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Policy Brief  
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## The importance of time-use surveys in informing gender policies

Considerations for their design and implementation in the Caribbean

### Introduction

Time-use surveys are data collection tools that quantitatively measure the time women and men allocate to paid and unpaid work activities in a typical day or week. These surveys provide information on the unpaid work activities that burden women more than men, such as unpaid care work. These unpaid work burdens hinder women's participation in the labour force and contribute to the gender gap in labour markets. Hence, these surveys produce information crucial in designing social and economic policies aimed at reducing gender inequality in employment and labour market participation (ECLAC, 2022b).

At the fifteenth Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in November 2022 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, member States promoted the use of social policies for tackling the structural inequalities faced by women as an essential pillar of the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. These structural inequalities include women having to devote more time to unpaid care work than men, thus widening the gender gap in labour participation and unemployment rates (ECLAC, 2022a).

#### Key recommendations

- **Implement regular time-use surveys between censuses.**
- **Include time-use questions in multi-purpose survey when resources are limited and dedicated time-use surveys are not possible.**
- **Adopt open and closed stylized questions in time-use surveys as they are more cost-effective methods to gather time-use data.**
- **Promote regional cooperation to enhance the sustainability of periodic time-use surveys in the Caribbean.**

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an increased interest in the collection of gender-disaggregated data on time-use in the Caribbean. The periodic conduct of time-use surveys by national statistical offices (NSOs) provides governments with data on how women and men allocate their time for different purposes, such as paid and unpaid care work.

In addition, these surveys provide further insights into factors impeding women’s labour market participation. One key factor keeping women from engaging in paid work is the burden placed on them by unpaid care work. Hence, time-use surveys provide crucial data for designing social policies that promote a care society in the Caribbean, which have the potential to help bridge the gender gap in labour market participation and unemployment rates.

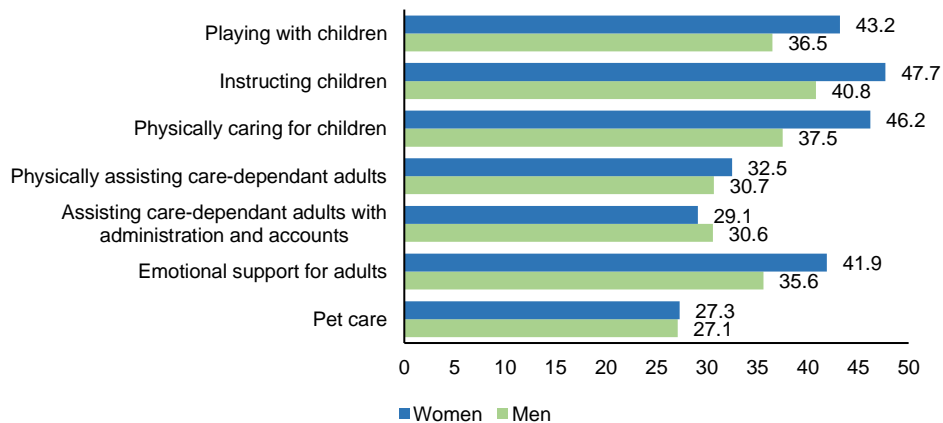
The lack of an established system of time-use surveys in Caribbean countries poses a challenge to governments in assessing their progress on Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5): to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. In particular, member States are challenged in measuring and reporting on indicator 5.4.1 of SDG 5: The proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, by sex, age and location. SDG target 5.4 recognizes the importance of unpaid work as critical to achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. Moreover, it calls on governments to measure the time-use of women and men on paid and unpaid activities.

This policy brief highlights the benefits of conducting regular time-use surveys in the Caribbean and offers several recommendations for decision-makers regarding the design of these surveys. The policy brief also discusses some limitations facing NSOs in the conduct of these surveys.

## Background

A recent ECLAC study reported that women spent more time in unpaid care work in the Caribbean because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Leon, Floyd and Abdulkadri, 2023). The study was based on the rapid gender assessment survey conducted by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in 2021. This survey yielded responses from 1,592 women and 565 men in 17 Caribbean countries on how they spent their time on paid and unpaid work.<sup>1</sup> Although women already dedicated more time to unpaid work than men before COVID-19, the study showed that the pandemic exacerbated this situation even further, particularly due to the burden of unpaid work of caring for children.

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents reporting an increase in time dedicated to care activities because of the COVID-19 pandemic by gender in 2021



Source: Leon, Floyd, and Abdulkadri (2023).

<sup>1</sup> The respondents of the survey resided in Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Panama, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname,

Trinidad and Tobago, and Turks and Caicos Islands. However, it is important to note that 90.4 per cent of the respondents resided in Barbados, Dominica, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago.

A substantial increase in the time dedicated to unpaid care work was reported by both genders across all care activities covered in the survey (see figure 1). Notably, the highest proportion of respondents reported increases in time-use in activities related to the care of children. In general, a higher percentage of women reported increases in unpaid childcare. Figure 1 shows a gender gap of at least seven percentage points in all activities related to the care of children. The gender gap was narrower for other care activities, such as those associated with the care of adults, apart from providing emotional support for adult family members.

Anecdotally, the public health control measures implemented to address the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the closure of schools and daycare facilities, significantly increasing the time household members spend on childcare. Since women are predominantly responsible for childcare due to preexisting social norms, they experience an increase in this unpaid care activity, which might reduce their labour market participation or constitute a barrier to regaining employment (Alon and others, 2020). Moreover, women dedicate more of their time than men to other unpaid work activities, such as caring for adult household members, including older persons and persons with disabilities.

Committing more time to unpaid work hinders women's re-entry into the labour market. As reported in earlier studies on the Caribbean during the first year of the pandemic, women consistently reported spending more time than men in care activities, such as taking care of older persons and children (Artega Garavito, Beuermann and Giles Álvarez, 2020). In particular, because of the pandemic, 46% of women reported spending an increased amount of time in unpaid physical care of children, compared to 38% of men who reported spending more time on the same unpaid care work (see figure 1).

## Impact

Time-use surveys elicit information on how women and men allocate their time to paid and unpaid work activities, usually within a day or a week, while accounting for other factors, such as place of residence

and employment type (Budlender, 2019). Hence, time-use surveys provide information on factors that burden individuals' participation in the labour market, which are not captured by socioeconomic indicators such as unemployment rates (ECLAC, 2022b). Understanding the factors that may obstruct individuals' labour market participation at the household level is critical to constructing social and economic policies designed to reduce gender inequality in employment and labour market participation. Recently, one such factor was the adverse socioeconomic shocks produced by the pandemic.

Governments have commissioned time-use surveys to ascertain the factors impeding labour market participation since the twentieth century. In Latin America and the Caribbean, Cuba was the first country to conduct a time-use survey in 1985, followed by the Dominican Republic in 1995 (ECLAC, 2022b). In recent times, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Uruguay have commissioned time-use surveys to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ferigra Stefanovi, 2022).

However, the implementation of systematic time-use surveys that inform social policies has not been institutionalized in most of the subregion's countries. Nevertheless, there have been encouraging developments in the Bahamas, Dominica, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. These four Caribbean countries have incorporated time-use modules in their population and housing censuses (Budlender, 2019; Department of Gender and Family Affairs, 2019). For the past 10 years, ECLAC has supported and encouraged Caribbean countries to include time-use questions in their censuses and national surveys (ECLAC, 2013). More recently, the Government of Grenada, in cooperation with UN-Women, pilot-tested the inclusion of three retrospective time-use questions on unpaid household and care work in their 2021 labour force survey (LFS) to generate regular data for SDG indicator 5.4.1 (Nicholson and Budlender, 2021).

## Threats and opportunities

The recent analysis of the rapid gender assessment survey presents an opportunity to guide further policy discussions on the need for governments to implement time-use surveys (Leon, Floyd and Abdulkadri, 2023). Insights from time-use surveys are crucial to developing and implementing effective policy measures that close the gender gap in labour market participation and reduce gender disparity in unemployment.

A crucial factor impeding the establishment and implementation of time-use surveys in the Caribbean is the substantial costs of conducting national surveys. These surveys are traditional sources of data whose costs could amount to over half a million United States dollars per survey (Fritz and others, 2019). However, multiple options are available to NSOs to overcome this financial obstacle.

NSOs with sufficient resources can deploy stand-alone time-use surveys. NSOs with more limited resources can deploy time-use questionnaires as part of multi-purpose surveys, such as household and labour force surveys, and combine time-use questionnaires with other aspects of social policies, such as the coverage of welfare measures, to evaluate their effectiveness (ECLAC, 2022b). Multi-purpose surveys allow NSOs to collect gender-disaggregated data to inform social policies promoting women's labour market participation more cost-effectively than stand-alone surveys.

A further opportunity for NSOs is to include time-use modules in the regular national censuses. While some Caribbean countries have already adopted this approach, a drawback to this option is that the resulting amount of data collected on time-use would likely be less than with stand-alone time-use surveys or multi-purpose household and labour force surveys. In particular, national censuses cover an immense array of socio-demographic topics. As a result, there is little room to interrogate respondents on time-use questions. A further drawback of this approach is that relying on data from periodic national censuses would yield data on time-use about every ten years per country, which is

not timely enough for such data to inform gender policies. Policymakers should, therefore, carefully weigh the pros and cons of this approach.

## Design of time-use surveys

Time-use surveys deployed as modules within censuses, as stand-alone surveys between censuses, or as part of multi-purpose housing and labour force surveys can provide critical data for targeted policies to address the gender gap in employment and labour market participation. However, NSOs should consider the type of questions when designing time-use surveys. There are two types of time-use questions: stylized and diary time-use questions. Each type of question has implications for the costs, validity, and reliability of time-use surveys.

Table 1: Example of an open stylized question

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Q: How much time do you spend feeding, bathing, changing diapers, dressing, putting to bed, talking to, minding, or playing with a child (0 and 5 years) in your household on a typical day during the last week?

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[            ] hours, [            ] minutes

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Source: Leon, Floyd, and Abdulkadri (2023).

Stylized time-use questions present respondents with structured questionnaires requiring quicker estimations of time-use by respondents. This type of survey approach presents open or closed questions. Respondents write their estimated time-use for open questions in the space provided, as shown in table 1. Each question asks about a specific paid or unpaid work and can also include questions about leisure or rest time.

Table 2: Example of a closed stylized question

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Closed version variant

Q: Last week, how many hours did you spend providing unpaid care or assistance to one or more seniors?

- None
- Less than 5 hours
- 5 to 14 hours
- 15 to 29 hours
- 30 to 59 hours
- 60 hours or more

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Source: Leon, Floyd, and Abdulkadri (2023).

Alternatively, closed stylized questions allow respondents to choose the option closest to their time-use for the identified activity from multiple choices, as depicted in table 2. Closed stylized questions have higher response rates, as they elicit

quicker responses and are thus less burdensome for respondents. However, there is a risk of reduced validity and reliability of outputs from closed stylized time-use questions, as respondents provide quicker and less detailed estimations of how they allocate time to different activities. Open stylized time-use questions suffer less from this problem, as the detail of responses is richer. Nonetheless, eliciting quicker and less detailed responses allows stylized questions to lower the costs of time-use surveys compared to diary time-use questions.

In diary time-use questions, respondents log their activities throughout different time slots of a typical day. This type of time-use questions is the gold standard of time-use surveys, as they provide richer data on time-use, thus providing greater validity and reliability of outputs. The downside is that they are costlier than stylized time-use questions.

Diagram 1: An example of structured time-use questions in a diary survey

Activity categories	15:00–16:00	16:00–17:00	17:00–18:00	19:00–20:00
Sleeping and resting				
Cooking and eating				
Employed work				
Caring for children				
Commuting				

Source: Leon, Floyd, and Abdulkadri (2023).

Diagram 2: An example of semi-structured time-use questions in a diary survey

Time period	Description of activities (Up to 3 activities per time period)	Same time? (yes or no)	Location 1	Location 2
15:00–16:00	Working	yes	Work	
16:00–17:00	Working, driving home	no	Work	On the road
17:00–18:00	Helping children with homework, cleaning	yes	Home	
18:00–19:00	Cooking, eating	yes	Home	

Source: Leon, Floyd, and Abdulkadri (2023).

The diary approach to time-use questions has two main types: structured and semi-structured. A structured questionnaire contains pre-selected

activities and timeslots for respondents (see diagram 1). Semi-structured questionnaires allow respondents to describe the activity they performed during selected timeslots (see diagram 2). This second type captures the respondents’ descriptions of the activities undertaken in different time slots on a typical day, thus increasing the validity and reliability of the responses. However, diary time-use questions, particularly the semi-structured type, are costlier and more challenging to conduct because they require greater cooperation from respondents, increasing the time an interviewer spends with an interviewee (Budlender, 2019). Additionally, data generated using this approach takes much more time and resources to analyse.

Regardless of the type of question used to design time-use surveys, retrospective questions should inquire about activities respondents engaged in over the past week. This consideration reduces recall errors by the respondents, which is a critical challenge to overcome when designing time-use surveys. All hours and minutes of the day must sum up to 24 hours if the survey examines time-use for a typical day or 168 hours for a typical week.

Furthermore, the design of time-use surveys should capture the different dimensions of unpaid work, such as the time allocated to the unpaid care of children and adults. For example, the unpaid care of adults sometimes occurs outside the household or involving non-household members. In addition, the types of unpaid work categories may vary in different social contexts. Due to the importance of capturing the different dimensions of unpaid work in the Caribbean context, researchers can deploy semi-structured diary questionnaires in small samples to capture the different qualitative dimensions of unpaid work. These qualitative findings can then inform the design of structured stylized time-use questionnaires containing open and closed questions, which are subsequently deployed to gather data from large and nationally representative samples.

## Policy recommendations

ECLAC offers the following recommendations for the consideration of Caribbean governments to enhance national statistical capacities in the collection of time-use data that inform gender policies. These policies can alleviate the burdens women experience in joining or re-joining the labour market, such as allocating substantial time to unpaid childcare.

**Caribbean countries should conduct time-use surveys between censuses.** Several Caribbean NSOs have made strides in including time-use modules in their national censuses. However, regular time-use surveys are necessary between censuses to generate timely time-use data. Ideally, NSOs should deploy two to three dedicated stand-alone time-use surveys between censuses to gather data that inform gender policies regularly. However, this approach can be prohibitively costly where resources are limited.

**Including time-use questions in multi-purpose surveys allows NSOs to gather time-use data between censuses cost-effectively.** Multi-purpose surveys, such as housing and labour force surveys, are statistical instruments that can include time-use questions. This approach allows NSOs to collect time-use data between censuses without incurring the costs of deploying stand-alone surveys while still gathering crucial data on the time-use of women and men in paid and unpaid work regularly.

**Stylized questions are cost-effective instruments of time-use data collection.** Diary time-use questions are the gold standard for time-use surveys for the validity and reliability of the collected data. However, such instruments increase the costs of stand-alone and multi-purpose surveys. Designing time-use surveys with open and closed stylized time-use questions allows NSOs to collect more estimations of time allocation to paid and unpaid activities by women and men than diary time-use questions with the same quantity of available resources. Including open and closed stylized time-use questions in survey questionnaires helps researchers develop cost-effective time-use surveys,

as these questions balance the validity and reliability of the collected data with quicker and better response from respondents.

**Regional cooperation enhances the sustainability of periodic time-use surveys in the Caribbean.** The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Regional Strategy for the Development of Statistics (RSDS) calls for harmonizing statistical standards and practices. The RSDS provides a valuable framework for Caribbean countries to develop standardized time-use questionnaires and methods to gather representative data to design and evaluate social policies at the national and subregional levels (Budlender, 2019). A subregional approach to the development and regular deployment of time-use surveys can efficiently enhance the technical capacities of Caribbean NSOs, which play important roles in national reporting on SDG target 5.4.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated structural inequalities that disproportionately burdened women with unpaid care work, particularly taking care of children. Time-use surveys are statistical tools for estimating the time women and men allocate to paid and unpaid activities. These surveys could provide policy and other decision-makers with the gender data required to evaluate social policies that address structural inequalities perpetuating the gender gap in labour market participation.

The institutionalization of regular time-use surveys in the Caribbean has been limited but expanding. Therefore, Caribbean NSOs and other policymakers are encouraged to advance the design and implementation of time-use surveys, which will also generate data to measure SDG indicator 5.4.1, essential to guide social policies that improve women's labour market outcomes. In designing these surveys, NSOs should consider including stylized or diary questions. They should also limit the survey reference periods to reduce recall errors and capture different dimensions of unpaid work. Finally, they can leverage subregional cooperation to develop these surveys.

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