



TIME POVERTY AS A DIMENSION OF MULTIDIMENSIONAL DEPRIVATION: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF UNPAID WORK, GENDER INEQUALITY AND WELL-BEING

Arts

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ABSTRACT

Time poverty has emerged as an important dimension of deprivation that extends the conventional understanding of poverty beyond income and material resources. While monetary poverty focuses on insufficient economic resources, time poverty refers to a situation in which individuals have inadequate discretionary time after fulfilling paid work, unpaid domestic work, caregiving, personal care, and other necessary activities. The burden of time poverty is particularly significant among women because of the unequal distribution of unpaid household and care responsibilities. This conceptual study examines the meaning, dimensions, theoretical foundations, determinants, and socio-economic consequences of time poverty. The study reviews major approaches to conceptualising and measuring time poverty, including time-use analysis, minimum leisure thresholds, and multidimensional approaches. It also explores the relationship between time poverty, gender inequality, employment, household welfare, and human development. The paper argues that time should be recognised as a scarce economic resource and that policies aimed at reducing poverty and promoting gender equality should incorporate the distribution and use of time. The study concludes that recognising unpaid work and addressing the unequal allocation of household and care responsibilities are essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable development.

KEYWORDS

Time Poverty, Unpaid Work, Gender Inequality, Well-being, Household Welfare

INTRODUCTION

Poverty has traditionally been understood in terms of inadequate income and consumption. However, economic well-being cannot be assessed solely through monetary resources, as individuals may possess adequate income while experiencing deprivation due to insufficient time for rest, leisure, personal development, family interaction, and social participation. This has led to increasing recognition of time poverty as an important dimension of socio-economic deprivation (Vickery, 1977; Merz & Rathjen, 2009). Time is a finite and non-renewable resource, and although every individual has twenty-four hours in a day, the allocation of this limited resource varies considerably across individuals and households. Paid employment, household production, childcare, eldercare, education, commuting, personal care, and community activities compete for the same limited time. When essential activities consume most of an individual's available time, discretionary time becomes severely restricted.

Time poverty refers to a condition in which individuals have insufficient discretionary time after completing essential activities such as paid employment, unpaid domestic work, caregiving, personal care, and travel. The concept is particularly significant from a gender perspective because women often combine paid employment with substantial unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities, creating a "double burden" that may restrict their opportunities for education, skill development, leisure, and economic and social participation (Blackden & Wodon, 2006; UN Women, 2019). Consequently, time poverty may exist even when a household is not income poor, revealing forms of deprivation that conventional income-based measures fail to capture. From an economic and social welfare perspective, recognising time as a scarce resource and examining its distribution across individuals and households is therefore essential for understanding the multidimensional nature of poverty, gender inequality, and household well-being.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the concept, dimensions, and theoretical foundations of time poverty from an economic and social perspective.
- To analyse the relationship between time poverty, unpaid work, and gender inequality, with particular emphasis on domestic and caregiving responsibilities.
- To examine the major approaches to measuring time poverty and its implications for individual well-being, household welfare, and public policy

Theoretical Foundations of Time Poverty from an Economic and Social Perspective

The theoretical foundations of time poverty are therefore rooted in the economics of time allocation, household production, feminist economics, the capability approach, and multidimensional poverty.

1. Household Production and Allocation of Time

The economic foundation of time poverty can be traced to Becker's

(1965) theory of the allocation of time. Becker explains that households allocate their limited time between market work and non-market activities to produce goods and services that generate utility. Household activities such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and other domestic responsibilities require substantial amounts of time even though they may not involve direct monetary transactions. This perspective is important for understanding time poverty because time devoted to one activity necessarily reduces the time available for another. An increase in paid working hours may generate additional income but reduce leisure and family time. Similarly, extensive domestic and caregiving responsibilities may restrict opportunities for paid employment, education, skill development, or recreation. Time poverty can therefore arise when competing demands on an individual's limited time leave insufficient discretionary time for well-being (Becker, 1965).

2. Opportunity Cost of Time

The concept of opportunity cost provides another important economic foundation for understanding time poverty. Since time is limited, allocating an additional hour to one activity involves sacrificing the possibility of using that hour for another activity. For example, an additional hour devoted to paid employment may increase income but reduce leisure, while an additional hour spent on unpaid domestic work may reduce the time available for employment, education, or personal development. Thus, time poverty involves more than simply having a large number of responsibilities. It also reflects the trade-offs associated with alternative uses of time. These trade-offs may be particularly important for individuals who face substantial unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities (Vickery, 1977).

3. Feminist Economics

Feminist economics provides a particularly important framework for analysing time poverty because it draws attention to the economic significance of unpaid domestic and care work. Conventional economic measures tend to give greater visibility to activities undertaken through the market, while unpaid household production may remain largely unrecognised. Feminist economists argue that care work and household production are essential for the functioning of households and economies (Folbre, 2006). Time poverty is therefore closely connected with the unequal distribution of unpaid work between women and men. Women may undertake substantial responsibilities for cooking, cleaning, childcare, eldercare, and other household activities while also participating in paid employment. This combination can result in a double burden of paid and unpaid work, reducing women's discretionary time and limiting their opportunities for education, employment, leisure, and social participation (Blackden & Wodon, 2006).

4. Capability Approach

The Capability Approach, particularly associated with Sen (1999), provides a broader social and welfare perspective on time poverty. The approach distinguishes between possessing resources and having the actual freedom or capability to achieve valuable ways of living. From this perspective, income alone is insufficient to determine well-being.

Individuals also require adequate time to rest, maintain social relationships, pursue education, participate in community activities, and engage in personal development. An individual may therefore have adequate income but still experience deprivation if excessive work and caregiving responsibilities leave insufficient time to pursue valued activities. Time poverty can consequently be interpreted as a restriction of capabilities, because severe time constraints reduce the freedom individuals have to choose and undertake activities that contribute to their well-being (Sen, 1999).

5. Multidimensional Poverty Perspective

Time poverty is also consistent with the multidimensional understanding of poverty. Poverty involves multiple forms of deprivation and cannot always be adequately represented through income alone. Time deprivation may interact with other dimensions of poverty, including education, health, employment, and social participation. For example, individuals experiencing severe time poverty may have limited opportunities to undertake education or skill development and may sacrifice rest and personal care. Similarly, unpaid care responsibilities may restrict labour-market participation and economic opportunities. Research on time and income poverty has therefore highlighted the importance of considering temporal and monetary deprivation together (Merz & Rathjen, 2009).

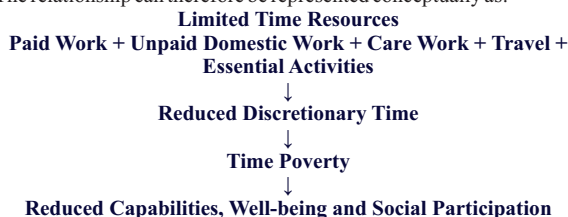
6. Social and Gender Perspective

From a social perspective, time allocation is not determined solely by individual preferences. Gender norms, household structure, cultural expectations, employment conditions, and caregiving responsibilities influence how individuals allocate their time. This means that individuals with the same 24-hour time endowment may have very different levels of discretionary time. The gendered distribution of unpaid domestic and care work is particularly important. When women undertake a greater share of household responsibilities, their time available for paid employment, education, leisure, and personal development may be reduced. Consequently, time poverty can be viewed not only as an economic constraint but also as a manifestation of social and gender inequality (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; Blackden & Wodon, 2006).

7. Time Poverty and Well-being

The above theoretical perspectives collectively demonstrate that time is closely associated with individual and household welfare. Excessive demands on time can reduce opportunities for rest, leisure, social interaction, education, and personal development. Harvey and Mukhopadhyay (2007), for example, demonstrate the importance of examining time constraints in understanding the experiences of working households.

The relationship can therefore be represented conceptually as:



The theoretical foundations demonstrate that time poverty is simultaneously an economic and social phenomenon. Economic theories explain the scarcity of time, opportunity costs, household production, and competing uses of time. Feminist economics highlights the unequal distribution and economic value of unpaid domestic and care work, while the capability approach emphasises the importance of adequate time for achieving well-being and exercising substantive freedoms.

Relationship Between Time Poverty, Unpaid Work and Gender Inequality

Time poverty is closely associated with the unequal distribution of unpaid domestic and caregiving work within households. Unpaid work includes activities such as cooking, cleaning, washing, shopping, household management, childcare, eldercare, and caring for sick or dependent family members. Although these activities do not generally generate direct monetary income, they are essential for household production and the functioning of the economy. Feminist economics emphasises that the exclusion or under-recognition of unpaid work can conceal the actual contribution of women to household and economic well-being (Folbre, 2006; Blackden & Wodon, 2006).

The relationship between unpaid work and time poverty becomes evident because domestic and caregiving activities consume a substantial proportion of an individual's limited daily time. When these responsibilities are combined with paid employment, individuals may experience a double burden of work. This is particularly relevant to women, who in many societies continue to perform a greater share of household and care responsibilities. Consequently, women's total workload may be considerably higher than that reflected in conventional employment statistics. The unequal distribution of unpaid work can therefore reduce women's discretionary time and increase their exposure to time poverty (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; Blackden & Wodon, 2006).

Gendered Distribution of Unpaid Work

The allocation of household work is influenced not only by economic considerations but also by social norms, cultural expectations, and gender roles. Traditional expectations may associate women more strongly with household management, childcare, and caregiving, while men may devote a larger proportion of their time to paid employment. Such patterns can persist even when women participate actively in the labour market. As a result, women's entry into paid employment does not necessarily lead to a corresponding reduction in their unpaid domestic responsibilities. This situation creates an important distinction between paid work time and total work time. A woman employed for eight hours a day may additionally spend several hours performing household chores and caregiving activities. If these unpaid activities are excluded from the analysis, her overall time burden will be underestimated. Time-use studies are therefore important because they capture both market and non-market work and provide a more comprehensive picture of gender differences in the allocation of time (Harvey & Mukhopadhyay, 2007).

Domestic Responsibilities and Time Poverty

Domestic work represents an important source of time expenditure. Cooking, cleaning, washing, shopping, household maintenance, and other routine activities must be performed regularly irrespective of whether household members are engaged in paid employment. The availability of household infrastructure and technology can influence the amount of time required for these activities. Where households have limited access to labour-saving facilities or affordable domestic services, family members may need to devote more of their own time to household production. The burden can be particularly significant for women because domestic responsibilities are frequently combined with paid employment. This may result in reduced time for sleep, leisure, education, social participation, and personal development. Thus, domestic work contributes to time poverty not simply because it occupies time, but because its unequal distribution can restrict the opportunities available to particular household members.

Caregiving Responsibilities and Time Poverty

Care work represents another major dimension of time poverty. Childcare, eldercare, and care for sick or dependent household members can require considerable amounts of both direct and indirect time. Unlike some domestic activities, caregiving can also involve emotional and mental responsibilities that may continue beyond the time spent performing specific tasks. The presence of young children, elderly persons, persons with disabilities, or dependent family members can therefore increase the time demands placed on households. Women often assume a greater share of these caregiving responsibilities. Consequently, caregiving can constrain women's ability to participate in paid employment or can force them to accept flexible, part-time, informal, or lower-paid employment that accommodates household responsibilities. This creates a potential cycle in which unpaid care responsibilities limit economic opportunities, while lower earnings reduce the ability to purchase market-based care services, thereby increasing dependence on unpaid household labour (Folbre, 2006).

Time Poverty and Women's Economic Participation

The relationship between time poverty and women's economic participation is therefore complex. Paid employment can provide women with income, economic independence, and greater decision-making power, but long working hours may simultaneously increase their total time burden. Women who face substantial unpaid responsibilities may also be unable to enter the labour market, work full-time, undertake additional training, or pursue career advancement. Consequently, time poverty can act as a hidden constraint on women's economic empowerment. Conventional labour-force indicators may show whether women are employed, but they do

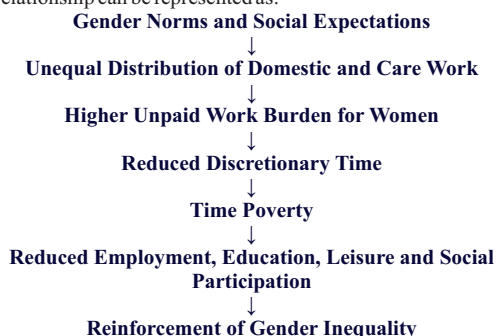
not necessarily reveal whether women have sufficient time for personal development, leisure, or rest. A time-use perspective therefore provides a more comprehensive assessment of women's economic and social position.

Intra-household Inequality

Time poverty should also be examined at the individual rather than only the household level. Members of the same household may have very different experiences of time deprivation. One member may have substantial discretionary time while another spends much of the day undertaking unpaid domestic and caregiving work. Household-level income measures can conceal these differences. This is particularly important for gender analysis. Even when a household is economically secure, women within the household may experience considerable time poverty because of unequal domestic responsibilities. Therefore, income-based measures of household welfare should be complemented by individual-level time-use information to identify intra-household inequalities (Merz & Rathjen, 2009).

Relationship with Gender Inequality

The relationship can be represented as:



This relationship can become self-reinforcing. When women spend more time on unpaid work, they may have fewer opportunities to earn income or develop skills. Lower economic opportunities may, in turn, increase their dependence on other household members and reinforce traditional divisions of labour.

The relationship between time poverty, unpaid work, and gender inequality demonstrates that poverty is not simply a shortage of income but can also involve unequal access to time. Women's unpaid domestic and caregiving contributions are essential to household welfare, yet their time costs are often inadequately recognised in conventional economic measures. The unequal distribution of these responsibilities can create significant time constraints and limit women's economic, social, and personal opportunities.

Therefore, reducing time poverty requires more than increasing women's employment or household income. It requires recognising, reducing, and redistributing unpaid domestic and care work through accessible childcare and eldercare services, improved infrastructure, flexible employment arrangements, supportive social protection, and a more equitable sharing of household responsibilities. Such measures can contribute not only to reducing time poverty but also to promoting gender equality and improving overall household and individual well-being (Blackden & Wodon, 2006; UN Women, 2019).

Major Approaches to Measuring Time Poverty and Its Implications for Individual Well-being, Household Welfare and Public Policy

Measuring time poverty is important because the conventional measurement of poverty focuses primarily on income and consumption and may overlook deprivation arising from inadequate discretionary time. Since time is a finite resource, the measurement of time poverty generally examines how individuals allocate their available twenty-four hours among paid work, unpaid domestic work, caregiving, personal care, travel, and leisure. The literature has developed several approaches to identify and measure time poverty, each capturing a different aspect of temporal deprivation.

1. Time-Threshold Approach

The time-threshold approach identifies individuals as time poor when their available discretionary time falls below a predetermined minimum threshold. The approach is closely associated with the pioneering work of Vickery (1977), who incorporated time constraints

into poverty analysis. The basic idea is that individuals require a minimum amount of time for necessary activities and some amount of free or discretionary time for adequate well-being. A major advantage of this approach is its simplicity and its ability to identify individuals who face severe time constraints. However, determining an appropriate minimum threshold can be difficult because time requirements differ according to age, gender, employment status, household composition, and caregiving responsibilities.

2. Time-Use Approach

The time-use approach measures how individuals distribute their daily time among different activities. Time-use surveys generally classify activities into paid employment, unpaid domestic work, caregiving, personal care, education, travel, and leisure. This approach is particularly useful for studying gender differences because it makes unpaid domestic and caregiving work visible. It can demonstrate that two individuals with similar employment hours may have substantially different total workloads because of differences in unpaid work (Blackden & Wodon, 2006). The approach is also useful for identifying intra-household inequalities, as household members may have very different amounts of discretionary time even when they live in the same household.

3. Time-Deficit Approach

The time-deficit approach focuses not only on whether an individual is time poor but also on the extent or intensity of time deprivation. The time deficit represents the difference between the minimum required discretionary time and the actual discretionary time available to an individual. For example, if a predetermined threshold is six hours of discretionary time and an individual has only four hours, the individual has a two-hour time deficit. This approach provides more information than a simple classification of time poor or non-time poor because it indicates the severity of the deprivation.

4. Time and Income Poverty Approach

Time poverty can also be examined together with income poverty. Merz and Rathjen (2009) argue that time and income are interdependent dimensions of poverty. An individual may be income poor, time poor, both, or neither.

This produces a useful classification:

Income Status	Time Status	Condition
Income poor	Time poor	Multiple deprivation
Income poor	Not time poor	Monetary deprivation
Not income poor	Time poor	Temporal deprivation
Not income poor	Not time poor	Neither monetary nor temporal deprivation

This approach is particularly useful because it demonstrates that income alone cannot capture all dimensions of poverty.

5. Multidimensional Approach

The multidimensional approach considers time poverty alongside other dimensions of deprivation such as income, health, education, employment, and social participation. From this perspective, inadequate discretionary time can influence an individual's ability to achieve other dimensions of well-being. For example, excessive domestic responsibilities may prevent an individual from participating in education or employment, while excessive paid work may reduce opportunities for rest, family interaction, and social participation. Time poverty can therefore operate both as a distinct form of deprivation and as a factor contributing to other forms of disadvantage.

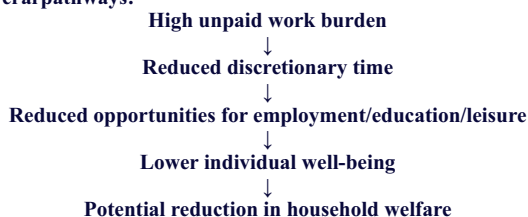
Implications for Individual Well-being

Time poverty has significant implications for individual well-being. When most available time is consumed by paid employment, domestic work, caregiving, and other necessary activities, individuals may have insufficient time for rest, leisure, personal care, social interaction, and personal development. Persistent time constraints can also affect opportunities for education and skill development. Individuals with heavy domestic or caregiving responsibilities may find it difficult to participate in training programmes or pursue further education. Similarly, excessive working hours can reduce opportunities for family interaction and social participation. From the capability perspective, adequate time is important because individuals require time to convert economic resources into valued activities and outcomes (Sen, 1999). Thus, time poverty can be interpreted as a restriction on individual capabilities and freedom.

Implications for Household Welfare

Time poverty also has important implications for household welfare. Households produce goods and services through both market purchases and unpaid household labour. Cooking, cleaning, childcare, eldercare, and household maintenance contribute directly to household well-being even when they do not generate monetary income. However, when the burden of unpaid work is distributed unequally, particular household members may experience greater time deprivation. Women are especially likely to face this problem because they often combine paid employment with substantial domestic and caregiving responsibilities (Blackden & Wodon, 2006; Folbre, 2006).

Time poverty may therefore influence household welfare through several pathways:



The household may have adequate income while individual members, particularly women, experience considerable time deprivation. This highlights the importance of examining time allocation at the individual level rather than relying exclusively on household-level measures.³

Implications for Public Policy

The measurement of time poverty has important implications for public policy. If poverty is assessed only through income, policies may overlook individuals who experience significant temporal deprivation. Time-use information can therefore help policymakers identify hidden forms of work and inequality.

Several policy interventions can contribute to reducing time poverty:

1. Strengthening care services and infrastructure: Affordable childcare, eldercare, community care services, improved public transport, and labour-saving household infrastructure can reduce the time burden associated with caregiving, domestic work, and commuting.
2. Promoting work-life balance and gender equality: Flexible and family-friendly employment policies, decent working-hour regulations, and equitable sharing of unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities can reduce excessive time burdens and gender differences in time allocation.
3. Strengthening time-use data and policy planning: Regular national time-use surveys can identify patterns of paid and unpaid work and provide evidence for designing gender-sensitive poverty, employment, social protection, and welfare policies. The recognition of unpaid domestic and care work is particularly important. Policies should move beyond simply increasing women's labour-force participation and also address the unpaid responsibilities that may constrain such participation.

The different measurement approaches demonstrate that time poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon. The time-threshold approach identifies inadequate discretionary time, while time-use analysis reveals how time is actually distributed. Time-deficit measures indicate the intensity of deprivation, and the combined time-income approach demonstrates the interaction between monetary and temporal poverty. A multidimensional approach further places time poverty within the broader framework of human well-being. Therefore, the measurement of time poverty has implications beyond the identification of individuals with insufficient leisure. It provides an important means of understanding gender inequality, unpaid work, household welfare, labour-market participation, and human development. For public policy, incorporating time-use information into poverty assessment can help design policies that not only increase income but also reduce excessive and unequally distributed time burdens.

In this context, time should be recognised as an important economic and social resource, and adequate access to discretionary time should be considered an essential component of individual well-being and a broader understanding of poverty.

CONCLUSION

Addressing time poverty requires policies that recognise, reduce, and redistribute unpaid domestic and caregiving work. Accessible childcare

and eldercare services, improved public infrastructure, flexible employment arrangements, decent working hours, and equitable sharing of household responsibilities can help reduce excessive time burdens. Incorporating time-use data into poverty and gender analyses can provide a more comprehensive understanding of deprivation and household welfare. Overall, recognising time as a scarce economic and social resource can contribute to more inclusive, gender-responsive, and people-centred development policies that promote not only economic security but also well-being and a more equitable distribution of time.

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