
UN Women

In collaboration with ECLAC

Expert Group Meeting

Structural and policy constraints in achieving the MDGs for women and girls

Mexico City, Mexico

21-24 October 2013

Measuring Unpaid Care Work with Public Policies in Mind¹

Expert paper prepared by:

Valeria Esquivel*
Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento
Argentina

Feminist economics has long identified unpaid care work (UCW) as a crucial dimension of well-being for those who benefit from the care received, but also as a cost for those who provide care, mostly women. These material costs, in terms of energy and sometimes health, forgone employment opportunities, income, and entitlements to social security, and the enjoyment of leisure time, are a major driver of gender inequalities, both within households and beyond them, particularly in the market sphere.

Time-use surveys (TUS) are the only way of measuring UCW. TUS show how individuals spend their time during the day or week, which provides evidence of the gendered division of labor within households, and the interdependence of women's and men's paid and unpaid work.

TUS have existed in one form or another in more than 60 countries. Yet, where time-use data exist, they are not much used in evidence-based, gender-sensitive policymaking – a fact that poses a major challenge to feminist scholars and development agencies trying to convince governments and statistical offices to collect such data on a regular basis.

¹ This short note is based on Esquivel, Valeria, 2011. "Sixteen Years after Beijing: What Are the New Policy Agendas for Time-Use Data Collection?", *Feminist Economics*, Special Issue on Unpaid Work, Time Use, Poverty and Public Policy (II), Vol. 17, No. 3, October, and Esquivel, Valeria, 2013. *Care in households and communities: Background paper on conceptual issues*, Oxfam Research Report, October, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/care-in-households-and-communities-background-paper-on-conceptual-issues-302287> See also "Note by the Secretary-General transmitting the report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights", United Nations General Assembly, Sixty-eighth session, A/68/293, 2013, in particular "Recommendations B. Measuring unpaid care work", <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N13/422/71/PDF/N1342271.pdf?OpenElement>

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

In this presentation, I would like to discuss some of the reasons for the gap between the availability of time-use data and their lack of influence in informing gender-sensitive policymaking, and make some suggestions for ways to bridge it. Among these reasons are:

- an overemphasis on accounting for women's unpaid care work within the framework of the United Nations System of National Accounts, which has resulted in an almost exclusive focus on the production of very aggregate and crude time-use estimates;
- the inadequate design of some time-use studies, which might explain why policymakers have not put time-use data to immediate use;
- and lastly, a neglect of a distributive justice agenda tied to measuring and valuing unpaid care work, which has diminished the possibility of defining a clear set of agreed-upon, gender-sensitive policies that time-use data could illuminate.

Of course, these reasons do not explain why progress in time-use data collection has been itself relatively slow, particularly in developing countries. Nor do they tackle broad political opposition to any gender equality agendas, which contributes to explaining – and may as well be the main reason for – the slow progress in time-use data collection and its low policy impact when these data exist. Yet, I would like to argue that since the 1995 Beijing Platform or Action (BPfA) urged countries to “conduct regular time-use studies to measure, in quantitative terms, unremunerated work”², *conceptual frameworks, political agendas, and time-use data collection methods* have evolved in ways that make it possible to put time-use data to use in gender-sensitive policymaking.

The overemphasis on accounting for women's work within the SNA framework

An examination of the text of the BPfA shows a close relationship between the collection of time-use data and its use to produce aggregate estimations of unpaid care work, which, through the imputation of monetary values, would contribute to the building household-sector satellite accounts.³ This connection between time-use data and estimates of unpaid care work reflects what Lourdes Benería has called “the accounting for women's work project” - make women's work “counted in statistics, accounted for in representations of how economies work, and taken into account when policy is made”.⁴ A strong emphasis on recognition and visibility were major objectives for this accounting endeavor – elements that are related to the political agenda behind the call for time-use data collection. These aspects profoundly shaped

² Countries should “[R]ecognize and make visible the full extent of the work of women and all their contributions to the national economy, including their contribution in the unremunerated and domestic sectors” by “conduct[ing] regular time-use studies to measure, in quantitative terms, unremunerated work” (UN Fourth World Conference on Women 1995: Strategic objectives A.4 and H.3).

³ In particular, Objective H.3, point (f) calls for: “(i) Improving data collection on the unremunerated work which is already included in the United Nations System of National Accounts, such as in agriculture, particularly subsistence agriculture, and other types of non-market production activities; (ii) Improving measurements that at present underestimate women's unemployment and underemployment in the labour market; (iii) Developing methods [...] for assessing the value, in quantitative terms, of unremunerated work that is outside national accounts, such as caring for dependents and preparing food, *for possible reflection in satellite or other official accounts that may be produced separately from but are consistent with core national accounts*, with a view to *recognizing* the economic contribution of women and *making visible* the unequal distribution of remunerated and unremunerated work between women and men (UN Fourth World Conference on Women 1995: Strategic objective H.3, point [f], emphasis added).

⁴ Elson, Diane, 2000. *Progress of the World's Women, 2000: UNIFEM Biennial Report*, New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women (p. 21-22).

advocacy for time-use studies at the time, and are still strongly present in the discourse of feminist national accountants and UN gender agencies.

But producing household-sector satellite accounts does not by itself change policy, at least not macroeconomic policy. For the household sector to be incorporated in macroeconomic modeling and eventually in macroeconomic decision making, a theoretical framework is required that had yet to be fully developed in 1995. Calculations of the aggregate monetary value of unpaid care work, and its comparison to other aggregates like Gross Domestic Product (GDP), are more useful in showing its structural role in supporting the paid economy, and in informing long-term development policy. Indeed, satellite accounts are more likely to have relevance for policy in the long run, when they make it possible to track relative changes in the size and composition of market production and households' production. But to be so, they need to be available at regular intervals, not as one-off calculations.

For short- and medium-term policy, however, information about the unpaid work devoted to caring for the ill or frail, or children, or water collection, or transportation, for example, is likely to be more policy relevant than aggregate household-sector satellite accounts, in particular regarding debates around public expenditure sectoral planning.

Indeed, the **overemphasis on accounting for women's unpaid work within the framework of the United Nations System of National Accounts** has resulted in an almost exclusive focus on the production of very aggregate and crude time-use estimates of women's and men's paid and unpaid work.

Time-use data collection methods

If the purpose of TUS is to produce macro estimations of unpaid care work in order to build household-sector satellite accounts, requirements for detailed time-use data are low. These low requirements might have encouraged an overly simplified methodological approach to time-use data, particularly in developing countries. Some TUS (particularly those using stylized diaries or tasks lists) have simply asked for the time spent in "domestic work," paying attention to differentiate it from subsistence production, but not between housework and care work. Even in cases when time-use data collected can provide some detail, reports frequently show only very aggregate data devoted to a reduced number of activities, disaggregated by gender –dismissing the wealth of analytical possibilities time-use data provide.

In order to produce policy-relevant detailed information, time-use data collection methodologies need to be shaped accordingly. Policy objectives should influence activity selection (the classification of activities used for coding in the case of activity diaries, and the list of activities in other survey instruments); sampling design and coverage; and specific background information requested. Furthermore, using information for different population groups to analyze distributive issues requires sufficiently large (and correctly balanced) samples. Information on household structure (kinship relationships and the number and ages of children); the distance to water sources, schools, hospitals, transportation, and shopping facilities; weekly paid working schedules; or households' children school attendance (including kindergarten) are all required to be used as "controls" if differential patterns of time use are to be identified.

A particular case in point is the methodological treatment of care work, which is qualitatively and quantitatively different from housework and, above all, influenced by different determinants and shaped by public policies in different ways than housework. Omitting care of persons or forcing respondents to report care only if it is a primary activity produces biased estimates, given the sometimes passive, “in the background,” and socially undervalued nature of care. Indeed, the main methodological challenge associated with measuring care of persons through TUS is appropriately collecting simultaneous activities, as simultaneity is an important feature of the care of persons. Simultaneity can only be measured by using activity diaries. And, I should emphasize, activity diaries can be and have been collected in developing countries **in adapted forms to cater for the many specific challenges of our contexts**. They have been collected in Africa, Asia, and in Latin America –Argentina, Chile, Venezuela and Brasil are cases in point.

In other words, if **time-use data are to be more valuable for informing gender-sensitive policies, good quality data is required**.

A distributive justice agenda

This leads to my third group the reasons for the underuse of time-use data for policy purposes, and that is the political agenda behind Beijing. The BPfA clearly establishes that measuring and valuing unpaid work is related to **visibility and recognition** objectives (see footnote 3). Claims for recognition emerge from the struggles of the “politics of identity,” defined by sexual, gender, ethnic, religious or national boundaries, against cultural injustice. But recognition (or cultural justice) has been is different from the “struggle for redistribution” associated with demands for economic justice. As Nancy Fraser explains, the “recognition dimension corresponds to [. . .] institutional patterns of cultural value,” while the distributive dimension “corresponds to the economic structure of society, hence to the constitution, by property regimes and labour markets, of economically defined categories of actors, or classes, distinguished by their differential endowment of resources” (p. 117; emphasis added).⁵ It is therefore odd that the BPfA put forth such a profoundly economic theme – the measurement and valuation of unpaid work, and its inclusion in GDP – in the cultural realm and thus deprived it of explicit distributive justice considerations.

The issue of measuring and valuing unpaid work was not an easy one in Beijing. Although the issue had already been present in previous UN conferences, and was in no way new, there was no consensus around the way it should be framed. Among the nongovernmental organizations that supported the initiative were the international Wages for Housework Campaign (WFH), which was the main political force behind demands for measuring and valuing unpaid work in Beijing.

However, the WFH agenda was strongly opposed by the European Union delegation – following the position of Sweden and Denmark – who feared “losing ground for their emancipation policies based on (gender) equality, if the value of the economic contribution of unpaid work was recognized for any reason whatsoever, even if purely on a statistical level”.⁶ This opposition is unsurprising, given the controversial aspects of the WFH proposal (among them, the likely deepening of the gender division of labor and poor women’s

⁵ Fraser, Nancy, 2000. “Rethinking Recognition” *New Left Review*, Vol. 3, pág. 117.

⁶ Picchio, Antonella (1995) “Relazione sulla contrattazione, sulla questione delle statistiche sul lavoro non pagato delle donne (Artt. 158, 167 g,h, 209, 212)” (draft).

withdrawal from the labor market). Indeed, for the WFH proposal, distributive justice does not take the form of redistribution of unpaid work but of compensation: in exchange for women's unpaid contributions to production it is money, not work, that gets redistributed.

The issue was settled by leaving aside any reference to wages for housework while accepting the “accounting for women's work” framework. In the process, however, this meant omitting any direct reference to alternative forms of distributive justice in connection to the measurement and valuation of unpaid work. In retrospect, this omission turned out to be counterproductive. By omitting such references, the inclusion of the unpaid work in National Accounts was rendered as abstract as GDP itself (that is, an issue for economists). This is one of the reasons, I suspect, that calls for measuring and valuing unpaid work are repeated in some UN documents and by noneconomist feminists using the language of recognition and visibility but without a clear view of the purpose of the endeavor.

Therefore, we require the development of a clear *redistributive agenda* associated to time-use data collection, one that goes beyond visibility and recognition to find more just ways of distributing the costs and benefits of unpaid care work.

In a nutshell, we need to recast time-use data collection *not only* as a precursor to the construction of household-sector satellite accounts, but as an irreplaceable source of information for the design of policies that support the reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work, within a framework that recognizes both caregivers' contributions to well-being and the costs of caregiving. Beyond the obvious impact in care policy design (care service provision, conciliation policies, social policies), time use data can and should inform development and macroeconomic policy. Furthermore, time use data has already been incorporated into well-being indicators that challenge conventional income inequality and poverty measures.⁷

In sum, we need to keep on demanding for time-use data to be collected, moving beyond the BPfA framework to call for:

- time-use data collection to be of good quality,
- mainstreamed (repeated),
- and policy-oriented, at the macro and sectoral levels, and also with gender equality and poverty alleviation policies in mind.

⁷ Zacharias, Ajit, Rania Antonopoulos and Thomas Masterson. 2012. *Why Time Deficits Matter: Implications for the Measurement of Poverty*, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: United Nations Development Programme and Levy Economics Institute of Bard College.