Policy BRIEFING

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Gender-Equitable Public Investment: How Time-Use Surveys Can Help

Macroeconomic policy often fails to recognise the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women, and as a result reinforces both gender and income inequalities. By providing detailed information on how this burden is unequally distributed across gender, class, ethnicity and other socioeconomic characteristics, time-use data can help in guiding more equitable allocations of public resources and promoting government budget priorities that recognise the importance of unpaid work, both for the economy and for human wellbeing.

About time-use surveys and their potential

Time-use surveys (TUS) can help to address the problem of women's activities not being 'counted' in statistics, 'accounted for' in representations of the economy and 'taken into account' in policymaking.

TUS show how women, men, girls and boys spend their time in a given day or week and make it possible to measure individuals' total paid and unpaid working hours.

TUS can document aspects of paid work that are inadequately captured by conventional labour surveys such as temporary employment and subcontracted work carried out in workers' own homes. They also record all sorts of other work that people do for no remuneration. This attention to unpaid work, often at a fine level of detail, constitutes TUS' main contribution to making statistics less gender biased. Unpaid activities recorded in TUS comprise subsistence agriculture and water collection.

Both are included within the United Nations (UN) System of National Accounts (SNA) production boundary, and should therefore in principle be included in the measurement of the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country but are in practice inadequately counted. They also comprise many activities which are outside the SNA production boundary, such as preparing and serving food, cleaning the house, washing clothes, looking after children or sick family members, and participating in voluntary work. All are essential to the wellbeing of families and make a vital contribution to both the functioning of the economy and the social fabric.

When appropriately designed, TUS expose how the burden of carrying unpaid work is shaped by inequalities based on gender as well as income, ethnicity, place of residence and age.

TUS enable us to measure intensity of work: the length of an average (paid and unpaid) working day as well as the simultaneous performance of

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two or more work activities (such as looking after children while selling produce at the roadside). In doing so TUS draw attention to 'time poverty' as an important source of inequality. It is the most disadvantaged groups who must endure overwork for a meagre pay at the same time as long hours of unpaid work at home. Prolonged spells of overwork undermine individual capabilities and are not sustainable for society as a whole.

Analysing patterns of paid and unpaid work side by side helps to show how the capacity for paid work is strongly correlated with the provision of care. We cannot predict or assess changes in the paid productive economy without understanding what is taking place in the unpaid reproductive economy.

Integrating time-use surveys into policymaking

The application of nationally representative time-use data could make a significant contribution to gender-sensitive policymaking, particularly in pointing where public services to reduce and redistribute unpaid work are most needed. Time-use data can be used to make the case for a range of interventions, but the case for investment in physical infrastructure (such as electricity and water) seems the most straightforward.

TUS have been produced in a number of developing countries in recent years, partly in response to the 1995 UN Beijing Platform for Action's call for countries to make visible the full extent of women's work. Yet progress in data collection and impact on policy has been limited.

This could be as a result of inadequacies in survey design and data collection. Some TUS do not provide sufficiently disaggregated data about the range of activities that constitute housework. They do not distinguish between food preparation, cleaning, or direct care of persons, for example, thus making it difficult to design suitable policy interventions across sectors. TUS are also not produced with sufficient frequency to enable tracking of trends over time and rapid impact assessments of economic shocks or policy reforms. There are also political reasons for the continued neglect of unpaid work in macroeconomic analysis. Some governments demonstrate poor commitment to gender equality goals and rely on economic planning tools that reflect mainstream theories with no gender lens. The fact that national policymakers are mostly men (and women) from privileged backgrounds might also explain the failure to recognise how taxing domestic work can be and the positive equity impact of greater public investment in physical and social infrastructure.

Using time-use surveys for public investment decisions: the example of water infrastructure

Limited access to safe water is a severe problem for many developing countries. Water is a key input in many unpaid care activities and it is usually women and children who collect water and bear a heavy burden, particularly in poor rural communities. However, the issue of the economic costs related to the considerable expenditure of time and energy borne by those responsible for water collection is not sufficiently considered.

Time-use data can be used to increase awareness of the gender dimensions of water provision and to improve targeting of public water services in a number of ways.

Visibility

Aggregate estimates of hours spent collecting water in a day for women, men and children separately can be used to highlight the overall magnitude of the problem and its gender dimensions.

The annual progress report of the World Health Organization (WHO)/United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) joint monitoring programme on water and sanitation routinely reports figures on how the burden of collecting water is distributed between women, girls, boys and men. These are usually calculated for a group of countries as a whole. This kind of reporting is a good way to raise awareness but is not as useful

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for overall monitoring, since the sample of developing countries from which the data are sourced tend to vary from one year to the other. Occasionally UNICEF and WHO also document how long trips for water collection are a distinctive feature of rural areas and which disproportionally affects the poorest, but this is usually provided as a one-off case study.

Only a comprehensive analysis of the specific determinants of water collection time burdens, and the variability across socioeconomic groups, at the country level, can help generate the insights needed for the formulation of specific national sectoral policies.

Better targeting

One step for moving beyond averages is to analyse data from a nationally representative TUS for a specific country in combination with contextual variables such as place of residence, access to infrastructure, household structure, age and poverty indicators. This analysis could be used to identify those individuals who are most burdened with the task of collecting water, where they live and their circumstances. This information could help in designing better tailored interventions to address the constraints and trade-offs they face.

An analysis of the 2005 Tanzania TUS finds that 85 per cent of the individuals who spend more time on water collection than the national average daily minutes are women, and that over three-quarters of them live in rural areas. It also finds that a significant proportion of children (aged 5–14 years) are overburdened as well. Further investigation of the data reveals that those who are overburdened with water collection are also more likely to be food insecure, to be living in rudimentary household structures and to use firewood or dung as the main source of energy.

Given this evidence, it is disappointing that a disproportionate level of government funding in many countries appears to be still directed to extending services in urban areas instead, even where urban areas are relatively well served.

Further findings from the analysis of the 2005 Tanzania data are that 'distance of the water source from the household' and 'main type of source for drinking water' significantly affects the burden of water collection. More specifically, easy access to water supply sources that are 'improved' according to the WHO/UNICEF definition appears to reduce the time that people spend collecting water. The Tanzania TUS could be further analysed to find out which of the 'improved' water supply sources is likely to ena ble the greatest time-saving and at the same time be most affordable for specific groups of women and men (e.g. rain water catchment tanks vs. protected public wells). All these indicators can be calculated for 21 different regions and preliminary findings from a simple regression analysis suggest that in a few of these regions the task of water collection is more burdensome than in others. This sort of information would be very valuable for identifying the specific localities in a country where water infrastructure is most lacking and the groups in these localities that need support the most.

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Policy recommendations

- Making public investment in gender equitable must include measures to reduce the drudgery of unpaid work. Using time-use data to inform government budgetary decisions can greatly contribute to this objective and should be promoted as a regular and integral part of national fiscal planning.

- Analyses of time-use patterns **disaggregated by gender, income group and other relevant variables** should be routinely included, for example, in estimations of costs and benefits of water supply interventions or other similar infrastructural plans.

- In order to facilitate uptake of TUS in macroeconomic planning TUS would need to be implemented as large-scale nationally representative surveys and produced regularly, ideally on an annual basis. Data would need to be collected in a format that enables their matching with other socioeconomic data such as employment data, households' demographics as well as households' access to infrastructure, services and home technologies.

- Improved availability of TUS is more likely to lead to fruitful outcomes if accompanied by a number of complementary initiatives such as capacity-building, dissemination of policy analysis and awareness-raising programmes. These could include, for example, training of macroeconomists and statisticians on how to integrate gender statistics into planning and budgeting analysis as well as advocacy campaigns that highlight the heavy personal, societal and economic burden of domestic work borne by low-income women and girls.

- Time-use surveys offer clear benefits for national fiscal planners wishing to promote gender-equitable development. As we move to a post-2015 world, the disaggregated data that time-use surveys offer, could also play an important role in supporting the monitoring framework for the Sustainable Development Goals which requires compatible statistics produced from the best data source available.

Further reading

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Credits

This *IDS Policy Briefing* was written by Independent Researcher, **Marzia Fontana**, in connection with the 'Making Unpaid Care Visible' stream of the UK Aid-funded programme on Influencing Policies to Support the Empowerment of Women and Girls, and the Sida-funded programme on Gender Power and Sexuality. It was edited by **Carol Smithyes**

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