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Measuring Women's Work: Innovations and Obstacles in the Global South

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Overview

The measurement of women's work remains one of the most enduring and complex challenges in labour statistics, particularly in the Global South. Despite decades of feminist scholarship, international statistical reform, and methodological innovation, substantial gaps persist in capturing the full spectrum of women's productive contributions. The panel on *Measuring Women's Work: Innovations and Obstacles in the Global South*, convened at the 66th Annual Conference of the Indian Society of Labour Economics (ISLE), brought together scholars and practitioners from India, South Africa, Latin America, and the International Labour Organization (ILO) to examine these challenges.

The discussion was framed around a set of foundational questions: What counts as work? How have international standards evolved to expand beyond employment? What methodological tools to better capture unpaid domestic and care work? And what institutional and political barriers continue to limit the translation of improved measurement into policy change?

Across presentations and discussions, a shared concern emerged: while the conceptual definition of work has expanded significantly, statistical systems continue to struggle with operationalisation, institutional continuity, and translation into policy. The conversation revolved around the following intersecting themes:

- expanding the concept of work beyond employment;
- methodological innovation through time-use data and survey reform;
- gendered bias in reporting and data collection;
- institutional and political economy constraints shaping statistical systems; and
- linking improved measurement to labour, care, and social policy.

Taken together, the panel underscored that measurement is neither neutral nor purely technical. Statistical categories shape economic narratives, influence public debate, and determine policy priorities. When women's unpaid domestic, care, subsistence, and assisting work is undercounted or misclassified, economic analysis and policymaking remain incomplete. The task ahead is not merely refinement of tools, but institutionalisation of a transformative measurement agenda.

Reframing the Concept of Work: From Employment to Total Work

At the centre of the discussion was the historical narrowing of work to employment. For decades, labour force statistics equated work with activities performed for pay or profit, excluding a vast range of unpaid productive contributions predominantly undertaken by women. This narrow framing had far-reaching implications: it rendered women statistically inactive even when they were engaged in intensive domestic, care, subsistence, and assisting labour.

The 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) Resolution in 2013 marked a significant conceptual shift. It distinguished between "work" and "employment" and broadened the definition of work to include all productive activities, whether market-

oriented or not. Under this framework, work encompasses employment, own-use production of goods, unpaid domestic and care services, volunteer work, and other forms of productive activity.

This reclassification represented more than a technical adjustment. It acknowledged the economic significance of social reproduction and the unpaid labour that sustains households and enables market production. However, as several panellists emphasised, conceptual reform has not automatically translated into consistent national practice. In India, changes in survey classification over time (such as the discontinuation or modification of activity codes capturing unpaid domestic and allied activities) have affected the ability to track women's work longitudinally. In South Africa, while time-use surveys have revealed persistent gender gaps, there is no continuous series capturing unpaid work over time.

The result is a persistent disconnect between global standards and national implementation. Although the ICLS framework provides conceptual clarity, operationalisation requires alignment across survey instruments, classifications, and institutional priorities. Without this alignment, expanded definitions remain aspirational rather than transformative.

Methodological Reform: Time-Use Data and Survey Architecture

If the conceptual expansion of work establishes what should be measured, methodological reform determines how measurement occurs. Time-use surveys (TUS) were central to the panel's discussion as a methodological innovation capable of capturing the full range of women's activities.

Time-use surveys differ fundamentally from conventional labour force surveys. Rather than asking respondents whether they worked during a reference period, TUS capture the allocation of time across a 24-hour day. This approach documents paid work, unpaid domestic services, caregiving, personal activities, and leisure in chronological sequence. It makes visible the "double burden" borne by women who combine employment with extensive unpaid responsibilities.

Panellists highlighted the strengths of diary-based time-use methods in reducing recall bias and constructing a narrative of daily life. However, they also acknowledged their resource intensity. Budget constraints, literacy barriers, logistical limitations, and declining trust in official data systems complicate implementation, especially in developing countries.

In response to these constraints, the ILO has developed a lighter time-use module designed for integration into Labour Force Surveys (LFS). This add-on approach seeks to balance methodological rigour with feasibility. The objective is not to replace comprehensive TUS but to complement LFS data by capturing unpaid care and domestic activities alongside employment indicators.

The Indian experience illustrates both potential and limitations. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) provides high-frequency employment data but lacks detailed capture of unpaid care. The Time Use Survey (2019) offered granular insight into daily time allocation but

remains episodic. Panellists argued that integrating light time-use modules within PLFS could enhance coherence, provided that trade-offs are transparently documented.

Field-level innovations undertaken by IWWAGE demonstrate how methodological refinements can alter outcomes. By expanding principal activity definitions, recording duration rather than binary participation, introducing standardised activity lists, and capturing self-reported responses instead of proxy reporting, survey instruments produced different and often higher estimates of women's participation. These findings underscore a crucial insight: measurement tools shape data outcomes. What is counted depends on what questions are asked as well as how questions are framed, who asks them, who answers them what is the extent of informant bias as one captures the difference between proxy reporting and self-reporting, and the extent of probing all significantly influence outcomes. Women may underreport or unintentionally misclassify their own work due to social norms, and perceptions that domestic and care work and responsibilities are not *real* work. Often, social desirability bias may influence women to underreport their employment activities and can be another challenge that needs to be resolved.

Survey architecture therefore requires deliberate design. Capturing assisting roles, own-use production, and caregiving responsibilities demands more than superficial adjustments. It requires systematic alignment between activity classifications, probing protocols, and enumerator training.

Gendered Bias in Data Collection

Measurement challenges extend beyond survey design into the social dynamics of reporting. A recurring theme across presentations was the gendered nature of response bias.

Women frequently underreport their own unpaid domestic and care work, perceiving such activities as natural duties rather than economic contributions. This respondent bias is shaped by entrenched gender norms. When surveys rely on self-identification of "work," women may not classify assisting roles, subsistence tasks, or caregiving as labour.

Proxy reporting introduces further distortion. In many household surveys, one member, often male, responds on behalf of others. Duration, multitasking, and assisting roles are particularly vulnerable to omission.

Enumerator bias also influences outcomes. The phrasing of questions, the depth of probing, and assumptions about what constitutes work shape responses. Without gender-sensitive training, enumerators may fail to capture secondary or preparatory activities, such as agricultural tasks performed intermittently.

These biases collectively produce statistical invisibility. Addressing them requires procedural reform: minimising proxy reporting, employing female enumerators where feasible, introducing detailed prompts, and training investigators to probe beyond initial responses. Data collection is not merely technical; it is a social interaction embedded within normative frameworks.

Institutional and Political Economy Constraints

Statistical systems do not operate in isolation. They are embedded within institutional and political economies that shape priorities and capacities. Several structural constraints emerged in the panel discussion. First, resource limitations restrict survey length and frequency. High-frequency labour force data is often prioritised over depth, leading to the truncation of detailed activity codes. Historically, earlier survey rounds included follow-up questions, particularly for those falling under the status codes of 92 (attended domestic duties only) and 93 (attended domestic duties and engaged in free collection of goods), providing insight into the range of activities women performed, from collecting firewood to tutoring children. The follow-ups were tailored to get binary responses that better captured women's participation in a range of activities. However, after 2012, these detailed classifications were discontinued or modified, limiting the ability to track such work over time. Hence, it was noted that the push toward high-frequency labour force data has often come at the cost of depth and nuance of understanding the range of work women perform. As a result, women's unpaid domestic and care responsibilities that are understood to be natural are inadequately captured, leaving policymakers without clear answers to key questions such as whether childcare and household work constrain women's labour force participation.

Second, discontinuities between survey rounds undermine longitudinal comparability. Changes in classification systems, questionnaire design, and sampling frames disrupt continuity. In India, successive survey reforms have introduced innovations but also eliminated certain detailed codes that previously captured unpaid activities. In the South African context, shaped by profound political and social transformation since the end of apartheid in 1994, despite major changes in household composition, labour markets, and social policy, there remains no consistent, dedicated data series capturing women's unpaid work.

South Africa has conducted multiple surveys, including the October Household Survey, Labour Force Surveys, the Quarterly Labour Force Survey, and Time-Use Surveys, but institutional discontinuities and shifting priorities have limited continuity. The 2010 Time-Use Survey provided important insights, showing that women spend substantially more time on unpaid work than men, particularly when young children are present, and even when women are employed, illustrating the persistence of the "double burden."

South Africa's distinctive household patterns, including declining marriage rates, rising non-marital childbearing, and the legacy of circular labour migration intensify the importance of measuring unpaid care and domestic work, particularly within multigenerational households where grandparents often share care responsibilities.

However, challenges such as resource constraints, loss of institutional memory, and declining trust in official statistics undermine the sustainability of data systems. Panellist emphasised that measurement of women's work occurs within broader data ecosystems. Without institutional continuity and public trust, even well-designed surveys struggle to produce long-term impact.

Additionally, they laid emphasis on how measuring women's work is feasible within existing statistical frameworks. The constraints are less technical than institutional. Prioritisation, funding allocation, and political will determine whether expanded measurement becomes embedded practice.

Global Comparability and Contextual Specificity

The discussion underscored measurement as a global challenge. Across contexts, agricultural work, assisting roles, and unpaid care remain underreported. International standards aim to enhance comparability, but national contexts vary significantly.

For instance, household structures in South Africa characterised by declining marriage rates, non-marital childbearing, and multigenerational caregiving shape the distribution of unpaid labour. In India, rural-urban differences, caste dynamics, and informal sector dominance influence women's work patterns. Survey instruments must be sensitive to these contextual realities while maintaining alignment with international classifications such as the International Classification of Activities for Time-Use Statistics (ICATUS).

Comparability should not come at the expense of contextual relevance. Instead, transparent documentation of methodological trade-offs enables cross-country learning without erasing national specificity.

From Measurement to Care and Labour Policy

Improved measurement has limited value unless it informs policy. The panel repeatedly emphasised the gap between statistical innovation and policy translation. Unpaid care burdens directly affect labour market outcomes. Women's time constraints influence labour force participation, occupational choices, and hours worked. During the COVID-19 crisis, evidence from South Africa and elsewhere showed that school closures and care disruptions intensified unpaid burdens, leading to labour market withdrawal.

The ILO's 5R framework: *Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward* and *Represent*, connects measurement to care policy. Recognising unpaid care through data enables governments to design childcare infrastructure, eldercare services, and social protection measures. Redistribution requires both state intervention and shifts in household norms. Rewarding paid care workers' demands labour regulation and wage policy. Representation ensures voice in social dialogue.

However, the translation from data to policy remains uneven. Even where time-use data exists, care infrastructure investments are often inadequate. Measurement must therefore be embedded within broader gender-responsive budgeting and planning frameworks.

In India, debates around female labour force participation often rely on headline rates without sufficient integration of time-use insights. Without understanding how women allocate time across paid and unpaid work, policy responses risk misdiagnosing labour market dynamics. It was noted that the Employment and Unemployment Survey rounds captured women's work aspirations with additional questions around the kind of work women would ideally want to participate. This has been omitted in the current PLFS rounds, raising concerns

about how employment policy can respond without explicitly measuring women's aspirations from labour market and their intentions.

Valuation and Economic Accounting

An underlying tension in the discussion concerned the valuation of unpaid care. While the ICLS framework recognises unpaid domestic and care services as work, these activities remain outside the core production boundary of the System of National Accounts (SNA). Satellite accounts provide one avenue for estimating economic value, yet methodological debates persist regarding appropriate valuation techniques.

Panellists noted that the objective of measurement is not necessarily immediate inclusion within GDP, but recognition and policy relevance. Overemphasis on monetary valuation risks conflating market and non-market logics. Nonetheless, quantifying time allocation is a necessary first step toward informed debate.

Toward a Transformative Measurement Agenda

The cumulative insights from the panel point toward a transformative agenda grounded in the following points:

- Consolidate conceptual alignment between international standards and national statistical practice.
- Institutionalise integration of time-use modules within labour force surveys to ensure regular and coherent data.
- Reform survey procedures to address gendered bias.
- Invest in statistical capacity and continuity.
- Embed measurement within care and labour policy frameworks.
- Reform must be systemic rather than episodic. Isolated surveys cannot sustain transformation. Statistical systems must evolve in tandem with policy frameworks.



Conclusion

Measuring women's work remains a central challenge in labour statistics and gender policy. Conceptual advances, particularly the 19th ICLS Resolution, have broadened definitions of work. Methodological innovations, especially time-use surveys, provide tools for capturing unpaid labour. Yet institutional constraints, gendered reporting bias, and limited policy uptake continue to impede transformation. Several noteworthy methodological themes recurred throughout the discussion:

- **Light time-use module:** Full 24-hour diaries provide detailed narratives but are resource-intensive. Lighter modules reduce cost but may sacrifice nuance.
- **Integration of TUS and LFS:** Combining time-use modules with labour force surveys can strengthen both instruments, but tensions may arise between objectives and design constraints.
- **Probing and Enumerator Training:** Carefully designed follow-up questions and strong enumerator training are critical for women's capturing assisting roles and unpaid activities.
- **Activity Classification:** Pre-coded exhaustive activity lists improve comparability and reduce ambiguity, particularly for women's unpaid domestic and care tasks.
- **Sample Size and Disaggregation:** Adequate sampling is necessary for reliable gender-disaggregated indicators at sub-national levels.
- **Institutional Sustainability:** Resource constraints, loss of institutional memory, and trust deficits undermine data ecosystems.

The panel demonstrated that invisibility is produced through layered processes: conceptual narrowing, procedural design, and institutional prioritisation. Addressing these layers requires coordinated reform across statistical architecture, survey methodology, and policy integration.

Ultimately, the task is not merely to count women's work but to reshape economic narratives and policy responses. Accurate measurement is foundational to redistribution, recognition, and representation. Sustained institutional commitment and political will are essential if improved measurement is to translate into substantive gender equality.



The brief is authored by Anjali S and has been reviewed by Bidisha Mondal. It is based on a panel titled, "Measuring Women's Work: Innovations and Obstacles in the Global South" at the 66th Annual Conference of the Indian Society of Labour Economics (ISLE), which took place at the Symbiosis International (Deemed) University (SIU), Pune, on the 19th of January 2026.

Speakers: Valeria Esquivel, Sona Mitra, G.C Manna, Daniela Casale, Sher Verick