

# A MATTER OF TIME

Committee for Managing Gender Issues



*“We all have the same 24 hours in a day”— this is nothing but a very simplistic understanding which wilfully chooses to ignore the dynamics of caste, class, and gender to name a few. This statement specifically irks me, especially when I remember how I sleep late trying to catch up on pending household work while I know others who have all these tasks done for them.”*

X, a Research Assistant at IIMA, is visibly agitated when they make this statement. X is not alone in their lament of ‘unaccounted work’, which often eats into their time use.

The given instance opens up to the issue of time use by different groups of people and how certain sections have additionally imposed restrictions on them owing to different socio-cultural factors. This can lead to limits being placed on their engagement with the broader society and impede aspirations.

In the following write-up, **Ahana Raina and Ruchira Ghosh**, Research Associates at IIMA, make a case for gender-sensitive policy making which can help alleviate the time burden on women.

## ARE TODAY’S POLICIES REALLY REDUCING FEMALE TIME BURDEN?

Over the years, time-use data have gained significance as a tool in examining gender inequality across different spheres. Studies based on harmonised Time Use Surveys (TUS) conducted in Europe (Moreno, 2017) reveal that such data have been instrumental in understanding the allocation of time by women and men across various activities. Particularly, these studies find that, across countries, women spend more time fulfilling household basic needs such as cleaning, preparing meals and caregiving, irrespective of their employment status. All of these activities, for which there is no assigned market value, constitute women's unpaid labour (Kamp et al, 2018). These tasks are recognised for being tedious and time-demanding (Borah and Das, 2021); yet they continue to remain invisible to policy change. This can be attributed to a lack of understanding as well as wilful ignorance towards gender roles and division of labour and the impact it has on one section of society.

In the Indian scenario, the Time Use Survey (TUS) conducted by the National Sample Survey (NSSO) in 2019 is the first time-use survey at a country level (with the exception of Andaman and Nicobar Islands). It collects data using a 24-hour time diary on a "normal" day of the week. Examination of the TUS data revealed how expectations based on gender roles shape the allocation of time for different activities. We look at some of these findings in the following section.

As per the Indian TUS data and as shown in Figure 1, among the population in the working age category, women spend three times more time on domestic work than men. Meanwhile, men spend nearly 150 minutes more per day on employment compared to women. What goes unnoticed in these aggregated statistics is the fact that the characterisation of activities according to the survey methodology and System of National Accounting eclipse women's time spent on home production as unpaid domestic work.

Bobel, C., Winkler, I. T., Fahs, B., Hasson, K. A., Kissling, E. A., & Roberts, T.-A. (Eds.). (2020). *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Springer Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0614-7>

Farid, H. (2021, June 1). Period equity: What it is and why it matters. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/period-equity-what-is-it-why-does-it-matter-202106012473>

Gupta, N. (2021, March 21). It is High Time We Talk About Period Poverty in India! Youth Ki Awaaz. <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2021/03/why-it-is-important-to-shine-a-light-on-period-poverty-in-india/>

Holmes, K., Curry, C., Sherry, Ferfolja, T., Parry, K., Smith, C., Hyman, M., & Armour, M. (2021). Adolescent Menstrual Health Literacy in Low, Middle and High-Income Countries: A Narrative Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(5), 2260. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052260>

Kios, S. (2022, March 24). Period Poverty Project: UNICEF-UM. <https://www.unicef.org/post/period-poverty-project>

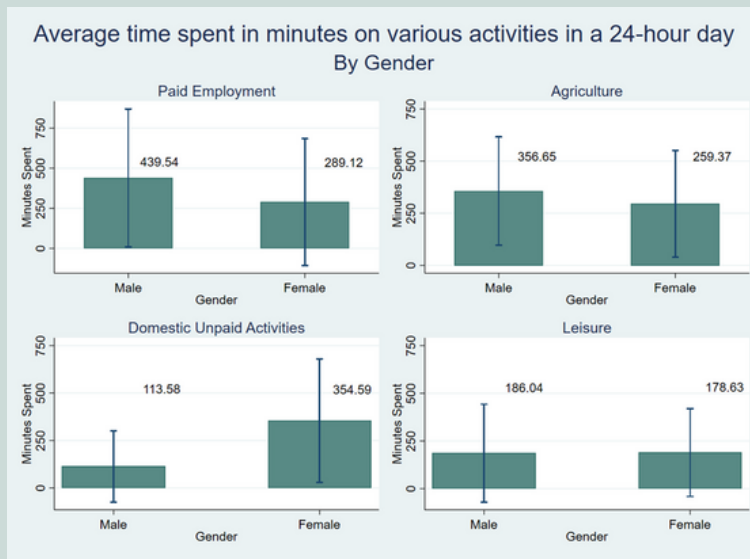
Michel, J., Mettler, A., Schönenberger, S., & Gunz, D. (2022). Period poverty: Why it should be everybody's business. *Journal of Global Health Reports*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.29392/001c.32436>

Neel, A. (2023, March 22). Stigmas of Period Poverty. <https://www.legalbites.in/topics/articles/stigmas-of-period-poverty-895954>

Olson, M. M., Alhelou, N., Kavattur, P. S., Rountree, L., & Winkler, I. T. (2022). The persistent power of stigma: A critical review of policy initiatives to break the menstrual silence and advance menstrual literacy. *PLOS Global Public Health*, 2(7), e0000070. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0000070>

Sweekruthi, K. (2023, January 29). Period poverty and the cycle of neglect. *Deccan Herald*. <https://www.deccanherald.com/specials/insight/period-poverty-and-the-cycle-of-neglect-1185532.html>

Figure 1



Source: Time Use Survey, 2019

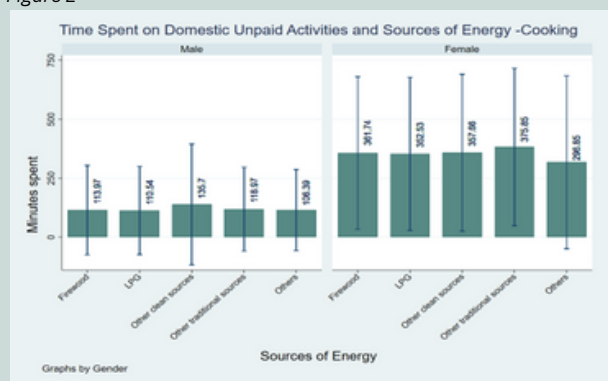
Note: Vertical lines represent 95% confidence interval

Essentially, a greater proportion of women's time is devoted to fulfilling domestic responsibilities irrespective of their employment status. The demanding nature of these activities indicate that women are left with little to no agency over their time allocation. Men continue to be more likely to be wage employed while women are more likely to be engaged in household activities. This continuity of social norms has been the main factor underlying decreasing female labour force participation. For women in employment, this often results in a "second shift", as articulated by Arlie Hochschild in 1989. This refers to the existence of a constant struggle to balance professional and domestic responsibilities.

Surveys such as the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy's Consumer Pyramid Household Survey, corroborate these findings. This leads to the question of whether policies in their current form address the question of disproportionate time burden. Next, we look at a few existing policies in the energy and WASH domain to see the time-use dimension associated with them.

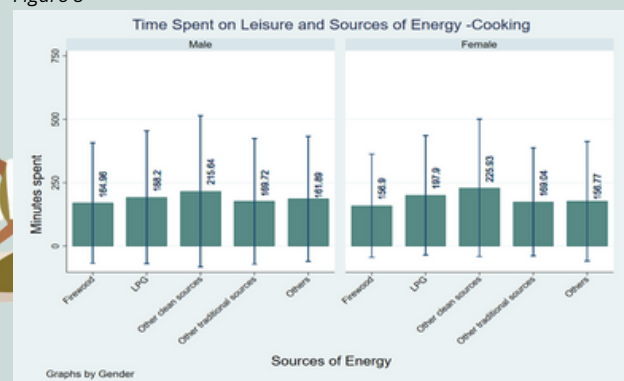
It is now a stylised fact that effective public services such as access to electricity, clean cooking energy and, piped water can alleviate women's time burden. In recent years, the government has introduced policies such as the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) aimed at providing access to LPG as cooking fuel and the Saubhagya Yojana aimed at connecting all households to grid electricity. The political narrative has emphasised that these policies are gender-sensitive and have been designed to improve the quality of life of women. The TUS data shown below takes a deeper dive.

Figure 2



Source: Time Use Survey, 2019

Figure 3



Note: Vertical lines represent 95% confidence interval

Looking at time spent on unpaid domestic work and fuelwood collection, women spend 7.2 hours on average compared to 2.8 hours spent by men. On average, women in households that use LPG or other clean cooking fuels spend less time on unpaid domestic activities, including meal preparation time, than those using traditional fuels (Figure 2). However, the magnitude of this difference is small. In terms of time spent on leisure, the difference is more pronounced. It is observed that women in households that use LPG or other clean cooking fuels enjoy an additional leisure time of 41 to 80 minutes compared to those using traditional fuels (Figure 3).

A similar result can be seen in the case of electrified households as well. Individuals from such household, on average, spent less time on unpaid domestic activities. For women, time spent on domestic activities was less by around 20 minutes. In addition, the average time spent on leisure by women in households with electricity as primary lighting source was about 35 minutes more compared to those not having electricity as their primary lighting source. Although these differences may seem small, it is likely that as women become more efficient at handling domestic work due to technology, they are burdened with more chores.

Along with energy policies, WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) policies are of considerable importance and maximum service to women. Preferably, these policies should focus on individual needs over households and must also account for gender dimensions throughout the policy process. Although no umbrella policy exists for WASH, schemes such as the Jal Jeevan Mission and Swachh Bharat Abhiyan fall under its ambit.

The Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), launched in 2019, aims to provide households with affordable and adequate drinking water through tap water connections. According to TUS data, the lack of piped water connections within households translates to women spending 46 minutes on average to fetch water. The introduction of tap connections would be a revolutionary change in their day. Anecdotal evidence as well as empirical studies note the same. Reduction of the drudgery involved with the task results in better health outcomes and increased engagement in income generating activities, education and productive work (Negi et al., 2023; Shukla, 2022; Sedai, 2021). However, as mentioned earlier, an initial freeing up of time, usually ends up being filled with more household chores (Deshpande, 2022).

## What does Time Use tell us about these policies?

Time use data can enhance understanding of gender norms and social structure. It points out how men and women allocate their time for various activities, or are socially conditioned to do so; thus, highlighting the far-reaching impact of social norms and gender roles. In the case of analysing gender disparities, time use can be used to understand the efficacy of policies or the lack thereof. From the findings above, it is evident that access to basic amenities such as water and electricity can have a more significant transformative effect on women relative to men. It not only forms an effective feedback loop but can also point out relevant areas which require immediate attention from policy makers such as support for caregiving. Care work is largely tendered to women, who have to spend significant time catering to their family's health. Indian policy is yet to address this (Dhanaraj and Mahambare 2019; Anukriti et al. 2020).

Therefore, policy makers must be cognizant of such nuances. Further, policies have to be formulated while taking into account the challenges associated with such entrenched institutions. While challenges are plenty, the evolving process of policy making and societal change should aim to improve the quality of life for women.

## FROM THE FIELD

**Therese Abraham**, Research Assistant, recalls instances from the field where she interviewed caregivers to Persons with Disability.

“I was looking at a State scheme which has a monetary incentive for caregivers to Persons with Disability (PWD). The beneficiary list was populated almost entirely with women. In some cases where the caregiver was listed as a man, the actual care work was done by a female member of the household. While men are overwhelmingly tasked with being the breadwinners of the family, majority of my female respondents were all employed and juggled care work and house hold work respectively. What Chakravarty calls the ‘Reserve Army of Nurses’ was very much visible during my interactions with the caregivers. There is an implicit understanding among policy makers where the success of each policy rests on the ‘free’ care work shouldered by women.

Many women also remarked how there was no restriction on them taking up jobs. However, shouldering the responsibilities of work, the house and the additional care required was proving to be a problem. A few respondents remarked as to how hiring someone to provide the care would not be economically feasible. Thus, between the care responsibilities and economic limitations, it was mostly women who withdrew from the labour market.

The respondents also talked of how they have little time to themselves after all their responsibility. Previous research also talks of how women tend to neglect their health in the caregiving process and end up worse for it in the future. There is also the question of emotional labour that is not physically manifest, which also takes its toll.

South Asian regions normally see a family-oriented form of caregiving, which is often valorised to an unhealthy extend. When the family-based model of caregiving is praised, the gender aspect within it is not addressed. Thus, even when it is claimed that the family is the one providing the care, it is specifically the women who do it. Unless we look at this disparity within the homes and address it, one section will always face an unequal division of labour and limited access to work.”



The monthly newsletter from the [Committee for Managing Gender Issues \(CMGI\)](#) is an attempt to initiate conversations on discrimination, gender bias, sexual harassment, and related issues. We would love to have the community participate. Please reach out to Therese Abraham at [theresea@iima.ac.in](mailto:theresea@iima.ac.in) for submissions, queries, and/or feedback.

If you feel you have been subjected to sexual harassment or if you would like to make any suggestions regarding curbing sexual harassment or gender bias on campus, please reach out to us at:  
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Phone: 97129 15533  
Please note that any communication with the CMGI is strictly confidential.