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Is There Really a 'Feminisation of Poverty'?

The international discourse on feminisation has had an impact on the agenda to promote gender equality.

Higher static levels of poverty among women is much more common than a dynamic process of feminisation of poverty.

The real levels of poverty among women are likely to be higher than the ones commonly presented, which ignore intra-household inequalities.

Current poverty measures capture only a small part of gender inequalities, but not the important lack of economic autonomy of women.

The term 'feminisation of poverty' refers to an increase in the relative levels of poverty among women and/or female headed households. It deserves special attention from policy makers since it is related to two negative phenomena: gender inequality and poverty. Given that the increase of poverty among a social group tends to set priorities for public policies, in the last decade the discourse on feminisation has had some impact on the agenda to promote gender equality in the economic sphere. This, however, comes at the risk of collapsing the broader gender inequality concerns into a pure poverty agenda.

Based on the available evidence about Latin America and some developed countries, this article briefly reviews whether there really is a generalised feminisation of income poverty. Irrespective of this, we argue that poverty—as currently measured—captures only a small part of important gender inequalities in the economic sphere.

Much has been said about a feminisation of poverty in the world. But such a feminisation should not be confused with 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' refers to the levels of poverty at a given moment; it includes the so-called overrepresentation among the poor. Thus, feminisation is a process while 'higher poverty' is a state.

So, is there a generalised feminisation of poverty in the world? No one really knows. There are not many empirical studies about this subject and, of course, a conclusive answer to this question depends on a comprehensive analysis based on data including several regions of the world. Yet the existing

information about the Americas and Western Europe points in the direction of a negative answer.

The first study identifying a feminisation of income poverty was about the USA, covering a period from the 1950s to the 1970s. Other studies followed, some of them arguing that such a feminisation did not happen in the USA in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. Likewise, studies of the United Kingdom found no evidence of a relative increase in the poverty among women or female-headed households between the 1970s and 1980s. In Canada, a worsening of the gender gap in poverty indicators was found for the period 1973-1990 if one compares female-headed with male-headed households, but not if the focus turns to an overall women-men comparison.

Our study found no evidence of a feminisation of income poverty in the 1990s in the countries that together encompass the large majority of the population of Latin America. This result holds for different definitions of feminisation of poverty and for various poverty lines and assumptions about intra-household inequality. Out of eight countries, including all the most populous ones, only in two—post-crisis Argentina and Mexico—a relative worsening of poverty indicators for female-headed households was found, but even in these countries no relevant differences were identified in overall women-men comparisons.

Reviewing several studies we found that the overrepresentation of women or female-headed households among the poor is a much more common phenomenon than the feminisation of poverty. However, although higher levels of income poverty among these groups occur in many countries, this is not a

general rule. Even in developing countries there is no rigid connection between the sex of the head of the household and poverty. In fact, poverty seems to be more correlated with the presence of children in the family and other characteristics of the household members.

A review of studies about developed and transition economies shows that there was a high degree of over-representation of female headed households in poverty in Canada, Australia, Russia, USA and Germany in the 1990s; a higher incidence of poverty among women was identified in the 1980s in USA, Australia, Germany, Canada and UK, but not in Spain.

In developing countries, studies indicate that female-headed households are more likely to be in poverty in Brazil and in urban India but not in six Sub-Saharan African countries, three Asian countries and thirteen other Latin American countries. One review comparing 61 country studies found that in 38 of them there was an overrepresentation of female-headed households among the poor, and in 15 of them some kind of relationship between certain types of female headship and poverty. However, in eight of these countries it did not find any such links.

The conclusion of another review, based on more than one hundred country studies, is that only in certain countries do the female-headed households consistently present worse poverty indicators.

Most studies are based on surveys of income or consumption at the household level. Invariably they neglect any inequalities in the distribution of income within the households. However, from a gender perspective, such an implicit assumption of perfect distribution can be disputed. There is no reason to believe that the factors that determine gender inequalities in the public sphere will not act within the families.

On the contrary, despite the scarcity of data to support such research, the very few studies available about this subject present some evidence of significant intra-household inequalities. They identified differences in the final

allocation of economic resources among family members, usually favouring men.

If intra-household inequalities were taken into consideration, we would probably find that the current figures of the levels of income or consumption poverty among women are underestimated. Everything indicates that the real levels of poverty among women are higher than the ones commonly presented. However, these data for developing countries are so limited that one will hardly be able to correctly estimate how much higher these levels are.

The inclusion of intra-household inequalities in the analysis of the feminisation of poverty seems to be an unlikely scenario for the near future, as this would require the measurement of these inequalities in more than one point in time. But, differently from the issue of overrepresentation, such an inclusion would not necessarily show that the feminisation is underestimated.

What matters for the feminisation is not the level of intra-household inequality but an increase in the bias against women. As the situation of women in many developing countries has improved in the last decades relative to that of men, the result of this inclusion would probably be in the opposite direction, that is, of a reduction of the feminisation of poverty if intra-household inequalities were considered.

This brings forward an important issue, both from the theoretical and practical points of view: poverty as usually measured should not be our priority guide to gender equity actions.

Although we frequently conceive poverty at the individual level, our measurement in effect occurs at the household level. The practice among researchers is usually to measure total family income or consumption, or the satisfaction of basic needs by households, and then to divide it by the number of persons in these households to come up with per capita estimates. Thus, the unit of analysis of poverty is the household.

However, inequalities between men and women cannot be studied having only

the households as the unit of analysis, as it tends to mask much of the dynamics of the relations between individuals. Even if we narrow the debate of gender equity to the economic sphere, from the perspective of gender relations it matters not only how much a woman can consume but also how she achieves the power to consume. Often, poverty research merely calculates the expected consumption per household member—more exactly, a simple or weighted average of the family income or observed consumption—thus neglecting how the economic power within the household is structured.

Many have taken the feminisation of poverty as a global fact. Of course, the term can be used to express different concepts, but in the sense of a worsening of the situation of women in relation to that of men—or female-headed versus male-headed households—there is no clear evidence of a widespread feminisation of poverty in the world. And while finding higher levels of poverty among women or female-headed households is far more common than finding a gender bias in the evolution of poverty over time, this is not a universal phenomenon either.

Beyond that, we have to question the degree of importance we should give to these issues. There is no doubt that poverty should occupy a prominent position in the political agenda, but the concerns about a feminisation of poverty or the overrepresentation of women among the poor should not overshadow the debate on gender inequality.

When we talk about poverty in the way we currently measure it, we are using a concept that captures only a small part of important gender inequalities. It seems that both researchers and policy makers would gain from focusing on related but different issues, such as the lack of economic autonomy of women.

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