

Time Poverty and Multi-tasking Among Women with Young Children in India

Laili Irani and Vidya Vemireddy



Photo courtesy Laili Irani

Caring for infants cuts into women's time for, as well as increases multi-tasking during, personal care and leisure. These forms of 'non-productive' time-poverty need much more attention from gender policy.

The social science literature is now well aware that time is a vital material resource, contributing as much to individual and family welfare as do income and public services. The concept of 'time poverty' - the lack of sufficient time to do the various things that one needs or wants to do, including discretionary time spent on self-care, leisure and rest - flows from this acknowledgment of time as a material asset. Empirical evidence from most parts of the world, and especially from low-income countries, also tells us that women are more likely to suffer from time poverty than men are. This is largely because, compared to men, women in developing countries spend a disproportionate amount of time on housework, (Esplen 2009, Kabeer 2007, Shimray 2004) and the demands on their time increase when they also do paid work and/or have young children.

A common strategy to address these increased burdens is for women to multitask - do several things simultaneously, especially when childcare is one of the duties they perform (Chopra & Zambelli 2017). However, the time-use literature does not adequately capture the nature and extent of women's time poverty or the extent of their multitasking; nor does it capture the changes in the levels of multitasking as women pass through their own lifecycles.

Irani and Vemireddy (2020) use a unique approach to measure time spent on various activities and quantify the amount of multitasking carried out due to childcare. Their study surveyed 3623 women in the North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, a region marked by relatively high fertility and disproportionate household work burdens on women. They analyzed variations in women's time-use practices by the age of their youngest child, categorized as being under 6 months, between 6 and 11 months and older than 5 years. Secondly, they conceptualized and incorporated a measure of 'multitasking' and thus improved the accuracy of estimates about women's work intensity.

The women in the three categories were identified and randomly selected from the same villages across the two states. The research used the tools in India's National Sample Survey Organization's (NSSO) time use survey in 2012, in particular the information on 29 activities across a 24-hour period. These 29 activities were compressed into four categories- necessary time, contracted time, committed time and free time (Vickery 1977).

The NSSO tool was further modified to calculate a multitasking score that captures the number of activities in which a woman reported taking care of her child at the same time that she was carrying out another activity. Counting childcare as a secondary activity even when women are completing other tasks provides a more precise estimate of the work associated with childcare. Further, following a review of the literature, regression analysis was used to identify other potential individual and household characteristics associated with the multitasking score, in particular, the age of the youngest child, mother's age, family type, woman's parity and household income.

The study found that mothers with infants spent a higher average time in childcare and

lower average time in personal care and leisure activities compared to mothers whose youngest child was older than 5 years. On the other hand, mothers with the youngest child being older than five spent more time on household chores and income generating activities compared to mothers with infants. Furthermore, multitasking was greater among mothers with infants compared to mothers whose youngest child was older than five. About 20-30%, more mothers with infants reported multitasking during self-care and leisure-related activities compared to mothers whose youngest child was older than five years of age.

Other characteristics associated with mothers who reported higher multitasking were – belonging to a nuclear family, lower household income, and higher parity. In addition, mothers with children between 6-11 months of age had 13% higher multitasking scores than mothers with children under six months. Furthermore, mothers whose youngest child was five years or older had 25% lower multitasking scores as compared to mothers who had children under 6 months of age.

Robust and precise empirical evidence on women's use of time is critical to the design of effective policy and programmatic interventions to alleviate women's work burdens. This study contributes to the conceptual and methodological understanding of time poverty and multitasking based on a new survey method and measure for capturing multitasking. The results also demonstrate interesting variations in maternal multitasking behavior by the age of children being cared for as well as by social characteristics like household living arrangements, along with factors associated with the behavior of maternal multitasking.

Understanding and measuring the nature and extent of female time poverty, multitasking and limited time available for rest and recreation is important because any of these three forms of restricted time use can denote negative impacts on the health and well-being of women and their families. The findings of this study highlight the need for a multi-pronged policy approach to reduce the time poverty imposed on women by unpaid and childcare work burdens. First, policies need to engage with the family and social environment around women in order to spread awareness about the need for more equitable work and time distribution. For example, community centers can become more responsive towards women's role in unpaid care work; likewise, men need to be made more consciously responsible for sharing housework, including childcare.

Another key focus area could be the provision of affordable and accessible childcare support systems near women's homes as one way of reducing commuter time. Lastly, the more active development and adoption of household labor-saving technologies can reduce household work burdens; these include basic household appliances such as gas stoves, pressure cookers, refrigerators, blenders, grinders, and piped household water access. We encourage policymakers, donors, economists and program managers to consider the burden of women's time poverty and multitasking strategies at the same time that efforts are made to increase and acknowledge their contribution in the formal workforce.

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CONTACT

Laili Irani, Independent researcher:
laili.ir@gmail.com

Vidya Vemireddy, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India:
vidyav@iima.ac.in



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