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New approaches to measuring unpaid work and work-life balance

A question of time. Measuring time spent on unpaid house- and care work in Sweden

Note by Statistics Sweden*

Abstract

Statistics Sweden has come to the conclusion that using diaries in any form as a tool for measuring time use in Sweden is no longer a realistic option due to its complexity, high costs, high response burden, and low response rates. In 2020 a pilot study was carried out to explore the possibility of using survey questions to measure time spent on unpaid house- and care work. This method proved to serve its purpose and Statistics Sweden was commissioned by the government to carry out a survey in 2021. The results were published in 2022. Due to the new way of collecting time use data the time spent on different activities could no longer be calculated for the 24-hour cycle. This implied new methodological challenges and possibilities. From a gender perspective we observed differences between women and men in the time spent on different activities within unpaid house- and care work. There were also differences in the proportions of women and men that felt stressed due to having too much to do. While being single or cohabiting didn't seem to affect the proportion of women and men that reported often feeling stressed, the occurrence of children did. Among people with children, women reported to a higher extent than men that they often felt stressed due to having too much to do.

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I. Introduction

1. One important purpose of the Swedish official gender statistics is to enable statistical follow ups of the Swedish gender equality policy. The policy's overall objective is to ensure that women and men have equal power to shape society and their own lives, and one of six interim goals is an equal distribution of unpaid house- and care work. The interim goal states that women and men must have the same responsibility for unpaid housework and have the opportunity to give and receive care on equal terms.¹ There are linkages between this interim goal and others, notably the goals concerning financial equality, an equal distribution of power and influence, and equal health.
2. The first Time Use Survey in Sweden was carried out in 1990/91², the second ten years later (2000/01)³, and the third after yet another decade (2010/11)⁴. The primary objective has always been to study time use from a gender equality perspective. In the latter two surveys, the data collection was to a large extent carried out in compliance with guidelines developed by Eurostat, to enable comparison between countries. Respondents reported their time use in a diary in which they noted activities for one entire day of 24 hours divided into 10-minute intervals.
3. The previous surveys indicated that the time women spent on unpaid work decreased over the years, while the time women spent on paid work increased. Among men, the pattern was the reversed when it comes to time spent on paid work – it decreased. However, the time that men spent on unpaid work almost didn't change at all between 1990 and 2010. The diminishing gap between women and men in the time spent on unpaid work was thus mainly the result of women spending less time on household work. In 2010, women and men spent the same amount of time on work in total, including both unpaid and paid work. Yet, women still spent more time on unpaid work than men did, and men spent more time than women did on paid work. It needs mentioning that the amount of time spent on the various activities included in the survey varied considerably, not only between women and men, but also over the different stages of the life cycle.⁵
4. In 2019 Statistic Sweden was assigned by the Swedish Government to draw up a proposal for how Statistics Sweden could implement a fourth time use survey in a way that enables a continuous follow-up of the distribution of unpaid house- and care work between women and men.

II. Surveying time use in Sweden in the 2020's

5. The development work to conduct a new survey was completed in three steps: an exploratory study, a pilot study and the implementation of a new survey.

¹ For further information: Statistics Sweden (2022:2)

² Statistics Sweden (1992)

³ Statistics Sweden (2003)

⁴ Statistics Sweden (2012)

⁵ Statistics Sweden (2012:2). Pages 38-40

A. Piloting a new methodology

1. The exploratory study

6. The main result from the exploratory study was that the use of diaries in any form as a tool for measuring time use in Sweden is no longer a realistic option due to its complexity, high costs, high response burden, and low response rates. Instead, Statistics Sweden suggested the use of an activity-based survey that included questions on time spent on different activities within unpaid house- and care work.
7. Other important results from the exploratory study were recommendations to use a shorter data collection period compared to those of the previous surveys (that had been carried out continuously over the year) and to concentrate resources by delimiting the population to people aged 18-84 (instead of the previously used age group of 15-84). The exploratory study also proposed that a pilot survey should be carried out. One important reason for this was to test the use of different reference periods.

2. The pilot survey

8. In April 2020, Statistics Sweden was commissioned to conduct a pilot survey to evaluate what was proposed in the exploratory study. In order to decrease the number of questions and to lessen the response burden Statistics Sweden decided to focus the survey on the time spent on different household and care work activities rather than covering all activities and hours of the day.
9. The population in the pilot survey consisted of people aged 18-84 registered in Sweden. The questionnaire was available on paper and online. No phone interviews were conducted. The sample included 4,000 people, and the overall response rate was 42 percent.
10. The pilot survey was designed to test different reference periods, question design, and to monitor any preferences in replying to the survey on-line or on paper. The overall results and patterns in the pilot survey were also compared with the findings from previous time use surveys.
11. To test the use of different reference periods, the sample was divided into two groups. In one group the respondents were asked to reply to the survey for an assigned day, and in the other group respondents had the option to choose which day (yesterday) they would answer for. In previous time use surveys, the method of assigning respondents with specific days had been used to avoid a systematic bias regarding which days the respondents answered for, though the extent to which the respondents followed this instruction is unknown. The results of the pilot study showed that the response rate was higher in the group that answered for an optional day (44.6 per cent), compared to those who answered for an assigned day (39.5 per cent). However, the former group responded to a lower extent for Fridays and Saturdays.⁶
12. Statistics Sweden has general recommendations regarding rewards for replying to surveys. In short these specify that in voluntary surveys with a high response burden addressed to individuals or households, rewards can be used in the form of cinema vouchers or gift cards for a maximum value of 99 Swedish kronor (approximately 9 euros). This type of reward was used in the pilot.

⁶ Statistics Sweden (2021)

13. Based on the results from the pilot survey, Statistics Sweden recommended to keep the reward for replying to the survey. Other recommendations from the pilot included adjustments to the stratified sample to compensate for lower response rates among foreign born and some adjustments to the questionnaire.

B. The new survey

14. Based on the results from the pilot, Statistics Sweden was commissioned to carry out a survey on women's and men's time use with a focus on the unpaid house- and care work. The survey was conducted in 2021 and could be answered on paper, online, and if needed by phone. The population consisted of people aged 18–84 that were registered in Sweden, and a stratified sample of 18,000 people was drawn.
15. Statistics Sweden chose to use an assigned day as a reference period even though this had generated slightly lower response rates in the pilot survey. This was due to the above-mentioned bias in the respondents' own selection of weekdays. This may have contributed to the lower response rate in the survey, which was 31.7%. The response rate may also have been affected by an oversampling of the foreign-born population in the survey, following conclusions drawn in the pilot.
16. In accordance with what had been proposed in the exploratory study and the pilot, the new survey focused on the respondents' estimations of the time spent on different activities during the previous day. The purpose of the new survey differs from previous ones in that it is delimited to estimate time spent on activities linked to unpaid house- and care work. The questionnaire didn't include questions about time spent on personal care (except for sleep) or activities such as watching TV, reading, exercising, or pursuing hobbies. Due to this, and to the fact that time spent on each activity is estimated regardless of any simultaneity, the time spent on different activities doesn't add up to 24 hours per day. All of this affects the comparability with results from previous surveys and diary-based surveys in other countries. However, even though estimates of time spent on activities in terms of hours and minutes cannot be compared between the new survey and previous ones, some comparisons of the results in terms of observed patterns are possible to do.⁷

C. Results

17. The findings from the new survey indicate that women generally spend more time than men do on activities such as cleaning, washing, and taking care of any children of their own (including feeding, dressing, hygiene, and evening routine). The same pattern could be seen in previous time use studies. In the survey from 2021 this is the case regardless of income, age, gainful employment, whether they are single or cohabitate and whether they have children or not. Men generally spend more time than women on paid work, maintenance and repairs of the home and vehicles. This also follows the pattern in previous surveys. The estimated time spent on cooking doesn't differ between single women and men. However, the results indicate that cohabitating women spend more time on cooking than cohabitating men do. This is regardless of any presence of children. The estimated time use for activities such as gardening, and grocery shopping is about the same for women and men. This also

⁷ Statistics Sweden (2022:1)

applies to some of the activities connected to children, such as helping with homework, attending the children’s activities, other family activities, and reading and playing. There are no differences between women and men regarding activities linked to caring for others, but women spend more time on maintaining contact with family and friends than men do.⁸

18. In this context it is important to take the actual amount of time spent on specific activities into consideration. Even a rather small difference in the sex distribution in the time spent on a specific activity can sometimes correspond to a considerable difference in the actual amount of time spent on that activity. Activities on which women spend more time than men (such as childcare, laundry and cooking) tend to be more time consuming compared to activities that men spend more time on (for example installations or vehicle maintenance). One way of visualizing this is by using box charts. An example of this can be found in the latest version of the publication “Women and men in Sweden 2022”⁹.
19. Apart from questions on the amount of time that women and men spend on activities connected to unpaid house- and care work, the survey included other questions related to unpaid work and work life balance. A finding that is highly relevant from a gender perspective is the differences in the proportions of women and men that felt stressed due to having too much to do. While being single or cohabiting didn’t seem to affect the proportion of women and men that reported often feeling stressed, the occurrence of children did. Among people with children, women reported to a higher extent than men that they often felt stressed due to having too much to do.¹⁰

Table 1. People aged 20–64 who often feel stressed due to having too much to do by type of household, 2022
Proportion (%) in each group

	Proportion		Measurement uncertainty	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Single without children	25	19	5	5
Single with children	41	28	6	7
Cohabiting without children	24	16	4	4
Cohabiting with children	39	23	4	4

Source: Statistics Sweden

III. Conclusions

20. The new method for measuring the time that women and men in Sweden spend on unpaid house- and care work has generated new data and findings that are important from a gender perspective. The method was developed to generate data of sufficient quality to a tolerable

⁸ Statistics Sweden (2022:1)

⁹ Statistics Sweden (2022:2)

¹⁰ Statistics Sweden (2022:2)

cost and response burden. The data can be used to analyse gender (in)equality in the division of unpaid work. A consequence of the new method is that findings cannot on a detailed level be compared with findings from previous surveys. Also, the actual number of hours and minutes that women and men in average spend on unpaid house- and care work in one day cannot be calculated. In any future surveys it would be interesting from a gender perspective to explore any possibilities of including a dimension of the flexibility of the activities into the analysis, since some activities are very time sensitive while others if needed can be postponed until the next day or longer.

IV. References

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