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Measuring gender equality by means of time-use data:  
bringing differences in the quality of daily life to the surface

Ignace Glorieux – Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Sociology Department, Research Group TOR

Gender inequality is often measured by means of general statistics on the participation in the central institutions of modern societies, such as political participation, participation in education, and labor market participation. General indicators, such as the Gender Development Index (GDI), even summarize differences of these indicators to measure evolutions and to compare countries in terms of gender equality. Such indicators sure have their qualities and make inequalities visible and discussible.

Time-use data, mostly collected by means of diaries and containing information on sequences of activities during a given period (day(s), week), are an alternative source to measure inequalities between women and men. These studies focus more on the daily lives of women and men, and as such do not only envisage formal work. Time-use studies generally point to inequalities in the division of work between men and women, where men generally are more active in formal, paid work whereas women do the lion's share of the informal, often unpaid work. One of the strengths of time-use studies is that they bring the informal work, often performed by women and often neglected in official statistics, to the fore. However, most time-use studies are restricted to general indicators in terms of durations of activities. As such, much of the rich and detailed information in the diary data is aggregated and summarized and much of the potential of time-use data remains unexplored.

Durations are but one indicator to analyze differences and evolutions in time-use. Diary studies typically not only collect data on the duration of activities, but also contain information on the context of the activities, such as the timing and sequence of activities and with whom and where the activities were performed.

In this contribution, we illustrate the use of different indicators to enrich the analysis of time-use data in terms of gender equality. We point to differences between women and men in the timing and fragmentation of activities, in multitasking, and interaction partners, and the impact of these differences in terms of gender inequality. We illustrate the potential of data collected on a household level to study the interaction of activities between couples, and of time-use data enriched with subjective indicators, such as the purpose or the meanings of activities, to make more qualitative analyses possible. As such, time-use study can not only reveal differences in the amount of work between sexes but also bring gender differences in the quality of daily life in much more detail to the surface.