**Gendered Analysis of Economic Production and Consumption in Sri Lanka: Insights from the National Time Transfer Accounts (NTTA)**

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**Abstract**

This study provides a gendered analysis of economic production and consumption in Sri Lanka by integrating the National Time Transfer Accounts (NTTA) framework with the 'Counting Women’s Work Project.' By considering both market and non-market work across the life cycle, it highlights gender disparities in economic contributions that are often overlooked in traditional economic metrics. Through this lens, the study underscores the significant but invisible role of unpaid care and domestic work in sustaining households and communities. By examining the gendered distribution of labor across the life cycle, the research reveals critical insights into the economic value of women’s unpaid labor and its implications for policy and sustainable development, particularly in achieving SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG Target 5.4, which advocates for the recognition and valuation of unpaid care work.

**Keywords**: Female labor force participation, education and empowerment, gender equality, barriers and challenges, unpaid work recognition

**Introduction**

This study builds upon the National Transfer Accounts (NTA) analysis of Sri Lanka conducted in 2021 by incorporating a much-needed gendered perspective (United Nations, 2013; Dissanayake et al., 2021; Dissanayake et al., 2022). The study employs the innovative methodology of the 'Counting Women’s Work Project,' which integrates System of National Accounts (SNA) data with non-SNA data to examine market and household production by gender across the life cycle. This approach moves beyond conventional metrics of economic activity to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender disparities in economic contributions. As the first study of its kind in Sri Lanka, it delivers critical insights that are pivotal for achieving sustainable development goals, particularly SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG Target 5.4, which emphasizes the recognition and valuation of unpaid care and domestic work.

Women’s economic empowerment and gender equality are essential prerequisites for achieving sustainable development in any country, including Sri Lanka. The journey towards empowering women began in 1975 with the United Nations General Assembly's declaration of International Women's Year. Subsequently, in 1979, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, further solidifying the commitment to gender equality. In 1981, an international standard was established to promote equality between women and men.

In 2017, the United Nations emphasized the importance of empowering and educating women and girls to achieve gender equality in the workplace, as it celebrated International Women's Day. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has reaffirmed the global consensus on the critical role of gender equality in realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It recognizes that increased employment opportunities, particularly quality jobs for women, universal social protection, and measures to acknowledge, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care and household work are crucial for achieving the new sustainable development agenda. This agenda aims to reduce poverty (Goal 1) and inequalities (Goal 10), achieve gender equality (Goal 5), and promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all (Goal 8).

In light of these global commitments, it is imperative for Sri Lanka to incorporate women's labor force participation into its national policy formulation regarding women. By prioritizing women's economic empowerment and ensuring equal opportunities for them in the workforce, Sri Lanka can make significant strides towards achieving sustainable development, fostering gender equality, and creating an inclusive and prosperous society. This study, by integrating the NTTA framework with a gendered lens, contributes to these policy discussions by offering evidence-based insights into the economic value of women's paid and unpaid labor across different stages of life. These findings will inform policy interventions aimed at reducing gender disparities in both market and household economies, thereby reinforcing the country’s commitment to sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

**Trends in Female Labour Force Participation Rate**

In Sri Lanka, the labor force participation rate of women has remained persistently low, despite the country’s significant advancements in educational attainment and other social indicators (Dissanayake and Weeratunga, 2017). Over the past two decades (Figure 1), there has been a notable decline in labor force participation across all age groups and genders. However, the gender gap in labor force participation has widened, particularly in the last decade, highlighting the economy's failure to effectively absorb the working-age population into its workforce. Furthermore, there is a growing trend of discouraging women from engaging in formal employment. Between 2013 and 2023, the labor force participation rate declined more significantly for women (11.6%) compared to men (9.4%).

A key factor contributing to the low labor force participation of women in Sri Lanka is the substantial burden of unpaid care work. The care economy—encompassing activities such as childcare, elder care, and household chores—remains predominantly the responsibility of women in Sri Lankan society. This unequal distribution of caregiving duties limits women’s ability to engage in formal employment. The lack of accessible and affordable childcare facilities further exacerbates this issue, particularly for women with young children, as it hinders their entry into the workforce. Addressing the care economy and promoting gender equality in caregiving responsibilities are critical steps towards improving women’s labor force participation in Sri Lanka.

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Labour Force Annual Reports, Various Years

In addition to economic factors, cultural and societal norms play a significant role in shaping women’s low labor force participation. Traditional gender roles often prioritize women’s domestic responsibilities over their professional aspirations. Societal pressures and stereotypes can discourage women from pursuing careers or entering the workforce, perpetuating the gender gap in labor force participation. Moreover, limited access to quality education and training opportunities for women, particularly in rural areas, further hampers their ability to enter and succeed in the labor market. To increase women’s labor force participation, it is essential to challenge and transform these cultural norms, ensure equal access to education and skill development, and promote inclusive workplaces that support women’s career advancement.

**Data and Methods**

**Data:** This study utilizes data from the quarterly labor force surveys conducted in 2017, along with the inaugural Time Use Survey conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, in the same year (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). The inclusion of the Time Use Survey is particularly valuable as it offers insights into the care economy and captures non-SNA (System of National Accounts) production activities, which are predominantly undertaken by women. By analyzing the 2017 labor force survey alongside the Time Use Survey, this study aims to examine the relationship between labor force participation and the care economy.

The survey covered the entire country and included interviews with nearly 17,000 respondents aged 10 and above. These respondents were selected from 6,440 housing units chosen for the 4th quarter Labor Force Survey in 2017. The data collection process involved two paper-based questionnaires: a household questionnaire and a time diary. After completing the household questionnaire, respondents were provided with a time diary to record their activities at 15-minute intervals over a 24-hour period.

In addition to the Time Use Survey, this study incorporates data from the Labor Force Survey conducted in 2017 by the Department of Census and Statistics. This survey, which covered the entire island, was based on an annual sample of 25,750 housing units. It provides national, provincial, and district-level estimates, along with corresponding standard errors, for labor force statistics during each reference period throughout 2017.

**Method**: This study adopts the innovative methodology of the "Counting Women’s Work Project," which integrates data from the System of National Accounts (SNA) with non-SNA data to analyze both market and household production by gender throughout the life cycle (Donehower, 2014; 2018). Traditional economic measures such as GDP and other SNA indicators focus solely on market transactions and formal economic activities, overlooking the significant contributions of non-market services performed within the household. These activities—such as cooking, caregiving, child-rearing, and cleaning—are predominantly carried out by women and are essential for the functioning of both the household and the broader economy. By integrating non-SNA data, this methodology allows for a more holistic and accurate portrayal of economic production, highlighting the gender disparities often masked by traditional metrics.

The approach moves beyond conventional economic indicators by combining data from the SNA, which captures market-based economic activity, with non-SNA data that captures unpaid household labor. This dual-data approach enables the study to present a more nuanced understanding of gender differences in economic contributions, showing not only how much women contribute through paid employment but also how their unpaid labor supports the broader economic structure. The methodology also examines these contributions across different stages of the life cycle, offering insights into the changing roles and responsibilities of women and men in both market and household settings over time.

Through this integrated approach, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of gender-based economic inequalities, particularly by addressing the undervaluation of women’s unpaid labor in national economic measures. By linking SNA and non-SNA data, the study generates more accurate gender-disaggregated accounts of both market and household production (Oosthuizen, 2018). This allows for a better understanding of the full extent of economic contributions from women, providing policymakers and researchers with a clearer picture of the gendered nature of economic activity and its implications for national economic policy and social equity.

**Time-Use Patterns Across the Life Cycle: Recognizing Women's Contributions Beyond Market Work**

Traditional economic metrics often overlook the substantial contributions of unpaid household production, thereby underestimating women’s role in economic development. The National Time Transfer Accounts (NTTA) distinguish between market work and non-market work, capturing a broader spectrum of economic activities. Non-market work, or household production, is further divided into housework and care work. Housework encompasses cooking, cleaning, and household maintenance, while care work involves caregiving for children, adults, and non-household members, including volunteer work.

Figure 2 illustrates the daily time allocation across different activities for individuals aged ten years and above. On average, 2.95 hours per day are spent on market work, 3.27 hours on unpaid household production, and 17.78 hours on non-productive activities.

**Figure 2: Time Use by Age, Sri Lanka, 2017**

Source: Authors’ calculations

**Gendered Patterns of Time Use Across the Life Cycle**

The study examines how individuals allocate time throughout their life cycle, revealing crucial insights into gendered roles and responsibilities. Figure 3 reveals that learning-related activities dominate younger age groups, particularly until age 30, with women showing higher participation rates. This trend underscores a significant investment in women’s education but does not proportionally translate into labor market engagement.

During midlife, women’s time is heavily absorbed by unpaid care and domestic work, while men allocate more hours to market-based activities. Notably, women also exhibit greater engagement in community activities such as socializing, communication, religious practices, and volunteering, particularly in older age groups. These patterns reflect the cultural framework of Sri Lanka and the evolving roles of women as key contributors to community cohesion.

**Figure 3: Time Use Activities by Major Categories and Age, Sri Lanka, 2017**

Source: Authors’ calculations

In terms of leisure, culture, and mass media activities, men report higher participation throughout most of life. However, women’s engagement in these activities increases significantly in extreme old age, potentially due to shifts in caregiving responsibilities over time. These patterns highlight the dynamic nature of gendered time use across different stages of life

**Recognizing Women's Involvement through Non-SNA Activities**

Women’s participation in non-System of National Accounts (non-SNA) activities is significantly higher than men’s across almost every age group, as shown in Figures 4 to 6. Time allocation disparities highlight critical gender differences in unpaid labor. Women spend an average of 3.61 hours per day on unpaid domestic services, over three times the 1.14 hours spent by men. Similarly, women devote 1.02 hours daily to unpaid caregiving services for household and family members, compared to just 0.29 hours for men. These responsibilities peak during women’s early 30s, coinciding with a decline in their employment-related activities. Moreover, women contribute more hours to unpaid volunteer, trainee, and other unpaid work (0.11 hours per day) than men (0.07 hours per day).

Figure 4: Unpaid domestic services for household and family members by Gender

Source: Authors’ own calculations

Figure 5: Time use for unpaid caregiving services for household and family members by Gender

Source: Authors’ own calculations

Figure 6: Time use for Unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work by Gender

Source: Authors’ own calculations

**Women’s Contribution to Market Production Activities is Constrained by their Greater Involvement in Household Production Activities**

Figure 7 illustrates total household production, encompassing both domestic and care work. It clearly demonstrates that women’s engagement in household production activities is significantly greater than men’s across the life cycle. In absolute terms, women contribute approximately four times more to household production than men. Additionally, the monetary value of women’s contribution to household production is presented in Figure 7, a critical insight that has not been previously shown in any analysis conducted for Sri Lanka.

However, this substantial involvement in household production limits women's participation in market production. As depicted in Figure 8, men’s contributions to market production far outweigh those of women, highlighting the gender disparity in economic activity. This imbalance is largely due to the time and effort women invest in household production, which restricts their ability to participate in formal, paid labor. Unfortunately, these household production activities have been excluded from the System of National Accounts (SNA), resulting in an incomplete understanding of women’s total economic contributions.

**Figure 7: Total household production work by gender**

Source: Authors’ calculations

Note: Profiles are standardized by dividing through by the average labour income for 30- to 49-year-old (‘peak labour income’); this average equal one income unit.

**Figure 8: Market production by gender**

Source: Authors’ calculations

Note: Profiles are standardized by dividing through by the average labour income for 30- to 49-year-old (‘peak labour income’); this average equal one income unit.

**Life Cycle Surplus is Improved When Home Production is Added to Market Production**

The life cycle surplus/deficit refers to the difference between consumption and labor income over the course of the life cycle. Typically, life cycle surplus is observed during the workforce years, while a life cycle deficit tends to occur during dependent ages (childhood and old age).

A striking observation is that the life cycle surplus increases significantly when home production is included in market production (Figure 9 and 10). This is primarily due to the contribution of unpaid care and domestic work. As seen in the life cycle surplus generated by home production alone, this contribution spans from around age 20 to 75. However, when considering labor market participation, women experience a life cycle deficit, as their consumption exceeds their labor income due to limited involvement in paid work. Therefore, improving female labor force participation is critical for reducing this deficit. For men, involvement in household production does not significantly affect their life cycle surplus.

When only market production is considered, children are a financial burden due to the deficit in consumption versus production, which must be covered by transfers from parents, family members, or society. Similarly, older individuals are also considered costly in terms of the market-based deficit. However, when home production is factored in, the financial burden of elderly individuals is alleviated, as they engage in significant unpaid care and household work themselves. This is true for both men and women. This shifts the perspective on the costs of population aging, suggesting that when non-market production is taken into account, the economic burden of young and old dependents may be lower than traditionally perceived.

**Figure 9: Life Cycle Surplus/Deficit for males in the Market and Home by Age**

Source: Authors’ calculations

**Figure 10: Life Cycle Surplus/Deficit for Females in the Market and Home by Age**

Source: Authors’ calculations

**Conclusion**

The inclusion of unpaid care and household services in national economic activity estimates has far-reaching implications for policy development. This study highlights the significant yet often overlooked contribution of unpaid care and household work, which accounts for roughly 36% of Sri Lanka's GDP in 2017. Notably, women disproportionately contribute to this sector, often shouldering the burden of care and housework. Policymakers must recognize that current economic measures are incomplete because they fail to account for these vital activities.

The findings demonstrate that women already contribute substantial time and effort to unpaid household work, which is often undervalued in traditional economic measures. While men spend more time in market activities, women’s time is predominantly spent on domestic responsibilities, hindering their participation in the labor market. This discrepancy suggests that increasing female labor force participation requires more than just encouraging women to work—it necessitates policies that reduce their unpaid household workload, such as promoting shared responsibility for domestic tasks and investing in public infrastructure to ease the burden of housework.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of addressing gender norms that influence women’s participation in market work. Policies should focus on fostering an environment where women can leverage their human capital more effectively in the labor market. Gender-sensitive education programs and public campaigns to encourage men’s involvement in household tasks could be key strategies for achieving this.

The impact of unpaid care work on young women is particularly concerning. The heavy time commitment to housework limits their ability to pursue education or career opportunities, affecting their lifetime earning potential. Policymakers should prioritize reducing this burden on young women to enhance their future economic opportunities.

Additionally, incorporating home production into economic analysis changes the perspective on the costs of dependency, particularly in the context of aging populations. The evidence suggests that older individuals contribute significantly through unpaid care work, which may reduce the economic burden of aging. This insight is vital for designing policies to address the challenges of an aging society.

Ultimately, this study calls for greater recognition of unpaid household work in national economic accounting. Policymakers should advocate for the continuation of comprehensive, nationally representative time-use surveys to provide accurate data that can inform gender-responsive policies. By acknowledging and valuing the contributions of women in both market and non-market activities, Sri Lanka can create policies that support families, enhance gender equality, and stimulate long-term economic growth.

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