

Gender and poverty: a case of entwined inequalities

Social Watch Research Team¹

Although poverty and gender are inextricably linked, the methodologies commonly used to measure poverty do not allow gender to be reflected in official statistics and consequently in poverty reduction strategies. Gender is frequently mentioned as a cross-cutting theme in many strategies, but when it comes to action plans and specific development projects it receives very little attention.

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 central themes of this report. The reports from national coalitions provide a series of arguments and evidence about the link between poverty and gender, showing to what point the problems of poor women are not always the same as those faced by poor men.

Poverty indicators do not see the women

The study of poverty from the point of view of gender 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

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

Poverty indicators are usually based on household information, without acknowledging the large gender and generational differences that exist within households. From a gender perspective it is necessary to decode situations within households, since people who share the same space maintain asymmetric relationships and authority systems tend to prevail. Gender inequalities within family contexts, which cause differentiated access to resources of the domestic group, worsen women's poverty, particularly in poor households. Further, despite current changes in roles, the division of labour by sex within households is still very rigid.

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

3 *Ibid.*

Gender inequalities as reported by national Social Watch coalitions:

"In the Palestinian context the hardship of daily life was felt most acutely by Palestinian women who carried the burden for responsibility within the household because of the death, imprisonment or unemployment of male members. (...) There is concern that in the absence of a strong government, traditional structures that reinforce patriarchal values are re-emerging."

Palestine national report

"...women [have] limited access to credit. Since they lack financial empowerment, they must approach credit facilities 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

"...negative impacts [are] of a particularly serious nature for women. Illiteracy affects almost 10 in 100 women, while it represents 7% among men, and differences are still more significant in rural areas. In 2003, female sub-employment was 50% compared to 25% for men, while unemployment rates accounted for 11% and 6.5%, respectively. (...) In terms of ownership, only 68% of women heads of household own their houses or are paying for them."

Ecuador national report

The division of labour by sex assigns women to domestic work and limits their access to material and social resources and participation in political, economic and social decision-making. Women are at greater risk of poverty because they have relatively limited material assets and also more limited social assets (access to income, goods and services through social connections) and cultural assets (formal education and cultural knowledge). The consequences of this disparity persist throughout a woman's entire life in diverse forms and in different areas and social structures.

The limitations placed on women by the division of labour by sex and the social hierarchies based on this division determine a socially unequal situation mainly within these three closely-linked systems: the labour market, the welfare or social protection system and the household.

Applied to families, the gender perspective improves the understanding of how a household works. 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 unmasks both public and household discrimination by identifying power relationships and unequal distribution of resources in both spheres.

The definition of poverty determines what indicators will be used for its measurement as well as the type of policies that should be implemented to overcome it. As Feijoó puts it, "that which is not conceptualized is not measured."⁴

4 Feijoó, 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/ILO, Santiago de Chile, August 2003.

The situation described in the Zambian report can be considered a paradigm for the realities of the least developed countries: "Gender disparities in the education system become higher at secondary level and widen considerably at tertiary level, manifesting their highest disparity in the labour market. The share of women in paid employment dropped from 39% in 1990 to 35% in 2000."

Zambia national report

In addition, the Chilean report shows that "...the more years of schooling that a person has, the wider the pay gap between men and women in the same job. A woman with up to three years of study earns 18.6% less than a man in the same situation, but a woman with 13 or more years of training makes 35.7% less than a man at the same level. Besides this, the provision of maternity benefits laid down in the Labour Code only operates for a limited sector of workers."

Chile national report

Inequalities in the labour market are also noticeable in the Canadian report: "Only 38% of unemployed workers receive benefits - down from over 75% in the early 1990s. Only three out of every ten women who lose their jobs today are eligible for benefits, due to rules that place workers with shorter or irregular hours at a disadvantage. Most of the 1.7 million households living on less than CAD 20,000 (USD 16,393) a year are precariously housed: they do not own their home and spend more than 30% of their income on rent. Female-headed households dominate this category. An estimated 250,000 people will be homeless this year, a number that continues to rise as housing costs increase."

Canada national report

Inequalities also manifest themselves in the form of barriers and invisible ceilings: "Although Korean society has strengthened policies and programmes to promote women's participation in socio-economic activities 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 that affect 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 in relation to men's wages 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

In a rural context there is a similar situation: "Tanzania's agricultural pattern basically thrives on small holders' farms and single households. Women are predominant in this sector, which does not provide adequate income and has poor living conditions."

Tanzania national report

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.

Naila Kabeer⁵ proposes making up for limitations in poverty measurement by disaggregating information to take into account the differences between "beings" and "doings" in the household. According to Kabeer, 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 not only helps make poverty visible but also plays a crucial 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

Gender violence is usually not included in poverty discussions even though the numbers reveal the seriousness of the situation: "In Uruguay a woman dies every nine days due to domestic violence, and unsafe abortions are the principal independent cause of maternal mortality. Particularly among poor women, transgressing traditional models of womanhood and womanhood-motherhood is a high risk practice."

Uruguay national report

The Romanian report presents similar findings: "...one in every five women is abused by her spouse or partner [and] in general society regards these attitudes as normal."

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 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

aspects of poverty. No methodology is neutral; not even gender-sensitive ones, since all include subjective and arbitrary elements that limit their accuracy and objectiveness.

The gender perspective contributes to widening 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 measurement methodology does not propose the development of a single indicator which synthesizes all the dimensions of poverty. On the contrary, the idea is to explore different

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 were 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 highlights the different dimensions of labour inequality: "Women are particularly affected by labour market flexibility, loss of clear work standards, fear of unemployment, labour segmentation between the sexes, unequal remuneration for the same work, exclusion from decision-making positions due to gender stereotypes, sexual harassment, along with a social security system that does not respond to the necessities of an aging population nor to the realities of the informal labour market."

Uruguay national report

5 Kabeer, *op cit.*

measurement proposals geared to improving the more conventional techniques while noting their advantages and limitations, as well as to creating new measurements.

Measuring household income

The measurement of poverty according to household income is currently one of the most widely used methods. It is a very useful quantitative indicator to identify 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 that measure poverty in monetary terms than by using other approaches (capabilities, social exclusion, participation). Measuring poverty by income therefore allows for country and regional comparisons and helps policy makers by estimating how many people are poor.

The main deficiency of income measurement is its inability to reflect the multidimensionality of poverty. It emphasizes the monetary dimension of poverty, and therefore ignores cultural aspects of poverty like power differences, which determine access to resources; and above all, unpaid domestic work, which is indispensable to the survival of households.

Another frequent 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.

Political participation is crucial in gender equity. The Salvadorean report states that “the biggest challenge for gender equity is related to the participation of women in politics. In autonomous public bodies only 9.1% of managerial positions are held by women; in Parliament only 10.7% of representatives are women, and on municipal councils women only hold 6.5% of posts. There is evidently a lack of political will to allow women to participate more in positions of power. The Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo de la Mujer (Salvadorean Institute for Women’s Development), the lead organization for gender policy, is allocated only 0.04% of the national budget, and women’s organizations make up only 16.3% of its management board.”

El Salvador national report

The legal dimension is also important, in particular in relation to abortion: “The most controversial gender problem in Portugal is abortion. It is illegal except in cases where the mother’s life is endangered, the foetus has serious problems or pregnancy is the result of rape. Thousands of women die every year or suffer serious health problems because they cannot get professional help and are forced to undergo unsafe abortions. For years there has been strong controversy in public opinion and among politicians, especially when women are prosecuted. Legal changes are urgent but they continue to be postponed.”

Portugal 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.

Unpaid work within the household is not counted as income. Yet 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 therefore 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: 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.

Further, the income method does not show the differences between men and women in their use of time or their expenditure patterns. These aspects are central to the analysis of poverty from a gender perspective. Time use studies confirm that women spend more time than men in unpaid activities, with the result that they have longer workdays to the detriment of their health and nutrition levels.

Individual measurements of economic autonomy and ability to fulfil each person’s needs are necessary to study intra-household poverty.

It is not about replacing one measurement with another, but about working with both, since they serve different purposes. Individual poverty measurements allow us to identify poverty situations which remain hidden to traditional measurements, such as the poverty of people living in non-poor households but without their own incomes. Those studies expose the greater limitations faced by women in becoming economically autonomous.

Unpaid work

Unpaid work is a central concept in the study of poverty from a gender perspective. Even when not valued monetarily, that work satisfies needs and allows for social reproduction to take place. There is a strong relationship between unpaid work and the impoverishment of women. The need to measure women’s work has been highlighted and has led to

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.”



different proposals which suggest assigning monetary value to domestic work and its inclusion in national accounts. The measurement of unpaid work 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 that must pay the private costs associated with this work (female-headed households).

Measurement of time devoted to “unpaid work”

Another way to measure and visualize unpaid work is through time use studies. Unpaid work is divided into 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).⁶ 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 use studies allow us to calculate total workload volume, which is a concept that includes both paid and unpaid work.

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.⁷ 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.⁸

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 heterogeneous aspects of poverty. The gender perspective strongly criticizes definitions of poverty based only in income 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). 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 alternatives, thus making 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. ■

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

7 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, Series *Mujer y Desarrollo* No. 50, Chile, 2003.

8 Aguirre, *op cit*.

