertinent. Quantitative analyses of unpaid work are limited by the invisibility of unpaid arrangements in labour statistics and by inconsistent operationalisation of duration, intensity, and task content. Mixed methods that combine corpus analysis of public texts, survey instruments refined for unpaid arrangements, and ethnographic observation can triangulate visibility gaps.

Consequences and Distributional Effects

Public health and economic research (McMunn, 2023; Krol & Brouwer, 2015) point to differential health and welfare impacts. A sociolinguistic perspective should interrogate discursive legitimization of unpaid work among different social groups—how gendered, classed, and casteed narratives justify unpaid participation and shape access to paid employment thereafter.

Institutional and Regulatory Responses

Grant Smith and McDonald map policy and organisational responses, but evaluations of effectiveness are sparse. Comparative discourse analysis of regulatory debates, consultation documents, and employer facing guidance can reveal how policy language constructs responsibilities and gaps.

Implications for Social Linguistics

Social linguistics can enrich unpaid work research by examining language as both index and instrument of labour relations. Specific avenues include:

Discourse Analysis of Recruitment and Role Descriptions

Build corpora of internship/volunteer advertisements, employer websites, and training provider materials to trace metaphors, modal language, and framing that shift perceptions from "paid work" to "opportunity/experience."

Interactional Ethnography in Placement Sites

Document talk in interaction between supervisors and unpaid participants to reveal how tasks, expectations, and rights are negotiated linguistically.

Narrative and Identity Work

Analyse autobiographical accounts and social media narratives from interns/volunteers to understand how unpaid work is incorporated into career stories and selfhood.

Comparative Policy Linguistics

Examine NRB style regulatory corpora and labour directives (or their equivalents in other sectors) to map how legislation legitimizes or constrains unpaid labour.

Multimodal and AI Mediated Texts

Study algorithmic job platforms and AI recruitment tools for incidental rhetorics that normalise unpaid formats.

Results and Discussion

Why Office Workers are Often Unpaid

The question of why so many office workers end up working unpaid hours isn't simply a matter of employer greed; it's a complex issue rooted in workplace culture, economic pressures, and the evolving nature of work itself. Several

factors contribute to the persistence of unpaid labor, many of which stem from both explicit and implicit expectations placed on employees . There are various primary reasons why office workers are often unpaid:

The “Always On” Culture

One of the most significant contributors to unpaid office labor is the pervasive “always on” mentality in modern workplaces. With the rise of smartphones, instant messaging tools like Slack, and email accessibility 24/7, the line between work and personal time has become increasingly blurred. Many employees feel pressure to remain available to respond to messages or jump into projects outside of their standard working hours. For many workers, the expectation is clear: if you want to advance or be seen as a dedicated team member, you need to be available whenever needed. The idea of “flexible hours” often becomes a double-edged sword, where employees feel they must work at all hours just to keep up or meet expectations.

Ambiguity in Compensation Structures

Many office workers are classified as salaried employees, which means they’re paid a fixed amount regardless of how many hours they work. For salaried workers, there’s often little clarity around what constitutes “regular” hours versus overtime. Because the workweek is defined as a set number of hours, anything beyond that is technically considered overtime, but without the specific legal protections for overtime pay that hourly workers receive. Many employers may not explicitly state that unpaid overtime is expected, but it becomes a norm over time, leaving workers to decide whether to “put in the extra hours” or risk being labeled unmotivated or uncommitted.

Fear of Retaliation and Job Insecurity

The fear of job loss can drive workers to sacrifice their time without compensation. In a

competitive job market, many employees worry that refusing to work unpaid hours—or speaking out about being asked to do so—could lead to a negative review or even termination. This fear is particularly prevalent in industries with high turnover rates or in situations where workers have fewer employment protections.

Lack of Awareness

In many cases, workers simply don't realize that they have the right to be compensated for all hours worked. Labor laws, especially in Nepal, require that employees be paid for overtime if they work beyond a certain number of hours. However, many office workers—particularly those in salaried—are often unaware of their rights. This knowledge gap means that many employees continue working unpaid hours out of habit, misunderstanding, or misinformation about the law. Additionally, employers sometimes take advantage of lack of awareness, and fix the boundaries for unpaid workers ..

Exploitation of Enthusiasm and Ambition

Especially younger employees or those just starting their careers, there is often an unspoken understanding that the extra hours will “pay off” in the future. In industries ,factories and organizations like schools ,universities like tech, media, or finance, long hours are sometimes seen as a rite of passage—a way to prove ambition, dedication, and a willingness to do whatever it takes to succeed. This exploitation of enthusiasm can lead employees to accept unpaid work, thinking it will result in promotions, raises, or other career advancement opportunities. However, the reality is that this mindset can often be abused, with workers sacrificing their time for little to no reward, becoming burned out without seeing returns.

The Consequences of Unpaid Labor

While the prevalence of unpaid office labor might seem like a harmless byproduct of the

modern workplace, the reality is that it carries serious consequences for both the individual workers involved and the organizations they work for. These consequences stretch far beyond missed paychecks—they can impact mental health, career progression, work-life balance, and even a company's long-term success. Let's break down some of the key ways in which unpaid labor takes a toll on workers and organizations alike.

Mental and Physical Burnout

One of the most immediate and damaging consequences of unpaid labor is burnout. When employees consistently work unpaid overtime, the stress, exhaustion, and lack of rest take a heavy toll on both their mental and physical health. The persistent pressure to “do more” without adequate compensation or recognition can lead to feelings of frustration, anxiety, and helplessness.

Chronic overwork leads to physical issues such as sleep deprivation, headaches, and increased susceptibility to illness. On the mental health front, anxiety and depression are common outcomes as workers struggle to balance the demands of the job with their personal lives. Eventually, this leads to burnout—a condition where employees feel emotionally and physically drained to the point where their productivity drops, and their overall well-being deteriorates.

Erosion of Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is often one of the first casualties of unpaid office labor. When workers are expected to continue working beyond their scheduled hours without compensation, their personal time becomes compromised. This means less time with family, friends, and for self-care activities, which can lead to feelings of isolation and resentment.

For remote workers, the boundary between work and home life can become almost nonexistent, resulting in an environment where “clocking off” becomes difficult. Employees may find themselves checking emails or completing tasks at all hours, never truly disconnecting from their job. Over time, this imbalance erodes workers' satisfaction with their jobs and can contribute to dissatisfaction in other areas of life as well.

Stagnant Career Growth

While many workers hope that putting in unpaid hours will lead to career advancement, the reality is often quite different. In fact, consistently working unpaid hours can hinder long-term career growth. First, workers who put in extra hours without compensation are often overlooked when it comes to raises or promotions. Employers might assume that workers who are willing to sacrifice their time will be content with their current role, even if they're doing more work than is officially recognized.

Second, unpaid labor tends to fall outside of formal performance evaluations, meaning workers who regularly contribute extra hours or take on additional responsibilities may never get the credit they deserve. Without clear recognition, employees can feel stuck in the same position for years, even as they work harder and harder. Over time, this stagnation can lead to frustration and disillusionment, resulting in talented employees leaving the company in search of better opportunities.

Exploitation and Decreased Job Satisfaction

When workers are expected to work without pay, it creates an environment ripe for exploitation. In the absence of clear boundaries, employees can be made to feel that their time is disposable, and their contributions are

undervalued. This lack of respect for workers' time leads to a decline in job satisfaction and loyalty.

Over time, employees may start to feel exploited, especially if their efforts go unnoticed or unappreciated. This exploitation can diminish morale across teams, leading to high turnover rates, lower engagement, and a toxic work culture where workers feel disconnected from the organization's mission and values.

In some cases, this feeling of exploitation may lead to a "quiet quitting" phenomenon, where employees still perform their duties but disengage from going above and beyond, either mentally or emotionally. The resentment from unpaid labor can seep into other areas of the workplace, affecting teamwork and collaboration.

Financial Impact on Workers

For hourly workers, the financial impact of unpaid labor is starkly felt. Though salaried workers may have a fixed income, they too suffer from the economic effects of working beyond their agreed hours without pay. The expectation to work for free, while not immediately noticeable, creates a financial strain over time, especially when workers are frequently required to sacrifice their personal time without compensation.

For those already struggling financially, unpaid overtime can exacerbate the stress of living paycheck to paycheck. Many workers are forced to take on second jobs or side gigs to make ends meet because the work they do during their main job doesn't cover their living expenses. This increases the risk of financial instability, especially for lower-wage employees who are often the most vulnerable to exploitation.

Harm to Company Performance and Reputation

While unpaid labor may benefit companies in the short term by reducing labor costs, the

long-term effects on company performance can be severe. Overworked employees, who are regularly asked to work unpaid overtime, tend to have lower productivity, increased absenteeism, and a higher likelihood of leaving the company.

When workers are constantly exhausted or feeling underappreciated, the quality of their work suffers. Mistakes are made, deadlines are missed, and projects get delayed, all of which harm the company's bottom line. High turnover rates also mean that companies must constantly invest in hiring and training new employees, leading to further costs.

Moreover, in today's social media-driven world, a company's reputation can be severely damaged if the issue of unpaid labor becomes public. Employees who feel mistreated are likely to voice their dissatisfaction, whether through platforms like Glassdoor or social media, and the company's brand image can suffer as a result. Potential recruits may be discouraged from applying, and customers may choose to support companies with better treatment of their staff.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite growing attention, significant gaps remain. There is a need for (a) empirical studies that integrate discursive analysis with robust outcome measures (earnings trajectories, health, transition to paid employment); (b) longitudinal research tracing cohort outcomes of unpaid participants; (c) comparative cross national studies that situate high income country internship cultures alongside informal and project based practices in the Global South; and (d) research on digital platforms that mediate unpaid or micro paid work. Importantly, intersectional analyses (gender, class, ethnicity/ caste) are essential to reveal how unpaid work reproduces or challenges inequality.

Unpaid work is a multifaceted social phenomenon with linguistic, economic, health,

and regulatory dimensions. The integrative review by Grant Smith and McDonald (2018) is a strong starting point, but the literature would benefit from greater terminological precision, improved measurement, and interdisciplinary methodologies that couple discourse analysis with quantitative outcomes. Through targeted corpus creation, ethnographic study, and policy discourse analysis, social linguists can clarify how language produces consent, conceals value, and shapes trajectories from unpaid participation toward (or away from) secure paid employment. Empirical work in contexts such as Nepal—drawing on occupational safety and recruitment studies (Mishra & Shrestha, 2017; Maskey & Mishra, 2018; Mishra & Aithal, 2021, 2022)—can illuminate regionally specific practices and add important comparative depth to global debates.

Conclusion

Unpaid work is the production of goods and services that are not sold on the market. We distinguish three main types of activities: i) household work, such as cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping and other chores inside and around the house; ii) care work, such as taking care of (grand)children, helping out friends or family with cleaning, shopping or personal care and iii) volunteer work, such as helping out in a community center or at a sports club. It needs noting that separating unpaid labor from leisure time can be difficult. For instance, is baking a cake unpaid labor or rather leisure time? The ‘third person criterion’ has been proposed to separate unpaid production from leisure. This criterion implies that all elements replaceable by a third person (i.e. baking a cake) are considered unpaid labor (Reid, 1934) and all non-replaceable elements (e.g. enjoying the process of baking) are considered leisure. However, even when applying the third person criterion, distinctions between leisure and unpaid work remain difficult.

On a practical level, unpaid labor seems to be ignored in the vast majority of economic evaluations claiming to take a societal perspective. For instance in studies conducted in elderly patient populations, common reasoning seems to be that productivity costs are irrelevant since patients are too old to be in paid profession. However, although unpaid labor is a non-market commodity, it is of clear economic value. Since many health care technologies are targeted at elderly populations, who are more involved in unpaid work than in paid professions, it is important not to ignore this value. Consequently, unpaid work should be included in economic evaluations of medical technologies aiming to take a societal perspective.

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