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GENDER AND POVERTY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Introduction: the complex terrain of gendered poverty, and the need for a multidimensional perspective

That poverty in general is increasingly acknowledged as multidimensional, with UNDP’s recently-launched Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) comprising ten variables relating to education, health and living standards, has driven to a substantial degree feminist scholarship. The latter has consistently highlighted in recent decades that gendered poverty is not just about income, and gender is not just about women (Chant 1997, 2007; Jackson 1997). ¹

Despite a multiplicity of shorthand terms used to describe the complex nexus between gender and poverty, ‘gendered poverty’ is perhaps one of the most apposite insofar as it gestures towards the need for an holistic gaze on the diverse meanings, causes, processes and outcomes embroiled in different forms of privation among women and men, and to their intersections with a host of social, economic, demographic and other variables (Chant 2010: 3).

Although strong evidence for persistent and ubiquitous gender differences in access to material resources such as earnings means that income must remain a key element in gendered poverty analysis, whether it should be pre--eminent is another matter. As Gerd Johnson-Latham (2004: 26–27) has posited, income may actually be a less ‘robust’ indicator of women’s disadvantage than factors such as access to land, agency in decision-making, legal rights within families, vulnerability to violence, and (self-)respect and dignity. For instance, on the matter of the most tangible issue here – land – gender gaps are more marked than in earnings. While women workers worldwide may still only receive an average 75 per cent of male wages, often on account of restricted employment options (see Figure 20.1), this pales into relative insignificance given that a mere 15 per cent of landowners globally are estimated to be female.

Bearing in mind caveats in data both on earnings and land and property ownership, the particularly parlous position of women in respect of the latter is due to discriminatory inheritance systems, and to the fact that their statutory rights are frequently compromised by lack of knowledge, plural legal codes, and sociocultural emphasis on the prerogatives of males and their consanguineal kin over land and property (see Chant 2013 for discussion and references). Even in Latin America, where women fare rather better in terms of asset acquisition than elsewhere in the world, in only two out of 11 countries that formed the basis of a comparative
regional study by Carmen Diana Deere, Gina Alvarado and Jennifer Twyman (2012) – namely Nicaragua and Panama – has gender parity been achieved in homeownership (Deere et al. 2012: 525).

Many women in developing countries can only find work in the informal economy, such as ambulant vending, which is marked by long hours and low remuneration.

The primacy routinely accorded to income in poverty assessments plays down other practical and potentially measurable – as well as subjectively interpreted and experienced – dimensions of poverty such as ‘overwork’, ‘time deficiency’, ‘dependency’ and ‘powerlessness’. As a growing body of research in different geographical contexts has revealed, the latter may be as relevant, if not more so, to women’s perceptions of disadvantage, and to the ‘trade-offs’ they are able to make between different aspects of privation (see Chant 2007 for discussion and references).

There is also a spatial element to gendered poverty, concisely summarized by Sarah Bradshaw (2002: 12) who stresses that women’s poverty is ‘not only multidimensional’ but is also...
‘multisectoral [and] ... is experienced in different ways, at different times and in different “spaces”’. Such spaces include not only the labour market and the realm of asset and property ownership, but the home, the neighbourhood, the city, the legal environment, the social policy arena, the political economy and territories of war, conflict and natural disaster (Bradshaw 2002; Chant 2010). Moreover, mobility between spaces, both physically and virtually, is often heavily circumscribed among women on account of restrictive norms governing female propriety, male-biased transport systems, and a gendered digital divide, with mutually reinforcing effects on income and other forms of poverty (see Chant, 2013 for discussion and references).

It is, of course, important to recognize that gendered poverty is also experienced by men and boys. As for women, this is differentially impacted by the diverse influences of age, ‘race’, nationality, sexuality, class, household headship and composition, marital status, fertility and family status, urban versus rural provenance and residence, migration within and across national borders, availability of public as well as private assets, labour market possibilities in the formal and informal economy, and state social transfers. Many of these variables not only intersect with gender and poverty, but with one another, and are associated with myriad processes and outcomes contingent on whether analysis is filtered through the conceptual lens of monetary poverty, capability poverty, social exclusion and so on; whether methodology is based on ‘objective’/quantitative or more ‘subjective’/qualitative/participatory measures; and whether the subject and scale in question are personal, domestic, local, national or global (Chant 2010: 2).

Having provided a brief introduction to some of the complexities of thinking through the nexus between gender and poverty, in the sections that follow, I concentrate on two interrelated issues that have dominated the field. The first is the ‘feminization of poverty’, which has become a common shorthand in academic and policy circles to describe women’s economic disadvantage, but which remains problematic on numerous counts. In critiquing the ‘feminization of poverty’ I pay particular attention to the increasingly widely contested assumption that female-headed households are the ‘poorest of the poor’, as well as to alternative formulations of the ‘feminization of poverty’ that play down a focus on income in favour of greater emphasis on gender-biased labour and time inputs in household livelihoods. The second issue is the mounting tendency for poverty alleviation initiatives to target women, which is discussed with particular reference to conditional cash transfer (CCT) and microfinance programmes.

The ‘feminization of poverty’
The term ‘feminization of poverty’ is generally attributed to the sociologist Diana Pearce (cited in Chant 2007), who used this to refer to the increased concentration of income poverty among women in the USA, especially among Afro-American female-headed households, between the 1950s and 1970s. Following gradual uptake of the term in a variety of geographically disparate studies, in the mid-1990s the ‘feminization of poverty’ began a new lease of life as one of the most widely generalized and circulated truisms of international development. At the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in 1995 the (albeit erroneous) pronouncement that women accounted for 70 per cent of the world’s poor, and that this proportion was rising, igniting support for addressing ‘the persistent and rising burden of poverty upon women’ under the auspices of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). Since this time the ‘feminization of poverty’ has effectively been regarded as a global phenomenon, and associated with three apparently intuitive (if inadequately substantiated) notions. Reflecting the legacies of Pearce’s original time- and place-specific concept, these are, first, that women are poorer than men; second, that the incidence of poverty among women is increasing relative
to men over time; and third, that growing poverty among women is linked with the ‘feminization’ of household headship (Chant 2007).

Each of these elements is open to question on conceptual and/or empirical grounds. The first assertion – that women are poorer than men – is static, and therefore anomalous within a construct whose very nomenclature implies dynamism. As summarized by Marcelo Medeiros and Joana Costa:

In spite of its multiple meanings, the feminisation of poverty should not be confused with the existence of higher levels of poverty among women or female–headed households . . . The term ‘feminisation’ relates to the way poverty changes over time, whereas ‘higher levels of poverty’ . . . focuses on poverty at a given moment. Feminisation is a process, ‘higher poverty’ is a state.

(Medeiros and Costa 2006: 3)

While the latter is inscribed in the second tenet, namely that there is a tendency for poverty incidence among women to be increasing relative to men, it is important to recognize that this too is intrinsically vague because no time period is specified. Besides this, in practical terms it is immensely difficult to establish whether gender gaps in poverty are widening over any interval except perhaps the past one or two decades. This is not only due to a dearth of sex-disaggregated panel data especially in developing countries, but the fact that even where data are available on income poverty, no consistent trend emerges in the direction of mounting economic privation among women. Through a rare and painstakingly detailed quantitative study on eight countries in Latin America between the early 1990s and early 2000s, for example, Medeiros and Costa (2006: 13) concluded that there was ‘no solid evidence of a process of feminisation of poverty’ (see Table 20.1). This interpretation was drawn not only on the basis

| Table 20.1 Trends in the feminization of poverty, selected Latin American countries |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Country (period)          | Overall trend in poverty | Feminization of poverty |                     |
|                         |                     | Women–Men | Female–Male headed HH |
| Argentina (1992–2001)    | increased           | no        | yes               |
| Bolivia (1999–2002)     | stable              | no        | no                |
| Brazil (1983–2003)      | decreased           | no        | no                |
| Chile (1990–2000)       | decreased           | no        | no                |
| Colombia (1995–99)      | increased           | no        | no                |
| Costa Rica (1990–2001)  | decreased           | no        | no                |
| Mexico (1992–2002)      | decreased           | no        | yes               |
| Venezuela (1995–2000)   | increased           | no        | no                |

Source: Adapted from Medeiros and Costa (2006, 12, Table 20.1)

* The exception occurs when comparing female-headed households without children with couple-headed households without children.

NB: ‘no’ stands for a rejection of the feminization of poverty hypothesis and ‘yes’ for the opposite.
of per capita income figures for women and men in general and according to male- and female-household headship, but also took into account the incidence, severity and intensity of poverty (see Table 20.1).

Interestingly Medeiros and Costa’s research indicated that in Latin America the presence of young children was more likely to place households at greater risk of poverty than female household headship. This is massively important in light of the fact that the third and perhaps the single most widely cited tenet of the ‘feminization of poverty’ is that rising female poverty is connected with increases in households headed by women – a notion confirmed by repeated, not to mention categorical, statements that female-headed households are the ‘poorest of the poor’ (see Box 20.1).

Most generalizations about the links between female household headship and poverty are suspect because they are based only on assumptions, or on statistical scrutiny that falls far short

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**Box 20.1 Assertions about female-headed households as the ‘poorest of the poor’**

The global economic downturn has pressed most heavily on women-headed households, which are everywhere in the world, the poorest of the poor.

*(Tinker 1990: 5)*

Women-headed households are overrepresented among the poor in rural and urban, developing and industrial societies.

*(Bullock 1994: 17–18)*

One continuing concern of both the developing and advanced capitalist economies is the increasing amount of women’s poverty worldwide, associated with the rise of female-headed households.

*(Acosta-Belén and Bose 1995: 25)*

What is clear is that in many countries women tend to be over-represented in the ranks of the ‘old’ or structural poor, and female-headed households tend to be among the most vulnerable of social groups.

*(Graham 1996: 3)*

The number of female-headed households among the poor and the poorer sections of society is increasing and . . . they, as a group – whether heterogeneous or not – are more vulnerable and face more discrimination because they are poor and also because they are man-less women on their own.

*(Bibars 2001: 67)*

Households headed by females with dependent children experience the worst afflictions of poverty . . . Female-headed households are the poorest.

*(Finne 2001: 8)*

Households headed by women are particularly vulnerable. Disproportionate numbers of women among the poor pose serious constraints to human development because children raised in poor households are more likely to repeat cycles of poverty and disadvantage.

*(Asian Development Bank 2003: 11)*
of the kind used in Medeiros and Costa’s rigorous analysis. For example, in some instances female-headed households are posited as poorer than their male-headed counterparts on the basis of comparisons of unweighted aggregate household incomes, which, given the generally smaller size of women-headed households, makes them ‘a visible and readily identifiable group in income poverty statistics’ (Kabeer 1996: 14). A further problem is that female-headed households are frequently taken as a proxy for women. Bearing in mind Lampietti and Stalker’s (2000: 2) caution that ‘Headship analysis cannot and should not be substituted for gender and poverty analysis’ (see also Deere et al. 2012), the situation of women within male-headed households is missed, even if their economic predicament may be worse on account of ‘secondary poverty’ deriving from the inequitable allocation of household resources. As Medeiros and Costa (2006: 9) point out, even where per capita income is the basis of household poverty measurements, one cannot assume that income is distributed equally among members.

While not denying that some female-headed households, especially in societies marked by extremes of gender discrimination, may find themselves worse-off than their male-headed counterparts, the automatic assumption that they are the ‘poorest of the poor’ bears witness to a widespread pathologization of ‘non-standard’ (non-patriarchal) family units that often flies in the face of empirical evidence (see Chant 1997; Safa 1998).

In another vein, an overwhelming (if implicit) emphasis on income poverty in the construction of female-headed households as the ‘poorest of the poor’ goes against the grain of women’s subjective experiences of privation. As has been attested to in a number of studies, female heads may well be ‘income poor’, but also ‘power-rich’ (see Chant 1997; Kabeer 1996).

Calls to acknowledge not only the multidimensionality of women’s poverty, but the critical part played by women’s subjective experiences of, and reactions to, poverty, have led to various attempts to deepen and diversify interrogation into the ‘feminization of poverty’ such that it more accurately depicts trends in female privation and offers a more meaningful basis for analysis and action. For example, although it remains difficult to establish a generalized tendency towards a feminization of income poverty, one recent development emerging from in-depth comparative field research has been the notion of a ‘feminisation of responsibility and/or obligation’ (Chant 2007). Among the factors emphasized in the latter concept are growing gender disparities in the range and amount of labour invested in household livelihoods, a persistent and/or growing unevenness in women’s and men’s capacities to negotiate gendered obligations and entitlements in households, and an increasing disarticulation between women’s and men’s investments/responsibilities and their personal rewards/rights (Chant 2007, 2008). Viewed from the perspective of these gender disparities, the ‘feminization of poverty’ may be more accurately attributed to the actual (and idealized) majority position of male-headed households than a rise in the numbers of households headed by women (Chant 2007). In male-headed households, for instance, an increasingly observed tendency for women to cope with a mounting onus of household survival arises not only because they cannot necessarily rely on men and/or do not expect to rely on men, but because a growing number seem to be supporting men too, including financially. This underlines the argument that poverty is not just about the privation of minimum basic needs, but of opportunities and choices. Although female household heads could conceivably be seen as an extreme case of ‘choicelessness’ and ‘responsibility’ – insofar as they have little option other than to fend for themselves and their dependents, and on potentially weaker grounds given gender discrimination in society at large – this needs to be qualified: a) because female-headed households do not necessarily lack male members; b) 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 c) women in male-headed households may be providing for spouses as well as children as an increasing proportion
of men seem to be stepping out of the shoes of ‘chief breadwinner’ into those of ‘chief spender’ (Chant 2008: 188).

In short, it appears that conventional portrayals of the ‘feminization of poverty’ have simplified concepts of both poverty and gender to the extent that some individuals in need are missed, those individuals most associated with the phenomenon (particularly female heads of household) are scapegoated as key to the ‘problem’, and issues of major importance in feminized poverty, such as gendered power relations, within, as well as beyond, the household are ignored.

Leading on from this, while it might be desirable to retain the term ‘feminization of poverty’ given its historic expediency in drawing attention to women’s privations and mobilizing resources for gender-sensitive policy interventions, it is necessary to ensure that the term is fleshed out more explicitly, and is understood to encompass a broader range of feminized privations than income alone (Chant 2007: 338–339).

Gender, poverty and policy interventions

With these provisos in mind, it is perhaps no surprise that routinized ‘feminization of poverty’ thinking tends ‘to have translated into single-issue and/or single group interventions which have little power to destabilize deeply-embedded structures of gender inequality in the home, the labor market, and other institutions’ (Chant 2008: 185). While nation-states, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and bilateral and multilateral agencies are often genuinely well-intentioned in their bids to promote gender equality and ‘female empowerment’ as part of poverty reduction, a number of pitfalls and unintended consequences are in considerable evidence. Indeed, despite widespread consensus on the fact that empowerment is a complex and highly contested term, many ‘empowerment’ interventions boil down to increasing women’s access to material resources as a route to widening their choices. Yet this itself is probably not enough, as revealed by debates around conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes and microfinance schemes.

Conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes and women

Most CCT programmes allocate stipends to women in exchange for ‘co-responsibility’ in respect of a series of health- and education-oriented duties designed to capacitate upcoming generations to exit poverty. In the Mexican programme Progresa/Oportunidades, for example, ‘co-responsibility’ requirements for cash transfers and food hand-outs are contingent upon women ensuring their children’s school attendance and health (including taking them for medical check-ups and participating in health workshops), as well as undertaking voluntary labour such as the cleaning of community facilities (see Molyneux 2006).

Directing cash transfers to women signals recognition that women are prudent with money, that they are good managers, and in a sense provides official endorsement for women to assume greater control of household income. In turn, and arguably much more positively, cash transfers can yield appreciable intergenerational gendered dividends such as affording young women unprecedented opportunities for schooling and labour force entry, as discussed in the context of young indigenous Mexican women by Mercedes González de la Rocha (in Chant 2010). As also noted in evaluations of World Bank-sponsored CCT trials in Malawi and Tanzania, girls tended to stay in school and rates of HIV-prevalence declined due to a fall-off in risky sexual behaviour – mainly because cash transfers reduced their needs to engage in unsafe transactional sex (Harman 2010).
By the same token, one major concern about CCT programmes is their instrumentalist reliance on women as a ‘conduit of policy’ (Molyneux 2006), whereby resources channelled through them are expected to translate into improvements in the wellbeing of their children and other family members.

Such instrumentalism is not only grounded in essentialist stereotypes such as ‘female altruism’, but also plays a part in perpetuating them. Leaning on women’s financial prudence, and/or ‘voluntary’ unpaid labour in the context of assumptions about their ‘traditional’ proclivities as wives and mothers usually adds to, rather than alleviates, already heavily feminized burdens of time, labour and financial management (see Bradshaw 2008; Chant 2008; Molyneux 2006; Tabbush 2010).

In turn, in the process of depending heavily on mothers, and making little effort to involve fathers in any unpaid volunteer work, such programmes have often ‘built upon, endorsed and entrenched a highly non-egalitarian model of the family’ (see Molyneux 2006; also Bradshaw 2008; Tabbush 2010).

**Microfinance schemes and women**

With regard to microfinance, women also represent a disproportionate share of ‘beneficiaries’ in the belief that giving women a ‘helping hand’ with their businesses will help them (and their households) exit poverty. At a world scale an estimated 84 per cent of microcredit clients are female (Daley-Harris 2006, cited in Chant 2010), and in the Gambia and the Philippines specifically, more than 90 per cent of microfinance loans made by government and international agencies in recent years have been directed to women (Chant 2007: Chapters 4–5).

The granting of loans to women who have historically been excluded from bank credit is deemed to afford them welcome opportunities to embark upon and/or strengthen their entrepreneurial ventures, to enhance personal wellbeing and economic status, and thereby to challenge gender unequal norms.

Yet despite these positive outcomes, a number of downsides are also apparent. For example, as highlighted by Supriya Garikpati (in Chant 2010) in relation to the Self-Help Group (SHG) Bank Linkage Program in India, many women’s loans end up invested in assets that are primarily controlled by husbands, or are used for household production or consumption, neither of which help women with loan repayments. Indeed, in order to fulfil their loan obligations women are often forced to undergo the ‘disempowering’ process of having to work harder as wage labourers, while also experiencing a growing gendered resource divide within their households. Related tendencies, including the reinforcement of women’s responsibilities for household expenditure with no expansion of their rights, have also been noted in other contexts (see Cons and Paprocki 2010 and Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996 on Bangladesh; Mayoux 2001 on Cameroon), compounding what Linda Mayoux has famously referred to as a ‘feminization of debt’.

Another concern raised about microfinance schemes is their common emphasis on group loans. In the context of Bolivia, Kate Maclean (in Chant 2010) contends that these often help microfinance institutions (MFIs) to guard against risk of default and ensure their own survival. Yet, to borrow Maclean’s expression, ‘capitalising on women’s social capital’ (which refers to utilising relationships of female reciprocity), may not be in the best interests of women insofar as this can exert immense pressure upon them to sacrifice individual wellbeing to keep up collective repayments. Indeed, the question of whether poor women are necessarily inclined to join forces in their bids to exit poverty is one in which general assumptions are ill-advised.
Questions of collective versus individual interests aside, although microfinance can make some inroads to reducing poverty – mainly because it allows women to ‘smooth-out’ fluctuations in household income – it is arguably ineffective at providing a pathway out of gendered poverty. Beyond paltry attention on the part of implementing institutions to the gendered structures of constraint that act to limit women’s personal autonomy, common obstacles include the small size of loans, lack of specialist expertise and training in enterprise development, and the fact that there is often inadequate dynamism in the local or even macroeconomic contexts in which women operate to allow for truly successful business ventures (see chapters by Bibars, Casier, Mohamed and Sweetman in Chant 2010). Thus, while, on balance, many MFIs may enjoy high rates of on-time repayments and rich returns on their investments, including capital growth, whether an escape from poverty, and advances in women’s well-being, form part of this scenario are less assured (Chant 2010). The issue of whether microfinance provides a route towards ‘female empowerment’ also remains a moot point, with Fauzia Mohamed (in Chant 2010), inter alia, stressing the need for a range of ancillary interventions such as reforms in education and legal systems.

Leading on from this the underlying premises of both microcredit and CCT programmes alike have been called into question. As persuasively argued by Stefan de Vylder (2004: 85), the pursuit of gender equality has normally been regarded by the GAD community as an end in itself from a human rights perspective; yet from the vantage point of stakeholders whose primary interest is alleviating poverty in general, the incorporation of women into poverty reduction programmes may be driven less by imperatives of social justice than by goals of pragmatism and efficiency.\footnote{Missing men}

**Missing men**

The fact that men and gender relations remain largely absent from contemporary policy responses to gendered (women’s) poverty goes against the grain of men’s frequently significant presence in women’s lives, and mounting recognition that their exclusion can seriously prejudice the success of gender projects and policies (see Chant and Gutmann, 2000; Cornwall and White 2000).

In Costa Rica, for example, lone and partnered mothers on low incomes have been the exclusive client group under at least two flagship ‘gender and poverty’ programs since the mid-1990s, notably the ‘Comprehensive Training Program for Female Household Heads in Conditions of Poverty’ (Programa de Formación Integral para Mujeres Jefas de Hogar en Condiciones de Pobreza) and ‘Growing Together’ (Creciendo Juntas) (see Chant 2007: Chapter 6). Despite the fact that both these schemes have nominally been ‘empowerment’-orientated and have comprised modules in ‘formación humana’ (human development/training) aimed at sensitizing women to gender and human rights, the exclusion of men may not just have perpetuated, but exacerbated, prevailing male tendencies to curtail women’s power and liberties (Chant 2007).

Additional dangers of excluding men include the fuelling of gender rivalry or hostility, with evidence indicating that growing pockets of male social, educational and economic vulnerability can manifest itself in violence in the home and in the community, in drug or alcohol abuse and other forms of disaffected behaviour (Chant and Gutmann 2000; Molyneux 2006).

**Missing the point?**

Despite the best-intentioned efforts of even the most rounded programmes designed to alleviate poverty and empower women, the narrow focus on income, and on women alone, leaves
much to be desired. Instead of women finding themselves ‘empowered’ to strike new deals within their households as their education, skills, and access to economic opportunities expand, more often than not they simply end up burdened with more obligations (Chant 2007). In the Gambia, for instance, where, as a result of dedicated policy initiatives to address gender inequality and poverty, young women are beginning to enjoy increased access to education and employment, familial claims on their newly acquired human capital act to deplete the possibilities of personal mobility. Many daughters not only continue helping out in the home, but are also expected to study hard and, when they do find work, to use the bulk of their earnings to subsidize their parents’ or brothers’ expenses. Later on in life, they often find themselves in a similar situation with husbands (Chant 2007: 169; see also ECLAC 2004: 29 on Latin American countries). Leading on from this, men’s individualism, not to mention their perceived entitlements to the fruits of female labour, continue to be tolerated. As mentioned earlier, women’s duty towards others is rarely questioned, which is partly to do with an aforementioned resilience of culturally condoned expectations of female altruism and servility – a phenomenon that in itself is probably owed to some degree to the tendency for GAD policies to focus only on women (Molyneux 2007: 4). Yet if we are to acknowledge that poverty and human rights are integrally linked, women’s rights to stand up for themselves and to negotiate social expectations of their roles in the family are fundamental. As affirmed by the Asian Development Bank:

> poverty is increasingly seen as [a] deprivation, not only of essential assets and opportunities, but of rights, and therefore any effective strategy to reduce poverty must empower disadvantaged groups, especially women, to exercise their rights and participate more actively in decisions that affect them. (ADB 2002: xvi–xvii)

**Conclusions**

It is vital that the alleviation of poverty and advances in gender equality feature as policy priorities in the twenty-first century, and there is encouraging evidence that this is occurring at an unprecedented scale. However, despite widespread rhetoric around ‘empowering’ women through involving them in poverty reduction initiatives, in practice there are worrying signs that they may be further disadvantaged in the process. In the name of making anti-poverty programmes more gender aware there has been a unilateral focus on women to the exclusion of men, and a bias towards women’s condition (incomes) as opposed to position (power) (Johnson 2005). Compounded by accompanying tendencies to capitalize on essentialist notions of women’s altruism (ECLAC 2004: 55; Molyneux 2006), a palpable reluctance on the part of policymakers to engage in what Cecile Jackson (1997: 152) terms ‘intra-household “interference”’, and a continued subordination of gender equality to the priorities of poverty reduction and economic growth, women’s burdens appear to have intensified rather than lightened.

Notwithstanding the importance of income in helping women to challenge other aspects of inequality, boosting women’s economic status is unlikely to go very far on its own given that the “feminization of poverty” is . . . an issue of inequality that extends to the very basis of women’s position in economic relations, in access to power and decision-making, and in the domestic sphere. It is emphatically not addressed in a sustainable manner, solely by measures to improve the material conditions of women’ (Johnson 2005: 57; see also Jackson 1997).
The reiteration of ‘smart economics’ thinking in the World Bank’s flagship World Development Report 2012 on Gender Equality and Development is unlikely to do much to counteract the seemingly inexorable tendency for gender equality and ‘female empowerment’ to be sacrificed to the larger goals of poverty reduction and economic growth. Aside from the fact that WDR 2012 concentrates its social policy attention to CCTs alone, as well as neglecting ‘serious engagement with the gender biases of macroeconomic policy agendas’ (Razavi 2011: 11), it also (re)affirms that ‘greater gender equality is also smart economics, enhancing development productivity and improving other development outcomes, including prospects for the next generation and for the quality of societal policies and institutions’ (World Bank 2011: xii). And even where ‘smart economics’ is not articulated as such, it is thinly veiled by the type of pronouncements that appeared on the World Bank’s website in the run-up to WDR 2012, including ‘The Bank recognizes the importance of gender equality for poverty reduction and development effectiveness’ and ‘One rationale for policies aimed at improving gender equality is that such policies ... will yield a large dividend in terms of economic growth’.

If gendered poverty is to be tackled more effectively in future, it is crucial that the ‘feminization of poverty’ is recast to adapt to the multiple deprivations encountered by women subjectively, as well as objectively, and that more empirically informed, imaginative, holistic and less instrumentalist ways are devised to ensure the attainment of comprehensive, and sustainable, gender justice ‘on the ground’.

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Thanks are due to Marcelo Medeiros and Joana Costa for their kind permission to adapt Table 20.1 from their 2006 paper.

Notes

1 This chapter draws heavily on previous publications, especially Chant (2007, 2008).
2 The incidence of poverty measures the proportion of the poor in a given population and is the most commonly used indicator when assessing poverty differentials between women and men, or between female- and male-headed households. The intensity of (income) poverty is measured by the aggregated difference between the observed income of poor populations and the poverty line, while the severity of poverty refers to ‘some combination of the incidence and intensity of poverty and inequality among the poor’ (Medeiros and Costa, 2006: 20n).
3 References to the authors cited in Box 20.1 can be found in Chant (2007).
4 Another variant on this terminology is the ‘feminization of family responsibility’ coined by Lynne Brydon (in Chant 2010), and an important theoretical antecedent to Chant’s formulation was Saskia Sassen’s (2002) concept of a ‘feminization of survival’.
5 An extended version of Molyneux’s (2006) paper, which I also draw on in this chapter, is Molyneux (2007) Change and Continuity in Social Protection in Latin America: Mothers at the Service of the State.
6 The ‘feminization of debt’ was most explicitly detailed in Mayoux (2002).
7 For an extended discussion of the different paradigms underpinning microcredit programmes see Mayoux (2006).
8 These and other Bank-stated rationales for ‘smart economics’ can be found in Table 2 in Chant (2012).

References


