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Monitoring progress towards gender-equitable poverty alleviation: the tools of the trade

Bipasha Baruah, *Western University*



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Bipasha Baruah

Department of Geography California State University, Long Beach
1250 Bellflower Boulevard, Long Beach, California 90840 USA

Abstract: This article contributes towards unpacking the relationships between gender, poverty and inequality at several interrelated levels. It explores the concept of poverty as a useful starting point not only for understanding *how* gender fits into it, but also for understanding *why* gender is not reducible to poverty. It provides a brief history of how poverty came to be analysed from a gender perspective, and how such a perspective advances our understanding of poverty and inequality. The article follows this with a critical analysis of important gendered and non-gendered approaches developed to measure poverty, and outlines their contributions to advancing the art of monitoring and evaluating gendered poverty. Using research conducted predominantly in South Asia, it demonstrates how the richness of academic scholarship and discourses on gender and poverty contrast sharply not only with the narrow range of strategies employed for poverty alleviation, but also the limited array of methods and tools designed to monitor and analyse poverty from a gender perspective.

Keywords: gender, poverty, inequality, monitoring, evaluation, South Asia

I Introduction

This article attempts to unpack the complex relationships between gender, poverty, vulnerability and inequity. It provides a critical assessment of the strengths, weaknesses and limitations of quantitative, qualitative and participatory tools and methodologies developed to monitor and evaluate poverty from a gendered perspective. The article also provides

recommendations for how researchers might engage with the complexities of the relationship between gender and poverty and avoid glossing over historical and situational specificities in designing their research.

Women's needs, skills and resources have always, albeit peripherally, been on the radar of 'solutions' to global poverty even though poverty has not always been analysed from a

gender perspective. Prior to feminist contributions, poverty measurement, analysis and policy were deemed to be gender-neutral so that women's needs and interests were perceived to be identical to, and therefore subsumable under, those of men. The gender research and advocacy of Northern and Southern feminist movements asserted that strategies that were thought to be gender-neutral were, in fact, genderblind, and while capable of capturing the male experience of poverty, they were woefully inadequate and inconclusive about women's experiences of poverty and deprivation. Despite such developments and an expanding body of literature on women in poverty as well as the discourses on gender and development that have moved from welfare, anti-poverty and efficiency to approaches that emphasise empowerment, human rights and human capabilities, there is still concern that the interlinkages between gender and poverty have not undergone comprehensive and rigorous study and analysis.

While the more instrumental and simplistic 'win-win' approaches of 'investing in women' to pull entire families out of poverty, illiteracy and disease have been contested quite abundantly not just in academic and research circles but also within development organisations, there are other approaches and assumptions that have not been challenged as widely. The tendency of anti-poverty analyses and policies to collapse gender subordination, perceived to be an equity issue by many, into an agenda about poverty alleviation is one approach that has been challenged to some extent (Buvinic, 1983; Jackson, 1996). The other prominent trend in anti-poverty discourse is to unquestioningly equate women or female-headed households with the vulnerable or the poor. This particular correlation was obvious even in the most conservative poverty line measurements, since gender-disaggregated information on household heads was easily available even in the simplest of surveys. It has been criticised in recent years by researchers who argue against the simple dualism of

male- and female-headed households given the range of circumstances and trajectories that lead to female headship. They assert not only that female headship is often a matter of choice and not necessity, but also that women in households headed by men frequently face greater poverty and deprivation due to inequitable and male-biased distribution of resources within the household (Chant, 1997a; Chant, 1997b).

Through innovations like the Human Development Report, organisations like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have also broadened the concept of poverty beyond a narrow preoccupation with incomes and markets to include other dimensions of human deprivation that strongly impact quality of life. Such perspectives increasingly see the poor as deprived of the basic opportunities to lead long, healthy and creative lives as a result of maldistribution of income, assets and human capabilities. They call for a combination of market opportunities and state support to counter the exclusion of the poor from the fruits of 'development'. Through the gender-disaggregation of well-being outcomes made possible by two new indices, namely the gender development index (GDI) and the gender empowerment measure (GEM), the Human Development Report has also succeeded in capturing not just some of the links between gender and poverty but also in highlighting significantly increasing female disadvantage in several regions of the developing world, most notably South Asia, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP, 1995). While all of these efforts have improved our understanding of the gender dimensions of poverty and well-being, they are for the most part generalised and lacking in context. They also do not shed light upon the different social, economic, cultural and political processes that lead to poverty and the behaviours and institutions that sustain and reproduce it contrary to the expectations and predictions of a globalising economic order. If the diverse trajectories that lead into and out of poverty are not explored

rigorously, and through a contextualised gender lens, it will be extremely difficult to understand not only why women frequently fail to benefit from development interventions, but also why strategies that improve the lives of poor men may not have a similar effect on the lives of poor women.

II Making gender count: a critique of prominent approaches

Poverty is increasingly seen, at least at the conceptual level, as a multidimensional phenomenon. This includes inadequacy of income or market-based consumption as well as the public provision of goods and services, access to common property resources and other less-tangible assets such as dignity, autonomy, self-worth and self-esteem. However, some more conservative approaches continue to privilege income as the best proxy for measuring poverty.

Conservative poverty line assessments and household expenditure data have been criticised for a number of reasons. Prominent among these is the concern that the equation of poverty with inadequacy of household income exemplifies the institutional biases of traditional economics and its focus on the market as the main institution through which human needs are met (Kabeer, 1996; Razavi, 1999). Other criticisms emphasise the failure of the poverty line approach to capture intra-household resource distribution and entitlements since little attempt is generally made to determine how equitably household income is distributed among family members and whether or not gender, more specifically, unequal gender relations, is a factor that affects distribution (Dreze and Sen, 1990; Kabeer, 1989). Some critics of poverty line measures have taken the debate further by stressing that such approaches support without qualification that people, irrespective of gender, with incomes above the poverty line have better lives than people with incomes deemed to be below it. While the evidence that one group of households has lower income than another group

may generally be taken as the evidence that male members of those households enjoy less nutritious food and lower purchasing power, a similar correlation may be erroneous for women (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). Since men frequently command a disproportionate share of family resources, it is entirely possible for female members of households with incomes deemed to be above the poverty line to be less well-nourished and to have less purchasing power than male members from poorer households.

Regrettably, despite the diversity of recent efforts to understand poverty better and the significant body of evidence that has highlighted this issue, there is a surprising widespread unwillingness on the part of administrative and governmental structures to probe the intra-household arena in research, data collection and analysis. Perhaps as a response to such shortcomings, prominent gendered approaches to poverty analysis tend to emphasise not just the rules that govern intra-household resource allocation but also how gendered rights and obligations are constructed, maintained and made to appear 'natural.' There appears to be agreement among such approaches that existing gender systems appear to be oppressive to women in two major related ways. The first supports unequal division of, and access to, different kinds of resources, unequal division of labour within and outside the home, and the associated dependencies, ideologies and behavioural norms they foster. The other distinct and common thread of oppression highlighted by gendered approaches is the implicit or explicit failure of non-gendered approaches to recognise and reward the 'care economy,' which is overwhelmingly the responsibility of women and which shape the resources, labour and ideologies that go into the reproduction of human beings in daily and generational terms.

The next few pages will provide a critical and selective assessment of the attempts made to measure gender disadvantage: the contributions they have made to understanding the

gender dimensions of poverty, how reliable they are in identifying gender bias, how they would fit into different social contexts, what kinds of contextual information would be needed to facilitate their interpretation and how well they capture the different processes leading to poverty.

1 Indicators of well-being and human development

Approaches that look more directly at what people can do or be with the physical, intellectual and social resources available to them were developed in response to approaches that privilege opulence criteria like income over other resources and capabilities. Indicators of the physical quality of life as propounded by Morris (1979), human capabilities and functionings as propounded by Sen and Nussbaum (1993) and human development indicators as propounded by UNDP (1995) are deemed preferable not only for drawing attention to the actual realisation of basic needs, as opposed to the potential value of income in achieving those needs, but also because being measured directly on the individual, they are less prone to gender bias and better able to render gender inequalities visible.

Sen (1987) has argued that especially in dealing with poor economies, there are advantages in concentrating on parameters such as nutrition, health, avoidance of morbidity and educational achievements rather than focusing on subjective utility in the form of pleasure, satisfaction or desire fulfillment since these can be strongly influenced by social conditioning or a resigned acceptance of misfortune. He also stresses that using subjective measures to capture the gender dimensions of poverty is problematic because cultural rules, norms and values not only tend to devalue women's well-being in many societies but also to militate against recognition by women themselves of 'the spectacular lack of equity in the ruling arrangements (Sen, 1990: 149)'.

Nussbaum (2000) also defends objective universal measures of human capability that

transcend differences of culture, class and context. She explains that not all universal approaches are obtuse, simplistic or insensitive to cultural and regional specificity. Indeed, she argues that universal norms are actually required to protect diversity, pluralism and freedom. Perhaps due to such forceful assertions, indicators like life expectancy, sex ratios at birth, maternal mortality and gender differentials in infant and child mortality, are now universally accepted as capable of capturing important dimensions of relative female deprivation.

One of the other major contributions of the capabilities approach and well-being indicators is the large body of literature on 'missing females' in South and East Asia and the increasing acceptance of the assertion that in certain parts of the world social factors outweigh and reverse the pattern that is expected on the basis of biological sex differentials in life chances. The South Asian literature on excessive female mortality has identified both proximate determinants, namely, sex bias in food intake and in access to health care, as well as underlying causes such as 'cultural' and 'economic' undervaluation of women because of their erroneously presumed low rates of labour participation, tenuous inheritance rights, low social status and limited autonomy within marriage in order to explain mortality differences (Das Gupta and Shuzhuo, 1999; Harris-White, 1997; Miller, 1981, 1997).

The use of well-being indicators has also revealed demographic manipulation where specific categories of daughters are neglected more than others. A good example is the village-level study conducted in Punjab, which revealed that girls born to mothers who already had one or more surviving daughters experienced 53 per cent higher chance of mortality than the average rate which is recorded for their male and female siblings (Das Gupta, 1987). This distinction between generalised neglect of daughters relative to sons versus selective discrimination is important because it supports that excess female mortality is a consequence

when parents not only internalise certain norms that lead them to care better for their sons than their daughters but also when the same norms lead them to care better for earlier-born than later-born daughters. Sex differentials in early age survivorship have also been instructive in determining whether or not improvement in general economic conditions promote better survivorship for girls. While it seems intuitive that the female disadvantage should lessen and disappear with mortality decline brought on by better economic conditions, several studies have indicated that sex differences in early age mortality have tended to persist in some regions more than others. Das Gupta (1987) reports that although improvements in living standards and health care in the wealthier districts of the Indian state of Punjab have led to significant rises in early age survivorship and overall life expectancy, the sex differentials in infant and child mortality have remained fairly resilient to change. Similar findings have been reported in a number of other village-level studies from North India (Jackson, 1996).

Well-being indicators have also successfully captured the impact of fertility decline on sex ratios. A number of studies have revealed that periods of fertility decline, when the number of opportunities to have a son is effectively reduced, correspond with more masculine sex ratios and rising female disadvantage in survival as parents manipulate the gender composition of their desired family size through prenatal sex-selection techniques (Das Gupta and Shuzhuo, 1999; Sudha and Irudaya Rajan, 1999). These findings also mesh well with the observation that increasing masculinity of sex ratios at birth usually go hand in hand with more equitable sex ratios of infant and child mortality (Goodkind, 1996). In other words, fewer girls are allowed to be born, but those that are born are more wanted and tend to survive. This may also partly explain the poor survivorship observed in Punjab of later-born as compared to earlier-born daughters. It also corroborates that fertility decline in the face of unchanging social norms and attitudes serves to exacerbate discrimination against girls.

Demographic and qualitative evidence on the incidence of pre-natal sex selection and female infanticide in India suggests that in the decades of maximum fertility decline, namely the 1980s and 1990s, pre-natal sex selection techniques may have been added to general neglect of daughters to create a 'double jeopardy' for female children (Sudha and Irudaya Rajan, 1999). In a January 2008 issue of *Outlook*, a weekly Indian newsmagazine, Chander Suta Dogra reports an alarming increase in the incidence of abandoned baby girls – dead or alive – being found across the state of Punjab. The article titled 'Punjab's Killing Fields' notes that at the beginning of the year 2008, Punjab had the lowest female sex ratio in India – one which keeps dipping every year. The Punjab government's crackdown on sex determination clinics and on doctors performing sex-selective abortions has had an unexpected and horrific result: an alarming increase in the incidence of female infanticide. Dogra reports that female infanticide was a common practice in Mughal times when the poor in the border areas of Punjab killed their girls to prevent them from falling into the hands of marauding invaders. Although the reasons for female infanticide have changed in the contemporary context, recent evidence in the state threatens a revival of the old practice.

While sex ratios at birth reveal the most masculine majority in northern and northwestern states, Sudha and Irudaya Rajan (1999) also show that sex ratios of child mortality definitely indicate increasing female disadvantage all over India. In the past such results were observed more frequently in the northern cultural zone, also termed the 'patriarchal-patrilineal-patrilocal' belt characterised by more deeply entrenched gender hierarchies and lower status of women. The more egalitarian societies of South India with higher levels of women's literacy, education and participation in labour markets generally tended to reveal lower fertility and mortality rates and also more 'normal' sex ratios (Dyson and Moore, 1983). Kerala, for example, has an adult literacy

rate of 90 per cent and almost universal literacy among adolescent boys and girls. Kerala's development achievements extend into economic, social and political spheres, earning it the well-deserved title of 'the most socially advanced state in India' (Nussbaum, 2000). Although not affluent in terms of per capita income, Kerala's achievements are the outcome of many factors: more than a hundred years of concerted left-leaning public action, matrilineal traditions, and a long – partly Jesuit-inspired – tradition of education that goes back to the eighteenth century. Such factors notwithstanding, the dichotomisation of a country, as large as India, into Northern and Southern zones is perhaps overly simplistic. Nevertheless, the more masculine sex ratios observed all over the country begs deeper analysis of the observed trends of women's disempowerment – female foeticide, introduction of dowry, dowry deaths, erosion of property rights and exclusion from labour markets and higher education – that have been observed in parts of the country, which were previously known for more egalitarian gender relations.

The focus of well-being indicators and capabilities-based approaches on intra-household resource distribution has also counter-intuitively challenged some long-held myths about anti-female bias in nutritional status and food intake. Contrary to the expectation that women are disadvantaged nutritionally throughout their lives, researchers have indicated that gender and age interact in more complex ways than previously understood over the life cycles of men and women rendering each gender more vulnerable at different stages. While the evidence of discrimination against girls is most compelling in the northern and northwestern states of India, findings from several nutritional surveys in the same region have indicated that adult women often fare better than their male counterparts (Harris, 1990). Similarly, Saith and Harris-White's 1999 study of the micro-level literature in South Asia suggests that the

differentials in nutritional status between adult men and women show no consistent indication of gender bias. Other researchers like Kynch and McGuire (1994) have suggested from their village-level studies in the northwestern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh that although females suffer significant nutritional disadvantage during childhood, the pattern is reversed during the childbearing years. In this period, women are less vulnerable to illness and low working ability due to thinness and exhaustion compared to men of the same age group. Male disadvantage can be explained in this context by deeply entrenched gender ideologies that require men to provide for their families. Poor men, who are compelled to do labour-intensive agricultural or construction work, may command larger portions of family food resources but may still not even be able to compensate for their average daily energy expenditure through their food intake given differences in adult anthropometry between the sexes.

These findings mesh well with the analysis of other researchers, most notably, with Jackson and Palmer-Jones (1999), who maintain that although time-use studies have been indispensable in making women's work visible, it is important to acknowledge and factor in the possibility that gender roles and division of labour can also render certain groups of men vulnerable at certain stages of life. They argue that a study of the physical arduousness of labour in combination with nutrition-health-productivity linkages captured through intra-household allocations of resources and consumption may better reflect how work and well-being interact for men and women. Shaffer (1998) examines the relationship between gender and consumption poverty in the Republic of Guinea and reports similar findings. National household survey data reveal that women are not more likely than men to be consumption-poor or to suffer greater consumption poverty. Data from the village of Kamatiguia reveal that women are 'worse off' than men only when deprivation includes, *inter alia*, excessive work load and reduced

decision-making authority. Taken together, these studies reflect the importance of probing the intra-household arena not just for further validation of female disadvantage, convincing as the findings may sometimes be, but also for contradictory findings that shed light upon the complexity and dynamism of households and gender relations.

While the gendered approaches discussed above have made significant contributions to our understanding of poverty and well-being, they are not without methodological constraints. Although gender-disaggregation has been used effectively to demonstrate female disadvantage, the fact that male and female bodies differ significantly in form and function make reliable comparisons between male and female well-being difficult. Life expectancy is an excellent case in point. While women are understood to be better endowed biologically for intra-uterine survival and longevity as compared to men if all other factors are held constant, it should not be ruled out that the *biological* life expectancy disadvantages that men are supposed to face under 'normal' circumstances may also have *social* attributes that work against them in health and longevity terms.

Comparisons of nutritional status between men and women are also fraught with methodological difficulties since they can only be made once 'norms' and 'cut-off' points, that are themselves open to controversy, have been made to adjust for gender differences. Harris-White (1997) notes in her study of gender bias in intra-household nutrition in South India that the use of different norms and cut-offs, or the use of gendered or non-gendered methods, can produce different conclusions about male and female disadvantage even for the same data set. The fact that such methodological controversies surface more frequently in studies that are regional in scope rather than national or global is both a liability and an asset for the use of well-being indicators at the local level. While regional studies of well-being tend to provide much more layered and contextualised

information than studies conducted on larger scales, they are more open to weaknesses of arbitrariness and use of non-standardised norms.

Data problems and issues of reliability and comparability that are significant shortcomings of systems of well-being indicators are not helped much by the fact that very few developing countries have comprehensive and reliable vital registration systems from which demographic data can be obtained. Where they do exist, studies of even straightforward indicators like mortality, life expectancy and literacy are almost never conducted frequently enough on a national level to provide up-to-date snapshots of demographics. As a result, international agencies often overuse outdated survey information compromising reliability and results. UNICEF, for example, has repeatedly acknowledged that many of the statistics used for estimating under-five mortality are based on mathematical models and projections rather than recent measurements (UNICEF, 1993).

One of the other most serious weaknesses of well-being indicators is the limited amount of causal analysis they are able to generate by themselves. Sex ratios at birth are a good case in point. While the use of human development indicators and studies of well-being have done a commendable job in outcome terms of highlighting issues of regional specificity in son preference, in the absence of detailed contextual information there is precious little information about the deeper social, cultural and economic roots of such a preference. Anthropological studies in India trace the roots of such a marked preference in the North to wheat-based agrarian economies where women are less involved, and social systems are marked by dowry, exogamous marriage and the seclusion of women as opposed to more normal sex ratios in the South, which is broadly characterised by rice-based agrarian systems with a greater role for women, endogamous marriage systems and more egalitarian marriage prices between the bride and the groom. Although not adequate to explain

sex ratios in all of India, such studies offer far more potential for causal analysis. This is a very important limitation and it warns users to be cautious about the extent to which well-being indicators, that rely on correlations and regressions without adequate complementary contextual information, can be indicative of larger social trends and phenomena.

2 Indicators of empowerment, freedom and agency

Critics of the well-being approach suggest that confining issues of gender inequality to basic indicators like mortality, life expectancy, literacy and sex ratios is problematic because it fails to capture the complexity and multidimensionality of gender disadvantage. They also argue that it fails to capture less easily quantifiable aspects of disadvantage such as lack of autonomy and decision-making power. Others like Kabeer (1996) suggest that baseline indicators convey the impression that female disadvantage is largely a function of poverty. She suggests that this is misleading since it has been observed in many cases in South Asia that while economic prosperity may reduce gender inequalities in basic well-being outcomes within a society, it may impose other restrictions on women's free movement and autonomy. Additionally, a focus on basic needs failures such as child mortality overlooks other quieter and more insidious forms of deprivation and disadvantage that are less prone to extreme outcomes, such as increased incidence among poorer women of chronic illnesses, longer workdays, heavier workloads and lack of leisure.

In response to such criticisms of baseline indicators, there have been several attempts in recent years to incorporate concepts of empowerment, freedom and agency into debates about poverty and inequality. During the course of evolution of the gender and development discourse, female empowerment has been validated in instrumental terms of efficiency and anti-poverty as well as within equity and social justice frameworks. The pressure to 'prove' that increased female autonomy

actually translates into reduced poverty was largely driven by funding agencies, which spearheaded the search for easily quantifiable indicators of empowerment.

While I will not delve into conflicting definitions of the notion of empowerment in this article, I will address how methodological problems and difficulties in interpretation outlined for basic well-being outcomes like sex ratios and longevity become even more challenging when applied to concepts that do not lend themselves easily to measurement, such as power, agency and choice. Indicators, by their very nature, provide simple windows on complex realities even for the most seemingly straightforward and quantifiable outcomes. When an indicator is called upon to capture a complex concept like autonomy that means different things to different people, it is very difficult to trust its reliability without contextual evidence to support the assumptions that are being made. Empowerment studies conducted in different parts of South Asia illustrate the importance of context. Schuler and Hashemi, who conducted empowerment research with the women workers of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh in the early 1990s, identified six specific indicators of women's empowerment in Bangladesh: sense of self and vision of a future, mobility and visibility, economic security, status and decision-making power within the household, ability to interact effectively in the public sphere and affiliation with non-family groups. A subsequent study of empowerment as experienced by urban members of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India revealed that one of the indicators, namely mobility and visibility, was far less important than others (Carr *et al.*, 1996). The priorities and aspirations of urban members of SEWA, who had always been relatively visible and independent workers in the informal economy, were significantly different from those of the rural members of Grameen who were new entrants to the paid economy.

One of the other major limitations of the use of indicators of empowerment and freedom is

the observed over-reliance on simple interview techniques to capture different aspects of female autonomy such as intra-household decision making, mobility in the public sphere and domestic violence. While purely statistical perspectives on intra-household power issues may be able to provide fleeting snapshots of intra-household power dynamics, they are also clearly limited in depth since they cannot tease out the subtle negotiations between men and women in their homes. Studies of well-being and empowerment appear to find themselves at opposing ends of the methodological spectrum in terms of reliance on quantitative statistical information and qualitative interview information respectively. Over-reliance on simple interview and focus group techniques are as capable of producing uncontextualised, single-stranded results that are open to multiple interpretations as are simple correlations and regressions using a few variables.

To overcome these shortcomings of empowerment indicators, Kabeer (1999) astutely asserts that it is only through grounded analyses that issues of power and disempowerment can be meaningfully assessed since it is only at this level that the context, content and consequences of choice and agency can be understood and interpreted. She also stresses the importance of cross-checking evidence of women's agency against the outcomes or consequences of the choices they make thus highlighting her belief that power relations are expressed not only through the exercise of agency and choice, but also through the kinds of choices people make. This is an important distinction because it helps explain why women sometimes 'consciously' make choices that are disempowering and detrimental to themselves or their daughters' health and well-being. This includes deeply entrenched and internalised behaviours of 'altruism' demonstrated by relinquishing their claims on property and household resources, caring for family members while neglecting their own health and the 'rational' response of discriminating against their daughters in nutrition, health care and

the like. Kabeer's understanding of the concept of agency is valuable because it includes the socially sanctioned and institutionalised 'structures of constraint' under which agency is exercised, and also because she includes the consequences of choice within the concept of agency. Similarly, Papanek (1990) writes that 'a perspective on resource entitlements *and* [emphasis added] social learning, finally, helps to uncover some of the processes of women's complicity in their own inequality (p.164)'.

In response to criticisms of the intended or unintended portrayal of Third World women as passive voiceless victims of circumstances, authors like Kabeer (1997) and Razavi (1999) have stressed through their micro-level studies of women workers in India, Bangladesh and Iran that spaces and possibilities for subtle negotiation of agency and choice exist, and are exercised by women, even within the patriarchal controls of the home or the factory floor. They also suggest that depending on the issue and context at hand, women are sometimes able to subvert gender-biased social norms to broaden their choices and control over their own lives. Kabeer (1997) highlights the experiences of many female garment workers she interviewed in Bangladesh. These women had found ways to secure a more central place within existing domestic relationships, to renegotiate the terms of unsatisfactory relationships, to step out of, or not enter into, relationships that were not acceptable, based on the confidence they had gained from entering the work force, albeit through poorly paid and vastly unprotected factory jobs, in Dhaka.

All of these contributions to the understanding and measurement of empowerment point to the fact that intra-household power is unlike any other form of power. It offers women compensations, inducements and 'protection' for remaining within its parameters and penalises 'selfish' autonomous behaviour. More importantly, this form of power is imbued with the ideologies of love, affection and camaraderie. The fact

that women have to navigate not just the broader structural constraints but also the internalised constraints burdens the arena of intra-household power with an extremely strong subjective element that does not lend itself to simplification, reduction or generalisation. These complications also raise not just the methodological tension between more objective criteria, such as skills, wages, education, health and more subjective criteria about the perceptions of work, health, and bodily and spiritual well-being but also the ability of such criteria to capture the gendered aspects of poverty, inequality, subordination and discrimination. Despite such complications, there is increasing consensus that to optimise our understanding of women's experiences of poverty and empowerment, a combination of objective well-being indicators that summarise key measures of physical survival and highlight incidence of poverty and gender inequality as well as women's own perceptions and values need to find space in these discussions. (Jackson and Palmer-Jones, 1999; Julia, 2001; Kabeer, 1996; Razavi, 1999; Saith and Harris-White, 1999).

3 Participatory methods

The previous sections have focused on the problems of relying solely on objective or subjective assessments of poverty to identify poor women's priorities and needs because of the power of social conditioning in shaping the 'choices' women make to the extent that they may be resigned to, or even actively promote and participate in, their own subordination and deprivation. In contrast to approaches discussed previously, participatory approaches determine both the constituents and sources of well-being through an iterative process termed participatory rural appraisal (PRA) that involves facilitators and participants. Because it gives participants a 'voice of their own,' proponents of participatory assessments stress that such methods of research and policy analysis enable local people, including previously marginalised groups like the poor,

the illiterate, and women, to appraise, analyse, plan and act (Chambers, 1995).

One of the other major contributions of PRA is the distinction made between poverty and vulnerability. Chambers (1988) emphasises that those who are vulnerable in any society are exposed to particular risks, shocks and stress, but that they are not necessarily poor. He contrasts vulnerability with security and links it with net assets or a wide range of tangible and intangible stores of value or claims to assistance which can be mobilised in a crisis. This inclusion of intangible assets, which by definition should include gender-based entitlements of kinship and society, makes the concept of vulnerability (and PRA) sensitive to women's particular circumstances and constraints. Additionally, it meshes well with other assertions that gender equity goals cannot be collapsed into poverty since rising family income frequently puts women in positions of increased subordination and vulnerability within and outside the household (Beall, 1997; Jackson, 1996). Razavi (1997) also found the notion of vulnerability to be quite useful to highlight issues of risk and security perceived by women in rural communities in south-eastern Iran, where increasing levels of family opulence improved women's survival chances and reduced their work burden, but also imposed new norms of seclusion rendering them more dependent on male income and thus more insecure within marriage.

There are many gendered and non-gendered criticisms of PRA (see, for example, Bastian and Bastian, 1996; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2000, 2003). Researchers like Whitehead and Lockwood (1999) suggest that the term 'participatory' has been co-opted by efforts like the World Bank's Poverty Assessments (PAs) to label even standard qualitative research methods used in sociology and anthropology, such as unstructured and semi-structured interviews. They stress that the term needs to be defined in more detail since qualitative methods are frequently used as a proxy for participatory assessments.

Others have been less critical of the World Bank's appropriation of the term 'participatory' for its poverty assessments or whether or not their brand of participation complies strictly with PRA norms. However, many have expressed concern that while the three-pronged strategy envisaged by the Bank, namely market-oriented agricultural growth, education and 'safety nets,' carries significant implications for gender issues, very little attempt has actually been made to analyse poverty broadly through a gender lens (Whitehead and Lockwood, 1999). Consequently, education is the only high profile gendered policy prescription in the PAs conducted in different parts of the world. Other inclusions are largely *ad hoc*, such as widows as a group being included in vulnerability and safety net considerations, while gendered analysis of agricultural growth strategies and market opportunities are all but absent.

Researchers like Mosse (1994) criticise the populist claims made by PRA proponents and argue that PRAs involve highly formal and public social events, where the information collected is strongly influenced by existing class and gender hierarchies. Others have expressed scepticism about the accurateness and truthfulness of information provided in such settings by participants, who may not even adequately comprehend the purpose of the research exercises, and may instead try to provide answers that they think the researcher or facilitator want to hear (Baruah, 2005; Jackson, 1997; Mosse, 1994). The payment of honoraria or meals as an incentive for poor people to participate in such exercises may also obfuscate results since it may have the effect of asking people to sing for their supper and lead people to provide inaccurate portrayals of their lives and problems.

Jackson (1998) elaborates upon the gender dimension of the problem when she writes, 'For women who are excluded from dominant world views and male vocabularies it is not wise to assume they can, or will, simply express their priorities as PRA assumes. (p. 57)'.

Women are also as likely as men to lie when asked about sensitive issues like domestic violence or food shortages, especially if they have been socialised to hide their deprivation from others and to keep intra-household matters private. Additionally, it is argued that increasing the numbers of women involved in 'participatory projects' cannot be seen as a soft alternative to conscious strategies for change in gender inequalities since gender inequalities in resources, time availability and power, structure the activities, priorities and organisational framework of participatory projects as much as 'top-down' development and market activities (Mayoux, 1995). Proponents of this argument stress that in most cases women can be empowered only through strategies of positive discrimination and organisational structures that protect their interests.

Cornwall (2003) pithily summarises some of the concerns about PRA expressed by feminist researchers as follows: the subsumption of 'women' under 'the community' masks the distinctiveness of women's experiences, and claims to inclusiveness wobble once questions are asked about who participates, decides and benefits from 'participatory' interventions. She goes on to say that the pervasive slippage between 'involving women' and 'addressing gender' may be tactically expedient, but it provokes a series of questions about the extent to which current understandings of 'gender' in participatory development mask other inequalities and forms of exclusion. Cornwall (2000) emphasises that just as a broader focus on poverty and powerlessness in participatory development can mask gender inequities, so too can a focus on women obscure other dimensions of exclusion. Indeed, recent work on certain groups of men and their experiences of marginalisation show that gendered powerlessness is not exclusively a female condition (Sweetman, 1997; Cornwall and White, 2000).

Given these limitations, it is easy to believe that PRA holds limited prospects for focusing

on the gender dimensions of poverty. However, one unique aspect of PRA, that is open to the interpretation of being a liability as well as an asset, is the crucial role of the researcher or the facilitator in understanding the voices of the poor. Indeed, authors like Kabeer (1997) have argued that PRA is as gender-blind or as gender-aware as its practitioner. At its worst, it is a weapon that is not available to researchers using more quantitative techniques, that allows PRA practitioners to disguise their gender biases and cultural and disciplinary baggage behind its populist rhetoric. This can have the effect of marginalising women and denying them a voice a second time around. Cornwall (2003), for example, presents evidence from several different regional contexts and institutional settings that demonstrate how the very projects and processes that appear so inclusive and transformative may turn out to be supportive of a status quo that is highly inequitable for women.

At a more optimistic level, since PRA requires the researcher to listen to the participant, it presents unique opportunities for the researcher not just to transmit the voices of the poor, but also to interpret, analyse and present it in a manner that is sensitive to gender, power and inequality. While the notion of the 'transparent' or invisible researcher is increasingly becoming a myth, it would be unduly pessimistic to assume that the researcher who is capable of presenting the voices of poor women without compromising the reliability and validity of the data also does not exist. The interpretation of the evidence emerging from participatory assessments is largely the responsibility of the researcher or practitioner. It is a large one as far as gender analysis is concerned since the statements made by poor men and women can reveal critical gender differences in how poverty is created and experienced.

Like other subjective assessments of poverty and well-being, participatory approaches have also been criticised for failing to make the connection between poor people's experiences

of poverty and its macro-economic causes. Again, it seems feasible that a combination of the transcripts of participatory exercises and other sources of quantitative and qualitative information about poverty and economic crises would enable a careful researcher to make those links quite reliably and forcefully without too much controversy.

Like the approaches described previously, PRA by itself is not a panacea for acquiring comprehensive knowledge of the gendered dimensions of poverty. Criticisms as varied as the semantic confusion over the meaning of the term 'participatory' to its failure to produce causal macro-analyses notwithstanding, I would argue that jettisoning participatory approaches as inadequate or unsuitable for gender analysis without teasing out its possibilities is akin to throwing out the proverbial baby with the bath water.

4 Multiple sources of evidence/triangulation/interdisciplinary strategies

An overview of different tools and systems designed to capture the gender dimensions of poverty corroborate quite strongly that to inspire confidence in gendered analyses, it is important not to rely on one source of evidence regardless of whether it is quantitative or qualitative. While this is by no means a new perspective, I believe it is worth reiterating for understanding topics as complex, multidimensional and layered as gender and poverty. Proponents of different approaches to gender analyses frequently emphasise the importance of context and of crosschecking and triangulation to validate estimates and analyses. Much of the work reviewed in this article support the importance of constructing internal and external validity for study results through multiple sources of evidence. They provide valuable insight into how conflicting results derived from the use of different research methodologies or from studies conducted at different scales should be handled. They also offer useful suggestions for future research. For example, in their study

of female demographic disadvantage in India, Sudha and Irudaya Rajan (1999) highlight the importance of combining micro-level studies with statistical information and geographic information systems to illuminate not just the spatial distribution of the phenomenon but also the region-specific and gender-specific social and economic constraints under which parents choose sex-selective abortions to weed out unwanted female children. They also support interdisciplinary future research that prioritises the examination of demographic behaviour, development trends and policies in India from a gender perspective and also a focus on the nexus between macro-level cultural and economic structures and micro-level household organisation and strategies. Similarly, Kabeer (1999) in her analysis of different approaches to the quantification of empowerment in the context of the same set of microcredit programmes in Bangladesh and the widely divergent results generated, emphasises the need for the triangulation of evidence in order to ensure that the indicators mean what they are intended to mean. She stresses that the absence of such supportive evidence carries the danger that analysts will load meanings onto their indicators that reflect their own disciplinary, methodological or political affinities rather than the realities they are trying to portray.

The need for contextual analyses, which is reiterated by many authors, also hints at some of the inherent limitations of indicator systems to stand by themselves, and highlights the need to supplement data from indicators with other kinds of information. The absence of up-to-date case study information and local studies in parts of the developing world reveals partly the development set's obsession with survey and census information, partly its propensity to construct a composite of the 'Third World poor' and universalistic solutions to their needs and partly more sensitive issues about the politics of poverty research such as the poor allocation of funds to local and regional social science studies.

As described above, most debates between the conventional survey-type assessments of poverty and their participatory counterparts have focused on the relative merits of objective versus subjective measures of poverty and their implications for gender. There are additional issues sometimes overlooked by both types of approaches that also have gender implications, such as the complexities involved in distinguishing between the identification versus the aggregation of the poor, and between static versus dynamic notions of poverty (Baulch, 1996). While objective measures of poverty that favour income or consumption have developed numerous ways to identify the poor and also to aggregate the level of poverty in a community or country, their estimates may be better suited to identify poverty among men rather than women since women's poverty is more dependent on the cultural context and hence frequently subsumed under the poverty of men. Participatory approaches, on the other hand, may be able to identify poverty from a gender perspective at the village or project level, but fail to aggregate the matrices of poor women's priorities at the regional or national level in any manner coherent enough to be useful for policy purposes. Large numbers of people, both men and women, fall between the cracks of well-intentioned social and economic policy because policy formulation relies on generalisations and not specifics.

The importance of capturing the experiences of both the chronically poor and the temporarily poor in a community, and of designing appropriate responses for each, throws up another methodological challenge that at the present time remains unresolved. None of the approaches described in this article distinguish between these two categories of the poor and instead provide essentially static pictures of who is poor at any given point in time. Without special consideration, certain groups of people like migrant seasonal wage labourers, street children and sex workers can be missed by all or most of the approaches discussed. The fact that such large groups of

people can be completely marginalised within the prominent approaches of poverty analysis, suggest that it will be necessary to adopt not just special census and survey techniques but also participatory methodologies to generate information about the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society.

III Conclusion

In recent years, poverty has re-emerged as an important unresolved item on the global development agenda. A review of the literature on poverty suggests that the understanding of what constitutes poverty and well-being has been significantly broadened beyond a narrow income definition to include other dimensions of human deprivation. This broadening of concepts is captured in this article in measurements like the use of sex ratios and infant mortality as indicators of relative female disadvantage as well as the emphasis on a wide range of indicators of social progress, empowerment and political participation. From a perspective of gender, these broader concepts and methods are valuable in that they allow a better treatment of the multidimensional aspects of gender than a focus purely on household income levels. However, as demonstrated by this article, the wealth of concepts, theory and academic scholarship contrasts sharply with not only with the poverty of methods and data with which to monitor and evaluate poverty but also with the uniformity of strategies for economic empowerment.

The range of indicators presented in this article suggest that we have, at least in theory, and to some extent even in practice, moved beyond definitions of poverty that privilege only income and/or consumption. Although such a significant body of evidence and argument has been devoted to challenging the conventional economic approach, demonstrating the multi-dimensionality of poverty, emphasising the importance of probing the intra-household arena and developing methodologies to capture the experiences of poverty in all its

diversity, few national level surveys or censuses have attempted to collect data at a more disaggregated level. Likewise, PAs conducted by the World Bank as part of the New Poverty Agenda constantly stressed the complex and multidimensional nature of poverty but ultimately gave priority to an income definition while marginalising less quantifiable insights about the nature of poverty and the trajectories that lead into and out of it. In effect, the results of such studies are as narrow, unreliable, non-comparable and devoid of context as their predecessors, the large-scale surveys and censuses that the PAs set out to improve upon. The *ad hoc* 'common sense' identification in policy documents of certain diverse groups of women such as female-headed households and widows as poor reveals not only a failure to examine the causes of impoverishment, but also methodological concerns about treating characteristics as independent variables. These are but a few examples that suggest that the practice of monitoring and evaluating poverty from a gender perspective has not been able to keep up with the ideas, concepts and theoretical discourses on the topic. It also reveals an inability to find the methodological savvy to balance the primarily static analysis of categories and characteristics and the dynamic analysis of social and economic relations.

Although only referred to indirectly in this article, a similar lack of synchronisation can also be observed in the wealth of theory on women's economic empowerment and the limited number of tools and interventions actually employed by practitioners to enable women to rise out of poverty. In the past two decades we have witnessed a proliferation of new tools of economic empowerment such as microfinance and the institutionalisation or formalisation of old ones like rotating savings circles that reaffirm a belief in the efficacy of markets to fulfill people's needs. The same period of time has witnessed very little progress or, in some cases, witnessed the complete neglect within major development institutions of other asset-redistribution strategies that

could become critical entry points for economic empowerment such as land reform, public provision of goods and services, and access to common property resources. Because equal and independent control over land and property and access to resources like community forests and village commons can provide women with income and social status that is unmediated by kinship ties, they have the potential to profoundly influence gender relations within and outside the household. Therefore, it is especially important that such issues not only feature on the agendas of development organisations but that they be given as much attention as other less controversial strategies for economic empowerment.

Over the past three decades gender analysts have valued and rendered visible women's domestic labour, they have demonstrated the substantial contribution made to agricultural work and transportation in a much wider range of societies than the farming countries identified by Ester Boserup in 1970. They have raised the visibility of caring labour done by women for their families and also indicated the community work contributed by women beyond household boundaries, in effect, profoundly changing the way work and value are conceptualised. Given the highly organised nature of the women's movement, the information-sharing strategies and networks between women's organisations and the increasingly ability of such organisations to pressurise and hold national and global institutions accountable, it can be expected that gains will be made in coming years in perfecting the tools to capture women's experiences of poverty and also in broadening the array of choices through which women can gain access to the skills and resources to lead long, healthy, productive lives.

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