Accounting for Women's Use of Time
Considerations on the use of a time poverty approach

Sarah Byrne, April 2014

One of the most important developments in engendering analyses of poverty and wellbeing in recent years has been the application of the lens of time (and more specifically time use) to poverty. This has two key aspects. Firstly, inspired by Amartya Sen's conceptualisation of poverty as capability deprivation rather than merely insufficient income (1), an analysis of time use stems in part from the understanding that the wellbeing of individuals and households is a function not solely of their income or consumption, but also of their freedom in allocating time. Time poverty can be understood as the fact that some individuals do not have enough time for rest and leisure after the time they spend working, whether in the labour marker, or in the home, or for other time consuming activities such as fetching water, and collecting fuel wood and fodder. According to Mark Blackden and Quenton Wodon, "*for those who are working long hours, the time constraint makes it necessary for individuals to make hard choices in terms of to what they allocate their time, with these hard choices having implications for the welfare of individuals and the household to which they belong*" (2). Thus time poverty, specifically a scarcity of time in which one is not working, is understood as being a key aspect of poverty more broadly understood.

Secondly, time use analysis has been used to measure thus far unaccounted activities such as subsistence agriculture, care work, activities in the 'informal sector' etc that are important to livelihoods – and that underpin the 'formal economy' – but are not remunerated and are thus 'hidden' from national accounting systems. Both of these aspects have significant implications for how women's time use in particular is measured, implications which have been addressed in the literature on topics such as the care economy (3).

If we think of poverty as encompassing a scarcity of non-working time, then – as development practitioners – we must ask ourselves the uncomfortable question of whether some of our interventions that are intended to reduce poverty have rather contributed to increasing it. Does participation in community development activities exacerbate poverty understood in these terms? For example, there is a longstanding and valid critique that the uncoordinated proliferation of community groups initiated to ensure participatory development actually extracts quite a high transaction cost from 'beneficiary' households (4). Indeed, this cost can even exclude poor families from participating in the group and accessing the benefits available to group members.

In a recent article, Julian Walker explores this relationship between time poverty and participating in community groups established by development projects (in the form of unpaid labour) (5). On the basis of a gender analysis of the Kyrgyz-Swiss-Swedish Health Project (KSSHP), Walker finds that this relationship is more complex than initially might appear (6). The KSSHP implements a community centred health promotion strategy, key to which is the formation and empowerment of Village Health Committees (VHCs) and their members. VHCs are overwhelming female in membership as undertaking (unpaid) community health work is not considered to be a suitable use of men's time (5, 6). If we consider that members typically spend between seven hours and a day and a half per month on VHC activities, and in mountainous areas and during the summer grazing period have to travel long distances to reach the health centres where meetings are held, we might ask whether the project is inadvertently increasing women's time poverty by adding to their unpaid labour requirements (5, 6).

However, as Walker explains, this is not how the women who participate in the VHC see it. It appears that the VHC members are willing to plan ahead and juggle other activities to make time for this work. Members were willing to do this juggling, and to put in longer days, because of the personal and communal benefits that can be derived from group membership, including a chance to participate in public life, solidarity with other group members, information about health issues, etc. Members frequently shared how they faced down resistance from other family members (such as husbands or mothers in law) who argued that they should spend their time on housework and not waste it on unpaid community development work. Walker concludes that "*by asserting their right to work on the VHCs, women VHC members are asserting more control over their own time… Thus the negative*

impacts on women's time poverty need to be set against the more positive impacts on women's ability to exert control over time their time use" (6).

A similar case is made in a recent analysis of the experience of Samriddhi (an SDC supported project in Bangladesh) in engaging poor people, especially women, in market and value chain development (7). A simple time use analysis might suggest that adding paid work outside of the home on top of the existing 'invisible' workload inside the home would pose a significant burden for women, particularly poor women. As Nancy Folbre suggests "*increased participation in paid employment is often purchased at the expense of time once devoted to personal care, sleep and leisure*" and she goes on to cite studies of time allocation in the United States that suggest that employed women often work a "double shift" or experience a "double day" (8). However, for the women involved in the Samdiddhi supported value chains, it is not clear that an excessive work burden is a limitation to participation in project activities, though this also depends on individual circumstances. The study reports that "*women producers questioned on the subject are very clear that they are happy to have the opportunity to earn money, and that this enhances their status in the household*" (7). This assessment is highlighted in the following representative statement: "*Of course our daily work has increased, but this is not a burden to us. We are happy to be making money and to be able to decide what to spend it on.... For example, household utensils, educational materials for our children, even a sari for ourselves.*" Lila Begum, Secretary of Business Management Committee, Nilphamari District (7)

The implication of these two case studies is that a purely quantitative accounting of time use can obfuscate the relationship between different aspects of poverty and wellbeing. In the case of the VHC members, an increase in time poverty was balanced by an increase in agency and empowerment. The members saw the former as an acceptable trade-off for the latter. Similarly, the women producers who work with Samdriddhi value their economic empowerment and increased agency such that the increase in working time is not perceived as a burden. Thus, Walker recommends that analyses of time use should also consider evaluations of the *quality* of time use and about women and men's *control over their own time* (5). This is important to ensure that a method that is intended to uncover women's hidden work does not itself hide women's agency. Furthermore, concrete measures to support women in managing the multiple demands on their time should be considered, such as the provision of child care services during community group meetings.

References

(1) Amartya Sen (1999). Development as Freedom. Oxford: Oxford University Press. http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780198297581.do

(2) Mark Blackden, Quentin Wodon (2006). Gender, Time Use, and Poverty: Introduction. In: Gender, Time Use, and Poverty in sub-Saharan Africa (edited by Mark Blackden and Quentin Wodon, World Bank Working Paper), 1-10. http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/11080/

(3) See, amongst others, Chhaya Jha, Sitaram Prasai, Mary Hobley, Lynn Bennett (2009). Citizen Mobilisation in Nepal: Building on Nepal's Tradition of Social Mobilisation to make Local Governance more Inclusive and Accountable. http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/VA1.pdf

(4) See, amongst others, Debbie Budlender (ed.) (2010). Time Use Studies and Unpaid Care Work. Routledge / UNRISD Research in Gender and Development. http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/search/414BA4D59E6D9AB1C125775B00480FD7?OpenDocument or Emily Esplen (2009).Gender and Care: Overview Report. Institute of Development Studies UK. http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/go/bridge-publications/cutting-edge-packs/gender-and-care/

(5) Julian Walker (2013). Time poverty, gender and well-being: lessons from the Kyrgyz Swiss Swedish Health Programme. Development in Practice 23(1): 57-68. http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/time-poverty-gender-and-well-being-lessons-from-the-kyrgyz-swiss-swedish-health-271596

(6) Development Planning Unit, University College London (2010). Gender Analysis of the Kyrgyz-Swiss-Swedish Health Project (KSSHP) Phase V. http://www.swiss-cooperation.admin.ch/centralasia//ressources/resource_en_197273.pdf

(7) Jane Carter, Md. Gias Uddin Talukder, Zenebe Bashaw Uraguchi (2013). Making Markets Work for Poor and Extreme Poor Women in Bangladesh: the experience of Samriddhi. Dhaka: SDC Samriddhi project and HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation. https://assets.helvetas.ch/downloads/helvetas_samriddhi_gender_cap__.pdf

(8) Nancy Folbre (2006). Measuring Care: Gender, Empowerment, and the Care Economy. Journal of Human Development 7(2): 183-199. https://www.amherst.edu/media/view/92075/original/measuring%2Bcare.pdf