

IN TIME

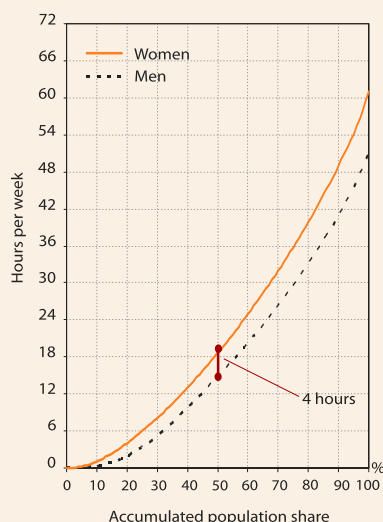
Studying individual time use can tell us much about the distribution of well-being among population groups, which is useful for public policy and poverty reduction strategies.

Women work more than men, but their labour is mostly unpaid; thus they do not achieve more economic power as a result.

However, most inequality in time use is located within, not between gender groups.

For poor people, escaping income deprivation often means increasing time deprivation.

Workload distribution by gender



Source: IPC Working Paper No. 34, page 6.

Time Use, Inequality and Well-being

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The way people use their time has direct implications for their well-being. Time is particularly important because it is a scarce resource and virtually all human activities are time consuming; allocating time to one activity requires restricting time for other activities. The study of the distribution of individual time allocations can tell us much about the distribution of well-being in a population.

Take, for instance, overwork, which has a clear impact on a person's life. Excessive work prevents people from living a reasonable family and social life and can even affect seriously the health of an individual when it does not allow for adequate rest. Work, here, does not mean only paid work but also unpaid domestic work. It is easy to imagine that excessive domestic work can negatively affect the schooling of children or the labour market participation of women.

One can always argue that there is no such thing as reduction of well-being due to excessive work or any other activities since time is allocated according to choices and rational individuals will always choose what is best for them. Nevertheless, for the moral judgments involved in the issue, what matters is not which choices are made but the restrictions affecting these choices. In order to understand these restrictions the distributional analysis is crucial.

The figure illustrates that time allocation is not only a matter of individual choice. It shows a generalized Lorenz curve—that is, a Lorenz curve in which the values were multiplied by the mean of the distribution—of time spent working, be it paid or unpaid work, by urban adult women and men in Bolivia, using data for 2001. As the populations are ordered according to the amount of total time spent at work, these curves should be interpreted as the cumulative workload along the population of each gender.

The first thing this figure shows is that the curves for men and women are very distinct. This means that there is a clear differentiation by gender in the patterns of allocation of time to work. It becomes hard to sustain that free choice prevails here since in a free allocation—free from social roles and other constraints—there would be no reason for such a clear group differentiation.

Second and perhaps more relevant is that the curve of women always lies above that of men. This dominance of the curves means that the workload of women is higher than that of men, regardless of the point of the distribution we assess it. Such a sustained difference gives no room to doubt: there is a clear gender division of labour in the Bolivian society leading women to work more than men. Some aspects of this division of labour have implications to other spheres of life. As shown in the bar chart (page 27), in many societies, particularly in the developing world, men systematically participate more in the labour market but less in unpaid domestic activities. This leads us to the conclusion that women work more than men but the fruits of this work do not necessarily translate in more economic power.

Using gender as an example of the relevance of studying inequalities in time allocation was not a random choice. Over the last twenty years feminist economists have correctly insisted on the need of incorporating time use information in the system of national accounts. Several non-market activities such as those related to the reproduction of the labour force—child care, the preparation of food, among others—are valuable for the

society but are not accounted as such. Knowing the time spent on them is a first step to evaluate this hidden contribution of women to economy and society. National accounts are based on market prices and there are obvious difficulties to give prices to non-market labour but despite the obstacles the fact is that the incorporation of time use in the accounts gives visibility to this important but often neglected part of the economy.

National accounts, however, focus on aggregates. Equally important is to fully understand the distribution among individuals and social groups underlying these aggregates. The concern with time brought about by the desire of giving women recognition for their non-market contributions can incorporate the concern with the reasons why some people work so much and others so little. As in the case of income distribution analysis, there are several reasons to look at time allocation inequalities and studying them can contribute to explaining inequalities in other spheres of life.

In fact, gender is not the single determinant of inequalities in time allocation. As depicted by the arc of the generalized Lorenz curves in the figure (page 26), much of the total inequality is located not between, but within gender groups. Indeed, in the Bolivian example, a decomposition of the total workload inequality shows that only a small fraction of it can be related to the differences between men and women. Most of it is inequality among males and among females because both are very heterogeneous groups in terms of factors such as family composition, class position, and so on. As an example, richer women can buy domestic services on the market, and therefore are less prone than poorer women to suffer from overwork due to a double-shift of market and non-market activities.

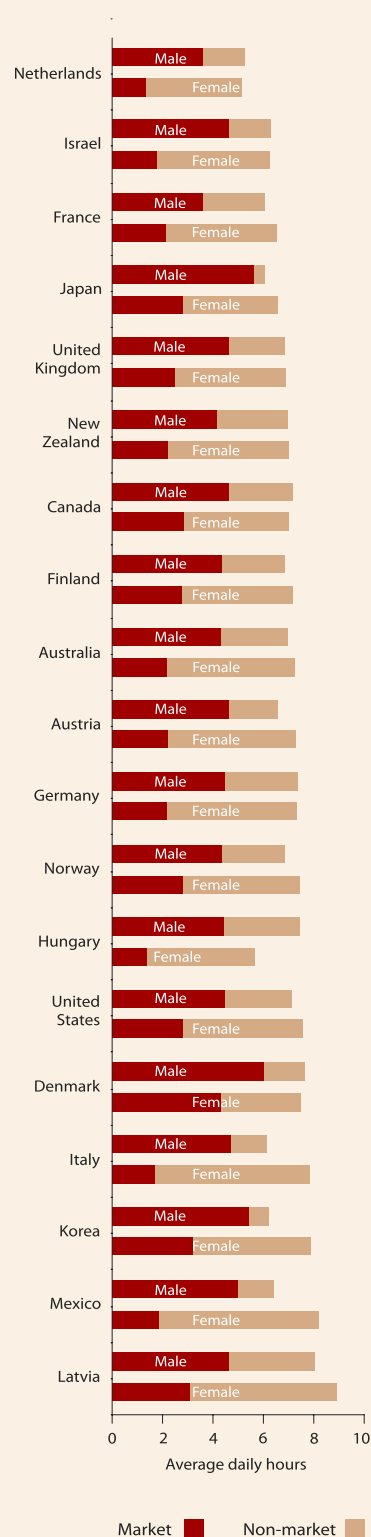
Besides gender, time use analysis can also contribute to a deeper understanding of poverty and other issues. For pragmatic reasons, a typical income poverty study equates higher income with more well-being. This seems to be the best feasible approach with limited data, but it should be noted that the gains in well-being from additional income may vary depending on how this income is earned. Earning income has costs and time is part of these costs. For the individuals more work means more welfare coming from the commodities their wages can buy but, on the other hand, less welfare coming from other sources, such as family activities. There is a trade-off between time deprivation and income deprivation; in other words, between time poverty and income poverty.

A simulation exercise using Brazilian data for 2004 shows how important this trade off can be. Using a simple decile-based threshold to define as poor those who belong to the two bottom deciles of the *per capita* household income distribution, we depart from an income poverty incidence (headcount ratio) of 20 percent of the entire population. This value ignores the amount of time spent in paid and unpaid work—that is, total work. However, reducing the amount of hours of unpaid work to limit total work to 60 hours per week increases the incidence to 21 percent. Going the other way around, reducing paid work hours to limit the total workload at 60 hours per week increases the incidence ratio even more, to 25 percent. Such simulations are always imperfect and depend on assumptions but, in rough terms, this means that about one fifth of the poorest people in Brazil are escaping income deprivation by falling into time deprivation.

A better understanding of the dynamics of time allocation can be very useful for public policies. It can be used to enhance strategies for reducing inequalities and achieving the MDGs. For instance, publicly run or subsidised *crèches* and pre-schools may contribute to releasing female labour force to the market, thus reducing poverty and increasing economic autonomy of women; they may also reduce overwork among both men and women. Similar benefits may be accomplished in poor countries, where women and children spend huge amounts of time on fetching water and firewood, by extending public water supply, rural electrification and fuel subsidies and/or improved fuel-efficient stoves. ■

Marcelo Medeiros, Rafael Guerreiro Osório, Joana Costa: Gender Inequalities in Allocating Time to Paid and Unpaid Work: Evidence from Bolivia. IPC Working Paper No. 34. April 2007.
<http://www.undp-povertycentre.org/pub/IPCWorkingPaper34.pdf>

Time use in 19 countries



Source: UNDP (2006). Human Development Report 2006, page 379. New York: UNDP. (Selected countries).