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What Do We Learn When We “Count Women’s Work”?

Standard measures of economic activity leave out one extremely important component of production and consumption—the unpaid care and household services most often provided by women. Unpaid services—such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and the elderly—add considerable value both to family welfare and to national economic output. And because household services are largely performed by women, standard measures that leave them out seriously underestimate women’s economic contribution.

Beginning in 2010, research teams within the National Transfer Accounts (NTA) network have expanded their analysis of economic activity to take better account of this “invisible economy.” The focus is on measuring all the time spent working by males and females at every age—including both work for pay and unpaid work in the home—and calculating the actual or imputed income earned for both types of work. This approach also provides more complete estimates of the goods and services consumed by all age groups.

Researchers start by separating out the income that men and women earn in the marketplace. Then, using a novel approach, they revise estimates of total production and consumption to include the time spent and the market value of unpaid care and household services.

Estimates of unpaid work begin with time-use surveys that indicate how much time women and men—and girls and boys—spend performing household tasks. The next step is to multiply the hours spent on each task by the average wage paid for that type of work in the marketplace to measure what we might call “household wages.”

This analysis makes it possible to estimate the size of the invisible economy of unpaid housework and compare the value of this work with the value of market-based goods and services. A more complete picture of production and consumption changes estimates of economic activity as a whole as well as the transfer of resources among household members, the level of dependency of different age groups, and the full economic contribution of all members of society.

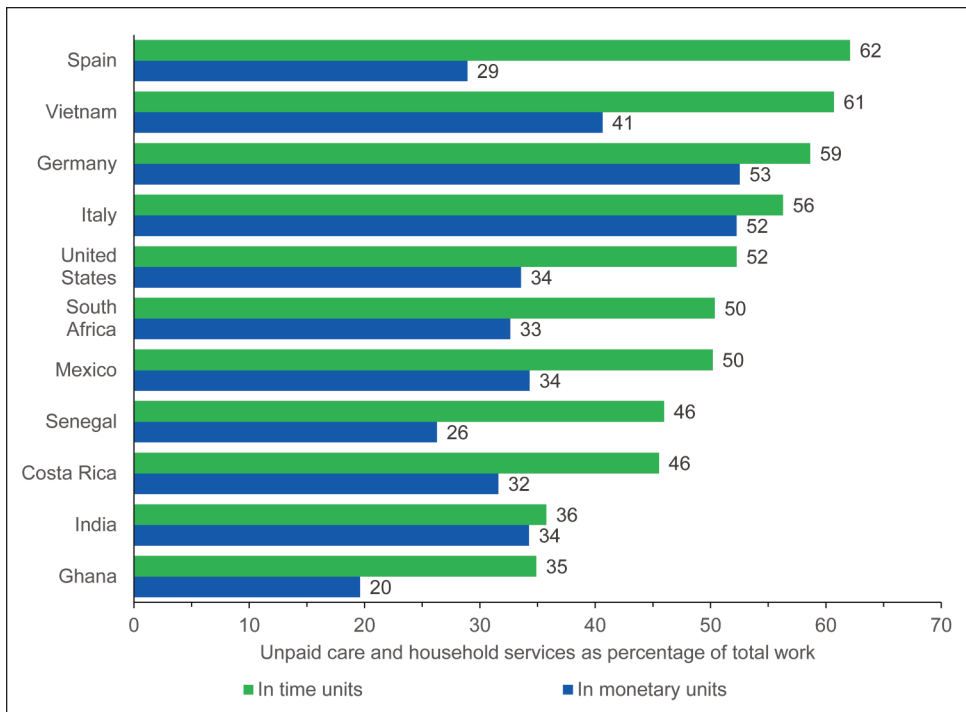


Figure 1. Unpaid care and household services as a percentage of total work in 11 countries, calculated in terms of time spent and real or imputed wages.

Source: Calculated from data available on the NTA Counting Women's Work project website at <http://www.cww-dpru.uct.ac.za/>.

Note: Chart data reflect the aggregate work time and wages for the national population, male and female combined, in a representative calendar year. The share of unpaid care and household services is shown as a percentage of total work, which is paid work plus unpaid care and household services.

Production of unpaid care and housework

In every country examined so far, unpaid care and household services account for a substantial proportion of all the time that men and women spend at work, ranging from 35 percent of all work time in Ghana to 62 percent in Spain (Figure 1, green columns). This is a huge contribution of labor that is left out of standard measures of economic activity.

The picture changes when the time spent on various productive activities is given a monetary value, based on the average market wage paid for each type of work (Figure 1, blue columns). Because the market wages paid for “women’s work” tend to be low, the care and household services provided largely by women tend to have a lower relative value in monetary terms than when measured in terms of time. Nevertheless, the imputed wages attributed to care and household services comprise from one-fifth to more than one-half of all wages earned in the 11 countries depicted in the figure.

Time use by age and gender: The case of India and the United States

A full analysis of time-use data by age and gender makes it possible to estimate how much time women and men at every age spend on market production and on unpaid

household care and services. In addition, time-use studies include the time spent on education, a particularly important use of time for adolescents and young adults. Time spent on education is defined comprehensively to include class time plus time spent studying outside of school hours.

It is interesting to compare India and the United States—two large countries at very different stages of economic development. The data from India are from a time-use survey conducted 10 years earlier than the US survey, but they illustrate the large contrasts in the economic life of Indian men and women that existed at the time.

A comparison of time-use data (Figure 2) shows that women in both countries worked longer hours than men overall. In both India and the United States, women age 20–59 spent an average of just over one-half of their total work time on unpaid household services such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, the elderly, and others. Indian men, on average, worked more total hours than American men, but they spent many fewer hours on care and housework—only 5 to 6 percent of their total work time compared with one-third or more of total work time for men in the United States.

Adolescents and young adults in India worked many more hours per week than their counterparts in the United States (Table 1). Indian girls worked particularly long hours,

Table 1. Time spent on market work, unpaid care and household services, and education for females and males age 15 and 20 in India (1999) and the United States (2009).

	Hours per week							
	Market work		Unpaid care and services		All work		Education	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
India: Age 15	13.8	21.4	19.6	2.1	33.5	23.5	23.3	28.4
US: Age 15	2.9	3.1	12.1	9.8	15.0	13.0	30.3	28.3
India: Age 20	19.5	44.7	38.9	2.5	58.5	47.2	5.2	9.4
US: Age 20	16.2	18.7	19.2	12.5	35.4	31.2	13.4	9.9

Source: Calculated from data available on the NTA Counting Women's Work project website at (<http://www.cww-dpru.uct.ac.za/>).

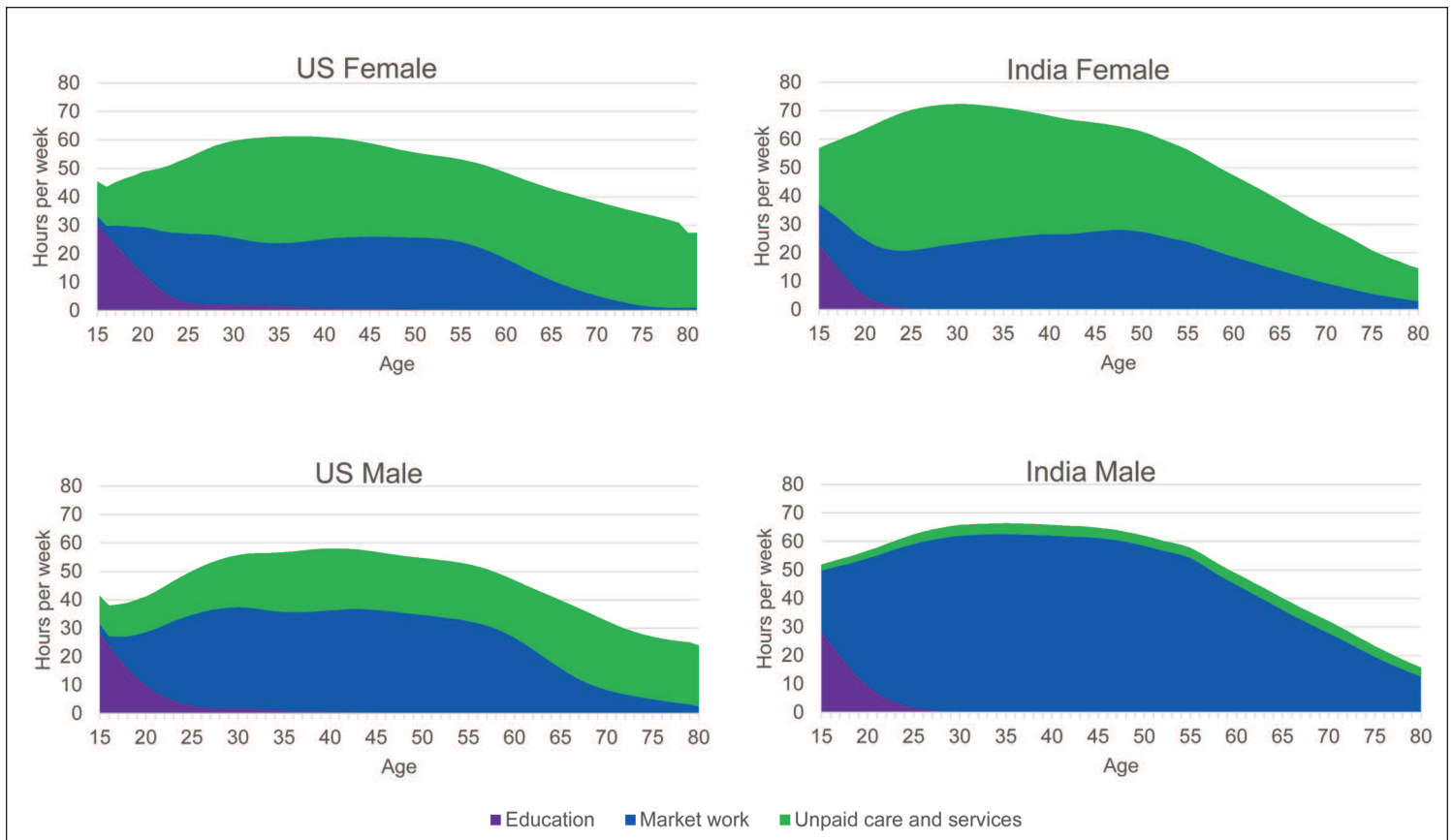


Figure 2. Time spent on market work, unpaid care and household services, and education for females and males age 15–80, the United States (2009) and India (1999).

Source: Calculated from data available on the NTA Counting Women’s Work project website at <http://www.cww-dpru.uct.ac.za/>.

primarily on unpaid care and household services. Boys in both countries spent about the same amount of time on education, while Indian girls spent the least time on education, perhaps related to the long hours they spent on housework.

At age 60, men and women in India and the United States worked about the same amount of time—between 47 and 49 hours per week (Figure 2). Combining market and housework, the time spent working dropped more steeply at older ages in India than in the United States, but in both countries, men and women in their seventies were still contributing substantial amounts of labor. In both countries, older men spent more time on market work, and older women spent more time on unpaid care and housework, but the difference was much greater in India.

When unpaid care and housework are included in the equation, the elderly turn out to provide much more labor than when market work is measured alone. This is true

for women in India and for both men and women in the United States. At age 70, American women contributed an average of 33 hours per week of care and housework, while 70-year-old American men contributed an average of 24 hours per week. Seventy-year-old Indian women contributed 20 hours per week of care and housework, on average, while 70-year-old Indian men contributed an average of four hours.

What does all this mean for policy?

The inclusion of unpaid care and household services adds substantially to estimates of national economic activity in every country studied. In Germany, India, Italy, the United States, and Vietnam, the addition of unpaid care and housework increases the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by one-third or more.

Although women in every country spend more time than men on unpaid care and housework, there are large differences

in the size of the gap between women’s and men’s contributions. Expectations about appropriate gender behavior are notoriously difficult to change, but the findings summarized here suggest that differences in gender roles related to housework are not universal or “set in stone.”

These results send a clear message to policymakers with their eye on increasing female labor-force participation to grow their economies—women are not an “untapped” source of labor. In fact, they are already working as much or more than men. Any policy seeking to increase women’s market work should include mechanisms to decrease their burden of unpaid work in the home.

Public-information campaigns and other policies that encourage men to take up more household responsibilities could potentially decrease the burden on women. Policies could also be considered that make it more convenient or acceptable for families to purchase household services in the market

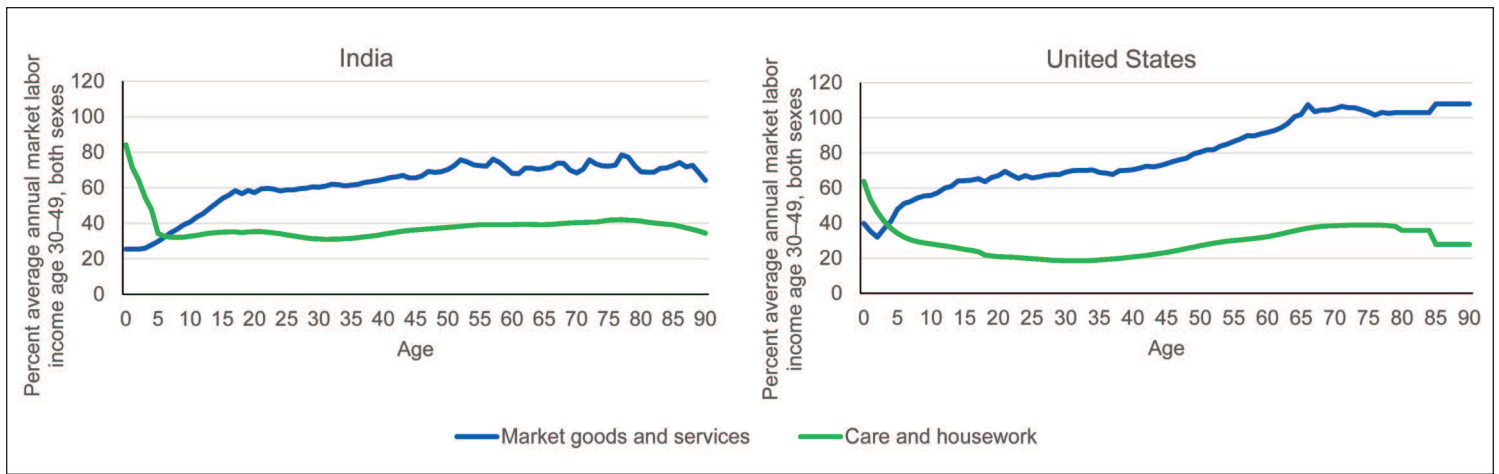


Figure 3. Consumption of market goods and services and unpaid care and household services by age and sex, India (1999) and the United States (2009).

Source: Calculated from data available on the NTA Counting Women’s Work project website at <http://www.cww-dpru.uct.ac.za/>.

Note: To enable international comparisons, monetary values are expressed as percentages of the average annual market labor income of a worker age 30–49 (both sexes) in each country.

or that eliminate some housework through infrastructure investment.

Of particular concern in some societies is the substantial burden of unpaid care and housework borne by young women and adolescent girls. Restrictions on the time they have available to study or pursue work opportunities could well affect their income-earning potential throughout their lives. In such societies, a policymaker or advocate wishing to encourage teenage girls to continue their education would do well to address the responsibilities for housework that take up so much of their time.

Another issue concerns the average wages paid for childcare and household services. In some countries, the wages paid for “women’s work” are extremely low. Efforts to bring remuneration for these services at least up to minimum-wage standards would increase economic fairness and contribute to the wellbeing both of the women who provide these services and the future generations who are currently receiving care.

Even with low imputed wages, adding the value of unpaid care and household services to consumption estimates for different age groups shows that the cost of raising children is considerably higher than normally assumed. In both India and the United States, young children consume considerably more unpaid care and

household services than they do goods and services purchased in the market (Figure 3).

Yet policies designed to help parents cover the costs of raising children—for example, through tax credits or family allowances—tend to be based on estimates of market costs alone. As such, they cover only a small fraction of the real costs of raising a family.

At the other end of the age spectrum, adding unpaid care and household services to production and consumption estimates shows that the elderly are not as heavy a burden on their families as sometimes suggested. Elderly women, in particular, tend to contribute more care and housework to their families than they receive, at least until extreme old age. This evidence of productivity in old age can provide useful guidance for policymakers seeking to prepare for an aging society.

Clearly, adding work such as cooking, cleaning, and care to estimates of economic activity leads to many important implications for policy. One priority for policymakers is to support the up-to-date, nationally representative, time-use surveys that make this kind of analysis possible. With good data, gender research within NTA can contribute to the design and implementation of policies and programs that both help women and their families and stimulate national economic growth.

Further reading

McKinsey Global Institute (2015). *The power of parity: How advancing women’s equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth*. Washington, D.C.: McKinsey and Company.

United Nations Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment (2016). *Unpaid work and care: A policy brief*. New York: United Nations.

Pan American Health Organization (2010). *The invisible economy and gender inequalities: The importance of measuring and valuing unpaid work*. Washington, D.C.: Pan American Health Organization.

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This issue of the *NTA Bulletin* is based on estimates provided by National Transfer Accounts/Counting Women’s Work research teams. The data for India are from Laishram Ladusingh, Professor of Demography and Statistics at the International Institute for Population Sciences in Mumbai. Gretchen Donehower, Academic Specialist in the Demography Department of the University of California Berkeley, provided the US results. Support for this issue of the *NTA Bulletin* was provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).