

Time use as a transformative indicator for gender equality in the post-2015 agenda

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Time use reflects how gender roles attributed to women and men, girls and boys, shape the division of labour within a household. Social norms define certain activities as more feminine or more masculine than others. Time use analyses have been increasingly related to unpaid care and gender inequality. The Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action urged States to assess the value of unremunerated work and highlighted the importance of tackling unequal distribution of unpaid work between men and women. Over the past 20 years, time use surveys have been initiated in many developed and developing countries, such as Brazil and South Africa.¹ However, one of the challenges has been to translate and transfer time use data into policy making on gender equality. This Technical Note aims to provide guidelines on how time use surveys could be used for transformative policies.

Why does time use data matter for socially transformative policies?

- **Making the “invisible” visible.** By including the home-production of good and services by household in the system of national accounts, women’s economic and social contribution can be better appreciated. At present, it remains invisible and underestimated since GDP calculations only include market production. Indeed, according to time use surveys carried out in 12 OECD countries in the 1990s, the domestic and care economy would represent between 35% and 55% of GDP (Charmes and Unni, 2004).
- **Understanding the persistence of gender gaps.** Time use data helps explain gender gaps in employment.
- **Highlighting the intergenerational transmission of gender roles.** According to ILO (2009) 10% of girls aged 5 to 14 years perform household chores for 28 hours a week or more: this represents approximately twice the hours spent by boys. This 10% attend school 25% less than girls doing fewer than 14 hours a week.
- **Increasing efficiency of policies on women’s empowerment.** Policies aiming to improve women’s empowerment are less effective if they neglect their burden of unpaid work. The time spent by women and girls to collect water, for example, or on care activities can be significantly reduced by a gender impact analysis of public service provision and infrastructural development, such as electricity, roads, rural schools or water.
- **Reducing gender gaps in time poverty.** Looking at combined hours spent on paid and unpaid work exposes the extent of the gender gaps in division of unpaid work. While men on average spend longer hours on paid work, women spend a disproportionately larger percentage of time on unpaid work: when both paid and unpaid total workloads are combined, women’s time poverty comes to the fore. In Nepal and Kenya for example, when unpaid and paid work are combined, women work 1.4 hours for every 1 hour worked by Nepalese or Kenyan men (ActionAid, 2013). Time poverty is relevant for welfare and well-being analysis since it can reflect reduced leisure time (except if this is due to non-voluntary unemployment).

Time use data as an indicator of gender roles

Examining gender discrimination in social norms and its impact on the achievement of gender equality is an important focus for the achievement of development goals. Given the gender disparities in time use and the unequal distribution of unpaid work between women and men, data on time spent in paid and unpaid activities are an essential component of gender analysis. This is critical to design policies leading to transformative social change. Quantifying the gendered division of activities and time illustrates how gender roles and social norms drive gender inequalities. Measuring social norms and gender roles is not straightforward due to the challenge in quantifying an intrinsically qualitative dimension of inequality. However, time use is a useful proxy to capture gender roles within the family and the community, and how they impact on time poverty and well-being.

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¹ Approximately 70 countries have conducted at least one time use survey.

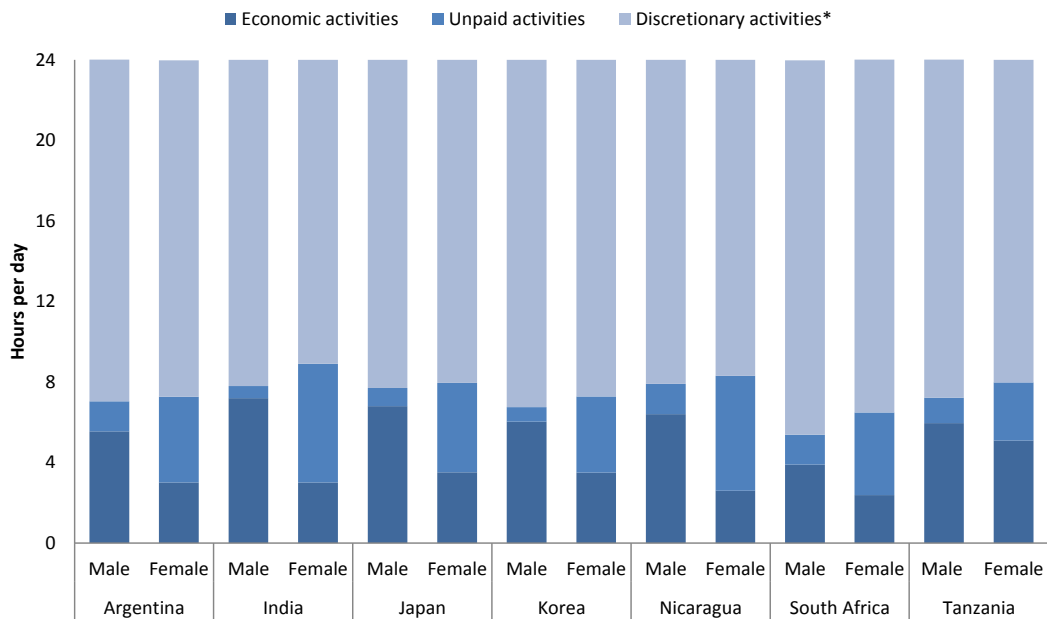


Two time use indicators may be used to capture gender roles and disparities in time spent in paid and unpaid activities:

- **The female to male ratio of average time devoted to household activities** as an indicator of gender gaps in unpaid work. This indicator gives an overview of gender disparities in caring responsibilities. In particular it captures how much less time women have to engage in other activities, such as paid labour, learning, engaging in a business network or skills training. It also captures country-specific features, such as access to child-care facilities as well as water infrastructure
- **The female to male ratio of total workload** (both paid and unpaid work). This indicator gives an overview of gender disparities in “discretionary time”² that is the total amount of time available (24 hours) minus the time spent at work. Measuring this residual time is critical since it is devoted to activities providing well-being, such as leisure, personal care and sleeping, participating in cultural and social activities or learning. While the time resources are shared equally by everyone, disparities in total workload capture gender inequality. This indicator can be a useful proxy of gender inequality in terms of deficit in discretionary time, or “time poverty”.

These two indicators allow policy makers to capture unequal distribution of activities within the family, and to understand women’s full range of activities. They are useful tools for the design of effective policies targeting gender equality.

Figure 1. Mean time spent per day on activities by gender and by country



Note: *Discretionary activities include leisure, personal care, etc.
Source: UNRISD (2010).

Collecting time use data: diary versus modules

The last decades have witnessed an increasing number of time use surveys collecting information on activities undertaken by individuals. Two methods are commonly used: time use diaries and time use modules included in standard surveys. Both approaches have distinct advantages.

These may be illustrated using two examples of different time use surveys for developing countries. The first is the Statistics South Africa Time Use Survey 2000 (SSA TUS) conducted as a diary in a separate survey. The second is the time use module included in the Nicaraguan 1998 Living Standards Measurement Survey (EMNV).

² “Discretionary time” represents the amount of spare time that is potentially available to people to do with as they please, while working time is devoted to unavoidable activities of paid and unpaid household labour.



The time diary method

The SSA TUS 2000 was the first of its kind at a national level for South Africa. The survey uses diaries from two household members, who are randomly selected among household members older than ten years. The final sample contained a total of 8 339 households and 14 306 individual records.

The diary had a fixed time interval of 30 minutes and the respondent could indicate up to three activities in the same 30-minute time slot, with a code to denote whether they were conducted simultaneously or sequentially. It was conducted over three trimesters to capture seasonal variation. The TUS survey contains a number of questions found in other SSA survey questionnaires including questions on household demographics, labour force participation, industry and occupation to allow matching. Hence, labour and time use surveys, for example, may be combined in order to come to more general conclusions regarding gender gaps in time allocation and in the labour force participation.

Table 1 describes the main features of diaries, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. A brief comparison with other methods commonly used to collect time use information leads to the preference for diaries, even if this is more time-intensive and costly. The UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) guidelines recommend the 24-hour time diary approach as the preferred method to address policy issues related to gender inequality and well-being analysis.

Table 1. Diaries’ description, strengths and weaknesses

Description	Strengths	Weaknesses
Reference time period of 24 hours or 168 hours (7*24) to give an overview on the daily or weekly time uses.	Provide more accurate data of better quality.	Time consuming.
May include only one diary for one working day or two diaries for one working and one non-working day.	Provide more detailed information on all activities undertaken. For example, domestic chores such as cooking, child care and cleaning may be distinguished.	Costly.
Activity reported may be done the day/week before or the day/week of the interview.	Able to capture activities performed simultaneously: crucial for care analysis since domestic care is frequently combined with another activity such as ironing, cooking, etc.	Not combined with other socio-demographic and economic characteristics.
Respondents may report successively all activities either in a predetermined fixed time interval or by indicating the beginning and ending time of each activity.	Contain information on who people are with and where they are when performing an activity.	
	Records satisfy the time constraint (sum of all activities equals to 24 hours).	

The time use module approach

The EMNV includes a time use module in the household questionnaire. The time use module was administered to half the households in the surveyed dwellings. Information on the time spent the day prior to the interview is collected. Respondents include all individuals in the household older than six years. The final sample contains 9 390 individual records.



The time use module used in the EMNV includes restricted information on child-care activities performed as a simultaneous activity but as separate variables. The respondents reported the amount of time they allocated to child care as a simultaneous activity. The difficulty with this approach is that the primary activity with which the second is associated cannot be identified and the information is approximate.

Generally, surveys including questions on time use ask people to estimate the total time they spend on various activities. For example, how long did you watch television yesterday? How much time did you spend yesterday doing housework? This method can lead to significant inaccuracy and restricts information on specific activities, such as housework without distinguishing cooking from firewood collection. The strengths and weaknesses are presented in Table 2. UNECE concludes that the time use module is less effective than diaries to collect time use data that are policy-relevant. However, it is still a good alternative to the diary method since it is cheaper and easier to implement.

Table 2. Time use module description, strengths and weaknesses

Description	Strengths	Weaknesses
Data collection through a separate time diary or an integrated set of questions on specific activities.	Easier and cheaper to implement.	Focus on specific predetermined activities rather than on all activities undertaken by individuals.
	May include questions relative to both working and non-working day.	Records do not satisfy the time constraint.
Activity reported may be done the day/week before or the day of the interview.	Combined with economic and socio-demographic information.	Do not capture activities performed simultaneously and underestimate the time devoted to child care for example.
		Inaccurate information based on individual's estimates rather than on effective time spent on a specific activity.

Conclusion

Time use data boast great potential for targeted policy making in a wide range of areas. Gender gaps in how women and men, girls and boys spend their time is critical for designing policies to improve female participation in the labour market or the educational achievement of girls, and at the same time, illuminate how public infrastructure and other social and family policies can help reduce gender inequality within the household and, more broadly, within the community. This potential requires data that is comparable over time, regularly collected and of high quality. Investments in conducting regular time use surveys can provide vital insights on the impact of social and other policies on the gender division of time and labour. Neglecting the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities between men and women, as well as between family and the State may have an opportunity cost for achieving gender equality.

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