Invisible No More?

A Methodology and Policy Review of How Time Use Surveys Measure Unpaid Work

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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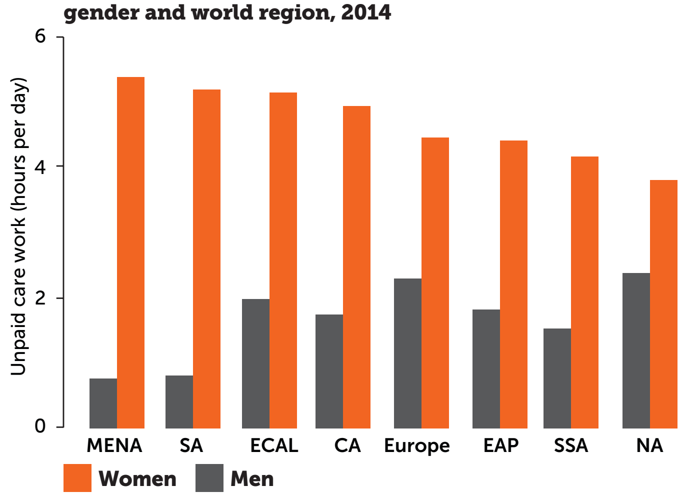
Introduction

Unpaid household and care work traditionally performed by women — feeding the family and taking care of children, the sick, and people with disabilities — is critical to the functioning and well-being of societies. Yet this work has historically been overlooked by policymakers and gone unmeasured in official statistics.

Figure 1. Average time spent on unpaid care work by gender and world region, 2014



Source: OECD (2014); Gender, Institutions and Development Database.
Notes: This chart includes coverage of 160 countries. MENA = Middle East and North Africa, SA = South Asia, ECA = Eastern Europe and Central Asia, LAC = Latin America and the Caribbean, EAP = East Asia and Pacific, SSA = Sub-Saharan Africa, and NA = North America.

Change is afoot, however. Recent decades have witnessed a remarkable uptake in the use and increased harmonization of time use (TU) surveys across countries, the latter thanks to the work of the United Nations (UN) and regional agencies. Further, this type of data should become an important tool to measure work in labor force surveys and to monitor progress against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2013, the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS19) agreed to begin measuring all types of work, paid and unpaid, in labor force surveys—challenging national statistical agencies to develop reliable, comparable, and simple measures of unpaid household and care work. The Sustainable Development Goals (2015) also underscore the need to collect sex-disaggregated data on unpaid work (SDG 5.4).

This report reviews recent efforts using TU surveys to identify: (1) good practices for designing comparable, simple measures of unpaid work, emphasizing care work; and (2) ways to improve the use of this data for policymaking, especially regarding labor market and other social policies, including care policies.

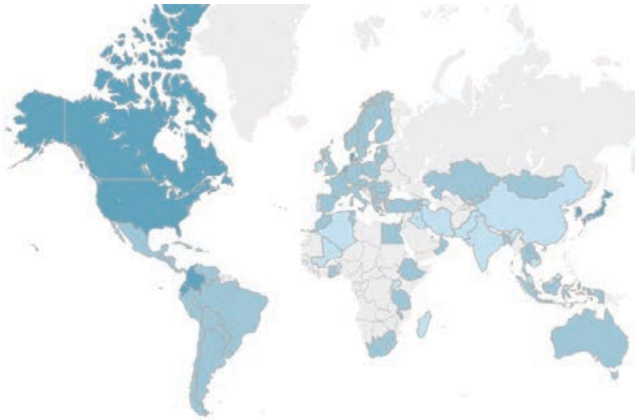
TU Surveys Overview

Though TU surveys have been conducted for over a century and were first used to program agricultural extension services and radio broadcasts, their comparative advantage in documenting gender inequalities and valuing women's unpaid work has been recognized only in recent decades. UN conferences and agreements in the 1990s and beyond fostered a new momentum for TU surveys, building on the collective efforts of women's advocacy groups, gender scholars, and TU researchers.

Country Experiences and Regional Differences

In recent decades, 257 major TU surveys have been fielded in 88 countries (Figure 2). Overall, European and Latin American countries have led the way in implementing TU studies. Other advanced economies are catching up and using information technology to gather data. Countries in Asia and Africa began collecting TU surveys in the late 1990s, using a variety of methods.

Figure 2. Number of time use surveys completed by country as of 2017.



1 | 2-5 | 6 or more | No TUS was conducted

Sources: Charmes (2015), UNSD (2018).

Activity Classifications

Variation in how activities are classified across countries depends on regional differences in culture and technology, and has challenged international comparability. However, as the United Nations Statistical Division's updated (2016) International Classification for Activities in Time Use Surveys (ICATUS) becomes increasingly adopted, it should enable greater harmonization; It also aligns with ICLS19's new definitions of work and employment.

Lessons about Methodological Issues

Collection Methods

Different TU methods may be more appropriate in low-income countries than in higher-income countries, due to different patterns of formal and informal work, more complex household structures, low literacy levels, or low prevalence of time pieces in the home. Methods that have been employed include: direct observation (enumerator observes and records), time diary (respondents self-report), interview (respondents recall activities), or stylized questions (respondents report time spent on specific activities). The choice of method should be guided by the country's socioeconomic profile and its capacity to analyze the data.

Some key approaches to TU surveys that increase the potential for policy relevance include:

- **Collecting contextual and demographic information** (such as location, educational level, employment, ethnicity/race, household structure and marital status) in addition to sex and age, to carry out more in-depth socioeconomic analysis of time use patterns
- **Fielding repeated surveys over time**, including the use of panel time-use surveys to identify the impact of policies on changes in people's activities.

Categorization of Activities and Harmonization of Time Codes

Harmonization of TU data involves overcoming differences in activity codes and survey methodologies. Countries must address the challenge of balancing comparability and customization, and the solution may require hybrid approaches.

Challenges for harmonizing TU data include:

- At present unpaid employment and nonmarket work can be missed and underestimated in traditional labor force surveys and censuses because the type and level of intensity of these activities can vary across the year, and because traditional surveys tend only to measure "main occupation." For TU surveys to adequately fill the gap left by traditional surveys, and respond to the new ICLS19 definitions of work, a number of methodological issues must be addressed. For example, whether data is collected on weekdays or weekends, seasonal variations, whether school is in session or not— all must be taken into account when collecting this type of data.
- Improvements to classifications are also required to capture secondary activities and time use intensity, particularly because unpaid care and other types of home-based work are often done simultaneously or overlapping with other activities and may involve many diverse tasks that are difficult to capture under the current frameworks.
- Definitions of "leisure" and "personal care" vary across classifications and in general are given little attention. However, these are essential to deepening our understanding of health and wellbeing.

Whose Time is it Anyway? Household Members Represented in Time-Use Surveys

While the selection of households for a TUS does not vary greatly from other household surveys, the selection of respondents within households must be carefully managed. Respondents' place within the household structure should be fully understood to avoid underestimating the contributions of other household members. Age also plays a role and the limited ability of very young and elderly respondents to self-record time use data requires different approaches. Household structures vary across countries, and these structures, as well as the demographic profile of a country and its age-specific literacy rates, are relevant considerations when designing TU surveys.

Innovations in the Implementation of Time Use Surveys

While the benefits of time use data are many, the cost of expanded and repeated data collection is a deterrent for many countries. To improve the cost benefit ratio, the report encourages stakeholders to assess new survey technologies to improve reliability and reduce cost, and to find simpler ways to collect data such as embedding modules in existing surveys or using a Light Time Use approach that involves pre-defined activity lists.

Policy Influence of Time Use Surveys

Data-to-Policy Framework

A generic data-to-policy framework was developed for the country case studies which accompany this report. This framework helps assess the extent to which TU data influenced policy, examine the conditions that facilitated this data-to-policy link, and identify ways to improve the collection of TU data to increase its usefulness as evidence for policymaking.

The framework first identifies the factors (Figure 3) that influence the data-to-policy link and, second, describes chronologically the steps that intervene between production and use of TU data.

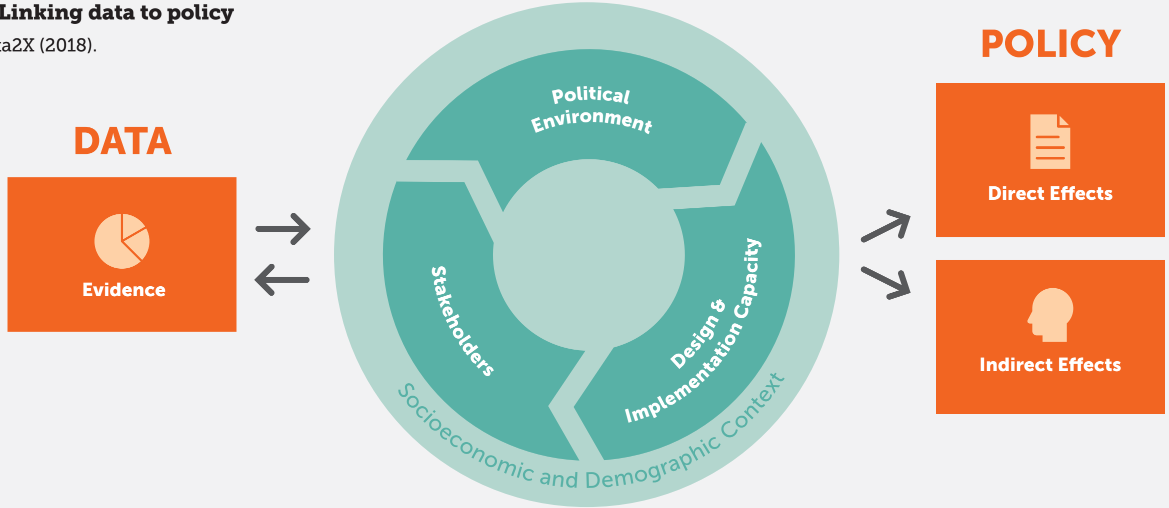
Factors that mediate the data-to-policy link on the supply side include high quality data and effective strategies for communicating this data. Individuals (both as independent agents and as part of advocacy coalitions), politics, and institutions interact with each other and mediate the process of data uptake. The use of data for policymaking is an organic, political process and policymakers' priorities and beliefs, the timing of the data release in the political cycle, and the strength of internal and external pressure and support, all help determine how the data will be used. Data uptake by policymakers depends on the existence of powerful data stakeholders outside of government. The design and implementation capacity of institutions (including budgetary, administrative and technical capacity of implementing agencies, quality and quantity of service providers, and the data and gender data culture in society) also have influence. Individuals, politics and institutions are influenced by the overarching "local" context, that is, the demographic, economic, and social challenges that particular regions or countries face, which help define the relevance of data for policy.

The process of data uptake and its translation into policy can be described by four consecutive stages that were used to frame the collection of information for the country case studies:

1. **Identify and prioritize:** which body identified the need for TUS and why?
2. **Collect and analyze:** survey instruments used, enumeration, funding, analysis (type and quality) and policy implications
3. **Inform and influence:** dissemination, role of various actors
4. **Develop policy and monitor progress:** identify direct influence (data has an instrumental role in changing policies) or indirect influence (data broadens "policy horizons") on policy; if no influence, outline the obstacles and constraints.

Figure 3. Linking data to policy

Source: Data2X (2018).



Direct or indirect policy influence was found in 10 of the 18 country case studies (Albania, Cambodia, Colombia, Finland, Mexico, Moldova, Mongolia, South Korea, Tanzania, Uruguay). In the remaining 8 countries, there was insufficient information to trace influence or underutilization of TU data (Chile, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Kazakhstan, South Africa, Thailand). Tracing the policy influence of TU data is often difficult, however, because of the organic nature of policy process and the varied, anecdotal, and incomplete sources of information. This means the country policy ratings are subject to modification if new information emerges.

Lessons about Policy Influence of Time Use Surveys

Based on information from the case studies, lessons regarding TU data's direct or indirect policy influence include:

- The TU data objective, when it is specified, can define ex-ante the way that TU data influences policy – indirectly, changing mindsets, or more directly, affecting policies.
- TU data can directly influence policy when it is used to assess the effectiveness of pre-existing government policies.
- Satellite accounts that use TU data to calculate women's unpaid work contributions to GDP may have influenced policy horizons but have yet to change policy.
- TU data are crucial to develop policies for the care economy, but other types of data are also required.

With regard to data supply, the report finds that:

- Whether TU data is demand- (users) or supply- (producers) driven can predict policy influence. When the data is collected to fill gaps in official statistics or is driven by external funding, the likelihood for direct policy influence is reduced.
- Good dissemination of quality TU data can improve policy uptake.

The activities of different stakeholders play a key role in advocating for the collection and use of TU data. Specifically, building regional cooperation, engaging lawmakers, and having civil society and academia as allies, can be powerful ways to strengthen policy influence.

Taking the political, institutional, and policy context into account is also crucial:

- Government buy-in matters for the data to be linked to policy, and domestic funding indicates buy-in and ownership. Externally funded TU surveys need the additional step of domestic uptake to influence policy.
- TU data has little influence on policy when gender-blind poverty reduction strategies are driving the government agenda.
- The timing of data production and dissemination needs to synchronize with policymaking cycles where possible.
- When the data user is a line ministry—with a clear mandate, line responsibilities and assigned budget, or when a line ministry is included in the design of the TU survey—the link to policy is facilitated.
- Alliances between national statistics offices and women's ministries have been found to impact data production but less so data use.
- An evidence-based policy culture nurtures the use of TU data for policy.

Conclusions

While TU surveys have gained popularity in recent years, their growing importance for measuring both the new definitions of work and the SDGs have fueled renewed urgency to resolve ongoing methodological issues. The report suggests the following lessons for implementers, policymakers, and supporting institutions:

- Balance the goal of having complete time records using harmonized activity codes against the goal of reducing survey costs by using simpler or focused activity lists.
- Resolve important methodological issues about measuring unpaid employment and household work relating to time of year/day of week when data is collected and particular issues for developing countries such as prevalence of unpaid work, low literacy, lack of use of time pieces, etc.
- Consider social norms and household structures in selecting the survey respondent and interpreting time use patterns.
- Find solutions for measuring and reporting simultaneous or secondary activities that do not overburden respondents.
- Consider fielding linked, repeated surveys over time as these increase the potential policy and research benefits of time use data.

Ultimately, the lessons above relating to policy influence will also need to be taken into account to ensure that not only is data improved, but that it informs policymaking. Behind encouraging signs of TU data helping to shape policy, we found a consistent theme of data underutilization across countries and regions. This is partly due to the fact that TU surveys are complex, costly data collection instruments, and partly due to a more general disconnect between producers and users of data.

Simpler TU methodologies should cut costs and help to improve uptake. What's more, international and regional development agencies have an important role to play in helping bridge the communications divide between data producers and users, as well as continuing to play their critical coordinating role and enhance their support for the main stakeholders at the country level. These efforts ideally will result in informed policymaking that will better address unpaid care burdens and improve the lives of women and girls, their families, and communities.

Data2X is a collaborative technical and advocacy platform dedicated to improving the quality, availability, and use of gender data in order to make a practical difference in the lives of women and girls worldwide. Data2X works with UN agencies, governments, civil society, academics, and the private sector to close gender data gaps, promote expanded and unbiased gender data collection, and use gender data to improve policies, strategies, and decision-making. Hosted at the United Nations Foundation, Data2X is funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

This Executive Summary accompanies the Data2X report, Invisible No More? A Methodology and Policy Review of How Time Use Surveys Measure Unpaid Work and 18 country case studies exploring the data-to-policy link of time use surveys. This work was initiated under the Women's Work & Employment Partnership at Data2X. To read the full report and learn more, visit www.data2x.org/time-use-report

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