Session 13: Time use, unpaid work, poverty and public policy

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1) Focus of session:

The focus of this session is on the importance of time use and unpaid work in poverty reduction and in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of public policy. Over the last decade or two, the challenges of feminist economists’ and women’s organizations to the invisibility of unpaid work in economic analysis and policymaking have contributed to the increased attention in accounting for unpaid work. At the same time, the persistence of poverty despite the economic progress witnessed over the last fifty decades, has brought this urgent concern to the forefront of governments’ agenda in the 21st century and has become a critical component of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). One of the key factors in the progress of accounting for unpaid work has been the time use surveys that have been conducted in many countries. A growing number of developing countries have joined the ranks of developed countries in implementing national timeuse surveys, motivated by the need to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the economic activities that people do as well as a better understanding of the quality of life that people have.

Despite significant progress on data collection, information on time use patterns and trends have not been incorporated, for the most part, in the formulation or evaluation of policy nor in monitoring their gendered effects on well-being and human development. Issues of childcare and care for the elderly are serious policy concerns throughout the world in the context of demographic and economic changes such as longer life expectancy, increase in single mothers and female-headed households, and growth of households with dual-income earners. There is much potential in the use of such data for examining the gendered effects of public policies, especially macroeconomic and fiscal policies on the level and distribution of unpaid care work. Furthermore, there are important dimensions of well-being that can be examined, which standard economic indicators do not convey, such as time poverty and work intensity. Existing wellbeing and economic indicators do not take into account for example, the serious
consequences of prolonged periods of work, the intensification of work and reduction of sleep and leisure particularly for women who maintain their families alone and for those in poor households. There is also need for research that explores the link between time use, poverty and aspects of individual’s capabilities and functionings, of children’s health and development. Likewise, we have yet to understand the relationship between welfare programs/poverty reduction strategies such as conditional cash transfers and unpaid work.

2) Relevance:

Knowledge on how women and men allocate their time improves our understanding of how economies work and what gendered impact public policy is likely to have, particularly among the poor. It allows us to examine the extensiveness of unpaid care work and how public policy can recognize and redistribute it. The diverse types of productive activities that encompass the concept 'unpaid work' makes it necessary to delineate and elaborate on the forms of unpaid work that are relevant in specific policy discussions. Gender advocates and feminist scholars focus on a particular type of unpaid work namely, domestic work and care work done at home and voluntary caring work done outside the home. They comprise a substantial component of unpaid work that is performed largely by women, and are critical in the sustenance of human life.

Feminist economists have argued that the macroeconomic dimension of economies cannot be fully understood without bringing unpaid work into the picture. Detailed time-use data provide a fuller understanding of the labor market and the ways in which people in diverse situations obtain their livelihoods. There are also compelling evidence on the importance of time use data for measuring non-standard, and atypical employment. Time use data can also provide a better understanding of the impact of structural changes in economies on women’s well-being.

Comparative analysis of economies also benefits from time use data, enabling us to understand the different roles of unpaid work in different economies and under different welfare or work-family support schemes. For instance, TUS data can be used to explore the effect of different
work-family balance strategies on the time use of low-waged working women with young children as they attempt to reconcile unpaid childcare work and the demands of paid market work.

A better understanding of the interrelation between time use, poverty and public policy is therefore an essential step towards the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid work in ways that contribute to gender equality and social development. Summing up, it promotes this important development agenda by:

- recognizing the totality of women’s contributions through a better understanding and valuation of unpaid work, especially care work;

- illustrating the importance of care that are performed by household members, especially women in the development of human capabilities and in the reproduction of societies;

- exploring the implications of the unequal distribution of unpaid work burden and division of workload, which affects women’s well-being and their participation in the labor market;

- broadening our understanding of poverty and the time-based dimensions of the quality of life that have received little attention;

- providing critical reasons for governments and societies to increase provisioning of care services and to implement policies that reduce the burden of unpaid care work and that redistribute care responsibilities not only between men and women in households but also across society as a whole; and
• showing the distributional dimensions of policies and programs particularly in terms of their impact of unpaid work and the need to implement gender-aware evaluation of policy effectiveness in these terms.

We also need to understand why many policy makers fail to pay attention to time use and unpaid work. Although more time-use data have become available in a wider range of countries, the effective use of this data to inform gender-sensitive policy-making has been lagging. There has been little use of satellite accounts that put monetary value on unpaid work and household production in understanding the effects of macroeconomic, social, labor and welfare policies including trade policies on unpaid work. Data limitations such as poor quality, irregular collection, which do not allow for longitudinal information, and over-aggregation of time use survey information, which do not provide sufficiently detailed evidence on the time spent in particularly activities; these data issues create challenges and affect the credibility of the analysis.

3) Analytic Logic and Examples:

(i) In order to relate time use and unpaid work with the implementation as well as impact of public policy, we need to develop new methodologies or improve upon existing ones that allow us to make use of time use data in order to measure both paid and unpaid work as well as well-being.

Maria Floro and Hitomi Komatsu (2011) make use of the 2000 South Africa Time Use Survey in order to show that a non-trivial proportion of men and women classified as either “not in the labor force” or “unemployed” are actually engaged in subsistence, temporary and casual forms of employment. Indira Hirway and Sunny Jose (2010) show that the Indian Time Use Survey is able to reveal concurrent and intermittent work that is missed by labor force surveys, and lead to better estimates of the extent of women’s labor force participation and contribution to national output. Although attempts have been made to estimate and include valuation of unpaid work performed in the subsistence sector and the informal sector in calculations of GDP starting in 1993, these types of economic contributions continue to be underestimated or
invisible in conceptual and statistical terms at many academic and policy discussions, despite its vital significance. Moreover, the work time for each activity may be scattered in the sense that it is not always continuous, but is spread throughout the day in an irregular manner. Hirway and Jose (2011) point out that “a poor woman may collect fuel wood, work on the family farm and then may work as domestic worker in a rich man’s house.” Labor force surveys often do not capture these multiple and scattered work as they collect information on only one or maybe two jobs, nor do they provide accurate information on the time spent by workers in each of the activities. As a result, labor force participation rates and employment rates that are drawn from labor force surveys tend to underestimate the economic contributions of women and men. In both countries, time use data provide a much richer picture of the livelihoods of low-income women and men than conventional labor force surveys.

There is also a need to improve our measurement and valuation methods of unpaid work and the valuation of household production. For example, imputing the value of household production must involve a thorough measure and valuation of childcare. Childcare is an extremely heterogeneous activity and without a careful exploration of the time use patterns of both parents and children, it is easy to underestimate the time spent by parents as well as the time output of care. The measure of supervisory childcare should include the time parents and children are not in the same room, but at the same location. Childcare activities are also performed in combination with another activity, such as cooking, gardening and watching TV. Killian Mullan (2010), using time-use data from the UK, demonstrates that assessing household production makes use of children’s time-use information in UK time use data, thereby enabling him to calculate the inputs and outputs of childcare. Valuations of childcare that take account of variations in the intensity of care when choosing shadow wages and prices are an important step in advancing toward a full accounting of the childcare produced in households.

Anant Pichetpongsa and Maria S. Floro (2010) have developed an individual well-being index that takes into account not only earned income and the capabilities related to education but also work intensity. Their index captures work intensity that refers to the length of an average (paid and unpaid) working day and the simultaneous performance of two or more work
activities that either require attention and/or energy or are monotonous and repetitive. This work-intensity measure can reveal that money income necessary for subsistence is often earned by working extraordinarily long hours and/or through the intensification of work.

Another dimension of well-being is time poverty, which is defined as “overwork combined with low income that impinges on individual capabilities.” Elena Bardasi and Quentin Wodon (2010) utilize time use data from Guinea, collected through the Living Standards and Measurement Survey (LSMS) and adapt the standard poverty measures to the concept of time poverty. They define the latter as working long hours without choice, either because an individual’s household is already poor or because they would be at risk of falling into poverty if the individual reduced her working hours below a certain time-poverty line. Time poverty is thus understood as the lack of time for leisure, sleep, and rest due to the heavy time demands of labor market work, domestic work, fetching water and fuel wood, and other forms of unpaid work. Their study of Guinea illustrates how individual capabilities can be greatly affected by time poverty.

(ii) Time use data allow us to explore the linkages between time poverty and its many correlates, including impairment of an individual’s capabilities and functionings, labor market participation, and effect on children’s development. But this typically would require systematic or regular collection to allow for establishment of panel data; cross-sectional data can be used but would require careful selection of the econometric and quantitative methods used in the empirical analysis.

Sarah Gammage (2010) makes use of time poverty in order to examine the neglected but crucial impact of social programs and finds that in Guatemala, women are more likely than men to be time-poor. This situation can be exacerbated by economic policies and social programs unless adequate attention is given to unpaid work in policy designs and project evaluations. Investment in small infrastructure and appliances has the potential to reduce time and income poverty, primarily by alleviating women’s time burdens and making their unpaid household work more efficient.
Sripad Motiram and Lars Osberg (2010) explore the effect of unpaid work on the education of children using Indian Time Use Survey data. The extent of gender inequalities in tasks is an important aspect of inequality in opportunity. There are clear gender inequalities in the allocation of household tasks although there is mixed evidence regarding gender favoritism in schooling. School attendance in rural areas drops much more rapidly with age for girls, but this is not the case in the urban areas where the attendance of boys and girls is essentially similar. Lan Liu, Xiao-yuan Dong, and Xiaoying Zheng (2011) study analyze the amount of unpaid care provided by married women to elderly family members using time-use panel data from China. They find that welfare reforms that cut back government and employers’ support for care services have increased the work burden and led to lower earnings of women by reducing their participation in the labor market. Longitudinal time use data allow for the recognition of unpaid care work and the effect of changes in the welfare system and workplace services such as support for caregivers and development of eldercare and childcare facilities.

Fiona MacPhail, Xiao Yuan Dong and Chongqin Chang (2010) use time use panel data from the China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS) in order to examine the impact of China’s rapid economic growth (over nine percent per annum), alongside the massive rural to urban migration experienced in the past few decades, have increased the female share of paid and unpaid work in the rural areas. Time use data can therefore help assess not only whether these structural changes are associated with the feminization of paid work, which may have a positive effect on women’s well-being, but also whether there is an increase in women’s total work burden, which may have a negative impact.

(iii) There are other implications of time use on poverty reduction, welfare reform and social policies (particularly those pertaining to child- and eldercare). Several studies illustrate the potential for TUS data analysis to illuminate on the interrelation between unpaid work and public policy.
Sarah Gammage’s (2010) study makes use of time allocation data in Guatemala’s national household survey (ENCOVI) to examine the impact of a poverty-alleviation initiative called *Mi Familia Progresa*, a conditional cash transfer (CCT) program. She analyzes the changes in time use and time burdens as a result of this widely-known poverty alleviation program. There is, by now, a plethora of CCT programs in Asia and Latin America, which aim to improve the health and education of children conditional on “parental co-responsibility”. However, it is based on the assumption that time is abundant in poor families. Since the majority of these conditional time investments, such as taking children to clinics, receiving nutrition and health education, and attending community meetings, fall on women, it is women’s time that is considered to most abundant and most flexible.

The time constraints of single mothers in the USA are emphasized by Randy Albelda (2011), who shows that anti-poverty policies in the United States fail to recognize these time constraints; as a result, the positive impact of these policies on the well-being of single mothers is overestimated. Employment promotion policies have increased the amount of time that poor single mothers spend in paid work, which is mainly lowly paid and lacking social insurance benefits. As well as taking care of their children and doing housework, low-income single mothers spend a considerable amount of time negotiating a complex system of welfare benefits to ensure survival for themselves and their children. The positive impact on their well-being of having more income is undermined by a squeeze on their time. In addition to facing the “double day” work burden – employment and care responsibilities, the employment imperative in recent anti-poverty policies has created a new time squeeze and dilemma.

Monica Dominguez-Serrano, Lina Galvez-Munoz and Paula Rodriguez Modrono (2010) study compares different European economies and their welfare regimes, using data from EUROSTAT’s Harmonised Time Use Surveys. It is clear that unpaid care work remains at the core of gender inequality in these countries but the time that women spend on unpaid care work time varies by type of welfare regime, household structure, and economic position/income class. For instance, in Scandinavian countries, the development of a welfare state has led to the
provision of paid care by the public sector; while in countries such as Italy and Spain, a considerable amount of care work in middle and higher income households has been externalized to the market and is performed mainly by low-waged female immigrant domestics or caregivers.

Cristina Carrasco and Marius Dominguez (2011) use Spanish time use data to investigate the strategies of Spanish households, and to examine the changes (if any) in the way that households satisfy the care needs of their members as women’s labor force participation rises. They find that male behavior has changed little, but the care provision strategies of women have changed substantially. Women are still responsible for ensuring care is provided, but now externalize part of this responsibility, either via the market, for those with higher incomes; or via help from other women in the extended family, for those with lower incomes. In particular, female single-parents with low incomes are not able to pay others to do housework and care for their children.

(iv) Given the role of economic theory and models in policymaking as basis or foundations for policy thinking and formulation, a gender-aware macroeconomic model can provide illuminating insights on the differential effects of economic policies and development strategies.

Elissa Braunstein, Irene van Staveren and Daniele Tavani (2011) develop a structuralist macroeconomic model that explicitly includes unpaid care work, as well as paid care work. Care work is modeled as a gendered input into the economy via its effect in producing the current and future labor force. The model is used to explore the characteristics of “selfish” economies compared to “altruistic” economies, which have more equal sharing of care responsibilities between women and men. Most existing time use data show that in reality, there is not an equal sharing of care responsibilities, but this model may prompt us to think about ways in which policy may move economies that promote sustainable development and gender equality.
4) References:

The articles cited in this session are published in:


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