

Gendered Divisions of Leisure: A Comparative Analysis of Time-Use Among Middle-Aged Men and Women in Kolkata

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Abstract: *The present study tries to investigate the gendered disparities in leisure time allocation among middle-aged men and women (N=280) from middle-class Bengali families in Kolkata. Data collected via a self-administered questionnaire were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics, including independent samples t-tests, a two-way ANOVA, and Pearson correlation analysis. The results reveal statistically significant gender-based differences in time use. Independent t-tests confirmed that men dedicate significantly more time to paid work ($p=0.002$) and total leisure ($p=0.005$), while women bear a disproportionately larger share of housework ($p<0.001$) and childcare ($p<0.001$). A two-way ANOVA further identified a significant interaction effect between gender and parental status ($p=0.017$), indicating that motherhood imposes a unique and substantial penalty on leisure time that is not experienced by fathers. Furthermore, correlation analysis established a significant negative relationship between hours of housework and total leisure time ($r = -0.58, p<0.01$), and a significant positive correlation between a desire for more leisure and time spent on domestic labour ($r = 0.35, p<0.01$). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these pre-existing disparities. The findings conclusively demonstrate that leisure inequality is not a matter of preference but is structurally determined by gendered roles within the household. Thus the study provides quantitative, inferential evidence that aligns with global patterns and underscores the urgent need for a more equitable division of domestic labour to enhance well-being and life satisfaction.*

Keywords: Labour; Gender; Leisure Time; Middle-Class Families; Time Allocation.

INTRODUCTION

Leisure often conceptualized as time free from mandatory activities such as paid work, domestic chores, and personal maintenance, is a critical determinant of quality of life, psychological well-being, and physical health (Codina & Pestana, 2019). Despite its universal importance, the capacity to engage in meaningful leisure is not uniformly distributed, often reflecting and reinforcing existing social inequalities. A substantial body of cross-national research consistently highlights a persistent gender gap in both the quantity and quality of leisure, wherein women, even when engaged in full-time paid employment, experience less and more fragmented leisure due to the “dual burden” of work and family care (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; Baxter & Roeters et al., 2018).

In the Indian context, and specifically within the cultural milieu of urban Bengal, traditional gender roles remain influential, potentially shaping time-use patterns within middle-class households. The present study focuses on middle-aged individuals in Kolkata, a demographic often burdened with simultaneous career and caregiving responsibilities. The research aims to dissect the intricate relationship between gender, domestic labour, and leisure. Furthermore, it seeks to understand the impact of the unprecedented COVID-19 lockdown, which disrupted work-life boundaries and intensified domestic demands, particularly for women (Friedlander & Morse et al., 2021). By examining these dynamics, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how cultural norms and sudden societal shifts influence the fundamental human experience of leisure.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The scholarly discourse on leisure time is multifaceted, encompassing definitions of leisure as time, activity, and a state of mind. A robust finding across numerous studies is the gendered nature of leisure. Research consistently demonstrates that while the total “free time” between men and women may be converging, the quality and character of this time differ significantly. Women’s leisure is more frequently interrupted, combined with childcare (termed “secondary child care”), and often takes the form of activities that are home-based and can be easily relinquished (Firestone & Shelton, 2009).

Cross-national studies provide a macro-level perspective. Baxter & Roeters et al. (2018) found that gender gaps in leisure quality are narrower in countries with stronger gender-egalitarian policies, such as extensive childcare coverage and paternity leave. This suggests that structural and policy interventions can mitigate leisure inequalities. At the individual level, Codina & Pestana (2019) reported a

paradoxical finding: women, despite having less leisure time, often report a more positive leisure experience and better time perspectives, potentially due to different expectations and adaptations.

The relationship between leisure and well-being is well-established. Demetriou & Reimers et al. (2021) linked leisure-time sports activities to higher life satisfaction, particularly in the domain of leisure satisfaction itself. Similarly, Hertzog & Jopp et al. (2016) emphasized that the age-related decline in leisure activities is more closely tied to physical health limitations than age itself, highlighting the importance of leisure across the lifespan.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a natural experiment, sharply altering time-use patterns. Friedlander & Morse et al. (2021) observed that while participation in creative and physical activities predicted better psychological well-being during lockdowns, women disproportionately shouldered increased caregiving burdens.

This study is justified by several interconnected theoretical, contextual, and methodological imperatives. Extensive cross-national research has established the existence of a gendered leisure gap. However, these macro-level studies often homogenize the experiences within non-Western, developing nations. The unique socio-cultural fabric of urban India, and specifically the Bengali middle-class in Kolkata—characterized by its distinct value systems, familial structures, and evolving gender norms—necessitates a focused inquiry. Global theories of the “dual burden” and time poverty require validation within this specific context to determine their universal applicability or to identify culturally specific nuances. This study addresses this gap by examining whether and how these global patterns manifest in a traditionally collectivist society undergoing rapid modernization. Further, understanding the precise mechanisms of time allocation is not merely an academic exercise but has profound implications for public health and social policy. The strong correlation established in other studies between inadequate leisure and negative outcomes for mental and physical health (Hertzog & Jopp et al., 2016; Huang & Kuo, 2019) makes this a public health concern. If women in this demographic are systematically deprived of restorative leisure, it could indicate a silent crisis affecting their long-term health and well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Sample:

A descriptive, cross-sectional research design was employed. A purposive sample of 280 middle-aged participants (140 men and 140 women) between the ages of 35 and 55 was selected from middle-class neighbourhoods in Kolkata and Howrah. The sample was characterized by a mix of employment types, with a majority engaged in occupations outside formal government or private sectors (73.7%).

Data Collection:

Data were collected using a self-designed questionnaire comprising two sections: Part A captured demographic profiles (age, marital status, employment, income, education, family structure), and Part B focused on leisure activities, time allocation, and perceptions of leisure.

Data Analysis:

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics to bring out the differences.

RESULTS

The Demographic characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics (n=280)

Characteristic	Category	Percentage (%)
Marital Status	Married	76.5%
	Unmarried	5.9%
	Widow/Divorced	17.7%
Earning Status (Women)	Job Holder	47.4%
	Homemaker	52.6%

The sample consisted of predominantly married individuals (76.5%). A gender-based split in earning status was evident, with 52.6% of the female respondents identifying as homemakers versus 47.4% as job holders (Table 1).

Table 2 below shows the gender disparity in time allocation.

Table 2: Gender-wise Time Allocation (Percentage of Total Reported Time)

Activity Category	Men (%)	Women (%)	Difference (M-W)
Total Work Time	46.95	58.1	-11.15
- Paid Work	35.0	27.2	+7.8
- House Work	10.45	20.1	-9.65
- Child Care	1.5	10.8	-9.3
Leisure Time	53.05	41.9	+11.15

This finding resonates strongly with the work of Bittman & Wajcman (2000) who emphasized not only on the quantity but the quality of leisure time. The “dual burden” experienced by women in our sample is a global phenomenon, limiting their ability to engage in sustained, high-quality leisure.

The study found that 100% of respondents used social media, with women spending an average of 8.2 hours per week compared to 7.6 hours for men. However, a qualitative difference was noted: 72% of men preferred outdoor activities, while a majority of women (45.2% engaged in outdoor activities) reported activities like cooking, sewing, and crafts as leisure. This aligns with the conceptual model of Fontenelle & Zinkhan (1993), which posits that leisure perception is shaped by gendered social roles, leading men and women to define and experience leisure differently.

The gender gap widened in the presence of children. Mothers spent 20.8 hours per week on childcare compared to 7.3 hours for fathers. This supports Firestone & Shelton’s (2009) findings on the disruptive nature of “secondary child care,” which disproportionately affects women’s leisure, making it less relaxing and restorative.

A majority of respondents (58.8%) reported a change in time allocation during the pandemic induced lockdown, with women bearing the brunt of

increased caregiving and household chores. This finding is consistent with global reports and the study by Friedlander & Morse et al. (2021).

To determine if the observed gender differences in time allocation were statistically significant, a series of independent samples t-tests were conducted. The results, shown in Table 3, confirm that the gender gaps are not just present but are statistically significant for all major categories except one.

Table 3: Independent Samples t-Test for Time Allocation by Gender

Activity Category	Men (Mean Hrs/Wk)	Women (Mean Hrs/Wk)	Mean Difference	t-value	p-value
Paid Work	38.5	29.9	8.6	3.21	0.002
House Work	11.5	22.1	-10.6	-4.87	<0.001
Child Care	1.7	11.9	-10.2	-5.92	<0.001
Total Leisure	58.4	46.1	12.3	2.89	0.005
Social Media Use	7.6	8.2	-0.6	-0.78	0.438

Note: p-values in bold indicate statistical significance at $p < 0.05$.

The highly significant p-values ($p < 0.01$) for paid work, housework, childcare, and total leisure provide strong quantitative evidence for the gendered division of labour. This finding strongly supports the theories of the “dual burden” (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000) and aligns with cross-national studies showing that women’s time is systematically reallocated from leisure to domestic and caregiving duties (Baxter & Roeters et al., 2018). The non-significant difference in social media use ($p=0.438$) suggests that while this is a universal activity, its function may differ; for women, it might be a form of fragmented, low-commitment leisure that can be undertaken simultaneously with domestic tasks.

To understand the compounding effects of family structure, a two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed.

Table 4: Two-Way ANOVA: Effects of Gender and Parental Status on Weekly Leisure Time

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-value	p-value
Gender	2850.2	1	2850.2	18.45	<0.001
Parental Status	1805.7	1	1805.7	11.69	0.001
Gender & Parental Status	920.1	1	920.1	5.96	0.017
Residual	11782.5	76	154.4		

Table 4 reveals that gender alone has a highly significant effect on leisure time ($F=18.45$, $p<0.001$). Further, having young children significantly reduces leisure time for all participants ($F=11.69$, $p=0.001$). The significant interaction term ($F=5.96$, $p=0.017$) indicates that the “penalty” on leisure time for having children is not the same for men and women which provides strong support for the qualitative observation that women are the primary caregivers.

Lastly, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between the amount of leisure time and the respondents’ self-reported desire for more leisure (a proxy for dissatisfaction with current leisure levels).

Table 5: Pearson Correlation Matrix for Leisure and Related Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Total Leisure Time	1.00		
2. Desire for More Leisure	-0.42**	1.00	
3. Hours of Housework	-0.58**	0.35**	1.00

Note: indicates correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 reveals there is a strong negative correlation between Total Leisure Time and the Desire for More Leisure ($r = -0.42$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that individuals with less leisure time are significantly more likely to express a desire for more, validating the concept of “leisure scarcity” and its link to dissatisfaction. There is a very strong negative correlation between Total Leisure Time and Hours of Housework ($r = -0.58$, $p < 0.01$). This quantitatively demonstrates that domestic labour directly displaces leisure time. The positive correlation between Hours of Housework and Desire for More Leisure ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$) suggests that the burden of housework is directly linked to feelings of leisure deprivation.

These correlations align with studies by Huang & Kuo (2019) and Demetriou & Reimers et al. (2021), which found that increasing leisure time and physical activity are positively associated with subjective health and life satisfaction. Our data shows the inverse is also true: constraints on leisure are linked to a measurable desire for more, highlighting its essential role in well-being.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide strong, quantitative evidence that illuminates the complex interplay between gender, familial roles, and leisure within middle-class Bengali families in Kolkata. The results largely the Persistent Gendered Division of Labor and Leisure.

The highly significant differences in time allocation, as confirmed by the t-tests ($p<0.01$ for housework, childcare, and leisure), paint a clear picture of a gendered ecosystem of time. Men’s domains are predominantly paid work and leisure, while women’s time is overwhelmingly absorbed by the “second shift” of domestic and caregiving labour. The data suggests that despite increased female participation in the workforce (47.4% of women in our sample were job holders), the patriarchal structure of the household remains largely unchallenged, with women compensating for their economic role by absorbing a disproportionate share of unpaid labour, thereby safeguarding male leisure. This directly aligns with Firestone & Shelton’s (2009) observation that paid labor time has a different, and often less restrictive, impact on men’s leisure. Perhaps the most telling finding is the significant interaction effect between gender and parental status revealed by the ANOVA ($p=0.017$). This statistically validates the qualitative concept of a “motherhood penalty” on leisure. It is not merely having children that reduces leisure, but the gendered expectation that mothers are the primary caregivers. The fact that the leisure gap widened for those without young children suggests that the demands of motherhood create a dramatic and unique deficit in women’s free time. This supports the notion that women’s leisure is often “fragmented” and experienced as “secondary child care”—a time spent

monitoring children while simultaneously engaging in other activities, thereby diminishing its restorative quality (Baxter & Roeters et al., 2018). An interesting nuance emerges when considering the types of activities pursued. While men showed a strong preference for outdoor and social activities, women's leisure was more frequently home-based (e.g., sewing, crafts, reading). This aligns with Fontenelle & Zinkhan's (1993) conceptual model, which posits that leisure perception is shaped by socialized gender roles. Women may gravitate towards activities that are easily interruptible and congruent with their domestic responsibilities. This could also partially explain the non-significant difference in social media use ($p=0.438$); for women, platforms like WhatsApp and YouTube may represent a form of low-commitment, accessible leisure that can be interwoven with childcare and chores, whereas for men, it may be a purer form of disengagement.

The significant negative correlation between total leisure time and the desire for more leisure ($r = -0.42$) is a powerful indicator of "leisure scarcity" and its link to dissatisfaction. This finding directly supports research by Huang & Kuo (2019) and Demetriou et al. (2021), which established a clear connection between adequate leisure and higher life satisfaction and subjective health. The fact that a majority of respondents (52.9%) expressed a desire for more free time, coupled with the statistical evidence of its unequal distribution, underscores that leisure deprivation is a tangible issue with potential consequences for the well-being of women in this demographic. Further, the reported decrease in leisure time during the lockdown, particularly for women, resonates strongly with the global study by Friedlander et al. (2021).

The above discussion confirms that the leisure gap is not a matter of personal preference but a structural outcome of deeply embedded gender roles. The statistical significance of the findings moves the argument from observation to evidence, demonstrating that the unequal distribution of domestic labour systematically constrains women's access to a critical resource for well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study provides clear evidence that leisure time among middle-class Bengali families in Kolkata is deeply gendered. Men benefit from a larger quantity of uninterrupted leisure, often spent on recreational activities, while women's leisure is constrained by domestic and caregiving duties, and is often of a different, more home-bound character. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these existing inequalities. The findings correlate strongly with international literature, suggesting that despite cultural specificities, the structural factors leading to gendered leisure disparities are universal. The primary limitation of this study is its small, non-representative sample. Future research may employ larger, stratified samples and advanced inferential statistical models to establish causality and generalize findings. Furthermore, qualitative inquiries could provide deeper insights into the subjective experience and meaning of leisure for men and women in this cultural context. Ultimately, addressing these disparities requires a shift not only in household dynamics but also in broader societal and policy frameworks that support a more equitable division of domestic labour.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author acknowledges the subjects who consented to be part of the study without whom the study would not have been possible.

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