

Gender and poverty: a case of entwined inequalities

Even though poverty measurement methodology does not allow gender to be reflected in official statistics or in poverty reduction strategies, poverty and gender are inextricably linked. Despite the frequent mention of gender as a cross-cutting theme in many strategies, in practice it is a topic which receives little attention in action plans and specific development projects. Poverty affects men, women, boys, and girls, but it is experienced differently by people of different ages, ethnicities, family roles and sex. Due to women's biology, their social and cultural gender roles, and culturally constructed subordination, they face disadvantageous conditions which accumulate and intensify the already numerous effects of poverty.

Poverty and gender are the two central themes of the Social Watch 2005 report, and the national reports provide a series of arguments and evidence about the link between poverty and gender, the characteristics of poor women and the problems they face in relation to poor men.

This article has two intentions. First, to bring light to the methodological problems of poverty measurement which conceal questions of gender. Secondly, to illustrate this through examples taken from national reports written by Social Watch national platforms. The examples are not meant to be representative, but rather illustrative.¹

The study of poverty from the point of view of gender provides a new perspective which has gained importance since the 1990s. Studies within this framework "examine gender differences in the poverty-generating results and processes, particularly focusing on the experiences of women and asking whether they form a disproportionate and growing contingent among the poor. This emphasis implies a perspective that highlights two forms of asymmetries that become intersected: gender and class."²

"Women have limited access to credit. Since from the start they lack financial empowerment, they must approach credit facilities in their countries to support their economic activities. However credit institutions - where available - are reluctant to extend their services to them. The reluctance stems from a prejudice that women are bad managers of funds and would not be able to repay the loan. Those willing to extend services to women insist on male guarantors."

Nigeria national report

The studies that confirm gender inequalities, particularly in access to and fulfilment of basic needs, support the claim that "female poverty cannot be comprised under the same conceptual approach as male poverty".³

In general, poverty indicators are based on household information, without acknowledging the large gender and generational differences that exist within households. From a gender perspective however it is necessary to decode situations within households, since in these cohabitation spaces people maintain asymmetric relationships and authority systems prevail.

Considering this, it is important to take the following factors into account:

- Gender inequalities within family contexts, which cause differentiated access to resources of the domestic group worsen women's poverty, particularly in poor households.
- Despite current changes, the division of labour by sex within households is still very rigid.

The division of labour by sex which assigns women to domestic work limits their opportunities to access material and social resources and participate in political, economic and social decision-making.

Women not only have relatively limited material assets but they also have more limited social assets (access to income, goods and services through social connections) and cultural assets (formal education and cultural knowledge), which places them at greater risk of poverty. The consequences of the disparity persist throughout a woman's entire life in diverse forms and in different areas and social structures.

Due to the limitations placed on women by the division of labour by sex and the social hierarchies based on this division, women have unequal access to different social areas, mainly closely linked systems such as the labour market, welfare or social protection systems and other households.

In terms of the relational dimension of gender, which addresses the relationships between men and women, women's poverty is analyzed taking into consideration both the family and the social environment. Applied to families, the gender perspective improves the understanding of how a household works, since it uncovers hierarchies and patterns of resource distribution, thereby questioning the idea that resources within a household are equitably distributed and that all household members have the same needs.

The gender approach to the study of poverty unmask both public and household discrimination by identifying power relationships and unequal distribution of resources in both spheres.

The conceptual discussion of poverty is crucial in the sense that the definition of poverty decides what indicators will be used for its measurement as well as the type of policies that should be

The situation described in the Zambian report can be considered a paradigm for the realities of the least developed countries: "...the Zambian education system has gender disparities at all levels. While the disparity is very narrow at the primary school level, it grows at the secondary level and widens considerably at the tertiary level. The disparities in education later manifest themselves in the labour market. The share of women employed in paid work dropped from 39% in 1990 to 35% in 2000."

Zambia national report

Inequalities manifest themselves in the form of barriers and invisible ceilings, as illustrated in this report. "Although Korean society has strengthened policies and systems to promote women's participation in socio-economic activity since the 1990s, there are informal barriers and glass-ceilings for women in the labour market. In addition there are low wages and employment problems (42.2% of all employed women) due to irregular, temporary and part-time work. Women must also interrupt their work and social participation because of domestic responsibilities such as marriage, pregnancy, child-birth, child-rearing and other family duties. The labour market in Korean society has a double structure. The upper part is characterized by high productivity, high wages, and stable employment while the lower part is characterized by low productivity, low wages, and unstable employment. This double structure, with men in the upper part and women in the lower part, separates the sexes into different business categories, positions and wage levels. The discrimination of women in the labour market results in poor female-headed households."

Republic of Korea national report.

The effects of these processes in the labour market are visible in income gaps even in developed countries. This is the case in Germany. "If women's wages in West Germany continue to move into line with men's at the same rate as over the last 40 years, it will take another 40 years, at least, for women white-collar workers and far more than 70 years for women in manual jobs, to catch up with their male co-workers.' Averaged across all occupational groups, women are still paid 20% less than their male co-workers for doing the same work. For female engineers the difference amounts to 30.7%."

Germany national report

1 The examples used in this article were taken from a sample of national reports received up until 20 May 2005.

2 Kabeer, Naila. *Reversed Realities: Gender hierarchies in development thought*. London: Ed. Verso, 1994.

3 *Ibid.*

implemented to overcome it. As Feijóo puts it, “that which is not conceptualized is not measured.”⁴

Since poverty is measured according to the socio-economic characteristics of households as a whole, it is impossible to identify gender differences in relation to access to basic needs within the household. Household surveys are also limiting in the way they obtain information since the only resource considered is income, while time devoted to household production and social reproduction of the home are not taken into account.

Naïla Kabere⁵ points out that in order to make up for limitations in poverty measurement, information must be disaggregated in order to take into account the differences between “beings” and “doings” in the household. According to the author, there is a need for indicators which recognize that the lives of

women are ruled by different and sometimes more complex social restrictions, titles and responsibilities than men’s, and that women live their lives to a large extent outside the formal economy.

This broader concept of poverty would include dimensions like economic autonomy and gender violence, which are rarely taken into account in poverty studies.

Measurement of poverty from a gender perspective

Poverty measurement helps make poverty visible and plays an important role in policy development and implementation. Measurement methodologies are closely linked to specific conceptualizations of poverty and therefore measurements may differ, since they address different aspects of poverty. All methodologies including gender-sensitive ones and even those considered to be more accurate and objective are not neutral but rather contain subjective and arbitrary elements.

The gender perspective contributes to broadening the concept of poverty by identifying the need to measure poverty in a way which accounts for its complexity and multidimensionality. The debate on poverty methodology does not propose the development of only one indicator which synthesizes all dimensions of poverty. On the contrary, the idea is to explore different measurement proposals geared to improving the more conventional measurement techniques while noting their advantages and limitations, as well as to creating new measurements.

Income measurement per household

The measurement of poverty according to income is currently one of the most widely used methods. It is a very good quantitative indicator for identifying poverty situations, and as far as models of monetary measurement are concerned, there is no method that is more effective. Also there is greater availability of country data for measuring poverty in monetary terms than by using other approaches (capabilities, social exclusion, participation). Measuring poverty by income permits country and regional comparisons and permits the quantification of poverty for policy development.

One of the most controversial aspects of income measurement is its ability or inability to reflect the multidimensionality of poverty. Some argue that income measurement emphasizes the monetary dimension of poverty, and therefore only takes into account the material aspects of poverty while ignoring cultural aspects. These aspects include power differences, which determine access to resources; but above all, unpaid domestic work, which is indispensable to the survival of households; as well as other indicators, which can best reflect poverty and differences in well-being between genders.

Another critique of this poverty measurement is that it does not take into account that people also satisfy their needs through non-monetary resources, such as community networks and family support.

Gender violence is usually not included in poverty discussions even though the numbers reveal the seriousness of the situation. “In Uruguay today, every nine days a woman falls victim to domestic violence. Unsafe abortion has become the principal cause of maternal mortality. For women, especially poor women, to break away from the traditional models of “woman” or “woman-as-mother” is very risky.”

Uruguay national report.

The Romanian report presents similar findings: “...one in every five women is abused by her spouse or partner (...) and in general Romanian society regards these attitudes as normal. Another study confirms that during 2004 at least 800,000 women were victims of domestic violence.”

Romania national report

Similarly in Nepal, “...young widows, particularly in the Indo-Aryan community, are subject to both psychological and physical violence due to disputes over their inheritance. It is estimated that annually 12,000 girls and women, approximately 20% under the age of 16, are trafficked into India and other countries for prostitution. Poverty and unemployment, caused by a progressive decline in demand for the services of village craftspeople and the impoverishment of peasants through land division, is forcing families to sell their own daughters.”

Nepal national report

Measuring income per capita by household presents serious limitations to capturing intra-household poverty dimensions. It fails to account for the fact that men and women experience poverty differently within the same household. This is because households are the unit of analysis, and an equitable distribution of resources among household members is assumed. By this measurement all household members are equally poor.

At the same time the method is also limited in the way it measures gender inequalities since it does not consider unpaid domestic work performed within a household as income. Unpaid domestic work can make a considerable difference in household income. Male-headed households are more likely to count on free domestic work performed by the female spouse and to avoid incurring expenses associated with household maintenance. This is less likely to happen in female-headed households, which generally incur the private costs of doing unpaid domestic work. These costs include having less rest and leisure time, which affects levels of physical and mental health; less time to access better job opportunities and less time for social and political participation.

This method does not show the differences between men and women in their use of time or their expenditure patterns. These aspects are central to characterizing poverty from a gender perspective.

Cultural traditions in different countries are the root of other restrictions faced by women. “Cultural norms do not only inhibit women from inheriting land. Traditionally upon the death of her husband, a widow is dispossessed of all of her husband’s property, which is distributed among the husband’s male relatives. One state in the country, Enugu, enacted a law in 2001 forbidding this practice. However there has been no enforcement of the law and the practice remains widespread. Other states and the federal government carry on as if they are not aware of the tradition.”

Nigeria national report

India’s report is also enlightening on the subject: “women are also marginalized because they are powerless in different economic, social and political activities. Legal provisions and social practices regarding ownership and inheritance are weighted against women, except in a few areas where matrilineal family structures exist. Social, political and family structures do not include women in decision-making. This not only affects the place of women in society, the economy and the family, but also contributes to their low self-esteem.”

India national report

The Uruguayan report notes the different dimensions of labour inequality: “Women are particularly affected by labour market flexibility, loss of clear work standards, fear of unemployment, gender labour segmentation, unequal remuneration for the same work, exclusion from decision-making positions due to gender stereotyping, sexual harassment, and a social security system which does not take into consideration the aging population or the informal labour market.”

Uruguay national report

4 Feijóo, María del Carmen. “Desafíos conceptuales de la pobreza desde una perspectiva de género”. Paper presented at the Meeting of Experts on Poverty and Gender Issues, ECLAC/LO, Santiago de Chile, August 2003.

5 *Op cit.*

Time use studies confirm that women spend more time than men in unpaid activities, which indicates that they have longer workdays to the detriment of their health and nutrition levels.

Income poverty measurement from the gender perspective

As mentioned above, economic autonomy, or having the income to fulfil one's needs is another dimension of poverty. For this purpose, an individual measurement is useful for studying intra-household poverty. It is not about replacing one measurement with another, but about working with both measurements since they serve different purposes. Individual poverty measurements are advantageous in their ability to identify poverty situations which remain hidden to traditional measurements (such as people living in non-poor households but without their own incomes), thereby exposing the greater limitations faced by women in becoming economically autonomous.

Unpaid labour

Unpaid labour is a central concept in the study of poverty from a gender perspective. It has been argued that although this activity is not valued monetarily, it satisfies needs and allows social reproduction activities to take place. There are those who hold that there is a strong relationship between unpaid labour and the impoverishment of women. The need to measure women's work has been highlighted and has led to different proposals which suggest assigning monetary value to domestic work and its inclusion in national accounts. The measurement of unpaid labour would also show an important difference in household income between households with a person devoted to domestic work and care giving (male-headed households) and households without which must assume the private costs associated with this work (female-headed households).

Measurement of time devoted to 'unpaid labour'

Another way to measure and visualize unpaid labour is through time allocation, which proposes a concept of unpaid labour that would include subsistence work (food and clothing production, clothing repair), domestic work (purchasing household goods and services, cooking, laundry, ironing, cleaning, activities related to household organization and task distribution, and errands such as bill payment among others), family care (child and elderly care) and community service or voluntary work (services provided to non-family members through religious or lay organizations). By taking into account the time women spend doing each one of these activities, they become visible and acknowledged, facilitating the perception of gender inequalities in families and society. Also, time allocation makes it possible to

6 For more information on these studies see Araya, María José "Un acercamiento a las Encuestas sobre el Uso del Tiempo con orientación de género", Unidad Mujer y Desarrollo, ECLAC, *Serie Mujer y Desarrollo* No. 50, Chile, 2003.

Paragraph 206 of the Beijing Platform for Action 1995 recommends:

- "(f) Develop a more comprehensive knowledge of all forms of work and employment by:
- (i) Improving data collection on the unremunerated work which is already included in the United Nations System of National Accounts, such as in agriculture, particularly subsistence agriculture, and other types of non-market production activities;
 - (ii) Improving measurements that at present underestimate women's unemployment and underemployment in the labour market;
 - (iii) Developing methods, in the appropriate forums, for assessing the value, in quantitative terms, of unremunerated work that is outside national accounts, such as caring for dependants and preparing food, for possible reflection in satellite or other official accounts that may be produced separately from but are consistent with core national accounts, with a view to recognizing the economic contribution of women and making visible the unequal distribution of remunerated and unremunerated work between women and men;
- (g) Develop an international classification of activities for time-use statistics that is sensitive to the differences between women and men in remunerated and unremunerated work, and collect data disaggregated by sex. At the national level, subject to national constraints:
- (i) Conduct regular time-use studies to measure, in quantitative terms, unremunerated work, including recording those activities that are performed simultaneously with remunerated or other unremunerated activities;
 - (ii) Measure, in quantitative terms, unremunerated work that is outside national accounts and work to improve methods to assess and accurately reflect its value in satellite or other official accounts that are separate from but consistent with core national accounts."

calculate total workload volume, which is a concept that includes both paid and unpaid labour.

Time use surveys help generate better statistics on paid and unpaid work and are an essential tool in developing a greater body of knowledge about different forms of work and employment.

There are precedents for this type of systematic study from countries such as Canada, Cuba, France, Italy, Mexico, New Zealand, Spain and Venezuela.⁶ In Italy "the increase in female participation is not matched with a fairer distribution of family activities: unpaid childcare and social reproduction activities fall almost entirely upon women whose total working hours, paid and unpaid, are on average 28% more than men's. Some 35.2% of men do not dedicate any hours to family care activities."

Other countries' efforts - although not systematic - have permitted specific studies of these dimensions. This is the case in Uruguay where a 2003 survey on male and female time use was carried out with the objective of generating indicators which would report on and display asymmetric gender relationships in families.⁷

Final summary

The gender approach has made valuable conceptual and methodological contributions to the study of poverty. In conceptual terms, it has provided a more comprehensive definition of poverty, proposing an integrated and dynamic approach which acknowledges the multidimensional and heteroge-

neous aspects of poverty. The gender perspective strongly criticizes income-based definitions of poverty and highlights the material, symbolic and cultural components as those which influence power relationships which in turn determine gender access to resources (material, social and cultural). It is possible to maintain that without a gender perspective poverty cannot be sufficiently understood.

The gender approach to the study of poverty has led to the review of more conventional measurement methods and an exploration of new methods, and has made a significant contribution to the ongoing debate.

Household income measurement does not capture the intra household dimensions of poverty, including gender inequalities, since it assumes a fair distribution of resources among members, thereby homogenizing each person's needs and considering everyone to be equally poor. The method has limitations for measuring gender inequalities because it fails to acknowledge, in monetary terms, the contribution of unpaid domestic work to the household. Finally, income measurement fails to capture gender differences in terms of time use and expenditure patterns, two dimensions that contribute to characterize poverty more fully and to design better policies.

The critique of the income per household measurement method aims at introducing a gender perspective in the traditional measurement of poverty. An issue to raise forcefully is the need to assign value to unpaid domestic work as a way of appreciating the contribution of women and recognizing household activities as work, since they are essential to the satisfaction of basic needs. ■

7 Aguirre, Rosario. "Trabajo no remunerado y uso del tiempo. Fundamentos conceptuales y avances empíricos. La encuesta Montevideo 2003", ECLAC, Santiago de Chile, 2004.