



“Summary of article by Shahra Razavi: Gendered Poverty and Well-being: Introduction” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 6: A Survey of Sustainable Development. Island Press: Washington DC, 2001. pp. 68-71

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Since the early 1990s, mainstream policy institutions have shifted from their preoccupation with stabilization and growth to a renewed focus on global poverty. Multilateral development agencies now follow their “New Poverty Agenda,” with its focus on “labor-intensive growth.” Meanwhile, discussions of “social exclusion” have been incorporated into analyses of poverty and social disadvantage. While much attention has been paid to women and poverty, the relationship between the two has not received careful study. This article, which is the introduction to a special issue of *Development and Change*, examines some of the shortcomings in the prevailing approaches, including that of the “New Poverty Agenda.”

Making Gender Visible: Some Methodological Traps

The relationship between gender disadvantage and poverty at first glance appears clear, for example, in equating female-headed households with poverty. Another common theme is the ‘win-win’ scenario depicting women’s education as a strategy for both reducing fertility and improving welfare. More detailed analyses highlight female disadvantage by disaggregating well-being outcomes. Unfortunately, such “generalizations have tended to replace contextualized social analyses of how poverty is created and reproduced. The gender analysis of poverty also needs to unravel *how* gender differentiates the social processes leading to poverty.” (410)

One prevailing methodological bias is the tendency to rely on income and consumption as the best single proxy for poverty, with other aspects of poverty – public goods and services, access to clean air, democracy – reflected in such calculations through the use of “shadow prices” which assign a monetary value to such non-monetary goods. These are then reflected, for example, in the World Bank’s Poverty Assessments (PAs), with the setting of a poverty line. Such data rely too heavily on household surveys, which tend to be narrow, unreliable, and non-comparable. They are also often one-time surveys, making them unsuited to the ongoing monitoring of poverty. Nor is there any consistency in how poverty lines are set. All of this defeats the purpose of collecting quantitative data.

This has profound implications for gender analysis, because household surveys typically ignore the intra-household distribution of income. Most make the assumption that resources are shared equally among all members of the household, inflating women’s access to resources. This over-reliance on household data also leads to skewed gender analyses that attempt to make gender visible by separating female- from male-headed households. This presents both methodological

and empirical problems. The label “female-headed households” is a heterogeneous category. “By aggregating these distinct categories of households generated through different social processes (e.g. migration, widowhood, divorce), and constructing a simple dualism between male-headed and female-headed households, it becomes impossible to interpret the evidence in a meaningful way.” (413)

One constructive alternative to this “money-metric” approach is the analysis of “capabilities and functionings” first developed by economist Amartya Sen. Because this approach measures access to and utilization of resources at an individual level, it is better suited to neoclassical microeconomic analysis. It also allows more useful gender disaggregation of data, which has led to important work documenting female disadvantage in quality of life outcomes.

Outcomes-focused approaches are not free of methodological problems, however. They can lead to problematic comparisons between men and women due to the basic differences in form and function between men’s and women’s bodies. Many diseases, for example, are gender-specific, as are, of course, reproductive health problems. Nutrition monitoring presents similar problems, as nutritional status can only be assessed and compared once norms and cut-off points are adjusted for gender difference, not an easy process. Social indicators are limited, too, in their ability to generate meaningful causal analysis.

In global comparisons, such outcomes analyses are plagued by data problems. Few developing countries have reliable vital registration systems from which to derive demographic data. Even where such data exists, international agencies often use flawed mathematical models to project current figures. For an indicator as straightforward as literacy, data is old or unreliable; for 19 of 145 countries in the world the most recent adult literacy data is from 1970 or earlier, while in 41 others the figure is from one year in the 1970s.

“Ironically, such over-reliance on simple econometric techniques also marks some of the emerging micro-level feminist research, which uses interview techniques to capture different aspects of female autonomy.... [H]ere too the results can be uncontextualized, single-stranded and difficult to interpret, with a heavy reliance on simple correlations and regressions using a few variables.” (417)

It is important to go beyond basic well-being outcomes so as to avoid reducing the issue of female disadvantage to poverty. Prosperity can reduce gender inequalities in such outcomes but still reduce women’s autonomy. Basic-needs measures also tend to look at extreme forms of disadvantage such as child mortality, which can obscure other important areas such as women’s heavier workloads. Three conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of these issues. First, it is difficult to assess issues of agency and informal power through interview techniques. Second, the extent to which women are constrained by social structures or are able to subvert such structures depends on the issue and context. Third, issues of bodily well-being need to be included within gender analyses of choice and agency.

Other methodological issues emerge as well. The increasing use of iterative processes of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and participatory poverty assessment (PPA), both of which purport to empower the poor to appraise their own situations and take concrete actions, represent

an advance in the use of qualitative analysis in institutions like the World Bank. But such approaches generally rely on data collected in highly public events at which people are under intense community scrutiny. There are also questions about the extent to which subjective perceptions can reveal all we need to know about individual welfare. For example, many PPAs include no analyses of the macroeconomic causes of poverty, an interpretive step often downplayed in favor of simple data collection. Overall, if poverty data is to yield meaningful results researchers will need to cross-check and “triangulate” their estimates from a variety of sources and methodologies.

Institutions and Entitlements

“The question that has not been explicitly addressed, but which is clearly central to our discussion, is: How can the focus of poverty analyses be sharpened and shifted so that the social, economic, cultural and political processes and the institutions that are implicated in the creation and perpetuation of poverty, become more lucid and central to the enquiry?” (424) The “entitlements” framework developed by Dreze and Sen (1989) made an important contribution to poverty analysis, with entitlements now seen to include not just legal rules defining rights but also socially enforced moral rules, which have an important impact on an individual’s access to commodities. Gendered rules of entitlement exist primarily in the household, but also go beyond it.

This makes for a much more complex analysis. For example, an examination of the evidence on the rising incidence of daughter disfavor in parts of India and East Asia during periods of rapid fertility decline suggests a contested set of causal explanations. Similarly, women’s lack of secure land rights emerges as an important cause of poverty only in certain contexts, and not, for example, where customary rights give women meaningful usufruct rights to land.

The “New Poverty Agenda”

Many of the problems associated with gender and poverty analyses are evident in the prescriptions of the “New Poverty Agenda,” first articulated by the World Bank in its *1990 World Development Report*. Using poverty assessments, this focus has led to policy prescriptions focused on labor-intensive growth, with a three-pronged emphasis on export-led agricultural growth, education, and safety nets.

There are a number of critiques of this approach. First, social and economic relations – the processes that cause and perpetuate poverty – are largely absent. Second, the Bank’s orthodox adherence to its three-pronged approach blinds it to the circumstances in any particular country, rendering policies ineffective. Finally, gender issues receive different weight in each of the prongs. Women’s issues emerge strongly in safety-net analysis in which women are a disaggregated group. They are often the centerpiece of education analyses. But one rarely finds a gendered analysis of agricultural growth strategies. This reflects the role of micro-economists in the policy arena, where prescriptions call for a reduction in women’s “reproductive burden” *in order to* enable them to more easily switch their labor to tradable goods, the kind of economic activity encouraged by Bank structural adjustment programs.

There are two problems with this approach. First is the assertion that the only reasonable justification for reducing women's work burdens is to enable them to work more, part of the New Poverty Agenda's "policy obsession with extracting work from the poor." (430) Second, the wider policy framework is assumed to be benign, leading to consistent failures to analyze the poverty and gender impacts of, for example, the food-security risks – at both the household and national levels – of increased reliance on export-crop production.

“There are serious doubts about whether agriculture can generate the route out of poverty and destitution in the absence of substantial and sustained developmental support from the government, which in the current policy climate seems difficult to achieve.” (431) “The fact that the agenda remains wedded to an abstract theory of labor markets means that it cannot explain the dynamics of female employment.... Nor can it explain how labor market arrangements themselves can perpetuate poverty and discrimination.” (431)

Ultimately, these analyses demonstrate that one cannot collapse gender analyses of poverty into a welfare agenda, nor can one ignore that gender analyses quickly “move beyond poverty issues into the wider domain of power and subordination....” (432)