

WHAT DOES FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY MEAN? IT ISN'T JUST LACK OF INCOME

*Sakiko Fukuda-Parr*¹

ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the use of poverty incidence among female-headed households as a measure of feminization of poverty. It proposes an alternative framework of human poverty, focusing not on incomes but on human outcomes in terms of choices and opportunities that a person faces.

KEYWORDS

Concept of poverty, measurement of poverty, opportunities

That “women are poorer than men” has become a truism. And the proportion of female-headed households whose incomes fall below the “poverty line” has been broadly adopted as a measure of women’s poverty. This paper challenges this measurement approach and its focus on income and proposes an alternative approach focusing on human outcomes and using the conceptual framework of “human poverty” (*Human Development Report* 1997). Written by a co-author of the HDR97, the article summarizes the concept of human poverty presented in that report and expands on its implications for the concept of feminization of poverty.

LIMITATIONS OF THE FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLD APPROACH TO POVERTY MEASUREMENT

In many countries, household consumption and expenditure surveys show a high incidence of female-headed households among the “poor,” defined as those whose incomes fall below the poverty line. Most of these countries are in North and South America, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe. But a review of the evidence shows that this trend is not universal.² In many countries of Asia and Africa such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Morocco, Guinea, and Zimbabwe, no difference is found between male- and female-headed households.



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Does this mean that women are not poorer than men in these countries of Africa and Asia? The answer is no. It is the measure that masks the extent of poverty among women. The measure is cast in a narrow framework of poverty that focuses on incomes alone and on the household as a unit, a focus that leads to ignoring intra-household disparities.

REDEFINING POVERTY – *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT* REPORT 1997 PROPOSES A NEW CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: “HUMAN POVERTY”

What is the meaning of poverty? How does poverty affect women and men differently? Poverty can mean more than a lack of what is necessary for material well-being. It is in the deprivation of the lives people lead that poverty manifests itself. Poverty can be defined as the denial of the opportunities and choices most basic to human life – the opportunity to lead a long, healthy, and creative life, and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem, and respect from others (HDR97). This concept of poverty, referred to as “human poverty,” is distinct from “income poverty.”

Human poverty is multidimensional. Lack of material means for a decent standard of living is an important dimension of poverty, but is not the only one. Nor can deprivations in other dimensions be explained merely by low incomes. A person or a household without adequate income may not be excluded from participating in the life of a community. He or she may enjoy good health and be able to lead a creative life. Poverty of choices and opportunities can be more relevant than income for policy-makers and others in taking action to eradicate poverty for they focus on the deep-seated structural causes of poverty and lead directly to strategies of empowerment.

Measurement of human poverty

Human poverty can best be measured by indicators of the opportunities and choices that people have. The *Human Development Report* (1997) introduced a composite measure, human poverty index (HPI), a multidimensional, nonincome-based measure of human poverty. The range of choices and opportunities in human life are literally in number, but some are basic, and deprivations in those areas foreclose many other opportunities.

HPI selected four key dimensions: survival, knowledge, decent standard of living, and social participation. The dimensions and the indicators used to measure the extent of deprivation are shown on the next page.

It is important to emphasize that the concept of human poverty is larger than the HPI. This is because some important dimensions are difficult to quantify, or data do not exist. Examples of such dimensions include political freedom, personal security, and exclusion. It is also difficult to use the same criteria of poverty in widely different socio-economic conditions, as

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	<i>HPI-1 (developing countries)</i>	<i>HPI-2 (industrial countries)</i>
<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Indicator</i>
Poor survival	Likelihood of dying before age 40	Likelihood of dying before age 60
Exclusion from knowledge	Illiteracy	Functional illiteracy (level 1 in IALS)
Decent standard of living or lack of material means	Malnutrition, lack of access to health and water	Income below poverty line
Social exclusion	–	Long-term unemployment

between Sierra Leone and Canada. Thus two sets of HPI were formulated: one appropriate to developing countries (HPI-1) and another appropriate to the industrial countries (HPI-2).

The full set of findings from HPI-1 and HPI-2 are published in the *Human Development Report*. They show interesting contrasts with income poverty: for example, Egypt and Pakistan have reduced income poverty to less than 15 percent by the international measure of \$1 a day, but human poverty remains high, at 34 percent and 36 percent, respectively. The United States has the highest per capita income among the seventeen industrial countries for which HPI-2 was estimated. But this country ranks last in poverty.

Poverty and gender: human poverty is more relevant than income poverty

Human poverty can be more relevant for an engendered understanding of poverty than income poverty. In societies throughout the world, women face restrictions on their choices and opportunities that men do not. Although these gender differences often lead to lower incomes for women, important choices and opportunities are related to other human outcomes. Exclusion from participation in decision-making is not dependent on income levels. Participation in decision-making is related to freedom and to the respect of others in the community. Unequal opportunity in schooling for girls and boys restricts choices not only in employment but also for a creative life.

Empirical studies of poverty focusing on income can mask poverty of choices and opportunities. For example, a study by Shaffer comparing results of surveys using different methodologies in the Republic of Guinea points out stark contrasts.³ Household consumption and income surveys do not show “feminization of poverty,” as the incidence of poverty among female-headed households is no higher than among male-headed households. Yet participatory rural appraisal studies show feminization of poverty as a distinct trend. When asked to identify individuals in the community who are “poor,” people consistently pointed to women. Even women who

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commanded considerable wealth and income were included among the “poor.” Why is this so? Shaffer presents evidence to argue that it is because women command less social respect and do not enjoy autonomy in decision-making.

Measuring “feminization of poverty”

For reasons presented above, incidence of income poverty among female-headed households is an unsatisfactory measure of “feminization of poverty.” A preferred alternative would be to use a gender-desegregated measure of human poverty.

Participatory rural appraisal surveys provide some useful information for analysis of human poverty. But this information tends to be rich in qualitative assessment but weak in quantification. They are also stronger for analysis of poverty at the micro and community levels than at regional or national levels. They would also be difficult to use in international comparison studies.

At the national and global levels, many standardized indicators of human poverty can be used that show gender disparities in deprivation. Of the world’s 800 million people who are illiterate, more than two-thirds are women. Of the 110 million children out of school, three out of five are girls. In survival, there are some 100 million “missing women.” Gender bias has led to lower survival for women, in spite of their biological advantage. And in political participation, women are the most deprived, holding only 7.5 percent of ministerial positions in governments and 13 percent in parliaments. These, along with many other indicators of human development and deprivation, should be used for monitoring poverty as it affects women and men differently.

Composite indices of gender disparities in human development – i.e., gender development index (GDI) and gender empowerment measure (GEM) – are also useful indices that show the extent of disparities between men and women in their choices and opportunities. They show particularly strong discrimination against women in areas of political and economic opportunities, even as the gender gaps in education and health are narrowing.

It would be desirable to build a gender measure of human poverty based on the HPI. In its current form, however, HPI is impossible to desegregate by gender. Use of other data to estimate male and female HPIs, or an adjustment to the HPI to take note of gender disparity, are among the possibilities that could be explored, as they are by Liz Durbin⁴ in her paper in this volume.

*Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Human Development Report Office,
United Nations Development Programme – Uganda House, Room 612
336 East 45th Street, New York, NY 10017, USA
e-mail: sakiko.fukuda-parr@undp.org*

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NOTES

- ¹ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr is Director, Human Development Report, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This article draws on the *Human Development Report 1997*. However, the article reflects the personal views of the author and is not a policy document of the UNDP.
- ² UNDP, *Human Development Report (1997)*, drawing on Valentine Moghadam, *Feminization of Poverty? Notes on Concept and Trends*, 1996.
- ³ Paul Shaffer, "Poverty and Gender in the Republic of Guinea," mimeo, 1996.
- ⁴ Liz Durbin, "Towards a Gendered Human Poverty Measure," *Feminist Economics*, this issue.

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United Nations Development Programme. 1997. *Human Development Report*. New York: Oxford University Press.