

**Poverty and Gender: a Proposal for Action Research.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Women constitute nearly sixty percent of the world's one billion poor. Of one-third billion people living in absolute poverty, over seventy percent are women. Over the last two decades of the twentieth century, the number of women living in absolute poverty has risen by fifty percent (in contrast to thirty percent for men).

As the world population doubles the need for food will more than double, and world agricultural output per unit of labor will need to increase by a factor of ten, mostly in the Third World(Marris,1999). FAO estimates show that women account for more than half the labor required to produce the food consumed in the developing world. In Africa – where female farming is of paramount importance, nearly seventy percent of the staple food in the continent is produced by women farmers and is of increasing importance as more men migrate from rural areas in search of work (Saito et al.1990; World Bank 1989) This makes women in the Third World an important group not only as beneficiaries of poverty alleviation but as contributors to the economic growth required to end poverty.

The different roles, rights and resources that men and women have in society are an important determinant of the nature and scope of poverty.

This is especially (though not uniquely) the case among rural populations in the Third World, where there is a central relationship between the capacity of rural households to produce enough income or food year round to meet their basic nutritional needs and the control women have over inputs and outputs in the food production-to-consumption system.

This paper examines the dimensions of poverty and the relationship between gender and the poverty of rural people in the Third World. This analysis is applied to formulate a proposal for the application of science and technology to improving food production and environmental protection, an agenda of central importance to rural women in the Third World.

## **The Dimensions of Poverty**

Between 1965 and 1992 according to Marris(1999) global poverty was reduced by about one third to the extent that half a billion people came out of absolute poverty. Nonetheless by the year 2000 there will be 1.5 billion people in absolute poverty in the world.

Absolute material deprivation is one dimension of poverty. The UN Human Development Report (1997) for example, uses five statistical indicators all of which affect men and women differently, and are pertinent to describing gender-differentiated deprivation: life expectancy; malnourishment under five years of age; illiteracy; access to safe water and health services. These indicators help to signal a degree of deprivation below which material survival is severely threatened, but cannot tell us much about a number of other dimensions of poverty which are especially important to women.

Income is a key aspect of poverty because in the absence of any other material assets, it reflects the capacity of the individual or household to obtain the minimum amount of goods needed to survive in society by sale or exchange of their labor. For example, the United Nations classifies a Third World person as poor if they are trying to live on less than \$1 per day (adjusting for international differences in price levels ). For the poor who lack material assets (the “laboring poor”), their income depends on the value of their labor . One interpretation is that unemployment, under-employment, low paid work and unpaid work necessary to the maintenance of social life – and performed largely by women, subsidizes the cost of wage labor in the market and provides a pool of cheap labor when required, thus keeping down overall wages and production costs. Thus efforts to reduce the poverty of low wage people, and in particular women, through income generation need to take into account the possibility that poverty based on the low value of their labor is a functional component of global as well as local market structures. Alleviation of this kind of poverty over the next half century will depend on increased overall economic growth, population control to keep the supply of labor from growing faster than demand, and a demand for labor that exceeds supply (Marris, 1999). This has some important gender implications explored in the next section.

Any discussion of the dimensions of poverty needs to go beyond the measurement of income needed to provide the minimum amount of goods

needed to survive. A useful framework for analysing the gender dimensions of poverty differentiates four dimensions which complement each other: starvation, subsistence, social coping and participation (Dean, 1999:8, after George and Howards, 1991). Relative poverty is as important as material poverty once starvation is overcome or basic physical survival is achieved. Inequality therefore, remains an important dimension of poverty even when we consider subsistence, which has socially defined standards that vary from one culture to another. By the end of this century the richest countries of the First World (about one tenth of World population), with over half of world GDP will be more than ten times better off than the poorest countries of the Third World (Marris, 1999). Some analysts show that wealth is becoming more concentrated. According to a United Nations report, the world's 358 billionaires in 1996 were wealthier than the combined annual incomes of the poorest 45 percent of the world's population (2.3 billion people). Whereas the richest 20 percent of the world's population were 30 times better off than the poorest 20 per cent in 1960, by the mid-1990s they were 61 times wealthier (cited in Dean, 1999).

Sen (1997) provides a concept of relative poverty very pertinent to analysing the gender dimensions of poverty based on the individual's capacities or capability to do many of the things valued in the society. This is similar to Runciman's (1966) concept of relative deprivation and Peter Townsend's (1979:31-57) concept of relative poverty, defined as the "lack of resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities, and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies to which they belong." An important contribution by Townsend was to define the poverty line as a situation in which people are excluded from participation in key aspects of the public life of ordinary citizens, a concept which has been built on by others (eg Scott 1994) to interpret poverty in terms of either participation in or "social exclusion" from the ordinary things which other members of the public enjoy.

The high degree of global material inequality at the end of the twentieth century influences what it means to be poor in relative terms. An example is the emergence of a privileged group in the labor force and among consumers who have access to personal computers from childhood, are highly computer skilled and are internet literate. Their influence in the global economy can make access to computers and computer skills an important element of relative deprivation and social exclusion and ultimately,

determine the value of the labor of vast numbers who have not acquired these skills.

The concept of social exclusion is important for our purposes because it provides a framework for understanding poverty in terms of different dimensions of participation, whether privileged participation or deprived participation. Jordan (1996) distinguishes between communities “of fate” and communities “of choice” as dimensions of poverty or wealth. Communities of fate are entrapped by a particular set of social and ecological circumstances, including coercion and subordination, both very relevant dimensions of the poverty of women in Third World societies as discussed in more detail in the next section. Communities of choice in contrast, have the freedom and the power to define and accrue to themselves forms of social exclusion and privilege.

Powerlessness is therefore a key dimension of a definition of poverty, although it is poorly operationalized in research. One way to conceptualize poverty in terms of powerlessness is to analyse the social distribution of risk or opportunity. At the negative end of this powerlessness spectrum might be the risk loss of control over one’s own body (eg. of being sold into slavery or prostitution). At the positive end of the spectrum might be the opportunity to migrate to wealthier and higher-wage societies.

Understanding poverty in terms of powerlessness has to be related to lack of resources as well as social exclusion from participation or levels of income. For this reason the concept of asset accumulation is an important one. Assets may be material capital (land, usufructory rights of important natural resources, savings, jewelery, livestock or other kinds of physical capital); human capital (education and skills); or social capital (organization). Different categories of impoverishment can be identified from the cross-classification of income with asset accumulation. For example, people with relatively high income but low asset accumulation will be more vulnerable to unemployment or business downturns that pitchfork them into poverty, than people with lower incomes but enough assets to tide them over. Asset accumulation is therefore, particularly important to identifying poverty in terms of exposure to the risk or vulnerability.

In summary, a number of dimensions of poverty can be usefully defined for analysing relationships between gender and poverty related to starvation (or absolute material poverty), subsistence, social coping and participation.

Income levels and in the absence of other assets, the value of labor are essential determinants of absolute material well-being as well as the capability to achieve the minimum goods defined by the society in question, as necessary for subsistence. Beyond material survival, socio-ecological factors (race, gender, geographical location) can be as important as income in determining access to or exclusion from the things that society defines as important for well-being, as well as degrees of participation and powerlessness. A factor in the capability of individuals to cope with hardship and to manage risk is asset accumulation.

## **GENDER AND POVERTY**

The different roles, rights and resources that men and women have in society are an important determinant of the nature and scope of their poverty. These differences are culturally constructed and historically determined; they are supported by social organization and economic systems. As such they can change; and it is a widely held thesis that the allocation of work and the valuation of women's labor has to change if poverty is to be eliminated.

The relationship between poverty and gender is especially important because of the positive effect that increasing women's incomes and education has on nutrition, child survival and, as child survival rates improve, on declining birth rates. When unwaged household production is valued, women's contribution is estimated at between 40-60 percent of total household income ( Goldschmidt-Clermont, 1987). This means that efforts to control population growth and provide employment for the poor must build on the provision of decent incomes and education for poor women.

Different types of women experience different degrees of poverty or wealth in society. Third World rural women may be unpaid or paid family laborers, they may be wage laborers outside the household, independent or joint entrepreneurs involved in a small business or in trading, they may be landowners in their own right or jointly with relatives.

It is therefore, erroneous to discuss Third World women and poverty as if there were one generic situation common to all women. Unfortunately however, there is a dearth of comparative studies which relate different types of women to corresponding levels and types of poverty taking into account the several dimensions of poverty discussed in the previous section, and

also compares their poverty with that of men. This is a serious gap in the research.

At present therefore, the best we can do is to draw together a series of observations based on individual studies, each of which offer some insights for the overall picture of gender-related poverty and inequality.

#### *Women's income and poverty.*

A number of studies conducted in the last decade show that poverty and food availability depend women's income, because men and women spend income under their control in different ways. The level of women's income is substantially and positively related to household calorie availability, child health and survival. Women typically spend a high proportion of their income on food and health care for children. Men use a higher proportion for their own personal expenditures (studies by von Braun and IFPRI). For example one study in Guatemala estimates that average yearly profits from nontraditional export crops would double household food expenditures if they were controlled by women rather than their husbands.

*Women's assets, participation and poverty.* Unequal rights and obligations, heavy time pressure to do multiple jobs, lack of access to land, capital, and credit, low levels of participation in agricultural extension support programs, education and collective organizations all prevent women from achieving the same levels of productivity as men.

Many studies show that plots of land controlled by women have lower yields than those controlled by men, because of lower access to technology and inputs like fertiliser as well as labor.

The potential for growth and food security that could result from improving women farmers access to resources, technology and information are as large or larger in some cases than the gains the expected from breeding "super-plants". For example, some estimates show that reducing the time burdens of women could increase household cash incomes by 10%. Estimates of how much women farmers' yields could increase just by giving them the the same level of inputs and education as men farmers range from 7-24 percent.

#### *Access to technology and poverty.*

Technology transfer aimed at women has been largely restricted to a few of women's existing activities, in particular traditional work related to housekeeping and childcare (Carr,1993). For example, cooking stoves have received a vast amount of attention worldwide. There have been several large-scale initiatives, such as the UNIFEM global 'WAFT' program, along with a vast number of projects attempting to provide improved technology to women in their traditional productive work, but "the transfer of larger and more complex technologies to women has been virtually non-existent" (Everts, 1998). At the same time, the record is mixed with respect to the unintended or indirect effects of new agricultural technologies on women; in some cases women have succeeded in adopting new varieties and other production technologies; in other cases women have been unable to process high yielding varieties developed without attention to postharvest qualities; in other cases, women laborers have been displaced by the introduction of high yielding varieties together with less labor intensive or more male labor-using technologies.

*Powerlessness, risk and poverty.*

The violence which affects the lives of poor women in the Third World is better documented now than it used to be and shows the many facets of their powerlessness in the most elementary respects: millions of female babies destroyed at or soon after birth such that there is a big "population gap" in female vs male births in the Third World (Chambers, 1996); the sale of young girls into forced labor, prostitution or as child brides; the ritual mutilation of female sexual organs; and physical violence used to control women's labor in the household. Other forms of social violence include abandonment of mothers to cope in female-headed households, denial of property rights.

Poor rural women are highly vulnerable to deprivation in terms of nutrition, health, education, asset accumulation, skill building and participation in collective organization because they tend to provide the "safety net" which protects their children and household against catastrophic poverty. The foundation of this safety net function is the division of labor which allocates a disproportionate share of un-waged or under-waged household and family maintenance work to women. UNDP estimated the value of this type of work at \$16,000 billion of global output, of this \$11,000 billion worth was carried out by women (UN, 1995).

Third world women's un-waged work includes activities that make it possible for laborers, small farms and businesses to work and produce at lower returns to labor and capital than would otherwise be possible: for example, cooking meals, fetching water and firewood, caring for the sick. One example illustrates this process: we costed the labor family women put into a single activity-- cooking for field workers-- in the course of production of a field crop at what it would cost the male head of household to hire a non-family member to do this task. The cost of hiring made the production of the crop unprofitable; and the conclusions of the economic analysis were borne out by the decisions of male producers in the community not to produce this crop if they did not have a family member to cook for the field workers (Ashby and Guerrero, 1985).

A detailed case study carried out in Kenya illustrates a situation of which there are multiple examples: women are increasingly the sole providers of labor on farms, because men migrate to higher wage opportunities, and women's labor is of lower value in the labor market. The added pressure on women's time led to low labor productivity on farm, particularly in female-headed households where women neglected on-farm tasks in order to hire out their labor to obtain income to meet the immediate food needs of the household (Mutoro, 1997)

Another study suggests that women's small enterprises such as food processing and trading provide a similar "safety net" function. Most of the enterprises owned by women are very small (maximum 25 employees), have low profit margins, are part-time or seasonal and are frequently run from the home so as to be combined with household responsibilities. Female entrepreneurs often do not increase investment in one specialized activity in order to maximize growth in their business; instead they diversify to minimize risks to stabilize income which guarantees basic food security. This safety-first orientation is often a response to the more risky strategies undertaken by other family members which are underwritten by the women's provision of a safety net (Downing, 1991).

This finding that innovators' risk taking in poor households is underwritten by the family, and in particular the provision of basic food security by women, is similar to the results of a study which examined the family background of poor farmers introducing risky new agricultural technologies and found that the early innovators were more likely to belong to extended families. The individual innovators were young men who did not own

much land and who worked as sharecroppers or farm laborers, but who belonged to an extended family unit with assets of land and household labor which enabled them as a group to absorb losses and cushion the individual from economic catastrophe. Young women did not have access to this pattern of familial support for agricultural innovation (Rivera and Ashby, 1985).

The low value of women's time and women's work is an important reason why development efforts which provide technologies and income earning opportunities directed at women's traditional activities have to a very large extent, failed to have a significant impact. Unless there is an activity with a higher return to labor, which generates additional income and which does not undermine the "safety net" function of women's economic contribution to the household, there is no incentive for women to save time in traditional activities especially if this requires expenditure on new technology.

Therefore one of the key interventions needed in poverty eradication is the identification of new opportunities for income generation which have superior returns to labor compared with women's traditional work. These need to be combined with support mechanisms for the "safety net" functions for the household provided by women's work and income.

### **A PROPOSAL FOR ACTION RESEARCH**

Several actors in the international development effort to eliminate poverty have taken important steps towards mainstreaming attention to gender and impact on poor rural women over the past three decades: in 1979 the UN Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women was adopted; in 1989 the declaration on violence against women followed; the Beijing declaration and platform for action formulated in 1995 at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women was another milestone. Other important commitments are stated in the World Bank since the publication of its paper "Enhancing Women's participation in Economic Development" in 1994, the OECD with its position statement "Gender Equality: Moving towards Sustainable People-Centered Development" made in 1995, and the European Union policy statement "Integrating Gender Issues in Development Cooperation" also issued in 1995. However, action lags far behind the statement of good intentions. For example, the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research, a \$360 million consortium supported by the same donors who issued the above statements, integrated

gender analysis as a program in its mainstream research agenda in 1996. A head count of the number of research studies considering gender reported shows a rise from 140 studies in 1995 to 227 in 1998. There is no reason for complacency about this steady improvement. An analysis of these studies shows that only 11 or 14% of the studies reported were specifically developing technology to benefit rural women.

The full integration of gender analysis and the participation of men and women farmers as partners in international agricultural research and technology development requires a three pronged strategy that consists of:

- catalysing collaborative research with the centers and partners, to generate sound evidence on the benefits in terms and impact of differentiating the needs of men and women as *users* of technology, and recognising their different contributions as *participants in research* ;
- supporting capacity building with the Centers to increase skills and knowledge to use gender analysis effectively and appropriately
- promoting information dissemination and exchange about best practices and lessons learned

#### **Key elements of a proposal.**

If we are to take the phrase “empowering women in agriculture” as more than a cheap slogan, then we have to work from the foundation relationship between gender and the several dimensions of poverty outlined earlier. Mainstreaming gender into the existing research agenda will not be enough, if that agenda is systematically failing to take into account the sources of income and the assets that women in poor households depend on. Moreover, the effects of globalization which creates a pressing need to find alternative sources of income in situations where traditional means are no longer economically viable, require us to go beyond adjusting technology to fit with the traditional responsibilities and constraints faced by poor men and women farmers. We need to be actively looking at new alternatives in the global economy and the gender-differentiated needs for technology, skills and information required for a frontal attack on poverty.

Strengthening the capacity of global agricultural research to take on this task has at least three important elements:

1. *Link research institutions with existing sources of information and expertise so that researchers and client groups can readily access and*

make use of the large body of information on gender, agriculture and technology for women already in existence . These linkages need to focus on strong interactions between technology designers, technology producers (such as small scale artesans, some of whom may be women in the Third World) and technology users (see for an example, Everts, 1998)

2. *Identify new livelihood opportunities for the poor in relation to a changing demand for agricultural technology which is analysed separately for men and for women.*

A coordinated diagnostic research initiative is needed to identify rapidly the priority geographical areas and populations in which gender-differentiated research and technology development has potential for high payoff in combating poverty. This diagnosis needs to include:

- Development of a GIS minimum database, using available data with expert input to identify areas of the world where women's special needs require priority attention
- Design sample of areas using the GIS minimum data base to define priority geographic area for rapid appraisal of gender differentiated opportunities and needs.
- In sampled areas, network with grassroots organizations and NGO's to select promising technology innovation opportunities for rural women

3. *Research for technology development*

- Select priority entry points where research is needed to promote the development of innovative agricultural technology by and for rural women in selected areas, and the policy interventions needed to ensure access
- Institutionalize regular technology evaluations by a network of gender differentiated user groups, as feedback to research on technology design.
- Establish an interactive, user-friendly database on evaluations of technologies for women with appropriate institutions
- Support regular review and exchange of results
- Establish a regular consultation to update the diagnosis of needs and the evaluation of technologies, monitoring and evaluation of impact of gendered research.

4. *Increase women's assets (physical, human and social capital)*

- Protecting women's traditional rights to land and other resources, including water, forest and grazing are essential. Often this requires participation in effective collective or community based organization .
- In general women's access to collective organization for resource management, health and child care, credit, information, marketing and small enterprise development needs strong support.
- Formal education and access to informal education and skill building is an essential ingredient of the effort to build women's access to secure non-traditional sources of income with forward linkages to improving child survival rates and decline in the birth rate.

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