

by Gita Sen,
Indian Institute of Management

Poverty as a Gendered Experience:

The policy implications

The poverty experience is gendered by the differential impacts on women and men, girls and boys, and by their different responses.

This should be considered more in the design and implementation of anti-poverty policies and programmes.

For poor women, time is often the most valuable resource; it is so much taken up by caring work that they can remain caught in a vicious circle of poverty.

Collecting more gender-based data can improve the functioning of social policies and help ensure the reduction of gendered poverty.

Policy discussions about the interactions between poverty and gender inequality have tended in the last two decades to use the idea of the *feminisation* of poverty to explain differences between male and female poverty in a given context, as well as changes over time.

Typically, this approach has fed the perception that female-headed households—however defined—tend to be poorer than other households. Recent empirical work has, however, cast doubt on this generalisation and sent analysts of gender and poverty back to the drawing board.

It is clear now that, not only is the empirical generalisation inaccurate, but that a single-minded focus on female-headed households narrows which households we focus on and how we understand what goes on within them. Focusing on female-headed households is of course much simpler, since this avoids having to address the messy complexities posed by gender relations within households, or the ways in which development policies and programmes affect them. But it is clearly inadequate to the task.

Viewing poverty as a gendered experience allows us to broaden the scope of analysis to include all poor households—however headed. It also directs us to a wider range of issues beyond simply asking whether women or men are poorer in income terms. These include the ways in which poverty is made a gendered experience by norms and values, divisions of assets, work and responsibility, and relations of power and control. Gendered experiences include (i) the differential impacts of poverty on girls versus boys, and women versus men within the household; (ii) the gendered ways in which poor households and their members respond to poverty; and (iii) the gendered impact

of the design and implementation of anti-poverty policies and programmes.

Understanding how gender relations work to define the experience of programmes requires focusing on:

- Who gets or has access to resources;
- How roles and relationships of work, responsibilities, cooperation, sharing or conflict define both women's and men's living and working conditions within households;
- How structures and programs of the state and other actors, e.g. the private sector and civil society, reinforce or transform those roles and relationships; and
- How normative frameworks affecting differential entitlements and responsibilities are challenged or reinforced by policies and programmes.

The generalisation that girls and women bear greater work burdens and responsibility for the care of human beings through unpaid work within households is well grounded empirically through numerous time-use and qualitative studies. However, the experience of care work varies profoundly between poor versus non-poor, rural versus urban, or landed versus landless households. Evidence from the National Sample Survey in India shows that care work in the poorest rural households is likely to include mainly fuel and water gathering, while in somewhat better-off households, it includes the care of livestock and kitchen gardens, or fodder collection. In households that are even better off, women are also more likely to engage in activities such as embroidery and supervision of household workers.

The care work done by women and girls in the poorest households tends

therefore to be extremely time- and drudgery-intensive, but critical to household members' ability to sustain basic daily consumption. As a result, it drastically limits women's choice of compatible income earning opportunities, their ability to take time off for government programmes, social exchanges or minimal leisure, and their possibilities for acknowledging their own needs for rest, recuperation or health care.

The gendered impact of poverty not only distinguishes between women and men, but also differentiates how care work burdens and responsibilities are experienced by different women. Evidence suggests that, where such burdens are reinforced by strong gender norms that define the 'good' woman as self-sacrificing, poor women in particular are likely to receive much less acknowledgement of—or attention to—their needs for nutrition or health care, not only by other family members but even by themselves.

Poor households cope in a variety of ways, some of which are gendered. In doing so, they react not only to insufficiency of incomes but also to insecurity and risk. As household income rises above poverty levels, risk management often dictates behaviours that appear more appropriate to lower income levels, at least until the new higher level becomes more secure. Well known are such responses as increased time spent on work, reduced consumption levels, increases in debt, debt-peonage, migration, and fostering in or out of household members. Less understood are such strategies as maintenance of socio-economic networks through ceremonies requiring consumption, spreading risk and borrowing potential by taking on multiple jobs, desertion or abandonment of the family, and selective education or rationing of health care among family members.

At least three of these responses are gendered, although with variations across cultural and economic contexts. While men may take on more paid work, partly to buy items such as tobacco and liquor, women often face difficult time allocation choices between paid and

unpaid work with home-made or freely gathered consumption items like food, clothing, and fuel. These tensions are often resolved by sacrificing the leisure, play-time, or education of daughters, who are expected to take on additional care work including kitchen tasks, foraging, and looking after siblings, as well as other responsibilities.

Another gendered response is desertion or abandonment of families, a strategy often used by poor men to escape the responsibilities of contributing to household consumption, particularly when their partners or spouses become pregnant. A third phenomenon noticed particularly in South Asia is selective education and health care with sharply lower entitlements for women and girls relative to men and boys. Such differentials in entitlements are reinforced through gendered norms and values that permeate across the economic spectrum. While they tend to be lower in intensity for better-off households, they do not completely disappear.

The gendered impacts of poverty and of household responses to impoverishment are often missed in the design of anti-poverty policies and programmes. Women's responsibilities for care fundamentally affect their ability to participate in social programmes, in labour markets, and to derive benefits from household resources. For poor women, time is often the most valuable resource, and poor women's time is so much taken up by caring work that they can remain caught in a vicious circle of poverty. Even worse, social policies often profit from this gendered division of work and its associated norms, thereby reinforcing the gendered norms and roles that are at the root of women's poverty and within-household inequalities.

Putting mothers 'at the service of the state' represents a convenient marriage of new social policies built on downsizing and decentralising the state while ensuring 'community' responsibilities—largely women's—for the success of programmes. Recent examination of conditional cash transfer programmes through a gender lens reveals that they can make significant

additional demands on poor women's time if designed in this way. Although women may be willing to pay this 'time tax' in order to improve their children's health, nutrition or education, it is nonetheless a costly burden and may involve other hidden sacrifices and burdens. The hidden gendered cost of programmes also raises questions about programme sustainability.

How can these insights be used for programme assessment? The collection of more gender-based information can be a way to improve programme functioning, e.g., the *Observatorio de Genero y Pobreza* as a complement to the *Oportunidades* programme in Mexico. Such information can be used to understand better the way in which the care economy and gendered poverty are affected by and affect social policies. Programme development based on such information can help to ensure that gendered responsibilities for care are not reinforced, as these are at the core of gendered poverty.

Such approaches can be complemented by programmes to transform masculinist norms and behaviours in relation to care work and responsibilities. Schools, public education, child and adolescent programme should focus gender education not only on girls but also on boys and young men. Consistent attention has to be paid to violence against women and girls within households which is often triggered by women's not meeting male demands in relation to food, keeping the house clean, taking care of children, sexuality or reproduction. Such changes in anti-poverty programmes may require as a pre- or at least a co-requisite, the transformation of mindsets within government bureaucracies towards greater awareness of the gendered consequences of policies and programmes. ■

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