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KNOWING GENDERED POVERTY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH:  
A PROTRACTED PATH TO PROGRESS?

**Abstract**

*This paper reflects on the difficulties of knowing about the extent and nature of gendered poverty across regions of the Global South in which women have often been assumed to bear a disproportionate share. Some advances have been made in collecting and collating data appropriate to the task, but there remain various lacunae which make it difficult to pinpoint, let alone explain, variations across space and time. This leads us to conclude that the path to mapping and understanding gendered poverty in developing regions is a protracted one, and that progress will need to be accelerated if we wish to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals of “eliminating poverty in all its forms everywhere”, and “empowering women and achieving gender equality”.*

“I know nothing. But my reasonable suspicion is that poverty is deprivation on all levels.”  
(I. McEwan, *Nutshell* [2016])

*Introduction*

Alongside Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 in the new global Agenda 2030 which aims to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”, gender is also flagged in SDG 1 which exhorts “eliminating poverty in all its forms everywhere”<sup>1</sup>. This holistic and gender-sensitive call is welcome for several reasons, not least because there is considerable evidence that poverty, which is typically linked to income but not reducible to it, encompasses multiple privations which are often disproportionately experienced by women and girls. This is perhaps particularly so in the Global South, notwithstanding that putting a precise figure on gender-differentiated poverty (even in income terms) and thinking about what data might come into the frame for tracking

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progress in SDG 1, remains a formidable challenge. To date, robust, geographically-compatible, sex-disaggregated panel statistics have been so sorely lacking that speculative assertions that “poverty has a female face”, “70% of the world’s poor are women”, and that women-headed households are the “poorest of the poor” have dominated scholarly and policy discourse as received, if uncorroborated, wisdoms.

Fortunately, we are moving into an era in which doubt about the veracity of claims about gendered poverty is being signalled by international organisations, giving weight to the idea that more and better data are needed. Indeed, in its *Progress of the World’s Women 2015-16* report, UN Women (2015: 45, Box 1.4) profess that although around 1 billion people in 2011 (c15% of the world population at that time) were estimated to be ‘extremely poor’ (on the basis of the international monetary poverty line of less than US\$1.25 a day at 2005 prices), “it is unknown how many of those living in poverty are women and girls”. UN Women also add, albeit in a footnote, that “The much cited ‘factoid’ that 70% of the world’s poor are women is now widely regarded as improbable” (UN Women 2015: 307, 92n).

These admissions should be construed as a major watershed, given that the statistic of 70% of the world’s poor being female, first aired at the Fourth Women’s World Conference in Beijing in 1995, and enduring over twenty years subsequently, was at an early stage doubted on grounds of its empirical validity (see Marcoux 1997). Moreover, such admissions help to unsettle the arguably flawed terminology of a global ‘feminisation of poverty’, which has often been used to describe situations where poverty was (or is) simply ‘feminised’ (state), rather than rising over time (trend) (Chant 2008; Medeiros and Costa 2006, 2008). This is not to deny that while issue may be taken with a never-substantiated baseline figure or its rarely-supported corollary of a ‘feminisation of poverty’, which seemed to gain sustained legitimacy over two decades simply on account of repeated circulation in policy and scholarly literature (see Chant 2008: 16; Wisor *et al.* 2014: 1, 2n), it must also be recognised that this has also earned gender a prominent place on the poverty-reduction radar.

Even if, over twenty years after Beijing, we cannot determine with any precision how far poverty gaps exist among women and men, and whether poverty is ‘feminising’ or not, some progress has been made in data-gathering and collation, as showcased, *inter alia*, by UN Women (2015) in their *Progress of the World’s Women 2015-16* report in the form of a summary box entitled “Gender and Poverty: What Do We Know?”, and an extensive statistical annex.

In the present paper we not only examine ‘what we know’ from UN Women’s statistical review and commentary, but also ‘what we don’t know’. We also identify areas where ‘we need to know’ more and offer some suggestions which could be useful in advancing understanding and monitoring of the complex intersections between gender and poverty across space and time.

In the first section of our article we reflect briefly on broad conceptualisations of parameters of, and processes accounting for, gendered poverty. In section two, we provide a brief review of key modes of poverty measurement and their sensitivity to gender. We then proceed to consider what UN Women offers in terms of evidence of women’s disproportionate share of poverty in Global South regions, how they calculate this, and what deficiencies exist in data (or their comparability) for different parts of the

developing world . In the succeeding section, we highlight the issue of how poverty incidence also appears to be skewed to what UN Women (2015) refer to as ‘female only households’. Thereafter, we explore additional findings from recent panel studies on Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa as to trends in gendered poverty since the 1990s, which reveal a tendency toward a (re)feminisation of poverty in the former, and a defeminisation in the latter, and raise questions as to what more we need to know to help explain these trajectories. In our concluding section, we reflect on the key priorities for progress in data collection and analysis that might provide a sturdier platform for future research, SDG monitoring and gender-responsive anti-poverty interventions.

### 1. *Gender and poverty: key parameters and processes*

Feminist scholarship on poverty since the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) has stressed that gender-differentiated privations are manifest in numerous intersecting forms and dimensions, span across a range of ‘private’ and ‘public’ sites and scales, and owe to a multiplicity of gender-discriminatory structures and processes (see Bradshaw 2002; Bradshaw and Linneker 2014; Chant 2003a, 2003b, 2010). In turn, it is important to recognise that people move in and out of poverty, with Murphy (2015) drawing an important distinction between ‘transitory poverty’ and ‘structural poverty’ (see also Shaffer 2008, 2013). While ‘transitory poverty’ can come about through ‘random shocks’, and shortfalls in social support for emergencies, the latter “arises as a result of unfair and unjust social arrangements” in which gender features prominently (Murphy 2015: 87; see also Bradshaw 2013). In this context, and given the subjectivity of experiences of poverty, it is clearly difficult to ‘know’ and ‘measure’ gendered poverty (Baruah 2009).

Women’s uneven burden of poverty has often been emphasised (albeit implicitly) in terms of access to income, whether through employment and earnings, or with reference to consumption (see Chant 2008; Kabeer 2003). But knowing and comprehending even the apparent simplicity of income poverty is complicated, not only because sex-disaggregated data remain persistently elusive, but on account of the different spaces across which monetary deprivations occur and how these intersect with and influence one another. For example, we know in general terms that patriarchal and capitalist social relations have shaped highly gendered (as well as racialised and generational) labour markets (see Benería *et al.* 2015; Perrons 2004), in which women are less likely to have access to employment (especially in the ‘formal’ economy), or earnings comparable to those of men, even when in the same sectors or occupations. But to what degree do these tendencies owe, *inter alia*, to direct gender discrimination on the part of employers who favour male over female recruitment on the basis of gender stereotypical assumptions that men are free(r) of practical obligations to their households other than ‘breadwinning’, or who employ women only in underpaid jobs that reflect a low valuation of ‘female’ skills or attributes? In turn, how are these patterns induced and/or compounded by indirect discrimination on the part of states (through legislation or absence of policies to support female working parents), or by gendered norms and practices within households and the domestic domain which place constraints on the

capabilities and freedoms of women to engage in remunerated work (for example through lack of literacy, education or vocational training, or double burdens of paid and unpaid labour), and to convert the returns from their labour to gains in power, personal control of income, and consumption? (see Bradshaw and Linneker 2003: 6; Chant 2010; Murphy 2015; Razavi 1999). These forces are clearly inter-linked, but it remains difficult to know whether social, economic or political influences have the biggest part to play across different sites, and where and which interventions could be introduced that would yield the greatest potential for rectifying gender inequalities.

In turn, there is a major question about whether income poverty is necessarily the only or most important element in addressing feminised poverty. Even though income may be implicated, other aspects of poverty with particular relevance for women and girls arguably include, *inter alia*, ‘time poverty’, ‘asset poverty’, and ‘power poverty’, all of which, again, interrelate with one another to some degree.

For example, part of Chant’s (2007, 2008) formulation of a ‘feminisation of responsibility and/or obligation’, has emphasised that regardless of women’s increased access to education and employment, and contributions to household income, their disproportionate burdens of unpaid labour in contexts in which they have limited support for domestic or carework from their immediate menfolk or states, can often lead to exacting demands on their time which preclude allowance for the restorative rest and recreation activities essential to human wellbeing (*ibidem*; see also Chant 2016b; Gammage 2010; Noh and Kim 2015). These pressures are typically exacerbated in contexts in which women are not only poor, but reside in environments such as urban slums or rural localities suffering lack of basic services or decent housing conditions (see Chant and McIlwaine 2016: Chapters 3 and 4).

Other than time poverty, lower levels of waged employment and women’s disproportionate likelihood of being engaged in informal economic activities (see Chant and Pedwell 2008; Chen and Skinner 2014), coupled with gender wage gaps (currently in the region of 25%), often mean women have smaller incomes, and less control over household assets and decisions (Bradshaw 2002; Chant and McIlwaine 2016: Chapter 4; Kabeer 2003: 198; Rakodi 1999). As summarised by UN Women (2015: 45): “Even where women and men are both just as likely to live in a poor household, women are more likely to be deprived in other key areas of well-being, such as education, and less likely to have an independent source of income through paid work... which can result in the uneven distribution of power and resources within the household.” This can lead to more limited consumption, which may compound other deprivations such as vulnerability to ill-health from insanitary living conditions, and limited access to medical services, with women themselves often picking up the brunt of domestic-based healthcare provision (Murphy 2015: 84). Indeed, the inclusion of different types of household asset indicators in which women may be disadvantaged relative to men, can plausibly increase estimates of women’s privations. For example, the fact that women’s share of land and property worldwide is estimated at only 15% (UNFPA 2007: 19) would suggest that women may be at greater risk of disadvantage in this dimension than in income terms. Even if caution around general estimates is necessary given unreliable data, competing conceptualisations of ownership, and the fact that tenure is often informal (see Chant and McIlwaine 2016: Chapter 3; Doss *et al.* 2015), detailed research

such as that by Deere *et al.* (2012: 525) on Latin America, suggest that in only two countries out of eleven they studied in the region – Nicaragua and Panama – have women achieved parity with men in respect of land and property title. Such disparities are backed-up by localised qualitative evidence, including a longitudinal field-based study in Guayaquil, Ecuador conducted by Moser (2016) which indicates that female-headed households (FHHs – see also below) do better than male-headed households (MHHs) in terms of income poverty, but worse in terms of wealth asset accumulation. In turn, asset deficits on these and other fronts, such as access to credit, labour markets, insurance schemes, social protection and social capital, may be a major factor threatening women’s likelihood of falling into poverty in several dimensions, as discussed, *inter alia*, by Klasen *et al.* (2014).

Assessments of women’s relative poverty may thus depend on what is measured and how it is measured in indicator development. To date different indicators of gendered poverty and change are often incomparable as they use different methods and data sources. Beyond this, there is the thorny question of which groups of women provide the basis for gendered comparisons. Should we compare women and men in general, or male heads with female heads of household?

#### *Poverty and female-headed households*

‘Feminised’ (or ‘feminising’ poverty) has often been associated with the ‘feminisation’ of household headship in developing regions, with Kabeer (2003: 81), among others noting historically that: “Female headship rapidly became the accepted discourse about gender and poverty in international agencies” (see also Chant 2003a, 2008; Jackson 1996; May 2001: 50).

Female-headed households (FHHs) have long been regarded as being the ‘poorest of the poor’ (Buviniç and Gupta 1997; Chant 1997b, 2008; Davids and van Driel 2001; Kabeer 1997), and have often become a ‘proxy’ for all women (Lampietti and Stalker 2000: 2), partly because sex-disaggregated data have only been available at the household level, with the typically smaller average size of FHHs giving them greater visibility in household-aggregated poverty statistics (see Kabeer 1996: 14; Quisumbing *et al.* 2001).

However, in many respects that FHHs might be the ‘poorest of the poor’ has objective *a priori* traction insofar as if women as a whole are disadvantaged by gender equality, then it might be expected that are more disadvantaged still through ‘male-deficit’ household arrangements (see Barrow 2015; Chant 2003b, 2016a). Not only are female-headed households regarded as disproportionately likely to emerge among poor populations, for example through involuntary labour migration, conjugal breakdown under financial stress, lack of formal marriage and so on (see Fonseca 1991: 138), but female household headship itself might prejudice the prospects of women themselves and their household members to exit poverty via a ‘transmission of inter-generational disadvantage’ (see Chant 2003b: 9 *et seq.*; see also Milazzo and van de Walle 2015: 3). However, evidence on the extent to which FHHs are poorer than MHHs is mixed and fraught with definitional and data-related issues.

For one, definitions of household headship and FHHs vary from those which use self-declared headship in household surveys, to those imposed by the enumerator or researcher where the person responsible for economic inputs is regarded as the

household head (Chant 2016a: 23; Liu *et al.* 2017; Milazzo and van de Walle 2015: 5-6). In turn, aside from the fact that household surveys do not always follow precise or consistent definitions of female household headship (see Chant 2007), FHHs are a fluid and diverse group, varying substantially in respect of their composition, age structure, access to support from ex-partners and the state, and so on (see Chant 1997b, 2008), as well as in the drivers that lead to headship (Bradshaw 1995a, 1995b; Milazzo and van de Walle 2015: 6). As noted by Chant (2003b: 48, 4n), although FHHs are often equated with lone mother households consisting solely of mothers and children, they commonly encompass other sub-groups such as grandmother-headed households, women-only, and lone female households, and *ipso facto* include widows, divorced, separated, abandoned, and single women and/or mothers, not to mention married women with absent male spouses. Indeed, further distinctions can be drawn between *de jure* FHHs (households with no live-in male partner or economic support from one) and *de facto* FHHs (married or partnered women heads whose male spouses live away, perhaps due to labour migration, but contribute remittances) (Youssef and Hetler 1983; see also Liu *et al.* 2017).

In light of the multiple axes of heterogeneity described above, it is perhaps no surprise that evidence regarding levels of poverty between male- and female-headed households is decidedly chequered. For example, while it has increasingly been argued that female-headed households cannot unilaterally be regarded as the ‘poorest of the poor’, it may well be that some are at an above-average risk of privation, for example, when they comprise dependent children, or are widowed, and/or lack transfer payments in the form of remittances or child support from absent spouses/fathers (Chant 2003a; Milazzo and van de Walle 2015: 6). This said, although the kind of analysis which allows fine-grained disaggregation of female-headed households is typically elusive, it is also interesting that a number of studies based on general comparisons between households headed by males or females show little difference in poverty (Chant 2007). In fact recent statistical evidence from Africa indicates that growing proportions of FHHs over the past two decades seem to have been contributed to GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth and reducing poverty in the region (Milazzo and van de Walle 2015: 3; see also below).

This said, despite improvements in time series of quantitative data, statistical surveys are unlikely to reveal the dynamics of intra-household resource mobilisation and distribution which can have a major impact on people’s actual and perceived experiences of poverty (see Murphy 2015: 75 and 79). A number of qualitative studies, for instance, have shown that optimising household labour utilisation, and ensuring equitability of income distribution and consumption, may be greater in FHHs than in MHHs. In the latter, for example, a situation of ‘secondary poverty’ is commonly observed whereby women and children are adversely affected by male retention of earnings for personal consumption (Bradshaw 2001; Chant 1997a, 1997b; also Fukuda-Parr 1999; González de la Rocha and Grinspun 2001; Moghadam 1997; Quisumbing 2003). Moreover, women’s inability to rely on regular financial inputs from male spouses, not only because of precarity in many men’s jobs, but also on account of unpredictable and variable levels of wage retention, can lead to excessive stress and vulnerability when women are forced into borrowing and indebtedness to ‘get by’ (Chant 1997a: 210). In MHHs we are

arguably more likely to witness what may be described as gendered ‘power poverty’, whereby women and girls are unable (because of fear of violence or abandonment) or unwilling (because of deeply embedded gendered norms which emphasise female altruism and servitude) to contest or resist male privilege or prerogatives (see Brickell and Chant 2010; Chant 2007, 2008; Kabeer 1999). In addition, even if income flows into FHHs may be lower in objective terms, the ability to exert control over financial and material resources, however meagre, may be worth more to female household heads and their members and thereby influence their perceptions of hardship and vulnerability. This signals the importance of recognising *perceived* as well as *actual* poverty, and *ipso facto*, subjectivity (see Chant 2003a, 2003b, 2009; Wisor *et al.* 2014). Indeed, referring to field-based research in Guinea, Paul Shaffer (2013: 35-36) reports how although the nationally representative official household survey indicated that women were not deprived in consumption relative to men, nor were female-headed households likely to be poorer than their male-headed counterparts, a village-level Participatory Poverty Assessment in Kamatiguia revealed that on account of their excessive workloads and lack of decision-making power, most women declared they felt like ‘slaves’, and would wish to be born male in a ‘second life’.

## 2. Tools to measure poverty and their potential sensitivity to gender

In light of such caveats, how poverty is measured clearly has implications for assessing the extent of feminised poverty, and the degree to which poverty is feminising (or not).

In macro-level international comparisons poverty is often defined and measured in respect of both absolute and relative incomes. Absolute measures, such as the ‘extreme poverty line’, are grounded in a ‘basic needs’ approach where an extreme poverty line is typically established as the income necessary to access sufficient calories to stay alive. The ‘poverty line’ is an absolute measure of the income/expenditure of resources needed to access food, but also includes housing and transport. The latest proposed extreme international poverty line for Agenda 2030 is US\$1.90 a day, which is the average of the national poverty lines in the poorest fifteen countries. While income poverty measures do not always capture the extent of women’s disadvantage relative to men in the developing world context, and have been widely critiqued for failure to grasp many non-income measures of gendered privation (see for example, Chant 2003a, 2007; Johnson-Latham 2004; Kabeer 2003), their use, especially when disaggregated by sex, is often relatively straightforward compared with multidimensional indicator (MDI) approaches which require more data.

Many MDI approaches follow the methodology developed by Alkire and Foster (2011) at the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) which constituted the basis of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) launched by the United Nations Development Programme in 2010 (UNDP 2010). In the latter deprivation is measured against a number of different criteria falling into three main categories: health (nutrition and child mortality), education (child enrolment and years of schooling), and living standards (cooking fuel, toilet, electricity, floor, water and assets). Generally this method first identifies who is poor, then aggregates to obtain overall

measures that reflect the multiple deprivations experienced by the poor. The importance of these multidimensional asset-based measures is made clear in Bader *et al.*'s (2016) study which found a differential overlap between monetary poverty and multidimensional poverty, with some non-income-poor people being 'overlooked', despite their MDI measure showing they suffer privations in other aspects of wellbeing (see also Rogan 2016).

Due to lack of reliable data on household income and expenditures, to calculate feminised poverty UN Women (2015) itself makes use of multidimensional databases, most notably USAID's Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), to construct a 'wealth asset index' whereby, via principal components and cluster analysis, households in the bottom quintile of the asset distribution are used as a relative poverty line indicator. The DHS data include information on assets such as dwelling type, water, sanitation and energy, but has no direct measure of income (see USAID, 2016).

While in many ways, construction of poverty profiles on the basis of household assets can take us further in determining privation in a more rounded manner, it should also be noted that different asset bundles may have varied impacts on gendered poverty (perceived and actual) since women's priorities regarding selected private and public household assets may diverge from those of men (see Wisor *et al.* 2014; also later). In addition, how wealth assets may influence the analysis of gendered poverty need to be taken into account in the context of countries with differing demographic profiles. For example, in countries with larger proportions of younger women it may be that feminised poverty inflates because women in their twenties and thirties have had less time and ability to accumulate certain assets. Conversely, nations with larger proportions of older women may show less in the way of asset-based poverty because individual and/or household assets have had a longer period in which to build up.

While the tools to measure gendered poverty seem lacking, some advances are in evidence from new data and calculations compiled by UN Women in the aforementioned *Progress of the World's Women 2015-16* report, to which our discussion now turns.

### 3. UN Women's (2015) calculations of gendered poverty

At the outset it is critical to identify that UN Women (2015) refer to two different measures when considering current gender differences in poverty (state), and changes in gender differences in poverty over time (trend). The basis for the state of gendered poverty is wealth asset poverty among women and men aged 20-59 years (denominated as adults of 'prime working age'), whereas that of changes in gendered poverty over time is based on income, regardless of age. Unfortunately, lack of comparable data across regions means that countries in Latin America and the Caribbean are excluded from their review and statistical annex on current differences in gendered poverty, but are the sole point of reference for longitudinal changes. The reason given for the latter in the report is that Latin America and the Caribbean "is the only region where analysis of the poorest households by gender composition has been done over time" (UN Women



2015: 45). It also transpired, from our personal communications with UN Women<sup>2</sup>, that lack of comparable measures of gendered poverty between this and other developing regions, had a major part to play in excluding Latin America and Caribbean from the tabulations of feminised poverty. Notwithstanding these geographically-dissonant discrepancies, in the following sections we turn to the current state of gender differences in poverty, second, to differences between households, and then at changes in gendered poverty over time.

#### 4. *The state of gendered poverty: how far is poverty feminised?*

Despite excluding Latin America which was actually the region in which the seeds of UN Women’s methodology were sown (see ECLAC 2004: 133-70; UN Women 2015: 307, 93n), the comparative abundance of information across a wide range of other Global South regions from DHS sources, leads UN Women (2015) to draw on the latter to determine the degree to which poverty is feminised. As they themselves articulate: “In the absence of data on individual poverty rates, a proxy measure of women’s risk of poverty has been developed where the percentage of working age women living in poor households (defined as the bottom 20% of households) is compared to the percentage of working age men in such households” (UN Women 2015: 45).

UN Women’s indicator, which standardises for the number of women and men in the general population when comparing the numbers of women to men in the poorest households, is something which we might denominate as a ‘Gender Poverty Index’ (GPI), as follows:

Gender Poverty Index (GPI)

$$GPI = A / B$$

where

$$A = \Sigma (\text{females in poor households}) / \Sigma (\text{males in poor households})$$

$$B = \Sigma (\text{females in all households}) / \Sigma (\text{males in all households})$$

P is the poverty rate ratio (Pf= F poor/ F all) within the population

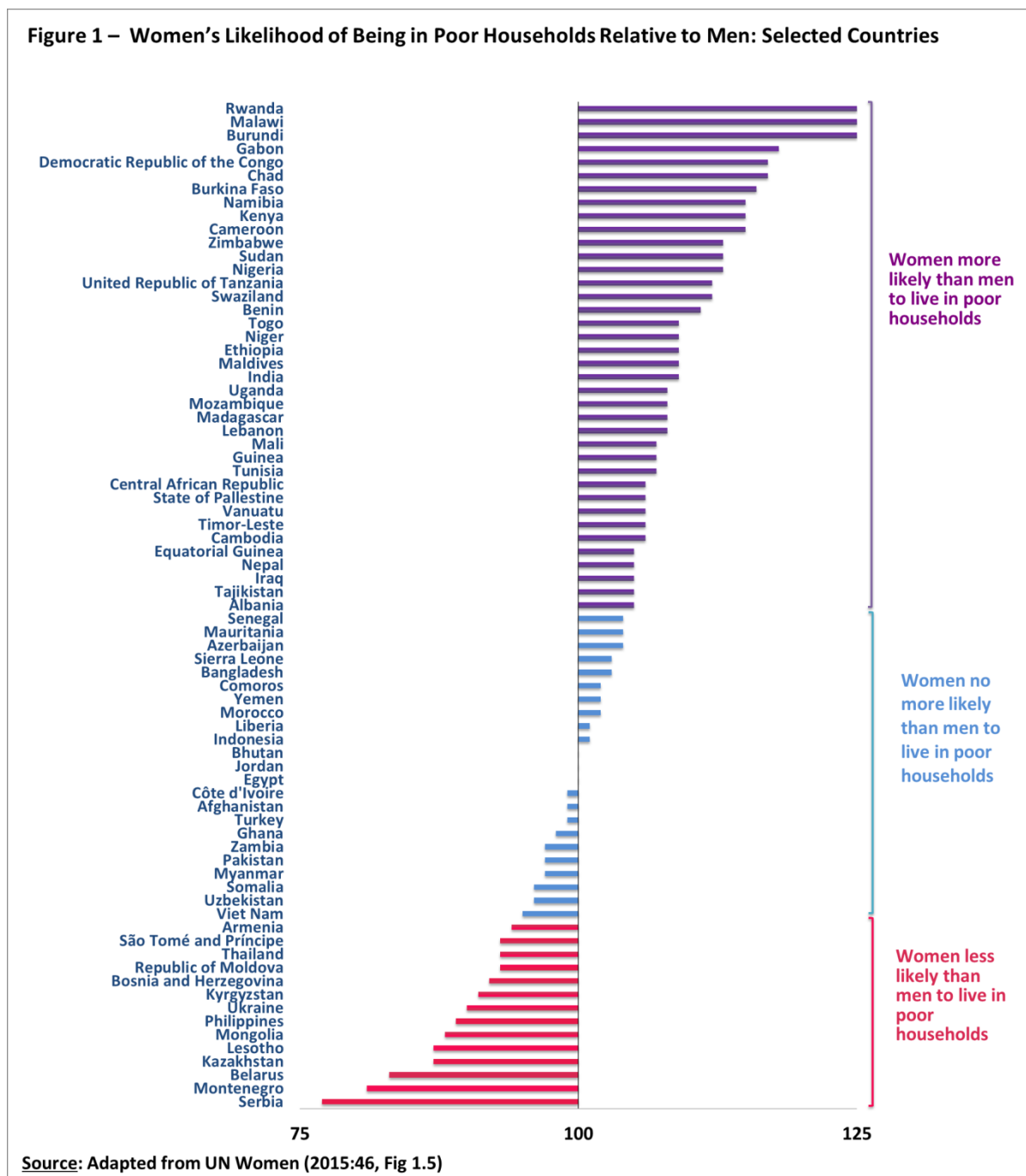
The indicator is expressed as the number of poor women per 100 poor men. UN women suggest that values above 103 suggest that women are overly represented among the poor, values below 97 indicate that men are overly represented, and values between 97 and 103 indicate gender parity.

Calculations of what we have called the GPI were drawn by UN Women (2015) from 75 countries from the following regions for which data were available, notably South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. For the latest available year, the index

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<sup>2</sup> Email correspondence with Silke Staab from UN Women, copied in to their chief statistician Papa Seck, 4 September 2015.

shows poverty to be feminised (higher incidence among women than men) in the majority of countries. More specifically, women are more likely to live in poverty in 41 out of 75 countries (54.6%), although in 18 countries differences are negligible, and in 16 there are more men than women in the bottom poverty quintile (see Figure 1)



### 5. Poverty and 'female only households'

UN Women (2015: 45) refer to the fact that, as with women in general, female only households (FOHs) (those without an adult male 20-59 years), are more likely to be

concentrated in the bottom quintile of households. This indeed seems to be the case, with our own exploration of the tables in Annex 1 of their *Progress Report* indicating that in no country for which data are available in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa are FOHs less likely than households containing an adult male to be in the poorest quintile. And indeed in some cases differences are quite marked. For example in India, the ratio of FOHs in the poorest quintile is as much as 152 for every 100 households with a male adult, 157 in Palestine, and 161 in Lebanon (UN Women 2015: 252 and 254). Although in the majority of (18 out of 25) sub-Saharan African countries for which data are available FOHs are again likely to be at greater risk of poverty, it is perhaps interesting that the gap narrows in East Asia and the Pacific, where in 4 out of 9 countries FOHs are less likely to be in the poorest quintile, and as many as in 8 out of 14 countries (more than half) for which data are available in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Also interesting, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, is that while there is a tendency for FOHs to be at greater risk of poverty than women in general, this is not always the case. For example in 3 out of 9 countries in East Asia and the Pacific (Mongolia, Philippines and Vietnam), FOHs are at less risk of poverty than women in general (UN Women 2015: 252) and in 5 out of 25 countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Zambia) (*ibidem*: 254-255).

These potentially puzzling issues aside, we feel we need to raise some concerns about the terminology ‘female only household’ and the choice to confine this to units lacking a ‘prime working age’ male adult (aged 20-59 years). First, ‘female only households’, are not, *sensu stricto*, ‘female only’, since they may contain boys or men younger or older than the UN Women age thresholds. While the 20-59 year male cohort may well be of ‘prime working age’, it is well known, on one hand, that boys and male youth may make significant economic contributions to household livelihoods (see Jones and Chant 2009), and on the other, that working and contributing income into old age is frequent and necessary among poor populations (Vera-Sanso 2010). As such, and especially as UN Women (2015: 45) itself notes that an over-representation of FOHs among the poor points to “... a greater risk of poverty among separated women, widows and single mothers, including heads of household without a male partner,” might it actually have been better to retain the term ‘female-headed household’?

Second, and related to this, although UN Women (2015: 307, 94n) concede that female-headed households are not always the poorest, giving the specific example of cases where men have migrated and remit money (*de facto* female-headed households), their stress on the high risk of poverty among unpartnered women may not actually dispel the idea that female-headed households are the ‘poorest of the poor’, which as identified earlier has been a very problematic assertion. Indeed, a third question is whether the new nomenclature of ‘female only households’ simply serves as a ‘Trojan horse’ for female-headed households, and whether the 20-59 year limit actually makes them more likely to show up in the poorest quintile because of enduring gendered wage gaps among ‘prime working age’ adults. Indeed, although paid work is widely regarded as a *sine qua non* in assessing the poverty status of households (see González de la Rocha 2001; González de la Rocha *et al.* 2016; Moser 1998; World Bank 2012), does the effective comparison of working age women against working age men build in a bias to

over-emphasising poverty among FOHs given persistent gendered wage disparities? Does it also prescribe the cure as more workforce participation among women, despite their already heavy loads of unpaid, as well as paid labour, and disadvantage in heavily segmented labour markets? Moreover, to what extent does a concentration on women of 'prime working age' deflect from the situation where female heads outside as well as within this age cohort often utilise a range of creative strategies to avoid poverty, such as extending their household membership to accommodate a balance of paid and unpaid work among co-resident members in which they themselves may not be the primary breadwinner?

### 6. *Changes in gendered poverty over time*

Moving on from the above, changes in gendered shares of poverty are vitally important in helping to establish whether feminised poverty persists, or is undergoing a process of further 'feminisation', or indeed 'de-feminisation' over time. Thanks to improvements in data gathering, UN Women (2015: 307, 97n) point out that there are 23 countries which now possess sex-disaggregated data on wealth that permit comparison between the early 2000s and c2007-2013. However, possibly because this is a relatively short interval over which changes in gendered poverty might be tracked, UN Women (2015) do not take it upon themselves to conduct a cross-regional comparative analysis of available data, and instead refer only to Latin America and the Caribbean where data on the poorest households by gender composition has a longer established history (see earlier).

#### *Gendered poverty trends in Latin America*

In their summary box UN Women (2015: 45) point out that for Latin America as a whole, the proportion of women versus men in poor households has risen between 1997 and 2012, from 108.7 to 117.2. They also identify that this trend has occurred within the context of declining poverty overall in the region: from 44.8% of people living below the poverty line in 1997 to 32.7% in 2012 (*ibidem*; see also Table 1). Referring to the Annual Report published by the Gender Equality Observatory of Latin America and Caribbean which concentrates on grants, support and burdens for women (GEOLAC 2013). UN Women (2015: 45) attribute that part of the reason for declining poverty is 'new social policies', even if outcomes vary "depending on the reach of the programmes and the size of transfers" (*ibidem*). However, what strikes us as particularly odd is that despite the fact that so many anti-poverty programmes rolled-out in Latin America from the 1990s onwards, most notably conditional cash transfer (CCT) schemes, have been directed at or at least through women (see Molyneux 2006, 2007), this does not seem to have arrested a tendency for women to be more deprived than men over time. Indeed, what is very interesting – and arguably alarming -- from our perspective is that poverty appeared to be 'de-feminising' in Latin America prior to the widespread implementation of female-directed anti-poverty initiatives (see Medeiros and Costa 2006, 2008), but has been 're-feminising' since. Although there is some evidence that CCTs have produced gains for younger generations of women, especially among traditionally marginalised indigenous groups, for example, in terms of access to education and employment (see

González de la Rocha 2010; González de la Rocha and Escobar Latapí 2016), it is also the case that adult women charged with the responsibilities of having to ensure their children attend school or health checks, as well as a range of voluntary activities, may be constrained by having to relinquish the opportunity costs of working – or migrating for work – by the demands of such programmes (see Feitosa de Britto 2007; Hernández Pérez 2012).

While detailed exploration of the undoubtedly complex relationships between the (re)feminisation of poverty and anti-poverty programmes, among other variables (for example, access to work) is beyond the scope of the present article, it is worth noting that slumps in feminised poverty between the late 1990s and early 2000s, and then consistent rises from 2005 onwards for both general and extreme poverty, only applies to calculations based on the ratio of numbers of women to men in all households aged 20 to 59 (ECLAC 2014; see also GEOLAC 2013). Interestingly, too, the figures show a greater vulnerability to poverty among women in urban areas although this could partly be a function of decidedly feminised sex ratios in towns and cities in Latin America, especially among more elderly cohorts, not to mention on-going rises in female household headship in urban areas compared with rural localities (see Chant and McIlwaine 2016: 20-24; Tacoli and Chant, 2014).

Table 1: Evidence for a Long- Term Feminisation of Poverty in Latin America, 1990-2013

<b>Feminisation of Poverty Index 1990-2013</b>							
	Year	Feminisation of Poverty Index					
		Extreme Poor (aged 20-59)			General Poor (aged 20-59)		
		National	Urban	Rural	National	Urban	Rural
Latin America (simple average)	1990	...	117.3	...	...	107.6	...
	1994	...	117.6	...	...	109.4	...
	1997	115.0	119.5	113.0	<b>108.7</b>	111.5	108.7
	1999	112.9	118.2	108.1	108.1	109.9	106.5
	2002	109.7	116.0	109.5	107.1	109.3	107.5
	2005	112.9	119.9	112.8	109.7	111.8	109.8
	2008	118.0	126.2	118.0	112.0	113.9	112.5
	2010	116.9	125.5	112.5	113.5	116.5	110.7
	2012	120.6	128.8	119.8	<b>117.3</b>	119.7	115.2
	2013	120.9	129.4	114.6	116.9	119.8	112.8

Source: Adapted from ECLAC (2014: statistical annex table 11), based on special tabulations from national household living standard surveys.

An interesting, and possibly surprising, contrast to the overall direction of gendered poverty in Latin America is presented by the study of Milazzo and van de Walle (2015) for sub-Saharan Africa. Although we know from UN Women (2015) that there is often a strong correlation between the share of women in the poorest quintile and female only households, and that FOHs and FHHs are not one and the same, in sub-Saharan Africa it appears that FHHs have been increasing across the region between 1990 and 2013 to now represent around 26% of the household population. As in Latin America, this period overall has been one of economic growth, with the authors finding that while poverty has declined across all household groups, “it has fallen faster for female headed households as a whole” (Milazzo and van de Walle 2015: 18). This leads them to conclude that “FHHs are contributing appreciably to the overall decline in poverty, despite their smaller overall share in the population” (*ibidem*).

The data on which Milazzo and van de Walle base their computations are drawn from DHSs for Africa (as per UN Women’s calculations for feminised poverty), and also on the World Bank’s Povcalnet database of harmonised household surveys for the region (Milazzo and van de Walle 2015: 7). However, diverging from UN Women, they concentrate on FHHs rather than FOHs, with a further separation of FHHs according to whether there is resident adult male (FM), or not (FNM male child <15 present), and also on grounds as to whether female heads are married or not (Milazzo and van der Walle 2015: 9). According to their data, most FHHs (nearly two-thirds) contain no adult male. Among those FHHs without an adult male, 38% of female heads are widowed, 31% married, 19% divorced and the rest single (*ibidem*). In cases other than where there is a male spouse who remits, the adult male is most likely to be a son.

Although overall a “very mixed picture emerges in how different types of FHHs fared across countries with no obvious patterns across countries and time periods” (Milazzo and van de Walle 2015: 17), it is significant that in a poorer region such as sub-Saharan Africa, feminised poverty as assessed through female headship, is apparently declining during a period in which it has been increasing in the relatively wealthier region of Latin America, and begs further interrogation of the role played, *inter alia*, by the composition and configuration of FHHs (see Liu *et al.* 2017), as well as anti-poverty initiatives, and changing patterns of gendered employment and earnings.

## 6. Conclusions and possible next steps in a research agenda on gendered poverty

Recent developments in data-gathering and methodologies have given rise to new empirical evidence on the feminisation of poverty over time. However, as we have seen in the present paper, studies use different approaches and datasets which limit comparisons between them.

While global poverty is generally declining, recent evidence from wealth asset measures finds poverty in most countries continues to be feminised, with higher proportions of women to men among the poor. Among ‘female only households’ lacking an adult male there seems to be higher wealth asset poverty, with FOHs accounting for one-third of women’s greater poverty incidence in general. Recent income poverty measures in the Latin American region also find a long-term trend of

feminising poverty, with growing proportions of women to men among the poor from the early 1990s to 2013, and especially from the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, given something of a ‘de-feminisation’ of income poverty up to the early 2000s, we might want to think of this as a ‘re-feminisation’ of poverty. Although not directly comparable with the analysis of panel data for sub-Saharan Africa conducted by Milazzo and van de Walle (2015), both on account of the latter’s use of different measures of poverty (combining income and wealth assets), and because they concentrate on female-headed versus male-headed households as opposed to women and men in general, the latter’s overall conclusion that poverty is de-feminising raises important issues with regard to the need for more internationally harmonised data and analysis, as well as to how upturns and downturns in gendered poverty burdens might be explained.

If data are to be better harmonised and more sensitive to changes in gendered poverty over time, what kinds of data do we need? Although income poverty has rarely been regarded as especially sensitive to women’s poverty, do we fare any better with wealth asset-based indicators? It could be argued that it might be more difficult to conduct longitudinal analysis from multidimensional wealth assets data because questionnaire information on assets can vary across surveys over time. This said, we suspect that adding dimensions under which women have greater deprivations into multidimensional indicators are likely to lead to higher estimates of the incidence and intensity of women’s poverty, and that, in turn, these could better inform policies to address persistent or rising levels of feminised poverty, as seems to be the case in Latin America.

Indeed, in addition to Conditional Cash Transfer programmes, income-oriented anti-poverty measures promoted by national governments or multilateral development institutions such as the World Bank have often stressed the significance of increased female labour force participation as a pathway to less poverty and gender inequality (Bedford 2008). This has been facilitated not only by microfinance, but via a range of mechanisms such as literacy, education, vocational training, support for entrepreneurship, and family planning (*ibidem*; see also Langevang and Gough 2012; World Bank 2012). As noted by Murphy (2015: 81): “Formal paid employment and engagement in production activities outside the home can generate choice and decision-making opportunities, leading to greater autonomy and control over one’s life choices. Thus it has the potential to provide intrinsically valuable benefits for women”.

While not denying undoubted dividends from improving women’s opportunities for decent work, access to income is only one factor in women’s multi-faceted disadvantage. Income shortages, however significant among the array of privations suffered by women in poor households, are far from the only ones (Fukuda-Parr 1999), especially given the time burdens accruing from women’s often excessive loads of unpaid labour (see Chant and McIlwaine 2016; Murphy 2015). Given that marginal increases in household income are insufficient to resolve several non-monetary deprivations among women and girls, and recognising that any single policy solution is unlikely to produce the same results for women across all countries, poverty reduction conceivably requires locally-responsive mixes of a range of efforts, including to address childcare facilities, housing policy (especially in terms of building materials, space and so on) and basic infrastructure and services (see Chant and McIlwaine 2016; Murphy 2015).

This said, the extent to which even multidimensional poverty indicators can inform policy is held in check by the fact that crucial intra-domestic gendered power relations and dynamics which substantially impact on women's and girls' multiple privations have rarely been explored other than in qualitative studies (see, for example, Bradshaw 2001, 2002, 2013; Chant 1997a, 1997b, 2007, 2008; Murphy 2015; also earlier). One way forward here is possibly to enhance the quality of information included in quantitative databases by including subjective inputs from poor women and men. A major step in this regard has been taken by multi-disciplinary team led by Pogge and Wisor, to create an 'Individual Deprivation Measure' (IDM), which drew on participatory consultations with 1800 women and men in six countries (Angola, Fiji, Indonesia, Malawi, Mozambique and the Philippines) to develop an index sensitive to gendered experiences of poverty and privation, and which following a pilot in the Philippines (see Wisor *et al.* 2014) looks set to be 'rolled-out' across the other five countries by 2020<sup>3</sup>.

Last but not least, including the perspectives of the poor in designing appropriate instruments for assessing gender differences in poverty at a given moment, and over time, might help us to better explain how general trends in inequality, as well as in poverty (and poverty reduction) impact on the share of poverty borne by women. While there have been reductions in poverty and allegedly in income inequality at a global level since 2000, as measured by the GINI coefficient (WB/IMF 2015: 9), income inequality has risen within many countries, and at a world scale wealth inequality seems to be solidly entrenched with the richest 1% of the population having accumulated more wealth than the rest of the planet put together (Oxfam 2016). The relationships between gender, inequality and poverty are complex, but it appears that economic growth, poverty reduction and advances in gender equality do not necessarily go hand in hand (see Chant 2008, 2016; Kabeer 2016; WB/IMF 2015).

Indeed, as UN Women (2015: 245) declare: "Given the monitoring requirements for the post-2015 agenda, as well as the ongoing implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action, the need to produce more and better data, disaggregated by sex, socio-economic status, geographical location, race and ethnicity and other markers of disadvantage, as well as additional gender-sensitive indicators is now greater than ever". As echoed by a recent World Bank (2017: 47) review on Monitoring Poverty, there is a need to look "not just at the decomposition of global poverty by gender but at nonmonetary dimensions that may be more readily measured on an individual basis". Indeed, otherwise, estimates of global poverty while not 'useless', are likely to remain 'flawed' (*ibidem*: xvi).

In order to address the paucity and non-comparability of sex-disaggregated survey data internationally, agencies concerned with measuring gendered poverty need to be talking more with one another and to accelerate advances in what to date has been an unduly protracted path to progress.

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<sup>3</sup> Personal communication with Sharon Bessell, 2 March 2017.



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