

Time and technology: a gender approach for the Portuguese context

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Abstract

This paper addresses a project in progress, which envisages an account and understanding of the ways of employment of technology in the domestic space. According to the principal thesis adopted, gender is assumed as the structuring variable in the ways of appropriation and negotiation of spaces and times, and technology contains the distinctive orders of the masculine and feminine positions. In brief, an attempt is made to understand how perceptions and representations of technology and time are gendered, and create distinct and differentiated ways of use of space and time.

In the paper, interim results are presented of the research, in particular of the survey carried out in the beginning of 2010 among couples in two regions of Portugal with different levels of development. This is preceded by an overview of some major studies about the relationship between time and technology, focusing on household equipment, its assumed and real time-saving effects for women and its repercussions on social organization within the household.

Keywords: Gender; Time; Technology; Household.

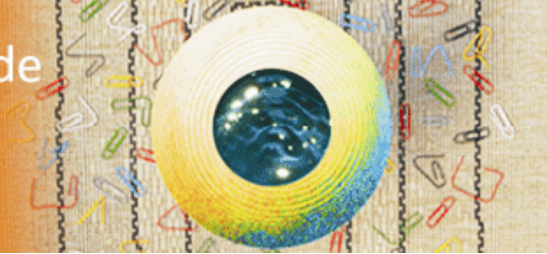
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Introduction

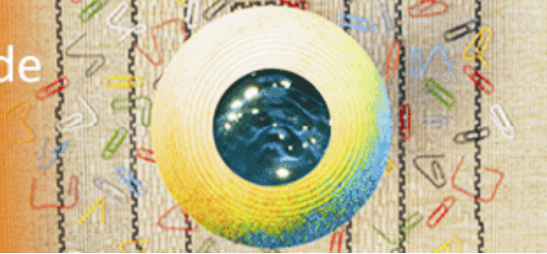
This text deals with the concept of gender inequality within household spaces, considering the mutual relationships between gender, time and technology. The focus is on the effects brought about by technological equipments, of which for simplicity's sake we consider two possibilities. The first is that technology endorses women's autonomy by promoting the *degendering* of domestic chores, while the second prospect is quite the opposite: the reinforcement of customary patterns in which women are responsible for the most part of household work. The domestic space, with its immense range of tasks and responsibilities, is being rapidly revolutionized nowadays, as a result of the multiple changes brought about by different schemes of working time arrangements, different modes of experiencing family life as well as different modes of understanding domestic spaces as sources of individual identity. All these changes are surrounded by new modes of living which are also sustained by new responses provided by the capitalist-consumerist society, as noticeable in the advancement of the 24 hour-society.

In the strict case of domestic chores, it is commonly held that women have gained much more autonomy inside the domestic space, and thus obtained more time for themselves and for the activities they like. The reasons for this presumed development include the modification of values; the appearance of women on the labour market; the usage of mechanical equipments; and the increasing possibilities of buying out services and products. This assumption may be contrasted with the view held by several authors, such as Bittman, who claim that the growth of market services is precisely a response to increasing time pressures arising from new responsibilities of women in the paid workforce, and to a quite inflexible sexual division of labour at home (Bittman, [Matheson and Meagher, 1999](#)).

In the following, data and considerations will be presented which derive from a research project which is currently going on in Portugal, involving a survey to couples in the districts of Castelo Branco and Braga⁶. The project in question examines the gendered nature of time and technology in the domestic domain, as regards use and representations. The close connections between technology and time, and the multiple ideas and interpretations they are subject to, are key elements in the project's theoretical framework. In methodological terms we consider various types of technological equipment which figure in and around the home. They are: those pertaining to the information and communication technology (ICT); means of transport; and household equipments. It is this last category which will be central in this paper. They are often called labour-saving devices, but are they also time-saving devices? And what is the impact of their use, or their mere presence, on the division of work (in its broadest sense) between the male and female member of a couple?

Use of time and technology as key factors for the promotion of gender equality

⁶ The Project is funded by FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia) and supported by CIG (Comissão para a Cidadania e a Igualdade de Género), both in Lisbon. More information on site www.ces.ubi.pt and on www.tempotecnologiagenero.com (presently under construction).



In discussions on the promotion of equality of opportunities between women and men, the organization of domestic life is often taken into account, and for good reasons. The implicit or explicit allotment of the responsibility for the domestic chores to women, as is often the case, means a higher input of time and effort for them. This unequal division causes differences in the private sphere, such as the reduced time women have for themselves. The performance of women in the public sphere is affected, too. Women have less time for civic activities, for schooling, and they may opt or feel forced to work in a different regime (such as part-time), which consequently affects their income and career prospects.

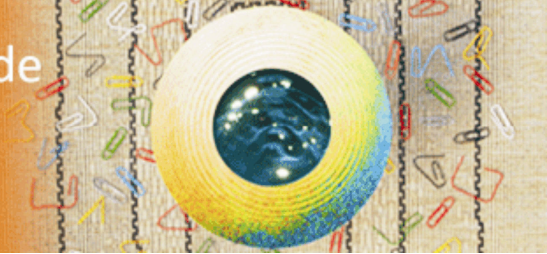
The domestic responsibilities do not only claim time but also mental and physical energy. The effort spent on household work, especially when care for children or other dependents is involved, may have a negative influence on the functioning of women in the labour force, and in particular on the perception other people have of their functioning. The alleged lower productivity of women in market work is forwarded as a justification for their lower wages as compared with men who do the same work during the same period (these arguments are discussed and endorsed by Becker 1993 [1981]: 57; Becker 1985). However, empirical reality belies the hypothesis of lower productivity. Women work hard both at home and at their job, and stress and exhaustion may be caused as much by the efforts they spend on their numerous tasks as by their repetitive attempts to combine their responsibilities within a narrow stretch of time.

For the problems of time-poverty and of the drudgery of housework, domestic appliances seem to offer a solution. It may therefore be assumed that they promote gender equality in the private and public sphere. Not only does household equipment reduce the time and the labour women spend on housework, but it might also stimulate a higher degree of sharing of the household tasks. In addition, it seems logical that men, in view of their association with machines and electric equipment, would be keen on handling the appliances in question. The problematic nature of these assumptions will be examined below.

Gender and mechanization

During the last few centuries, the introduction of more sophisticated technology in domains such as agriculture, industry, and health care, implied a higher participation of men, while women in general remained with the tough manual tasks which yielded low prestige and low earnings, if any (Simonton 1998: 209; Sullerot 1968).

In the collective representation of most societies and groups, machinery is associated with men, and the process of mechanization thus triggered the monopolization by men of many activities which until then were, at least in part, carried out by women. The assertion of men that women are not fit for the operating of (certain) machines is endorsed by many women. In the Barroso region in northern Portugal, women and men work along in agriculture, but the working with machines is a



“men’s job” because, according to both genders, the women are nervous (“*nervosentas*”) and afraid (“*timoratas*”) (Ribeiro 1997: 307-308).

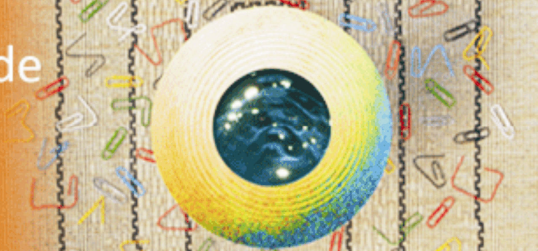
Exceptions to the rule that mechanization is identical to masculinization are plenty and are found in particular in the domestic domain. In Europe, for example, men are reticent towards the use of washing machines, much the same as towards every other activity related to the process of cleaning and fixing the clothes (see Blain quoted by McMahon 1999: 29-30). Regarding the operating of a laundry machine, men often display the same «techno-fear» which in other contexts is attributed to women. Handling the machine in itself may seem simple, but difficult for men is the step to engage in a world which they consider not to be of their competence, distant and of a lesser value: the world of garments and textile in the domestic context, the world dealing with image, sensibility and style, the world not immediately considered productive. In fact, women and men implicitly agree that this is a female domain. This is an idea well developed and illustrated by Jean-Claude Kaufmann in his book *La trame conjugale. Analyse du couple par son linge* (1992). Behind this conclusion lies the assumption that women and men perform different social roles corresponding with different levels of power and responsibility, the man holding the dominant position (Bourdieu, 1998) insofar as he has continued to reserve for him the more instrumental tasks. This all might suggest that it is the function of the technology rather than the type of technology which causes its association with one of the genders. In fact, this idea is an orientation line for our research.

Household machinery and time

Apart from the immediate caring tasks, the household jobs which demand most time and energy are food preparation and the maintenance of clothes. The equipment for cooking has progressed from the wood-burning cooker to the present-day full-automatic oven and microwave. As for laundering, this tough job has been eased by the availability of running water and electricity in the household, and the variety of machines for several stages of the washing and drying process. Ironing remains a time-consuming job, but the electric iron is a great improvement to the charcoal version and hand mangles of bygone days.

Technical research and engineering produced in the twentieth century various other equipments with an evident time-saving dimension, such as the refrigerator and the vacuum cleaner, nowadays an almost universal presence in western families. But also laboratory research resulted in inventions which lightened the domestic work, including no-iron fabrics and more effective detergents.

These scientific and technological developments as such do not guarantee a reduction of the time dedicated to domestic work, nor a better balance in the sharing of this work between men and women. Already in the 1960s some authors doubted (or nuanced) the time-saving effects of household technology, such as Kathryn Walker (1969), who weighed data of 1952 against those of 1967 for upstate New York (see also Robinson and Converse 1972). The exchange of opinions on this issue has been gaining impetus in recent decades, undoubtedly under the influence of the more universal spread of an increasingly sophisticated technology, but a major trigger will have been the



questioning of the role of women in the domestic and in the public sphere, as an element of the pursuit of more equality of opportunities between the genders.

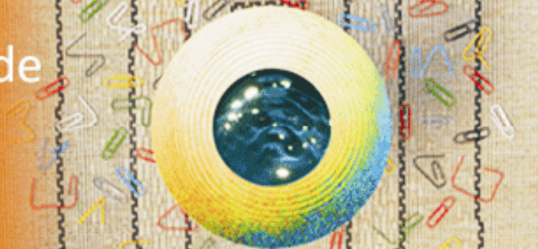
Contributions to this debate were delivered by a wide array of authors from different disciplines. A pioneering and still much-cited study is that by Joann Vanek, who around 1970, when comparing USA data of the 1920s and 1930s with those of her time, found that modern household equipments had not diminished the time spent on domestic chores⁷. As explanations for this unexpected conclusion she proposed, among others: the claim on time by the proper device (the learning of the functions, the fuss resulting from a breakdown); the (increasingly) higher standards of cleanliness, often as a consequence of the presence of the device; and the virtually disappearance of domestic servants. In addition, there was an increase in time dedicated to other, not technology-supported household tasks. Vanek concluded that mothers devoted more time to the care and assistance of their children and of infirm relatives and suggested that the household technology may have allowed them to do so (Vanek 1974a; Vanek 1974b). Also shopping and chauffeuring, especially of children, had been consuming more time. This was related to the change in lay-out of many American cities, in which the suburbanization implied greater distances between residential areas and the areas where the services were concentrated. But it was also a consequence of the steady penetration of transport technology into the domestic space: in the period after World War II, middle - class women in the USA had obtained more access to cars, and they used it principally for a great number of household and caring activities, to be performed at longer distances, thus more time-consuming (Harms 2003; Dupuy 1995).

Most interesting for our purposes is the conclusion, not only of Vanek but of many authors after her, that household equipment may have a perverse effect on the sharing of domestic tasks between men and women. Or, as Murcott (1982: 133) asserted, "The very lightening of the domestic load has the effect of keeping women (as opposed to men) doing it." According to these authors, men feel less necessity to lend a hand, let alone execute the task, when it is considered as easy and effortless. Sometimes the modern ways of laundering and washing up are viewed as jobs which occupy hardly any time. The question: "Who does the laundering?" meets then with the response: "the machine".⁸ As Vanek concluded, as soon as a technology is associated to a domestic chore, men tend to decline requests for help in that job. Washing up used to be a job shared by several members of the household, but with the appearance of the dishwasher on the scene, men withdrew (Vanek 1974b).

In the debate about this question, some authors, while not necessarily doubting the developments mentioned by Vanek and outlined in the preceding paragraph, point out that household appliances have had a thoroughly time-saving effect. For the United States, numbers vary: "Bryant (1996) calculated that the decline [in time spent on housework] between the mid-1920 and the mid-1960 was around 14%. Lebergott (1993) instead argued that housework decreased importantly over the course of the century, from 58 hours a week in 1900 to 18 hours in 1975." (Cardia 2009/2007, note 2).

⁷ As expounded in her Ph.D.thesis, presented at the University of Michigan in 1973, "Keeping Busy: Time Spent in Housework, United States, 1920-1970".

⁸ This notion was also frequently expressed in our research, by both men and women.



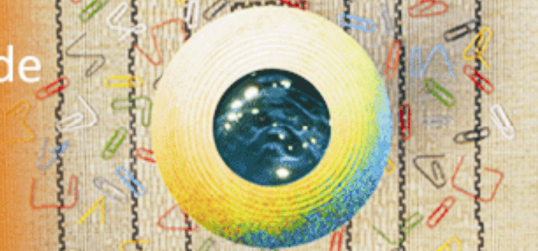
The high variance of these numbers does not necessarily entail an invalidation of these authors' overall conclusion that time dedicated to domestic work has lessened. However, the divergence, which is a recurring feature in the comparison of time-use studies, does point towards a probable lack of accuracy and the difficulty posed by a confrontation of data on time-use emanating from different researches⁹. In fact, it is hard to measure the effects and the quantity of the time which is spent or saved, especially when jobs are concerned which require caring and responsibilities, such as those which take place in the domestic space. Caring tasks imply a constant alertness but the activities may be intermittent, and therefore caring is often carried out simultaneously with other jobs. A parent who is ironing the linen may keep an eye on young children, but when the children need full attention, the activity of ironing has to be interrupted. Or, to take another example, the caring for sick persons maybe quite time-consuming, and the short breaks possible may be employed to do quickly some job related to household or study.

The various studies on time use, mentioned above, were carried out in different periods, and this implies not only differences in the presence and types of equipments, and changes in norms regarding hygiene and (possibly) gender roles, but also changes in household composition. Some of these alterations caused a reduction, others an increase in the volume of housework to be carried out, and affected also the number of family members who may participate in the housework.

The relation between the use or presence of technological equipments on the one hand, and the variation of the time spent in domestic activities by men and women on the other hand, is dependent of the historic and social-cultural context (Turner and Grieco, 2000: 131). Within the United States, the differences between rural and urban areas, ethnic and religious backgrounds, and regional traditions may all have resulted in diversity of gender roles and also of the pace and pattern of the adoption of household technology. Today's Europe shows great disparities between the several countries regarding time dedicated to housework, but in all it is the women, including those with paid work, who devote more time to the domestic space. Using a predominantly quantitative orientation, the survey "Family and gender roles" of the ISSP (International Social Survey Programme), held in 2002/2003, concluded that in Portugal, men dedicated 5.58 hours a week to domestic chores, and women 26.35 hours. In Great Britain, men's time for housework was more or less the same (5.83 hours) as in Portugal, but British women spent 11.64 hours, which was much less than in Portugal (Crompton and Lyonette 2007: 121). There is thus a great disparity in overall time families dedicate to housework, and this is more evident still when also the data of other countries, in the same survey, are taken into account. The study by Perista (2002: 450) referring to Portuguese data of 1999 shows that women with a paid occupation spent 4 hour and 7 minutes a day on household work and caring for the family, and men 1 hour and 38 minutes.

These data should be adequately analysed in terms of the socio-economic profile of families, insofar as a higher economic status corresponds to greater possibilities to exchange money for time,

⁹ This limited comparability of time-use studies has been a reason for a standardization, in the latter decades of the twentieth century, of those carried out at national level (mainly conducted by national statistical organizations, such as in Portugal the INE, National Institute of Statistics). To promote the comparability, Eurostat has since 2000 issued guidelines for HETUS (Harmonised European Time use surveys). (Eurostat 2009) .



allowing the buying out of household services. This may also have as a consequence the covering of gender disparities, especially with respect to the upper classes. Therefore, for a correct idea about the relationship between household equipment and time allocation, some basic variables should be considered in the process of data-collecting. These include household composition, the types of appliance existent, the socio-demographic data of the individuals, and also the definition of housework. In some studies this is considered the same as non-market work; in others just a few activities are taken into account. Essential is the assessment of caring activities, those which can hardly be reduced through technical appliances, but on the other hand may be extended thanks to the higher availability of time permitted by technical devices. On the other hand, the time gained thanks to the equipment may simply be employed for other jobs, some of which remunerated. In other instances, this time may be converted in favour of cultural activities or leisure in its broadest sense.

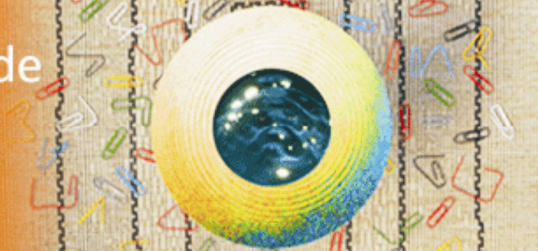
The research in Portugal

In the previous section, it was referred that in Portugal the hours women dedicate to household tasks exceed largely the average of European countries. But Portuguese women also have a massive presence at the labour market, almost always working in a full-time regime. These circumstances confer an extra significance to the study of the gendered use of labour-saving appliances in Portugal. In our research, we are outlining the situation in this respect in two districts with different development profiles, Castelo Branco in the centre - east and Braga in the north - west.

The research has quantitative and qualitative elements. It started with a survey among 400 households (200 in each district) applying a questionnaire which aimed to gather data clustering around the following themes: aspects of household composition; education and profession; time spent at work, at several types of housework (including care), in leisure and in transport; presence, knowledge about and use of various types of technological equipment (kitchen articles, ICT objects, and vehicles). Among the respondents, men and women were in equal measure present, while in the sample also care has been taken of a reliable representation according to age, habitat and educational level. The data obtained in this survey are presently being treated and interrelated and this will be a basis for the next steps, which will have a qualitative character. The most interesting and problematic aspects will then be discussed in focus groups and will be elaborated in in-depth interviews.

Final Notes

In our days, a recurrently expressed idea is that in the western world the housework is less timeconsuming than a few generations ago, and to a considerable degree is being shared between the spouses. To corroborate this notion, several developments are usually pointed out. In the first place there is an increasing participation of women in market work, which would leave less time for housework and incite the male spouse to a higher participation. A second development which



influences household organization concerns the micro-level, such as the availability of take-away meals, and the existence of special outdoor services for household tasks (such as ironing). And, in the third place, the technological gadgets, the household devices, are assumed to be a great help in the saving of time.

An overview of the studies on this last aspect points out the complex relationship between availability of technical equipment, time management, and sharing of housework. The Portuguese situation in this respect is a major focus of our research in progress, highlighting the gendered views, attitudes and action existing within families. At this point, the view of Bittman, Rice and Wajcman (2004) that “[t]he domestic division of labour by gender remains remarkably resistant to technological innovation” is being confirmed.

For our present research, the conclusions of previous studies, leading to diversified and sometimes controversial theoretical viewpoints on this issue are a challenge and an incentive. Theoretical reflections and the empirical evidence so far have endorsed the prime of place attributed in the research model to gender as the main variable which influences conceptions and use of technological equipment.

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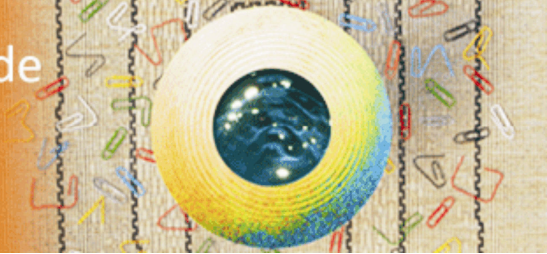
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