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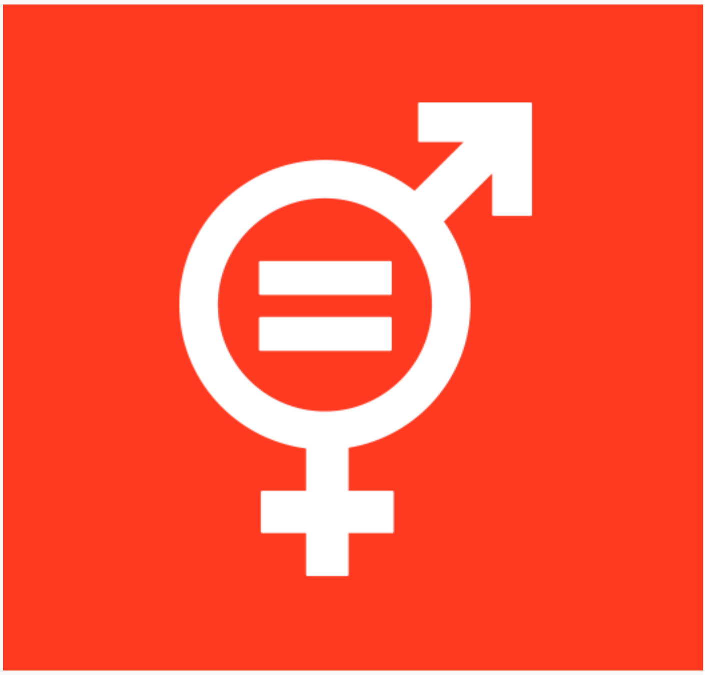

MYTHS AND MYSTIFICATIONS AROUND GENDERED POVERTY: CURRENT CONCEPTUAL AND POLICY CONCERNS

by Sarah Bradshaw, Sylvia Chant and Brian Linneker

Key points

- While a feminised and feminising monetary poverty has been assumed, there is little evidence on which to base this assumption.
- The evidence that exists is contradictory, and any feminisation may be as much down to statistical method as 'real'.
- Asset, time and power poverty interrelate with monetary poverty to determine women's relative deprivation.
- Current anti-poverty programmes such as CCTs, while focusing monetary resources on women, do little to improve their asset or power poverty and may increase their time poverty.
- More research is needed on these other dimensions of gendered poverty if anti-poverty programmes are to improve women's wellbeing.

Introduction

The maxim that poverty has a 'female face' first emerged during the Fourth Women's World Conference in Beijing in 1995 when it was claimed that women were '70% of the world's poor, and rising' (Chant, 2016:1-2). Twenty years later, UN Women, in their flagship report *Progress of the World's Women 2015-16*, declared that this much cited 'factoid' was now 'widely regarded as improbable' (UNW, 2015:307, 92n), and, perhaps more importantly, that it remained 'unknown how many of those living in poverty are women and girls' (ibid.:45, Box 1.4). Despite lack of adequate available data to measure how women and men experience poverty, the assumption that women are poorer than their male counterparts and that female heads are the poorest of the poor, has become received wisdom in policy circles. Policies such as Conditional Cash Transfer programmes (CCTs) have targeted women with monetary resources. Studies suggest this places the responsibility for poverty alleviation on them, rather than alleviating their poverty, and may in fact add to a feminised poverty. Can we determine this with any degree of certainty? In fact, it is incredible to think that even with a new headline global goal of eradicating extreme poverty by 2030, we continue to know so little about gendered poverty. This briefing asks: What do we think we know, what do we actually know, and what do we need to know about women's poverty, and how does this relate to poverty alleviation programmes?

The complexities of gendered poverty and the limitations of existing indicators

Poverty is a deeply complex and multifaceted lived experience and women commonly experience this as intersecting privations in assets, time, and power, as well as income. For example, while engaging in income-generating activities may reduce pecuniary privation, if this is on top of unpaid care work in the home then it increases time poverty. The household is a key site where gendered poverty is experienced and although aggregate household income might be sufficient for a household to be classified as 'non-poor', women and children may lack access to that income and thus face deprivation as individuals. Even when women earn money in their own right, they may be unable to translate income into voice within the home and accordingly experience 'power poverty' marked, inter alia, by limited control over household assets and decision-making.

To understand gendered poverty we need to go inside households (Bradshaw 2002, 2013; Chant 1997a, b). We need multidimensional indicators (MDIs) of individual privation (Alkire and Santos, 2010), and we need MDIs to be disaggregated by sex (Bader et al, 2016; Wisor et al, 2014). However, at a global level, we have no indicators that have combined these multifarious strands to date.

Gendered poverty: What we think we know about women's income poverty?

The 1995 assertion that women were '70% of the world's poor' gave rise to the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis, which has proved to be a distinctly abiding conventional wisdom (Chant, 2016). Despite scant empirical evidence in its favour, policymakers, including UN Women, continue to posit that poverty is both feminised and feminising (Bradshaw et al, 2017a). Other policy myths have also arisen, including the notion that female household heads are the 'poorest of the poor'. While this has long been contested in scholarly circles, it remains remarkably engrained in policy rhetoric (Chant,1997a, b; Kabeer, 1997). However, there is little evidence to support any of these enduring assumptions.

Measuring feminised poverty: What do we know, and who do we know about?

Highlighted in UN Women's Progress Report 2015-16 is that women of 'prime working age' (20-59 years) are more likely than their male peers to be represented among the poorest households (UNW, 2015). In addition, what UN Women denominate as 'female only households' (FOHs), are more likely to be among the most deprived.

The data collated in UN Women (2015) reveal that in only 41 out of 75 countries under review (55%), were women likely to be poorer than men. This questions the existence of a global feminised poverty. Our analysis of two key studies on changes in gendered poverty over time (Medeiros and Costa, 2006 and ECLAC, 2014) also reveals contradictions, demonstrating the significance of choice of methodology in determining whether the extent to which feminised and feminising poverty alike is 'real' or statistical. To provide a better comparison we applied the ECLAC methodology, which constructs a gender poverty ratio indicator, to the Medeiros and Costa data (see Bradshaw et al, 2017b). This produced some general agreement in trends, but also differences across the two studies over the 1990s and 2000s. For example, in Latin America, poverty was feminising during this period in Chile, Costa Rica and Mexico, but in Bolivia, Brazil, and Venezuela it was discovered to be de-feminising. Even within one region, there is no single trajectory

The use of FOHs by UN Women (2015) limits analysis to those households lacking a 'prime working age' male adult (20-59 years). This ignores the frequent reality that men younger or older than this age cohort contribute income to their households. This new, and arguably rather narrow, conceptualisation is something of a 'Trojan horse', perpetuating, if not exacerbating, the tendency for female heads to be clustered in the poorest quintile on account of enduring gendered wage gaps (Bradshaw et al, 2017a), and, indeed, reinforcing the 'poorest of the poor' stereotype. Given that sex-disaggregated headcount data are often only available at the household level, meaning that comparisons of men and women are actually those of male to female heads of household, the feminisation of poverty thesis is further entrenched. Such a thesis might be welcomed if women become the target of poverty reduction programmes. However, the intrinsic desirability of feminising poverty alleviation schemes remains decidedly equivocal for women in general, and for those who head their own households, as discussed below (see Bradshaw, 2008; Bradshaw et al, 2017b; Chant, 2008, 2016).

The feminisation of poverty alleviation

A key instrument to tackle poverty in the post-1990 neoliberal era has been Conditional Cash Transfer programmes (CCTs). These programmes channel monetary disbursements to women on certain conditions. The conditions to be met vary across programmes, and within programmes there may be multiple aims, with CCTs often asserting that their main objectives are to reduce poverty now, and in the future, while also claiming to empower women and girls in the process. Conditions include aspects such as ensuring that children attend school and health check-ups, and that mothers themselves participate in workshops on hygiene and nutrition. All of this consumes several hours which women are assumed to have 'free' to donate to the programme (Molyneux, 2006, 2007). However, research in countries such as Mexico and Ecuador highlights that women who become CCT 'beneficiaries' spend less time in paid work and more time in unpaid work than those not in the programmes, suggesting involvement changes time use rather than taking up their 'free' time (ECLAC, 2017: 36). While FHHs are constructed as the poorest of the poor in wider policy discourse, CCTs in general do not specifically target them. Moreover, while FHHs potentially have the most to gain from CCTs, the time burdens imposed and the opportunity cost of lost earnings may effectively 'price them out' of these schemes (Bradshaw et al, 2017b). On top of this, given that CCTs focus on 'better' mothering, the exclusion of female household heads by default, if not design, can add to or perpetuate their routine stigmatisation as 'unfit parents' (Bradshaw, 2008; Chant, 2007).

While the professed aims of CCTs are often manifold, 'success' is typically measured only in terms of improvement in children's nutrition, health and schooling. The success of CCTs then depends on women's altruistic behaviour as 'good mothers' (Brickell and Chant, 2010), and the use of the cash transfers to improve the well-being of their offspring. It might be assumed then, that CCTs do little to improve women's own income or asset poverty. However, we do not really know this as programme evaluations seldom examine all the multiple, and at times competing, aims of the interventions, and, in particular, rarely measure the impact on adult female participants. Academic studies suggest that when the income women bring to the home is not earned, it may not give them more voice in the household, leaving their power poverty unchanged (Bradshaw, 2008, 2013; Chant, 2007, 2016). The economic cost of CCTs has been justified by the results - improving the health and education of children – but the real costs may be women's increased time, power, and income poverty (Chant, 2008). Despite research highlighting how CCTs are part of a wider policy move toward a 'feminisation of responsibility and obligation' (Chant, 2008), which places women at the service of development rather than being served by it (Molyneux, 2006) these policies continue to be rolled out across the globe with the financial support of international development banks and agencies.

Conclusions

Despite doubts as to the extent to which poverty is feminised, female-biased privation has become received wisdom among international agencies and is used to justify a focus on women, which it is claimed meets equality goals, but, more importantly, improves efficiency in delivering resources to children and thereby to break cycles of inter-generational poverty. The feminisation of poverty alleviation programmes should not be assumed to be driven by a feminisation of poverty, and it must also be acknowledged that poverty reduction initiatives can actually increase feminised privations. Among many challenges ahead we need to develop more accurate and holistic indicators of the extent and nature of women's poverty in order to measure not only women's and men's monetary privation, but also gender inequalities in assets, time and power within households. It is necessary to identify how these elements interact with one another and intersect with cross-cutting characteristics such as age, race and ethnicity, and differential ability. This would help us to move towards generating data that is up to the task of enriching conceptual debates and informing appropriate policy interventions.

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