

Re-thinking the “Feminization of Poverty” in Relation to Aggregate Gender Indices

SYLVIA CHANT

Sylvia Chant is with the Department of Geography and Environment at London School of Economics

Abstract The “feminization of poverty” is often referred to without adequate specification or substantiation, and does not necessarily highlight aspects of poverty that are most relevant to women at the grassroots. The United Nations Development Programme’s gender indices go some way to reflecting gendered poverty, but there is scope for improvement. In order to work towards aggregate indices that are more sensitive to gender gaps in poverty as identified and experienced by poor women, the main aims of this paper are two-fold. The first is to draw attention to existing conceptual and methodological weaknesses with the “feminization of poverty”, and to suggest how the construct could better depict contemporary trends in gendered privation. The second is to propose directions for the kinds of data and indicators that might be incorporated within the Gender-related Development Index or the Gender Empowerment Measure, or used in the creation of a Gendered Poverty Index.

Key words: Gender, Poverty, Feminization of poverty, Aggregate gender indices, Gender-related Development Index, Gender Empowerment Measure, Gendered Poverty Index

Introduction

The “feminization of poverty” is often used in a cursory and unsubstantiated manner, and does not necessarily highlight aspects of poverty that are most relevant to women at the grassroots. Although the gender indices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) go some way to reflecting the multidimensional nature of gendered poverty, there is scope for improvement. In order to work towards indices that are more sensitive to gender gaps in poverty as identified and experienced by poor women, the main aims of this paper are two-fold. The first is to draw attention to existing conceptual and methodological weaknesses with the “feminization of poverty”, and to suggest how the construct could better

depict contemporary trends in gendered privation. The second is to propose directions for the kinds of data and indicators that might be incorporated within the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) or the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), or used in the creation of a Gendered Poverty Index (GPI).¹

What is the “feminization of poverty”?

Although people often refer to a “feminization of poverty” without any elaboration, three of its most common tenets are that women represent a disproportionate percentage of the world’s poor, that this trend is deepening, and that women’s increasing share of poverty is linked with a rising incidence of female household headship (Chant, 2006).

The “feminization of poverty” made its major breakthrough into the development lexicon in the 1990s. A critical catalyst was the 4th United Nations Conference on Women at which it was asserted that 70% of the world’s poor were female, and eradicating the “persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women” was adopted as one of the 12 critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action.² Disregarding the fact that the 70% level was supposed to be rising, and that 10 years on there is still no change to the original estimate, this categorical claim, with its alarming(ist) predictions of “worse to come”, seems to have accorded women, if not gender, unprecedented visibility in international fora on poverty reduction (see Chant, 2006). Yet while some benefits have been spawned by popularization of the “feminization of poverty”, a number of weaknesses can be identified.

Conceptual and empirical shortcomings of the “feminization of poverty”

Terminology, definitions and assumptions

As already mentioned, the term “feminization of poverty” is often deployed loosely, and without any specification of its meaning. In a UNDP review of 13 national *Millennium Development Goal Reports*, for example, women are identified to be particularly vulnerable to poverty in four reports, and the “feminization of poverty” is identified as a challenge, but no data are given in support of these assertions, and in only one country is use made of sex-disaggregated statistics (UNDP, 2003). While it is claimed that the statements in some *Millennium Development Goal Reports* about feminization of poverty are “indicative of a welcome shift from earlier approaches that were insensitive to the differential concomitants and implications of poverty for women and men”, it is also noted that “... when they are not backed up by data or policy commitments, such statements are of little value either as entry-points for refocusing the direction of poverty policy or as benchmarks for tracking

change” (UNDP, 2003, p. 22). As summarized by Davids and van Driel (2005, p. 5), women’s impoverishment has become a “global orthodoxy that is not questioned anymore”.

In terms of basic definitions and assumptions, one problem about the “feminization of poverty” is that women are either presented as a homogeneous mass, or are differentiated solely on grounds of household headship. A second is that monetary poverty seems to be the main criterion. Notwithstanding that income should undoubtedly be included in any assessment of poverty, as cautioned by Fukuda-Parr (1999), the “feminization of poverty” is not “just about lack of income”. This is more than amply demonstrated by work on gendered poverty that has consistently emphasized the need for more holistic conceptual frameworks to encapsulate gendered privation, encompassing capabilities, livelihoods, subjectivities and social exclusion (see Chant, 2006; Johnsson-Latham, 2004a; Kabeer, 2003; Klasen, 2004; UNDP, 2005). As argued by Razavi (1999, p. 417):

From a gender perspective, broader concepts of poverty are more useful than a focus purely on household income levels because they allow a better grasp of the multi-dimensional aspects of gender disadvantage, such as lack of power to control important decisions that affect one’s life ...

Problems of empirical substantiation

Another major problem attached to the focus on income in the “feminization of poverty” is that relevant sex-disaggregated statistics are sparse (see United Nations Statistics Division, 2005; Chant, 2006). As Rodenberg (2004, p. 1) has argued: “... a large proportion of the 1.3 billion people living in absolute poverty are women, though there is too little gender-specific data to substantiate the oft-quoted figure of 70%” (see also Baden, 1999, p. 10; Klasen, 2004, p. 14; Marcoux, 1998).³

Despite the calls of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women), and more recently the BPFA (Beijing Platform for Action), for more sex-disaggregated statistics, there is still no international database that provides a breakdown of the incidence of women’s monetary poverty in comparison with men’s (United Nations Development Fund for Women [UNIFEM], 2002, p. 60). Latin America is the only part of the South for which are there region-wide figures on females and males within households below national poverty lines (see Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 2002).

Although simple headcounts of male and female household members below the poverty line do not detract from the conceptual and pragmatic difficulty of assigning household incomes or assets to individuals of different gender within households (Klasen, 2004, p. 2), in most parts of the South information regarding economic resources is only available at a

household level. In such instances female-headed households tend to show-up as poorer on account of their smaller size when in per-capita terms they may actually be better off (Kabeer, 2003, pp. 79–81; also Chant, 1997). As it is, even aggregated household income data do not present a picture of unilateral disadvantage. Despite a rise in extreme poverty among female-headed households in some parts of Latin America over the past decade, and that the greatest increase in female headship has occurred among the poor (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2004, p. 58), within a wider geographical remit there is scant evidence to support the notion that women-headed households are poorer than their male counterparts in any systematic manner (see Chant [2006] for discussion and references). As summarized by Lampietti and Stalker (2000, p. 2): “Headship analysis cannot and should not be considered an acceptable substitute for poverty analysis”.

Irrespective of whether we consider households or individuals, another major problem in sustaining the idea of the “feminization of poverty” as a *trend* is the dearth of sex-disaggregated panel data that permit longitudinal comparisons (Johnsson-Latham, 2004b, p. 18; Klasen, 2004, p. 2).

Beyond this, sex-disaggregated data on income poverty are rarely disaggregated further. Except for headship, lack of breakdown according to other axes of difference has prevented any dedicated investigation of which particular groups of women, if any, might be especially prone to privation. Yet in terms of trends over time and across generations, getting a handle on *age-specific poverty rates* might be an appropriate first step. This would help to show whether increased poverty among women is due to the demographic ageing of populations, or because gender gaps in income are widening among the young (see Chant, 2006).

More specific conceptual problems

In addition to the definitional and empirical problems with the “feminization of poverty” described earlier, other problems of a more conceptual/analytical nature are as follows.

Over-emphasis on income

Aside from the paucity of sex-disaggregated data on monetary poverty, and feminist calls for more holistic perspectives, other persuasive reasons not to rely solely on income when examining the “feminization of poverty” are four-fold.

- (i) While monetary poverty may be the easiest to quantify, it is not always amenable to accurate data collection. This might be seen as particularly pertinent to women whose earnings may be subject to fluctuation, or who possess little or no knowledge of their spouses’ incomes.
- (ii) Since information on incomes, consumption (and assets) are usually only available at the household level, they are difficult to convert into

individual equivalents according to gender, age, and so on, without problematic assumptions about equality of distribution, or about the different needs and preferences of individual household members (see Klasen, 2004).

- (iii) Income, along with longevity, is allegedly less robust in confirming women’s relative privation than other criteria commonly found in the GAD (Gender and Development) literature such as access to land and credit, decision-making power, legal rights, vulnerability to violence, and (self)-respect and dignity (Johnsson-Latham, 2004b, pp. 26–27; see also Moghadam, 1997; Fukuda-Parr, 1999; Parpart, 2002; Charmes and Wieiringa, 2003; Franco, 2003; Rodenburg, 2004; UNDP, 2005).⁴
- (iv) Household income may bear no relation to women’s poverty because women may not necessarily be able to access it (see Bradshaw, 2002, p. 12; also Chant, 1997). Feminist research has shown that inequitable resource allocation can often lead to “secondary” poverty among women and children in male-headed households, and, as such, how for many women the capacity to command and allocate resources may be more important than the actual resource base in their households (Chant, 2003; Kabeer, 1996; González de la Rocha and Grinspun, 2001). As summarized by Sweetman (2005, p. 3): poverty is “... as much about agency compromised by abuse, stress, fatigue and voicelessness, as it is about lack of resources”. In this light it is understandable how women may opt to “trade-off” the economic difficulties of female headship in favour of gaining more control over the lives and well-being of themselves and their dependents. As articulated by Rodenberg (2004, p. 13):

It is ... advisable to bear in mind that a woman’s decision to maintain a household of her own may ... serve as an avenue out of a relationship marred by violence. If poverty is understood not only as income poverty but as a massive restriction of choices and options, a step of this kind, not taken in isolation, may also mean an improvement of women’s life circumstances. (see also Chant, 1997, 2006; Fonseca, 1991; Jackson, 1996; van Vuuren, 2003).

Over-emphasis on female-headed households

A second and related problem with the feminization of poverty is its over-concentration on female-headed households. As with income, this is somewhat paradoxical not only on account of tenuous data, but on conceptual grounds. On one hand, feminist research has often identified that unequal domestic relations with male partners constitute a major cause of women’s poverty in developing countries. However, given widespread stereotyping of female-headed households as the “poorest of

the poor” (Chant, 2003), the suggestion is that when women are without men, their situation is worse!

While categorical generalizations in any direction are clearly inappropriate, it is evident that women may actively choose headship as a means by which they are able to enhance the well-being of their households and/or exert more control over their own lives. As summarized by Baden (1999, p. 13): “The processes which lead women to head households are many and in some cases this may represent a positive choice, so that ... connotations of powerlessness and victimhood are inappropriate”.

Bolstering the case against undue emphasis on female-headed households is that they are a highly heterogeneous group, with differentiation deriving, *inter alia*, from routes into the status, stage in the life course and household composition (Chant, 2003).

Neglect of men and gender relations

The focus on women in the “feminization of poverty” tends to deflect attention from men and gender relations, when it is the latter that should perhaps come under greater scrutiny. Indeed, if poverty is feminizing, does this imply there is a counterpart “masculinization” of wealth, power, privilege and asset accumulation? If so, how is this explained when there is so much talk of a “crisis of masculinity” and mounting evidence that men in some countries are beginning to fall behind women in respect of educational attainment and access to employment (see Gutmann, 1996; Chant, 2000)? The relevance of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) (2005, p. 12) observation that, in general, “Male underachievement has not led to parallel underachievements in wealth and politics”, cannot be ascertained until more work on men in relation to the “feminization of poverty” is undertaken.

On top of these already quite well-established criticisms of the “feminization of poverty”, another set of interrelated points derive from my recent fieldwork with low-income groups in The Gambia, the Philippines and Costa Rica (see note 1), and underline the potential importance of re-casting the “feminization of poverty” along broader lines.

Towards a “feminization of responsibility and obligation”?

The broader remit I deem relevant to the “feminization of poverty” — perhaps best encapsulated under the rubric of a “feminization of responsibility and obligation”,⁵ — stems from the observation that although women are often income-poor, and this needs to be addressed, we must also take into account gender differences in *inputs* to household livelihoods to a greater degree, as well as their *outcomes* for women’s lives. Three elements require particular emphasis here:

- (i) *The diversification and intensification of women’s work versus declining inputs from men.* In and beyond The Gambia, the

Philippines and Costa Rica, growing numbers of women of all ages are working outside the home, as well as performing the bulk of unpaid reproductive tasks. Men on the other hand, are not only finding it harder to be the sole or primary economic support for their households, but are not significantly increasing their participation in reproductive work either.

Notwithstanding evidence from some parts of Latin America of increasing male participation in childcare (see Gutmann, 1996; Olavarría, 2003), in the region more generally, reproductive labour continues to be assigned almost exclusively to women. As noted by ECLAC (2004, p. 5): “... most men still do not share in household work or in the array of unpaid care-giving activities entailed by membership in a community or society”. In turn, men in “... male-headed households are more likely to enjoy the advantages of free domestic work by the spouse, thus avoiding expenditures otherwise associated with maintaining a household” (ECLAC, 2004, p. 23).

- (ii) *Persistent and/or growing disparities in women’s and men’s capacities to negotiate obligations and entitlements in households.* Women’s mounting responsibilities for coping with poverty do not seem to be conferring any leverage in respect of negotiating greater efforts on the part of men. Many women in The Gambia, Philippines and Costa Rica emphasize that they have little choice but to deal with poverty on a daily basis, working harder in and outside the home, and allowing themselves minimal licence for rest and recreation, or personal over collective expenditure. Men, by contrast, seem to feel entitled to periodic or even regular “escapes” from the burden of assisting their families. This ranges from withholding earnings (and/or appropriating those of other household members), to absenting themselves from the home to spend time with male friends, and/or consoling themselves with drugs, drink, casual sex and gambling. While this by no means applies to all men, and some pursuits can be an important source of networking and securing resources, others can drain household finances and/or plunge households deeper into debt. For example, where men become ill or unable to work as a result of prolonged drinking, or other “risk-taking” activity, their households not only suffer loss of income (and sometimes assets), but are often forced into increasing their care and expenditure burdens (see Chant, 2006; Delamonica *et al.*, 2004, p. 23).

While some women faced with minimal support from male partners may be able to break away and set up their own households, others may not be in the position to do so, and are rendered more vulnerable than ever to extremes of servitude and inequality. This may be endorsed by culturally condoned expectations of female altruism — a woman who opts for another, more egoistic course — is not deemed “feminine”, and the consequences can be severe. Indeed, some women who “encroach” upon the “male terrain” of

paid work seem to re-double their efforts to live up to altruistic ideals attached to idealized norms of “good wives” and “dutiful daughters”. Whether this is on account of reaffirming their “femininity”, to defuse gender conflict, or represents a tactical move to improve their long-term fall-back position (see Gates, 2002), the patterns described endorse Whitehead’s (2003, p. 8) observation that: “... men and women are often poor for different reasons, experience poverty differently, and have different capacities to withstand and/or escape poverty”.

- (iii) *Increasing disarticulation between investments/responsibilities and rewards/rights.* Leading on from this, a third element in the “feminization of responsibility and obligation” is that while responsibilities for dealing with poverty are becoming palpably feminized, there is no corresponding increase in women’s rights and rewards. Indeed, the self-same rise in women’s burdens seems to have curtailed the resources at their disposal to negotiate gains of any description. As underlined by United Nations/UNIFEM (2003, p. 19):
- (iv) One might even argue that the economic and social reproductive realms which women are expected to tread, overextend the range of roles and responsibilities of women compared to men, which does not necessarily enlarge their life choices, but may even limit them. (See also Molyneux, 2006)

Men, on the other hand, despite their lesser inputs, are somehow managing to retain their traditional privileges and prerogatives. This presents a rather puzzling, not to mention worrying, scenario in which investments are becoming progressively detached from rights and rewards, and creating a new and deeper form of female exploitation. Since neither analysis nor policy has got to grips with this as yet, it is hardly surprising that these inequalities have not to date been captured by aggregate gender indices.

What do the GDI and GEM tell us (or not) about gendered poverty?

The GDI and the GEM (Box 1) represent an attempt to measure gender inequality rather than gendered poverty. However, although they say little about the “feminization of effort”, and other dimensions of poverty that I deem particularly important to women, they arguably provide some basis for mapping gendered privation across space and through time.

While the GDI focuses on the costs of gender inequality for the aggregate human development (and well-being) of society (see Klasen, 2004, p. 11), the GEM refers to the opportunities through which women are actually able to achieve equality with men (Bardhan and Klasen, 1999;

Box 1. Components of the GDI and the GEM

Gender-related Development Index (GDI)

The GDI adjusts the HDI for gender disparities in the three main indicators making up the Human Development Index (HDI):

- i. ‘longevity’ (female and male life expectancy at birth),
- ii. ‘knowledge’ (female and male literacy rates, and female and male combined primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment ratios),
- iii. ‘decent standard of living’ (estimated female and male earned income)

Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM)

The GEM aims to assess gender inequality in economic and political opportunities and decision-making, through:

- i. The share of parliamentary seats occupied by women,
- ii. The proportion of legislators, senior officials and managers who are women,
- iii. The female share of professional and technical jobs,
- iii. The ratio of estimated female to male earned income

Source: UNDP (2002).

Rodenberg, 2004, p. ii). Both the GDI and GEM include information on gender gaps in income, which is potentially important to poverty, as well as on some capabilities and opportunities such as health, education and occupational status. Concentration on gaps between different aspects of women and men’s well-being is important given that they “... both affect and reflect power dynamics that influence the process of resource distribution” (UNRISD, 2005, pp. 49–50). It could also be argued that the GEM’s component on women’s share of parliamentary seats is relevant to poverty. Baden (1999, p. 6), for example, asserts that: “increasing women’s political representation may be instrumental to reducing women’s poverty” (see also UNMP/TFEGE, 2005, p. 14).

Leaving discussion of variable selection until later, the fact that the GDI and GEM are “aggregate indices” has pluses and minuses, recognizing also that there are two dimensions to this: one being that they are “composite” (i.e. they bring together different variables in a single measure) and the other being that they aggregate (and generally average) data for the relevant population as a whole.

As regards the “composite” dimension of the GDI and GEM, one of the major “plusses” is that this gets us away from the notion that women’s well-being can be reduced to a single measure (UNRISD, 2005, p. 57). In broad terms, both indices also show on a number of counts how everywhere in the world “... women have markedly less chance to lead their lives in dignity and prosperity “ (Rodenberg, 2004, p. ii).⁶ On the “minus” side, I am not sure that aggregated scores can do much more than permit superficial comparative assessments of national achievements in gender equality or to track broad movements in individual countries over time.

Nonetheless, a major advantage is that it also possible to decompose the indices and examine individual components, which reveals interesting

variations in levels and types of inequality within as well as between nations. For example, some countries score highly in respect of female political participation but poorly in respect of women's share of earned income. This reflects the multidimensional nature of gender inequality in which gains in one sphere may not be matched in another, and which resonates with the fractured privations in women's lives at the grassroots.

On the "aggregate/average" front, there are possibly more problems — one being that since means mask inequalities among women, they can reduce the visibility of poor women, especially in situations of pronounced socio-economic polarization.

In turn, some components exclude poor women from the equation altogether, and could lead to the GEM in particular being regarded as a measure not of gender inequality, but "gendered class privilege".⁷ Notwithstanding that greater representation of women in formal political life (as in the GEM) may impact positively on poor women, women in public office are generally educated and/or elite women whose class interests may well override their gender interests, and who might do little to advance the social or economic status of their poorer counterparts. Not only is the income component in both the GDI and the GEM, in being restricted to formal sector remuneration, also class-biased (Kabeer, 2003, p. 87),⁸ but the discounting of household production tends to exclude poor women who are much more likely than their better-off counterparts to be directly involved in unpaid household labour and subsistence farming. In short, the measures used in the GDI and GEM are, as Willis (2005, p. 135) describes, based on "'top-down' perspectives of 'development'" and the "public sphere of paid employment and formal politics". Although these are important, they provide only a partial picture of gender inequality given that a considerable amount of this is "... generated in the home and outside of formal markets" (Klasen, 2004, p. 4).

The numerical bias in the GDI and GEM, as well as with any other quantitative measures, can also occlude important dimensions of *meaning* and *quality*. Meanings are not easily transported across cultures or classes such that while higher female income shares are commonly equated with more gender-sensitive development (and, by implication, less likelihood of female poverty), for poor women earning income can compound heavy burdens of reproductive work and thereby undermine well-being (Dijkstra and Hanmer, 2000; Klasen, 2004, p. 19; Chant, 2006). In terms of quality, the privileging of numbers in the GDI and GEM can make for some spurious interpretations of "progress". As UNIFEM (2002, p. 6) argues in relation to Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 3, concern with male-female ratios should not detract from the fact that general improvements are sought: "... the empowerment of women does not just depend on the elimination of numerical gender disparities. It is possible to equalise the enrolment of boys and girls in school at a low level for both, a situation that empowers neither" (emphasis in original).⁹

Another problem with the numerical dimension of aggregate indices is that this limits components not only to those that are observable and quantifiable, but that are actually quantified. Notwithstanding that the measures on which the UNDP gender indices are based may seem crude or limited, many poor countries find it difficult even to produce the data presently required. As of 2004 it had only been possible to compute the GDI for 144 out of 177 countries for which the Human Development Index is calculated, and a mere 78 for the GEM. As such, making the gender indices more comprehensive may imply reduced coverage, especially for low-income nations. Indeed, where attempts have been made to formulate more elaborate indices, such as the “Measure of Women’s Empowerment” devised by the World Economic Forum,¹⁰ a lack of baseline data has prevented scores being calculated for more than 58 countries, which are mainly in the North. Moreover, a number of countries have been unable to date to produce even basic sex-disaggregated data on population, births and deaths (United Nations Statistics Division, 2005, p. 6).

Despite — and arguably because of — these constraints, the GDI and GEM are important complementary tools in the analysis of gender gaps, as well as indicating the increasing prominence given to gender in national and global accounting of economic development and poverty. As Dijkstra and Hanmer (2000) have argued, published indicators of gender inequality have major policy relevance since they draw governments’ attention to gender inequalities and can potentially galvanize them into action (see also UNIFEM, 2002). They also put pressure on states to collect more data and with greater rigour and frequency.

Similar considerations apply in relation to other relevant UNDP indices such as the Human Poverty Index (HPI). Although the HPI is not explicitly gender-sensitive, its three components are pertinent to gender, namely: (i) the proportion of people who are expected to die before the age of 40 years, (ii) the proportion of the population who are illiterate, and (iii) a “decent standard of living” as measured by a composite index of access to healthcare and safe water and malnutrition among children under five years old. These could be calculated separately for women and men using proxies for less clear-cut issues such as water supply (Durbin, 1999). However, whether this would reveal anything significant about women’s poverty relative to men’s poverty is doubtful given the omission of many gender-relevant issues such as access to land, housing, credit and social participation (Durbin, 1999).

Re-thinking the “feminization of poverty” and its implications for aggregate gender indices: towards revision of the GDI and GEM, or the creation of a GPI?

Following on from my critique of the “feminization of poverty”, I proposed that widening gaps in gendered privation among the poor are perhaps most obvious (and more personally meaningful for women) in

respect of inputs rather than incomes — as summed up in a “feminization of responsibility and obligation”. Within this, I highlighted how women seem to have progressively less choice other than to assume the burden of dealing with poverty, and that their growing responsibilities have not been matched by a notable increase in agency, power to (re-)negotiate men’s inputs, or personal reward. Whether or not the nomenclature of the “feminization of poverty” is retained to describe these processes (see Chant, 2006), it is important that indicators more effectively capture the particular dimensions of poverty that are exposing women to greater suffering and exploitation over time.

Improve quality and coverage of sex-disaggregated data on material poverty

An essential starting point is to improve the coverage and quality of sex-disaggregated data on material poverty. Where possible this should not only follow ECLAC’s lead in enumerating women and men in households below the poverty line, but also involve comparative poverty assessments of household headship based on per-capita and/or adult equivalence scales¹¹ rather than aggregate household income. While neither simple per-capita or adult equivalence scales will reveal anything about intra-household distribution, something of a window on this could be achieved through the collection of data on actual personal consumption of individuals. Moreover, notwithstanding the potential difficulties attached to disaggregating resources used by all household members,¹² I am also in favour of generating a sex-disaggregated database of “asset poverty” comprising land and property ownership, as identified by the UNDP for improving the gender sensitivity of the HPI (Durbin, 1999), and by the United Nations Millennium Task Force on Education and Gender Equality (UNMP/TFEGE, 2005, pp.10, 18) as warranting consideration as an indicator in MDG 3 (see Box 2). Although women may benefit from the use of land and property owned by men, lack of personal or joint ownership can impact in various ways on women’s poverty and vulnerability, such as inhibiting the use of property for income-generating activities, restricting access to credit, and undermining women’s fall-back position in the event of divorce or widowhood.

Improve data on the economic returns to female and male labour

Related to concerns around time and inputs, more information is needed about the economic returns to women’s and men’s labour. In respect of income-generating activities, for example, we must go beyond statistics on gender differentials in earnings in the formal labour market (as in the GEM), and document remuneration in the informal sector. This, too, accords with a suggestion by the United Nations Millennium Project’s Task Force on Education and Gender Equality for MDG 3 to include an

Re-thinking the “Feminization of Poverty”

Box 2. Menu of indicators for MDG 3 proposed by the task force on education and gender equality

Education

- Ratio of female to male gross enrolment in primary, secondary and tertiary education
- Ratio of female to male completion rate in primary, secondary and tertiary education

Sexual and reproductive health and rights

- Proportion of contraceptive demand satisfied
- Adolescent fertility rate

Infrastructure

- Hours per day (or year) spent by women and men in fetching water and collecting fuel

Property rights

- Land ownership by women, men or jointly held
- Housing title, disaggregated by women, men or jointly held

Employment

- Share of women in employment (wage and self-employment), by type
- Gender gaps in earnings in wage and self-employment

Participation in national parliaments and local government bodies

- Percentage of seats held by women in national parliament
- Percentage of seats held by women in local government bodies

Violence against women

- Prevalence of domestic violence

Sources: UNDP (2005, p. 53); UNMP/TFEGE (2005, Box 1).

indicator on gender gaps in earnings in both waged and self-employment (Box 2).

Further efforts to assign a monetary value to reproductive labour are also essential, not only because much of women’s work is dedicated to investment in future generations, but since the statistical invisibility of “the sexual division of labour”, or the assignment of household chores to women, means that “women are overloaded with work whose value is not socially or economically recognised” (ECLAC, 2004, p. 2; also Folbre, 1994, this volume; Budlender, 2004).

Generate data on gender differentials in expenditure

Another critical step in enhancing understanding of gendered dimensions of poverty may be to collect data not only on what women and men in poor households earn (or manage or have access to), but what they spend their money on, and/or the extent to which different sources of income are devoted to collective basic household needs, to investments in other household members and/or are reserved for personal expenditure. Some indication of this could be discerned from “outcomes” such as the education and health status of household members.

Improve data on gender differentials in work time and time use

Beyond this, investigating and mapping gendered poverty in a more rounded fashion will undoubtedly require more and better quality data to be collected on time use. Although Corner (2002, pp. 2–3) argues that the generation of time-use data of a form and quality suitable for policy purposes is a “complex and necessarily expensive task”, it is essential in challenging the persistent invisibility of much of women’s contribution to developing country economies. This is particularly important for policy since women are often inappropriately loaded with the task of solving poverty, and, as noted by Elson (1999, p. 13), “Women’s time burdens are an important constraint on growth and development — women are an *over*-utilised not an *under*-utilised resource. The benefits of reducing this gender-based constraint can be considerable” (emphasis added) (see also Floro, 1995; UNDP, 2005, p.7; Folbre, this volume). This is also recognized by the Task Force on Education and Gender Equality, who propose that another indicator in MDG 3 should be the hours women and men spend within a given unit of time (e.g. day or week) fetching water and collecting fuel (Box 2).

Eliminate over-emphasis on household headship as criterion of differentiation among women, and incorporate other differentiating factors such as age

To improve knowledge, measurement and indicators of gendered poverty we also need to eliminate the largely uncorroborated assertion that female-headed households are the “poorest of the poor”. While female household heads could be seen as an extreme case of “responsibility and obligation”, this needs to be qualified:

- i) because female-headed households do not necessarily lack male members;
- ii) because, free of a senior male “patriarch”, their households can become “enabling spaces” in which there is scope to distribute household tasks and resources more equitably; and
- iii) because, unlike their counterparts in male-headed households who may co-reside with men who are “chief spenders” rather than “chief breadwinners”, female heads are unlikely to have to support spouses as well as children and other relatives.

While household headship should probably be retained as a differentiating element within any statistical breakdown and/or index of gender inequality, it would be useful to disaggregate female heads according to stage in the life course, marital and fertility status, and so on (see Lampiotti and Stalker, 2000, p.25). In turn, we need to know which other axes of difference among women place them at particular risk of vulnerability and privation, with age being especially relevant in helping to determine trends in gendered poverty.

More grassroots input to gendered poverty indicators

In addition to the above suggestions, we must consider that it is not just which data are collected that is important, but where the data come from (e.g. national surveys or more micro-level in-depth research), the scale at which the data are collected (i.e. individuals or households), who collects the data (states, non-governmental organizations, academics, etc.), and how the data are interpreted and presented.

Too much data collection, indicator selection and index construction to date has been “top-down”. It has been determined primarily by international “experts” and has deprived the poor themselves from a meaningful role in the process. One route towards a more inclusive approach to poverty diagnosis and representation might be to spend more time conducting participatory or “self-rating” poverty exercises such as Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs), and to use these as a guide to what might eventually be factored into the GDI or GEM, or a possible GPI. Indeed, PPAs to date have often highlighted factors such as women’s greater burden of “time poverty”, their vulnerability to domestic violence, and unequal decision-making (Kabeer, 2003, p. 99). The extent to which subjective and culturally specific information can and should be fed into an internationally comparative index will clearly depend on the uses to which such an index will be put.¹³

Going beyond the GDI and GEM: what kind of GPI?

That the GDI and GEM are suitable vessels for recording the many gendered dimensions of poverty is in some doubt. Given that both the indices tend towards the prioritization of better-off women, there are grounds for creating a dedicated GPI. Recognizing that aggregate indices can only comprise so much, the key components could include time-use (labour inputs versus leisure/rest time), the value of labour inputs (in the paid and unpaid sector) versus earnings, and sex-differentiated expenditure and consumption patterns. Acknowledging, as mentioned earlier, that aggregate in the “average” sense of the term can mask inequalities among women, the GPI might also be confined those groups of the population who fall under the national poverty line, even if this would maintain the priority accorded to monetary poverty.

At the same time as adopting more selective aggregation, we also need to make sure that aggregates are amenable to disaggregation so that, within the context of a general GPI, it is also possible to calculate GPIs for specific groups, in relation to age, household headship, and so on. This will help to eliminate the tendency to treat “women” and “men” as homogeneous categories, and allow intra-group as well as inter-group comparisons.

Accepting that not every aspect of gendered privation is amenable to quantification and that indices will always require gender analysis to tell us about processes, it is vital to start cultivating a broader and more inclusive

base for longitudinal comparisons of gendered privation, and to determine whether, how and in which particular forms a “feminization of poverty” is evolving.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws heavily from the author’s current research on “Gender, Generation and Poverty in Africa, Asia and Latin America”, funded by a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship (2003–6) (Award no. F07004R), to whom the author is grateful for support. The field research has comprised individual interviews and focus group discussions with 223 low-income women and men in different age groups in The Gambia, the Philippines and Costa Rica, and an additional 40 consultations with professionals in non-governmental organizations, government organizations and international agencies. For assistance in the field the author would like to thank Baba Njie (The Gambia), Tessie Sato, Josie Chan and Fe Largado (Philippines), and Enid Jaén Hernández, Luis Castellón Zelaya and Roberto Rojas (Costa Rica). For comments on an earlier draft of this paper, the author is indebted to Susana Franco, Stephan Klasen, Cathy McIlwaine, Maxine Molyneux, Diane Perrons, Silvia Posocco, Edward Hart and Eric Neumayer. A longer version of this paper is published as a working paper by the LSE Gender Institute (see Chant, 2006), and the author would like to thank Hazel Johnstone for organizing its production. The author would also like to thank the Government of The Netherlands for their support for this paper through UNDP’s Gender Thematic Trust Fund.

Notes

- 1 A “GPI” was first proposed by Durbin (1999), and in this instance stood for a “Gendered Human Poverty Index”.
- 2 The word “asserted” is used advisedly here. Aside from a lack of robust empirical evidence, Marcoux (1998) points up that the 70% share of income poverty assigned to women in 1995 is untenable in light of the age distribution of the global population and its household characteristics. Even assuming *a priori* that being female places persons at a greater risk of being poor, given that the sex of children under 15 is unlikely to have more than a negligible impact on gender differentials in household poverty, only single-person and lone-parent units could be responsible for the excess of female poverty. Yet there are simply not enough of households of this type to give rise to the purported 70/30 ratio of poor women and girls to poor men and boys (see also Klasen, 2004).
- 3 The current world estimate of people in poverty (living on less than US\$1 a day) stands at 1.5 billion (Lopez-Claros and Zahidi, 2005, p. 4).
- 4 Violence tends to be statistically invisible despite the fact that it exacts a heavy economic toll in terms of costs and instability not only on individual households but on society at large (World Bank, 2003, p. 7; also ECLAC, 2004, p. 26; Women’s Environment and Development Organisation, 2005).
- 5 Sassen’s (2002) notion of a “feminization of survival” derives from her observations of international migration, in which not only households, but whole communities, and

states, are increasingly reliant on the labour efforts of women, within as well as across national borders, and frequently under exploitative conditions.

The term “feminization of responsibility and obligation” is cumbersome, but so far I have found this the best term to sum up women’s increasing liability for dealing with poverty (responsibility), and their progressively less choice other than to do so (obligation).

- 6 Gender disparities might look even greater were it not for the fact that the GDI includes longevity, which is one criterion in most countries of the world where women have a comparative (biological) advantage. Although to some extent this is factored into the GDI in so far as women are calculated to have an average five-year survival advantage over men, what is not taken into account is men’s premature mortality as a result of “voluntary” health-damaging behaviour, and whether this should be treated in the same way as women’s premature mortality which more often results from bias in household resource allocation (see Klasen, 2004, p. 17)
- 7 I am grateful to Silvia Posocco for this shorthand.
- 8 For important discussions of other conceptual and empirical problems with income in the GDI and GEM, see Bardhan and Klasen (1999), Charmes and Wieringa (2003), Dijkstra and Hanmer (2000), and Klasen (2004).
- 9 Klasen (2004) raises a series of other problems around the issue of “equality”, and whether this is necessarily desirable in all situations. For example, given the biological predisposition for infant males to suffer greater risk of death than their female counterparts, equal infant mortality rates would actually be an indicator of male bias (Klasen, 2004, p. 6).
- 10 The World Economic Forum Measure of Women’s Empowerment comprises economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, and health and well-being. Each of these dimensions includes more criteria than that gathered for comparable elements in the GDI and GEM (see Lopez-Claros and Zahidi, 2005).
- 11 Adult Equivalence Scales refine per-capita measures on the basis of the expected consumption needs of different household members at different stages of the life course, notwithstanding the problems of setting of standards for consumption (see Chant, 2006).
- 12 I am grateful to Stephan Klasen for his observations about the impossibility of disaggregating all aspects of material poverty (and spending) at the level of the individual when so many assets and utilities are “public goods” used by all members. However, as identified in the paper, I deem ownership of major items such as land and property to be relevant to gendered poverty. Moreover, while it may be problematic to assign a value to ownership in specific instances, especially where women’s titular “ownership” of land may be mediated through kinship practices, crude information could be gathered fairly readily through land and property registers.
- 13 I am grateful to Diane Perrons and Silvia Posocco for raising questions around the goals of the gender indices and how they are used (see Chant, 2006).

References

- Baden, S. (1999) ‘Gender, governance and the “feminisation of poverty”’, background paper prepared for *UNDP Meeting on ‘Women and Political Participation: 21st Century Challenges’*, New Delhi, 24–26 March.
- Bardhan, K. and Klasen, S. (1999) ‘UNDP’S gender-related indices: a critical review’, *World Development*, 27(6), pp. 985–1010.
- Bradshaw, S. (2002) *Gendered Poverties and Power Relations: Looking Inside Communities and Households*, ICD/Embajada de Holanda/Puntos de Encuentro, Managua.
- Budlender, D. (2004) *Why Should We Care About Unpaid Care Work?*, UNIFEM, New York.

- Chant, S. (1997) 'Women-headed households: poorest of the poor? Perspectives from Mexico, Costa Rica and the Philippines', *IDS Bulletin*, 28(3), pp. 26–48.
- Chant, S. (2000) 'Men in crisis? Reflections on masculinities, work and family in north-west Costa Rica', *European Journal of Development Research*, 12(2), pp. 199–218.
- Chant, S. (2003) 'Female household headship and the feminisation of poverty', *Gender Institute Working Paper Series*, 9, London School of Economics, London.
- Chant, S. (2006) 'Revisiting the "feminisation of poverty" and the UNDP gender indices: what case for a Gendered Poverty Index?', *Gender Institute Working Paper Series*, 18, London School of Economics, London.
- Charmes, J. and Wieringa, S. (2003) 'Measuring women's empowerment: an assessment of the Gender-related Development Index and the Gender Empowerment Measure', *Journal of Human Development*, 4(3), pp. 419–435.
- Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (2002) *Boletín Demográfico No. 70, América Latina y el Caribe: Indicadores Seleccionados con una Perspectiva de Género*, CEPAL, Santiago de Chile.
- Corner, L. (2002) 'Time use data for policy advocacy and analysis: a gender perspective and some international examples', paper presented at the *National Seminar on Applications of Time Use Statistics*, UNIFEM Asia-Pacific and Arab States, Regional Programme for Engendering Economic Governance, UNDP Conference Hall, Delhi, 8–9 October [http://www.unifem-ecogov-apas/ecogov-apas/EEGProjectsActivities/TimeUseMeeting] (accessed 2 Feb 2005).
- Davids, T. and van Driel, F. (2005) 'Changing perspectives', in T. Davids and F. van Driel (Eds), *The Gender Question in Globalisation*, Ashgate, Aldershot, pp. 1–22.
- Delamonica, E., Donahue, M. and Minujin, A. (2004) *Children Living Only With Their Mothers. Are They Disadvantaged?*, UNICEF, New York.
- Dijkstra, A.G. and Hanmer, L. (2000) 'Measuring socio-economic inequality: towards an alternative to the UNDP Gender-related Development Index', *Feminist Economics*, 6(2), pp. 41–75.
- Durbin, E. (1999) 'Towards a gendered human poverty measure', *Feminist Economics*, 5(2), pp. 105–108.
- ECLAC (2004) *Roads Towards Gender Equity in Latin America and the Caribbean*, ECLAC, Santiago de Chile.
- Elson, D. (1999) 'Gender budget initiatives', *background paper*, Commonwealth Secretariat, London.
- Floro, M. (1995) 'Women's well-being, poverty and work intensity', *Feminist Economics*, 1(3), pp. 1–25.
- Folbre, N. (1994) *Who Pays for the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraint*, Routledge, London.
- Fonseca, C. (1991) 'Spouses, siblings and sex-linked bonding: a look at kinship organisation in a Brazilian slum', in E. Jelin (Ed.), *Family, Household and Gender Relations in Latin America*, Kegan Paul International, London/UNESCO, Paris, pp. 133–160.
- Franco, S. (2003) 'Different concepts of poverty: an empirical investigation and policy implications', paper prepared for *Conference on Inequality, Poverty and Human Well-Being*, UNU/WIDER, Helsinki, 30–31 May.
- Fukuda-Parr, S. (1999) 'What does feminisation of poverty mean? It isn't just lack of income', *Feminist Economics*, 5(2), pp. 99–103.
- Gates, L. (2002) 'The strategic uses of gender in household negotiations: women workers on Mexico's northern border', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 21(4), pp. 507–526.
- González de la Rocha, M. and Grinspun, A. (2001) 'Private adjustments: households, crisis and work', in A. Grinspun (Ed.), *Choices for the Poor: Lessons from National Poverty Strategies*, UNDP, New York, pp. 55–87.
- Gutmann, M. (1996) *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Jackson, C. (1996) 'Rescuing gender from the poverty trap', *World Development*, 24(3), pp. 489–504.

- Johnsson-Latham, G. (2004a) “‘Ecce homo’? A gender reading of the World Bank study ‘Voices of the Poor’”, in G. Johnsson-Latham (Ed.), *Power and Privileges: Gender Discrimination and Poverty*, Regerinskanliet, Stockholm, pp. 6–15.
- Johnsson-Latham, G. (2004b) ‘Understanding female and male poverty and deprivation’, in G. Johnsson-Latham (Ed.), *Power and Privileges: Gender Discrimination and Poverty*, Regerinskanliet, Stockholm, pp. 16–45.
- Kabeer, N. (1996) ‘Agency, well-being and inequality: reflections on the gender dimensions of poverty’, *IDS Bulletin*, 27(1), pp. 11–21.
- Kabeer, N. (2003) *Gender Mainstreaming in Poverty Eradication and the Millennium Development Goals*, Commonwealth Secretariat, London.
- Klasen, S. (2004) ‘Gender-related indicators of well-being’, *Discussion Paper No. 102*, Georg-August Universität, Ibero-Amerika Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung, Goettingen [<http://www.iai.wiwi.uni-goettingen.de>] (accessed 15 Dec 2005).
- Lampietti, J. and Stalker, L. (2000) ‘Consumption expenditure and female poverty: a review of the evidence’, *Policy Research Report on Gender and Development, Working Paper Series No. 11*, World Bank Washington, DC.
- Lopez-Claros, A. and Zahidi, S. (2005) *Women’s Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap*, World Economic Forum, Geneva [www.weforum.org] (accessed 18 May 2005).
- Marcoux, A. (1998) ‘The feminisation of poverty: claims, facts and data needs’, *Population and Development Review*, 24(1), pp. 131–139.
- Moghadam, V. (1997) ‘The feminisation of poverty: notes on a concept and trend’, *Women’s Studies Occasional Paper No. 2*, Illinois State University, Normal.
- Molyneux, M. (2006) ‘Mothers at the service of the new poverty agenda: PROGRESA/Oportunidades, Mexico’s Conditional Transfer Programme’, *Journal of Social Policy and Administration*, forthcoming.
- Olavarría, J. (2003) ‘Men at home? Child-rearing and housekeeping among Chilean working-class fathers’, in M. Gutmann (Ed.), *Changing Men and Masculinities in Latin America*, Duke University Press, Durham, pp. 333–350.
- Parpart, J. (2002) ‘Gender and empowerment: new thoughts, new approaches’, in V. Desai and R. Potter (Eds), *The Companion to Development Studies*, Edward Arnold, London, pp. 338–342.
- Razavi, S. (1999) ‘Gendered poverty and well-being: introduction’, *Development and Change*, 30(3), pp. 409–433.
- Rodenberg, B. (2004) ‘Gender and poverty reduction: new conceptual approaches in International Development Cooperation’, *Reports and Working Papers 4/2004*, GTZ, Bonn.
- Sassen, S. (2002) ‘Counter-geographies of globalisation: feminisation of survival’, in K. Saunders (Ed.), *Feminist Post-Development Thought*, London, Zed, pp. 89–104.
- Sweetman, C. (2005) ‘Editorial’, in C. Sweetman (Ed.), *Gender and the Millennium Development Goals*, Oxfam, Oxford, pp. 2–8.
- UNDP (2002) *Human Development Report 2002*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- UNDP (2003) *Millennium Development Goals: National Reports Through a Gender Lens*, UNDP, New York.
- UNDP (2005) *En Route to Equality: A Gender Review of National MDG Reports 2005*, UNDP, New York.
- UNIFEM (2002) *Progress of the World’s Women 2002, Volume 2*, UNIFEM, New York.
- United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (2005) *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*, UNRISD, Geneva.
- United Nations Statistics Division (2005) *Special Report of the World’s Women 2005: Progress in Statistics. Focusing on Sex-disaggregated Statistics on Population, Births and Deaths*, UNSD, Department of Social and Economic Affairs, New York.
- United Nations/UNIFEM (2003) *To Produce and to Care: How do Women and Men Fare in Securing Well-being and Human Freedoms?*, UN Country Team/UNIFEM, Manila.
- UNMP/TFEGE (2005) *Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women*, Earthscan, London.

- van Vuuren, A. (2003) *Women Striving for Self-Reliance: The Diversity of Female-headed Households in Tanzania and the Livelihood Strategies they Employ*, African Studies Centre, Leiden.
- Whitehead, A. (2003) *Failing Women, Sustaining Poverty: Gender in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers: Report for the UK Gender and Development Network*, GADN/Christian Aid, London.
- Willis, K. (2005) *Theories and Practices of Development*, Routledge, London.
- Women's Environment and Development Organisation (2005) *Beijing Betrayed: Women Worldwide Report that Governments have Failed to Turn the Platform into Action*, WEDO, New York.
- World Bank (2003) *Challenges and Opportunities for Gender Equality in Latin America and the Caribbean*, World Bank, Gender Unit, Latin America and the Caribbean Division Washington, DC.