

Measuring Women's Economic Activity

Over the last decade interest in the role of women in economic development has increased greatly. The measurement of female labour force activity is often underreported in censuses and surveys. Statistical data on women's economic activity are either inaccurate or incomplete and show lower activity rates for women than expected. Economists have always been concerned with the delimitation of what is and what is not to be accounted for. One of the major problems concerning women's work is the lack of a **well-developed** definition of women's economic activity. There is a growing concern to expand the meaning of economic activity beyond the conventional definition of the "production boundary" that gives primacy to market activity. Accounting only for goods and services provided and distributed in the market-place was broken when imputations were made in national accounts for agricultural products consumed by the farmer himself.

This is the only exception to the market criteria, but there are no regular exceptions for women's participation in home management and domestic production. Changes in the "production boundary" would create better reporting of women's participation in the informal sector of the economy and better measurement of women's contributions in the System of National Accounts (SNA).

The work of women in the Middle East, as elsewhere, has gone largely unacknowledged and unmeasured and has been excluded from national accounts. According to current definitions, these non-market activities of the household are considered to be "non-productive", unpaid services and remain "outside the production boundary". According to the United Nations, economic activity is defined as "any activity which is devoted to the production of goods or services which is measurable in economic terms and in which, generally speaking, people are gainfully



Women do two-thirds of the world's work, receive one tenth of the world's income, and own less than one percent of the world's assets.

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employed".⁽¹⁾ Continuous efforts are being made to measure women's non-market activities of the household and to include it in labour force surveys and studies.

The process of socioeconomic development in the Middle East has generated a larger demand for and larger supply of women's labour in the market economy. Moreover, women's labour was also affected by the following demographic changes:

- Reduced mortality, with a longer expectation of life beyond the reproductive years.
- Decreased fertility, which leads to lower responsibilities of women in the household.
- The increased periodic out-migration of males in search of jobs leaving women as heads of households.

All these factors are catalysts for change in women's roles and will enhance their participation in the economy outside the household enterprise.⁽²⁾ Measuring women's economic participation involves collecting and analyzing information on women's work as well as

(1) United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 1974. *Towards a System of Social and Demographic Statistics*. Studies in Methods, Series F, No. 18. New York: United Nations.

(2) Zurak, Huda. "The Measurement of Women's Economic Participation" in *Population Factors in Development Planning in the Middle East* by Frederic C. Shorter and Huda Zurayk (Edits.). The Population Council, New York and Cairo 1985, p. 18

factors influencing their economic activity. The population census remains the primary systematic source of information or labour force statistics in most countries⁽³⁾.

Housewives' services are still the largest item missing in national accounting, despite the fact that non-market household production is now accepted as an economic activity, sharing many characteristics with market production. It is also recognized that it is quite difficult to impute a value on household activities because there are no direct market transactions which determine prices. Also, there is very little documentation of household activities which "merge imperceptibly into the process of living",⁽⁴⁾ so that coverage and inclusion of this item in national accounts becomes difficult and uncertain.

The recommendations of the U.N. Statistical Office for data collection on economic activity in censuses specify the following classification of economic activity:

1. Activity Status: The **economically active** population includes all persons engaged in economic activities on full-time or part-time basis for a minimum time during a given reference period. It includes both the employed and the unemployed. The **economically inactive** population includes home workers not engaged in economic activities, students, retired persons, persons deriving their incomes from sources other than work, and persons too young, too old, or unable to work.
2. Occupation: Relates to the type of work an individual does or seeks when looking for work.
3. Industry: Relates to the principal product of the enterprise in which the person is working or seeks work.
4. Employment Status: Relates to the employment relationship of the person to the enterprise, and includes a category of unpaid family workers, defined as "persons who do a specified minimum amount of work without pay in economic enterprises operated by other members of his (her) household".⁽⁵⁾

(3) United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 1968. **Method of Analyzing Census Data on Economic Activities of the Population**. New York: United Nations.

(4) Ibid. F. No. 18

(5) United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1985. **Handbook of Population Census Methods**. New York, United Nations.

Time - allocation studies are the best indicator of how much time is allocated to productive activity within and outside the household. These studies are subject to methodological problems that can affect the validity of the information produced:

- The reference period to be used in collecting time budgets must be fixed so as to reflect the variable nature of women's work and to minimize recall problems. Most reports of time-allocation studies suggest the use of short periods of about 24 hours, spaced throughout the year to catch seasonal variation in activities.
- Data collection procedures must ensure reliable recording of what women actually do through direct observation, random visits to record the activity of the household members, recall-activity specific during some reference period, real-sequential of activities.
- Summary classification of activities must be designed to allow a meaningful and complete representation of the information collected.⁽⁶⁾
- Development planners must be fully aware of the existing economic contribution of all members of society. Women's work is still unmeasured and unaccounted for in policy planning and implementation.

The following suggestions have been proposed to improve the current system for measuring economic activity:

- Additional questions on economic activity should be added to the census questionnaire to improve its ability to cover and to measure market activity that is not organized on a full-time, single-job basis (this applies to both sexes).
- Moreover, thorough analysis of census data by sex should be undertaken by means of cross-tabulations as well as by applying multivariate analysis. A sample from the census data can be utilized to make the cost reasonable.
- Finally, the statistical system should expand to include some household production activities in addition to market activity. This will require redefinition of economic activity, which should be based on prior time-allocation studies of household members.⁽⁷⁾

(6) United Nations Statistical Commission. 1979. **Progress Report on the Development of Statistics of Time Use**. Report of the Secretary General.

(7) Zurayk, pp. 45-46