

# On the crossroads of Gender and Poverty

Sheetal Prasad ,

Senior Research Fellow and PhD Research Scholar,

Centre for South Asian Studies,

School of International Studies,

Jawaharlal Nehru University,

New Delhi, India

## Abstract

This research aims to study a gender-disaggregated statistics and capacity building in gender analysis. Women are the care givers as common in all cultures across the globe. This constitute their unpaid labor and hence require socialization of child care cost along with redistribution of the burden of reproductive labor thereby reducing time poverty for women, enabling them to fully participate in productive activities. This also calls for Gender Mainstreaming developed by UNDP by which state assesses the impact of legislations on men and women.

Keywords-deprivation, gender, labor ,poverty, resources.

## PROBLEM

India is a country with many social divisions and women get doubly disadvantaged due to patriarchy coupled with other social challenges. Such practices inhibit the all round personality development of women with myriad challenges posed by various institutions of society. This results in the incidence of poverty among women.

## OBJECTIVE

This paper tries to interrogate the relationship between state, society and gender bringing into limelight the subtle differences in societal attitude towards men and women. It shall also try to unravel the doublespeak of Indian democracy which continues to deprive one section of its population of their basic rights in society leading to their deprivation pushing them into a vicious cycle of poverty.

## METHODOLOGY

The proposed study is descriptive, exploratory and explanatory in nature. The research will include qualitative and analytical methods. The study proposes to refer both primary and secondary sources of information and data by using deductive method.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

Despite being acknowledged for its constitutionalism and liberal progressive ideals in society, does Indian society still subject its women to differential treatment which has caused them to live a life of perpetual poverty?

## BACKGROUND

Poverty in its most traditional sense can be called a state of material deprivation caused by lack of income, productive assets and access to resources. With recent additions to the definition of poverty, it has become a multidimensional concept involving various parameters like social exclusion, capability deprivation and insufficient economic resources. UNDP has come up with Human development Index to measure human development where poverty eradication has been defined as “a process of enlarging people’s choices”. The 1997 Human Development Report talks about priority areas for poverty eradication which includes gender equality in one its six area concerns. Poverty is multidimensional hence poor people come across multiple trade-offs with its many manifestations as one deals with myriad deprivations. Women as a matter of fact are encountered with many more trade-offs as compared to men given their socially constrained behaviors and lack of economic choices. The aim of this interdisciplinary dialogue between representatives of different divisions is to identify the points of intersection between two areas of study, namely poverty and gender (UN, 2004).

## POVERTY: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There can be three ways to understand poverty in the context of gender-

- **Insufficient Economic Resources-** This approach looks at the economic well being of people reflected by income or consumption. The main critique to studying poverty solely through economic metrics is that it offers a narrow and static account of poverty, whereas poverty should be conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon that includes both material and social deprivations (Chant 2003).
- **Capability Deprivation-** The capabilities approach has greatly expanded the conceptualizing of deprivation to include constraints on persons’ opportunities, and abilities, to generate valuable outcomes—in a sense, the freedom to achieve (Sen, 1999). These capabilities are not particularly defined hence has the advantage of flexibility which the critics say, makes it difficult to measure or operationalize.
- **Social Exclusion-** It is used to assess “a situation of multiple disadvantages in terms of labour market marginalization, poverty and social isolation” (Gallie and Paugam 2004). Social exclusion is a multidimensional social process where the exclusion or isolation is relational between two entities.

## CONCEPTUALIZING POVERTY

Poverty eradication is an aspect of human development, which is defined as “a process of enlarging people’s choices” (UNDP 1990). As poverty has been understood in a more material sense predominantly, women ought to be poor because of their low possessions of property. Moreover, they have persistently faced discrimination when it came to labour and credit market either for their lack of knowledge or vulnerability. In many countries,

women are subjected to isolation, harassment and social exclusion as they are divorced, widowed or abandoned. This makes it further difficult for them to survive and maintain a livelihood for themselves and their dependents. Such women, if they have children, face greater constraints due to paucity of time. This time constraint leads them to curtail their work time hence underperforming at work. Such practices do not exist in a social vacuum. It is duly strengthened by the social norms and institutions that define social behavior. It is this society which also limits the opportunities and resources at the disposal of women adding to their plight. This forms a part of the social exclusion approach which talks about the importance of social networks and social solidarity in influencing the state of poverty of women. This makes it even more difficult for them to transform their talent into income or any kind of material well being. It makes them highly vulnerable and under-confident pushing them to the verge of chronic poverty and lack of self belief. Though women should not be considered as passive victims of society, we do realize their agency become restricted due to their social identity. This is also indicative of the fact that how due to certain gender inequalities, women perceive poverty differently than men both in private and public sphere of life. The 1997 Human Development Report argued that across countries there are systematic relationships between gender inequality, as measured by the Gender Development Index (GDI), and the general level of human poverty, as measured by the HDI (UNDP,1997). It conceptualized six areas that define poverty .

## INTERSECTION BETWEEN POVERTY AND GENDER

Women's constrained choices stem from the fact that they are given the position of caregivers in their society which along with being patriarchal is also reflective of women's restricted role in economic sphere. There is a concept of pay penalty which derives from the time and hence money, which women have to let go to fulfill their obligation as an unpaid caregiver. Women therefore end up balancing roles both inside and outside their home leading to taking up of less desirable jobs which are more home-based. As a result their participation in labor market is reduced which is the single most important factor in the incidence of poverty. Moreover, with the advent of globalization, women have occupied a sizable proportion of the informal market devoid of any social protection. Such conditions at work for women in the labor market are more precarious and less remunerative in nature. It is this care economy which shapes the ideology, resources and labour for productive activities in the labor market. Notably, this influential factor—the association of women with unpaid care work—is widespread throughout both developed and developing countries (Folbre,1994)

Recent researches throw light on the idea of time poverty which the caregiver is made to suffer. Therefore concerns of women who have traditionally played the role of caregivers need to be addressed doing away with the Gender-blind economic growth model that is placing extra burden on the growth potential of women leading to partial development of the human race . Thus, we need to unpack the relationship between household structure, paid work, and gender for development of a meaningful link between gender and poverty. The reason for women being more vulnerable to chronic poverty is the inequalities they face in the distribution of resources like access to credit along with the gender biases that occur in the labor market. This dimension of social exclusion is entrenched in all economic and political institutions that women form a part of. This has led to feminization of poverty.

## FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

This concept took shape during the UN Decade for women (1975-85) and the term was coined by U.S scholar Diana Pearce in the late 1970s. This was the time when scholars all over the world were contemplating on the disadvantages faced by women and linked it to poverty research. The term “feminization of poverty” was further popularized following the famous Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. She highlights the call, in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPA), for eradicating the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women (Chant ,2007). Feminization of poverty talks about three tenets-

- Women constitute the face of poverty also linked to female household headship
- Women constitute majority of world’s poor population
- Women’s share in poverty is disproportionate as compared to men and is on the rising trend

It also means women’s poverty is deeper and they face greater barriers in overcoming poverty given their vulnerability.

## REASONS BEHIND “FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY”

### **Time poverty and overall work burden-**

UN Statistics Division reported women spend double the time men spend for unpaid care work. This way, women are working double than men while managing both paid and unpaid work. Often in carrying out their vital unpaid routine, women face transportation issue like in accessing cooking fuel or drinking water, battle health and sanitation issue among others which is in turn a result of poverty itself. When a woman hence becomes time poor, it affects not only her present capacity but also her future possibilities. This time poverty leads to lack of time for their own education creating a vicious cycle of poverty spoiling their present and future opportunities.

### **Limitations in access to productive resources**

Physical or financial resources always affect the incidence of poverty among women more than anything else. Land ownership is less among women resulting in their low ownership of key assets. Women are less likely to have bank accounts or have knowledge about financial instruments. Female entrepreneurs are more likely to pay higher interest rate on their borrowing due to ignorance. More than legal barriers, it is the cultural and regulatory barriers to be blamed for the current scenario. Such limitations lead to women getting drawn to the informal sector which in itself is very exploitative for them.

### **Gender based violence**

Poverty has a direct relation with gender based violence as poor people live in precarious situations hence more vulnerable than others. Travelling long distance for basics in life itself opens up a site of exploitation. Such daily cases of violence go unreported and hence unpunished as it is approved by the cultural norms of their society. Violence is meted out with girls in private spaces like family and in public spaces like schools. This restricts their mobility resulting in high dropout rates and absenteeism. This not only has a negative effect on their physical health but also mental health causing depression among women. This reduces human capital

development and creates barriers for access to opportunities for women pushing them further to the verge of poverty.

### **Early or forced marriage**

Parents marry off their daughters too soon to prevent them from reaching an age where they develop their own thinking and decision making power. It also creates a power differential such that it restricts women from access to household income. Their weaker position within the family makes them more vulnerable to gender based violence. It can further translate into poor maternal health, curtailed educational opportunities among other inhibiting factors towards their all round development. This state of subordination and dependence only makes them poor as they lose all opportunities to lead a better life and come out of poverty.

### **Women in agriculture**

As women form a huge agricultural labor force, disparities in agriculture becomes a cause of concern. If they have access to credit and ownership of land, their socio economic status would improve leading to better nourishment of the family and higher decision making capacity at home. Research has proved such households are better able to cope with poverty.

### **Access to education**

Education is the only way to gain employment in future and bridge the labor force participation in the economy. But this becomes a great challenge right from getting permission from family to study. After this, economic problems limit their education and safety issues lock them at home. Ensuring that all women and girls living in extreme poverty receive an education is a key catalyst, improving job opportunities, ensuring more informed health choices, and generating economic benefits across generations (USAID, 2015).

### **Women and reproductive health**

Poor women have less say in terms of their reproductive health resulting in frequent childbirths from a very young age which not just poses risk to her health but also creates disruptions for her employment. Per capita investment in health is not up to the level hence it leads to disease transmission. On the contrary, healthy women will be able to increase the income of the family through her employment and also maintain the health of her family.

### **Difficulties facing gender policies**

It is extremely difficult to challenge existing social norms and come up with a research proposal for policy making. The agencies which have a mandate to establish policy related to gender suffer with technical and professional expertise as the funds allotted remain underutilized. Despite efforts at integrating gender perspective in the development dialogue, there exists a certain level of bias against inclusion of women in the public arena resulting in their low visibility.

### **Weakness of poverty reduction strategies**

Macro-economic policies are considered to be gender neutral and lack special measures for women. The data they use are often old and not gender disaggregated. Gender problems are not concerned cross cutting but are treated as an isolated issue. There are intra household dynamics affecting poverty which are often ignored in poverty estimation. Even the views of civil society are hardly taken into consideration.

## Employment market

Women find it rather difficult to find a job in the formal sector and even if they do, they remain underpaid. Wages are not equal for men and women for the same job. Moreover there is limited consideration for safety of women at work, provision of crèches or maternity leave. Such specific conditions regarding employment of women are considered as a drawback by the employer who does not rely on women as a workforce.

## WAY FORWARD

There is a dire need to understand poverty in a truly multidimensional sense. It should be conceptualized through the lens of human poverty along with income poverty. As women are subjected to both paid and unpaid labor, there should be better technologies for their assistance. There should be proper intervention by the state and society for an improvement in the productivity of their labor, there is a need to socialize the cost of child care and distribute responsibilities to help women reduce their time poverty and involve more fully in the labor market. There should be endorsements by the state for women's organization and trade unions. These non state actors can be effective in disseminating information among the general population who do not have access to knowledge.

Gender Mainstreaming is defined as “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any areas and at all levels( UNDP,1998) .We need Gender mainstreaming so that in the longer run , elimination of poverty becomes a developmental mandate as contrary to present initiative of just alleviation of poverty, these goals would require efforts which are more than just aimed at coping with poverty. As the biggest factor underlying poverty among women is employment, there is a huge scope for the microfinance initiatives to become a success story that would pull women out of the grip of poverty. This requires a responsibility on the part of state to regulate such activities and monitor their impacts to ensure that the benefits are reaped by all in a fair and equitable manner.

A fairly new concept which can be of huge aid to women's cause is corporate social responsibility. These were the voluntary corporate codes for the employer that has been made mandatory for the larger good of the society. This can also start from the idea of self regulation and better working condition of women within their own institutions to public relation exercises to fulfill their obligation towards the society. As the onus to alleviate poverty for all rest on the welfare state, there should be capacity building programmes to integrate gender perspectives in the national policy making. This requires an increased participation of civil society in preparing the strategy and a more conscious policy formulation by the executive who would also stand responsible for its effective implantation. . A further monitoring and policy evaluation would go a long way in bringing real changes on ground.

In India, a pro poor social mobilization programme has started with the support of UNDP, we need more of such international initiatives to keep the good work going. Innovative approaches to women's empowerment through microcredit and donor discourses must be brought about. Governments therefore have the onus of creating an enabling environment to develop the potentialities of women either directly through targeted poverty alleviation programmes or through informal channels like voluntary organizations. Anti-poverty strategies must also include the goal of democratic governance as a poverty issue.

## CONCLUSION

In conceptual terms, the gender perspective has broadened the conceptual repertory on poverty and developed an integral and dynamic concept of the phenomenon, which recognizes its multidimensionality and heterogeneity (UN,2004 ). This gender perspective has made valuable methodological and political contributions to the debate on poverty. It disputes its very definition to include culture and symbolic factors beyond just material calculations. This has brought another key factor into limelight which talks about how power relations have an impact on the incidence of poverty as well its measurement. This had a transformatory effect on the study of poverty as it is now able to depart from its rather conventional aspects to foray into newer methods of research.

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