In the more developed regions, women spend an average of almost five hours a day on domestic work, whereas men spend on average less than two and a half hours a day on this, or half the amount of time spent by women. In some countries – for example, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Spain and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – the difference is even greater, with women spending three-to-four-fold the amount of time spent by men on domestic work.

Although still very far from equitable, the sharing of domestic tasks between the sexes is more favourable in the more developed regions compared to other regions. Men perform far less domestic work in Asia. For example, in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Pakistan and Turkey, the time men spend on domestic work is not even a fifth of what women spend (see Statistical Annex).

Evidence from Latin America and Africa is weaker, as there are data for only a few countries. Nevertheless, from the available data it is apparent that in both of these regions, women spend far more than twice the time men spend on unpaid domestic work (figure 4.9).

Cultural conceptions of women’s and men’s roles no doubt play an important part in the unequal sharing of domestic work between the sexes. Change may be slow, but a trend towards a more equitable division of household work is evident in many European countries. In the Nordic countries and the United States of America, where time use studies over a number of years allow long-term comparisons, findings indicate that the number of hours spent by the average woman on household work has decreased while that spent by the average man has increased. In Norway, for example, the time women use for household work per day declined by about two hours in the 30 years between 1971 and 2000, whereas for men it increased by about half an hour, due mainly to more men taking part in household work than before. In the United States of America, women’s and men’s hours spent in housework moved towards convergence over the 30-year period from 1965 to 1995, primarily due to the steep decline in women’s hours but also due to an increase in men’s hours. Recent results indicate a continuation of the trend, although the convergence has been much slower since 1985.

Data from time use surveys may be summarized and presented as either participant averages or population averages. In the participant average, the total time spent by all individuals who performed an activity is divided by the number of persons who performed it (participants). In the population average, the total time is divided by the total relevant population (or a sub-group thereof) regardless of whether people performed the activity or not. In this chapter, all statistics presented on time spent in various activities are population averages. Population averages can be used to compare groups and assess changes over time. Differences between groups or over time may be due to a difference (or change) in proportions participating in the specific activity or a difference (or change) in the amount of time spent by participants, or both.

When time spent is expressed as an average per day, it is an average over seven days of the week, weekdays and weekends not differentiated. Thus, for paid work, a five-day work week averaging seven hours per day would show up as an average of five hours of paid work per day (35 hours divided by 7 days).

Finally, statistics presented refer to the “main activity”. Any “secondary activity” performed simultaneously with the main activity is not reflected in the average times shown. It should be noted that limiting analysis to the main activity results in a downward bias on the actual time spent on many activities, especially those that are often secondary to other activities. One such activity is childcare, a considerable portion of which is recorded as secondary activity (for example, parents may be looking after their children while cooking or cleaning the house).

Box 4.9
Interpreting statistics of time spent on activities

Data from time use surveys may be summarized and presented as either participant averages or population averages. In the participant average, the total time spent by all individuals who performed an activity is divided by the number of persons who performed it (participants). In the population average, the total time is divided by the total relevant population (or a sub-group thereof) regardless of whether people performed the activity or not. In this chapter, all statistics presented on time spent in various activities are population averages. Population averages can be used to compare groups and assess changes over time. Differences between groups or over time may be due to a difference (or change) in proportions participating in the specific activity or a difference (or change) in the amount of time spent by participants, or both.

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Figure 4.9
Time spent on domestic work by region and sex, 1999–2008 (latest available)

Source: Computed by the United Nations Statistics Division based on country-level data from Statistics Sweden, UNECE, UNECLAC and national statistical offices (as of December 2009).

Note: Unweighted averages; the numbers in brackets indicate the number of countries averaged.