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CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Editors **Deeptha Chopra**
and **Catherine Müller**



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1 Introduction

Poverty has not always been analysed from a gender perspective. Prior to the feminist contributions to poverty analysis, the poor were either seen as composed entirely of men or else women's needs and interests were assumed to be identical to, and hence subsumable under, those of male household heads. Gender research and advocacy has challenged the gender-blindness of conventional poverty measurement, analysis and policy in a number of different ways. Early research singled out the female-headed households as a disproportionately represented category in the ranks of the poor (Buvinic and Youssef 1978; Kossoudji and Mueller 1983; Merrick and Schminck 1983). This particular link between gender and poverty was a relatively visible one in conventional poverty line measurement, since disaggregation by gender of head of household could easily be accommodated. Female heads of households as 'the poorest of the poor' consequently became – and have remained – a primary variable in the equation between gender and poverty.

Subsequent research directly challenged the ability of the poverty line approach to capture the gender dimensions of poverty. Evidence of systematic gender inequalities – amongst adults as well as children – in basic well-being outcomes within the household suggested that household-based measures of income/expenditure missed out on the unequal distribution of deprivation among household members, and hence the actual incidence of poverty within a population (Agarwal 1986; Kabeer 1989). And studies from a variety of different contexts have shown that women were more likely than men to spend resources under their jurisdiction on basic household needs (Whitehead 1981; see also contributions in Bruce and Dwyer 1988), a finding which was also given quantitative confirmation (see references in Alderman *et al.* 1995). Thus, on grounds of welfare, basic needs as well as intra-household equity, there were powerful arguments for investing in women.

In addition, some feminist scholars have argued compellingly that any concern with social justice must start with the concerns of poor Third World women. Particularly in contexts where race, class and/or caste introduced extreme forms of stratification, a strategy for social justice which started from

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Naila Kabeer

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some notion of women's shared interests across these divides was a difficult one to sustain. Instead, the vantage point of the most oppressed appeared to offer a more strategic entry point for grasping – and tackling – the complexities of subordination in the interests of a more just development. As Peggy Antrobus put it, 'the strongest case for the focus on the poor Third World woman is that in her we find the conjuncture of race, class, gender and nationality which symbolises underdevelopment' (1989, p. 202; see also Sen and Grown 1985; Kabeer 1994).

This persuasive body of evidence attesting to the gendered nature of poverty has had ramifications in the policy arena. In methodological terms, it highlighted the weakness of conventional household income-/expenditure-based measurements of poverty in capturing its gender dimension and suggested alternative indicators, such as female headship (as in the IFAD study on world poverty) as well as indicators of individual well-being and entitlement (such as the UNDP's gender-disaggregated Human Development Index). Concern with women as 'the poorest of the poor' is now routinely referred to in official policy discourse and the theme of 'women in poverty' occupied an important place in the Beijing Platform for Action. Policy makers have begun to target women specifically in their antipoverty efforts, often through the formation of separate women's groups, in a range of poverty-related efforts: microcredit, food-for-work, vulnerable feeding programmes, training and extension services. Channelling resources through women in poverty-alleviation programmes appeared to serve a range of policy goals: basic needs, welfare, equity and even women's empowerment.

However, alongside advocacy efforts to highlight the gender dimensions of poverty, unease has also been expressed at the selective terms on which gender has been assimilated into the poverty discourse. An early expression of this unease is found in Buvinic (1983) who suggested that the enthusiasm demonstrated within development agencies in the 1970s for a focus on 'women in poverty' reflected two inter-related considerations. Firstly, such a focus readily accommodated the pre-existing welfare-orientation of most programmes for women which were designed to address the needs of poor women exclusively in terms of their roles as mothers and

wives. Secondly, it allowed official development agencies to sidestep the alternative of an antipoverty strategy which would have justified assistance to poor women in terms of productivity rather than welfare. The redistributive connotations of such an approach were believed to have the potential for causing conflict – between women and men and between different classes of women.

More recent approaches to poverty, such as micro-credit programmes for women as well as the World Bank's two-pronged strategy for poverty reduction, appear to unify welfare and productivity considerations. But unease with the encapsulation of gender concerns within the poverty agenda continues (Jackson 1996). Analysis appears to have been replaced in policy circles by simple and sweeping generalisations. The automatic inclusion of women in the category of 'vulnerable group', the equation of female headship with poverty and tenuously substantiated claims about the global feminisation of poverty. This has been accompanied by the increasing 'instrumentalisation' of women by major agencies, such as the World Bank. As Jackson puts it, 'Gender issues have been taken on board insofar as they are consistent with other development concerns (including poverty) and insofar as women are seen to offer a means to these, other, ends' (1996 p. 490). The conflation of gender concerns with poverty matters allows issues of gender discrimination and injustice which affect the well-being of women *qua* women to disappear from the agenda (Kabeer 1996). Simultaneously, of course, the poverty of men becomes increasingly sidelined, and the costs of masculinity, whether borne by men themselves or passed onto other family members, is erased from view.

The resort to instrumentalist arguments for channelling resources to women is often symptomatic of the institutional weakness of gender advocates, particularly those working within major development bureaucracies, *vis-à-vis* both policymakers as well as other claimants on policy resources. As Razavi points out 'Internal policy advocacy has to demonstrate positive spinoffs in order to win allies and to press its claims successfully against rival claimants' (Razavi, forthcoming, 1997). Gender advocacy, like any other form of advocacy, needs simple but eloquent generalisations, formulated in appropriate language if it is to get the attention of those

responsible for key decision-making¹. However, to sustain that attention and, more importantly, to ensure that it is translated into effective and enabling action, we also need a constant process of iteration between the general and the particular, and their practical implications for the interlinkages between gender, poverty and inequality. Both instrumentalism and generalisation need to be backed up by ongoing empirical analysis and the development of sound analytical frameworks.

This Bulletin is intended as a contribution to the task by moving beyond the existing generalisations about gender and poverty to reconsider their empirical and analytical interlinkages in a range of different contexts. Some of the contributions use empirical case studies to theorise context-specific versions of these linkages. Others take empirical findings as a starting point for a more general analysis. The empirical material covers urban as well as rural, national as well as cross-cultural contexts: Iran (Shahra Razavi), West Bengal (Ben Rogaly), Karnataka (Ramya Subrahmanian), Malaysia (Gillian Hart), Karnataka and Pakistan (Jo Beall), Costa Rica, the Philippines and Mexico (Sylvia Chant), Ghana (Rachel Yates), Zambia (Elizabeth Harrison), West Africa (Mathew Lockwood) and South Africa (Shamim Meer). In addition, Cecile Jackson attempts to link the specificities of locale within a broader framework of human rights deriving from commonalities across locales.

A workshop was held in March, 1997 to discuss the contributions and to pull out some of their common themes. These are discussed in this Editorial. As Ann Whitehead pointed out at the workshop, attempts to make direct links between gender and structural adjustment policies have conventionally generated a 'variables-based' approach. A very

different approach is evident in the contributions here. While changing macroeconomic environments are clearly the backdrop against which many of the case studies are located, the focus of the analysis is on how such change was experienced at the local level and what this tells us about the link between gender, poverty and inequality. An important analytical point reiterated in these contributions is that gender relations are not confined to the domestic arena – although households constitute an important institutional site on which gender relations are played out – but are made, remade and contested in a range of institutional arenas. What occurs in the broader economy and through state action is mediated through these meso-level institutions, and their impact on the lives of women and men from different social groups will be shaped by how they are positioned in relation to these institutions.

2 Gender, Poverty and Inequality: Unpacking the Relationship

A conceptual unpacking of the concept of poverty is a useful starting point for discussing the main themes of this Bulletin because it can help to demonstrate both how gender 'fits' into poverty analysis and why it is not reducible to it. Poverty can be seen as a dually constituted form of deprivation: deprivation in the sense of basic 'ends' or needs and deprivation in the means for satisfying these needs. Basic needs deprivation was conventionally associated with some of the more visible and familiar consequences of shortfalls in household purchasing power e.g. inadequate shelter, food, clothing, education and health. But it is increasingly extended to more intangible forms of deprivation: social isolation, vulnerability in times of crisis and dependency relationships (Chambers

¹ The pressures on internal advocates to make their case in the language of numbers was compellingly illustrated for me at a meeting at the Feminist Economics Conference at Tours, 1995, when I asked representatives of the UNDP's Human Development Report about the methodology used to arrive at one of the most widely cited of these generalisations which came out in a UN publication for the mid-decade conference in Copenhagen, 1980, viz, that women account for two-thirds of the world's working hours, receive a tenth of the world's income and own less than one per cent of the world's property. It was revealed by a member of the audience who had known the author of the statement that it was based on 'hunch' rather than a massive

statistical exercise. This is, of course, an empirically dubious practice. At the same time, there were good reasons that the declaration gained the currency that it did: it is intuitively plausible, it fits with the findings of large numbers of smaller scale surveys, it captures the imagination, it speaks to an equity rationale and it is probably true. It is also unlikely that any agency, individually or collaboratively, was at that time willing to put resources into a more rigorous calculation of gender inequalities in hours of work, rates of return and ownership of assets. Most existing global calculations are based on incomplete data, heroic assumptions and a certain amount of hunch.

1988). Underlying these 'outcomes' is a second order and deeper level of deprivations which relate to the adequacy of means to meet these basic needs and which constitute the causal mechanisms through which poverty is reproduced (Kabeer 1994). The problem with poverty line discourse is that it privileges income as the key means and the market as the key institution for meeting basic needs.

A different approach to these issues is possible if we bear in mind that, in reality, people meet their needs through a variety of resources aside from income, and gain access to these resources through a variety of institutional relationships aside from those of the market. A reformulation of Sen's concept of entitlements (1982, 1990), which draws attention to the different basis of claims on resources which prevail in a society, has the merit of expanding the analysis of poverty from access to the market to this wider set of relationships and activities. Entitlements can be seen as generated through the rules, norms and practices which characterise different institutional arenas – market-based exchange; state provision; and the 'moral economy' of community and kinship – and which determine who gets what and on what terms.² Within such a framework, inequalities are generated as a result of inadequate resource endowments, of the unfavourable terms on which one set of resources are exchanged for another or else by 'unruly' practices³ where the rules or norms of entitlement are ignored, subverted, overridden or simply changed. Equally, of course, resistance to inequalities – and to the deprivations and dependencies it creates – occurs through struggles over the definition and interpretations of rules and norms and a variety of other practices through which people seek to protect, enhance or realise the value of their entitlements.

By encompassing both the outcomes of deprivation as well as their underlying causes, such an approach

draws attention to issues of equity and justice as well as to basic needs and welfare. It takes us beyond an economic focus on ownership and exchange to socially constructed definitions of who is entitled to what and on what basis: in other words, to questions of identities and interests as well as to divisions of labour, power and resources. It also shifts attention away from a static view of poverty – poverty as end-state – to a more dynamic concern with the processes of exclusion, inclusion and marginalisation which are set in motion by shifts in the configuration of entitlement relationships within which people define goals and devise strategies and which place some groups of people at an entitlement disadvantage in relation to others.

And most importantly, for the purposes of this Bulletin, inasmuch as the inequalities encoded in the rules and practices of different institutional arenas 'entitle' women and men differently and unequally within different social groups, an institutional approach draws attention to the likelihood that inequality, deprivation and insecurity will be diversely constituted across a population along axes of gender, caste and other forms of social inequality. Since the focus is on 'functioning' outcomes as defined by survival, security and some notion of self-determination as the object of the analysis, rather than on household income/consumption *per se*, the poor/non-poor distinction is no longer tenable. Poverty as a result of entitlement failure or shortfall curtails choices and agency and imposes painful 'trade-offs between different forms of privations' (Chant, this volume). Equally, however, gender⁴ differentiates the experience of poverty – and wealth – in terms of the kinds of claims and entitlements which women and men mobilise, the goals they prioritise and the forms of agency they can exercise in negotiating meanings and challenging distributions. Gender justice becomes an integral component of social justice.

² Thus within labour and commodity markets, people can exchange what they own or control for a different bundle of resources through selling their labour power in the production of goods and services for a wage in cash or kind; they can exchange the commodities they have produced. Within financial markets, people can use their assets as collateral to raise capital for their productive enterprises. Within the household and other kin-based organisations, entitlements are very often governed by implicit rather than explicit contractual arrangements,

whose legitimacy rests on customary norms and practices rather than legally enforceable ones. Community-based entitlements, for instance, to the use of common property resources may also embody notions of entitlements that rest on accepted norms and customs rather than having a legalistic status.

³ The phrase comes from Fraser (1989).

⁴ Like other forms of socially-ascribed inequality, such as race, caste, ethnicity.

3 Tactics and Trade-Offs: The Social Construction of Agency

The multi-sited constitution of gender relations and gender inequality is a key theme of many of the contributions to this Bulletin. While households remain a significant location for understanding the gendered experience of poverty, the authors also document how intra-household relations reflect and help to shape the wider institutional environment. Hart's paper shows how attempts by neo-classical economists to take account of feminist insights into gender relations have resulted in a gradual move away from the artificial harmony of interests imposed by earlier household models to an acknowledgement of divergent preferences within the household and in 'degrees of patriarchy' beyond it. But she also points to the limits imposed by the 'predictability' imperative of neo-classical economics on the capacity of even these new, more socially aware models to grasp the complexities of power and the struggles through which power relations are contested. As feminist scholarship has demonstrated, rules and norms are not just exogenous constraints which help determine household outcomes, they are also resources which are drawn on in processes of negotiation. It is through their ability to define and interpret rules and norms that powerful groups have been able to legitimise their ability to command a disproportionate share of material resources. And it is through their contestation of this power that marginalised groups have sought to recover some control over their own lives. Indeed, many of the case studies help to illustrate how women and men from different social groups seek to draw on prevailing norms of gender identity to press for or withhold resources.

Gender asymmetries in intra-household resources and responsibilities, and the powerful norms of (dis)entitlement which underpin them, help to shape the differential ability of different categories of household members to gain access to extra-household institutions and hence to an expanded range of entitlements. In rural Karnataka, gender divisions in livelihood strategies and the domestic division of labour determine which children will go to school. In addition, however, while female seclusion is not a major issue, Subrahmanian's contribution suggests that the social risks attached to girls remaining unmarried beyond puberty added a highly gender-specific constraint on their

education. Departure from social norms of gender propriety constitutes a form of risk which poorer households appear to be unwilling to take on. Daughters consequently grow up disadvantaged compared to sons in access to labour markets and government employment opportunities. Women's primary responsibility for domestic work and child care also disadvantages them in the labour market: they are more likely to be confined to more casual and badly paid segments of labour markets and are less able than men to migrate in search of work when local opportunities dry up. Where norms of female seclusion prevail, as in West Bengal, Iran and Pakistan, added considerations come into play to further curtail women's work opportunities. However, caste and other forms of social inequality cut across gender differentiation in the labour market. Beall's paper, for instance, documents the social relation governing urban waste disposal in Bangalore and Faisalabad and notes how social norms which ascribe pollution, dirt and uncleanness to such work help to allocate it to certain marginal groups among the poor – women as well as men – who are considered to be born to do such work. Marginality is thus compounded by the equation made between stigmatising work and stigmatised groups.

Female seclusion also figures in Rogaly's account. He points out that while labour-intensive economic growth in West Bengal has improved employment opportunities for women as well as men, caste considerations have meant that not all women from poorer households have benefited. It has been largely women from scheduled caste and tribal groups, where norms of masculinity do not apparently rest on female dependence and seclusion, who have taken up these labour market opportunities, and very often as seasonal migrants. Interestingly, while Rogaly noted how norms of female seclusion in rural West Bengal help to exclude women from poorer households from employment opportunities in agricultural labour markets, Beall's study points out how similar norms in urban Pakistan have protected waged domestic work as a labour market niche for poorer women. The practical implications of seclusion norms clearly reflect local contexts and opportunities. Nevertheless, both studies also highlight that such norms can work both ways: to entitle but also to constrain. Even though gender and caste may serve to carve out labour market niches

for the marginalised poor, Beall suggests that many – and women in particular – find it hard to resist or to escape the exploitative conditions entailed. Quite apart from the various forms of market closures they face, norms of gender propriety and fear of sexual harassment serve to curtail women from fully exploiting even the limited niches open to them.

The normative and allocative activities of the state, of community-based organisations and of donor agencies also help to shape and reshape gender-differentiated structures of entitlement and disempowerment. As Chant points out in her contribution, child care responsibilities would not constitute such a major source of disadvantage for women in the labour market if public provision helped to compensate for the widespread dearth of male support within the household. She shows how the absence of such public provision impinges particularly on those female heads of households who, in the absence of either a male breadwinner or a wife, must combine a breadwinning role with domestic responsibilities. In Iran, according to Razavi, the explicit gender ideologies promoted by the Iranian state have accentuated labour market segmentation. Its normative emphasis on the male breadwinning role has led to active intervention to improve the conditions for male workers – through the enforcement of a minimum wage for instance – and indifference to the low wages and casualised conditions prevailing in female segments of the labour market. Hart documents how, in Malaysia, the attempts of the ruling party to counter the influence of militant religious groups have also led to the active promotion of a similar model of gender relations, premised on the male breadwinner and the dependent housewife. In addition, the government has poured resources into the countryside which have been channelled through various patron-client networks. It has been largely men from poorer households who have been included, and their female members who have been excluded, from these clientelist relationships of entitlement.

What are the implications of these gender-differentiated structures of opportunities and risks for choices that women and men face and the kinds of agency they can exercise? One implication is that women and men are likely to have very differing stakes in existing familial relations, to access

differing kinds of resources across institutional domains and to face differing structures of risks. Inasmuch as men are able to mobilise extra-familial resources to a greater extent than women, women tend to be more dependent on resources distributed through family and kin networks and invest a great deal more in maintaining these networks. And because the social management of relationships requires resources, poverty often introduces specific forms of instability into familial relationships, between parents and children as well as husbands and wives so that poorer women face different trade-offs between different dimensions of well-being to poorer men.

Lockwood's paper draws attention to the body as a resource for women, not simply as a source of labour as conventionally understood, but also as reproductive capacity. He shows how women in West African contexts draw on the uniquely female bodily capacity – the capacity to conceive and give birth – as a means of strengthening their claims on a range of possible kin. A 'successful' reproductive record is an important means by which women achieve a 'successful' life defined in terms of the quality of their relationships, both with their children and with a wider circle of kin. Conceptions, pregnancies and live births can all help to secure a woman release from heavy drudgery, more nourishing food as well as gratitude from her husband and his kin for having struggled on their behalf. However, such tactical manoeuvres can impose high costs on poor women. Scarcity of resources can lead to the denial of nutritional resources or the relief from heavy work necessary if women are to recover the 'blood and strength' lost through frequent pregnancies. This will undermine their future reproductive options should their present relationships break down. Gender and poverty clearly interact in creating a spiral of physical exhaustion and social marginalisation. Lockwood's paper also reiterates the importance of social norms in structuring the scope of action and opportunities for women relative to men: women appear to be able to access a broader range of social relationships in matrilineal and cognatic kinship systems than in patrilineal ones.

In Iran, growing prosperity generated by export-oriented agriculture benefited many households but has been a mixed blessing for their women

members. On the one hand, women have been able to withdraw from arduous manual labour in the fields but on the other, they have lost their independent sources of income. It was poorer women who were able to defy norms of propriety as a pre-occupation of the elite and to seek out opportunities for waged labour within their own villages and outside. Interestingly, one of the tactics used by women who have withdrawn from field labour to carve out some form of economic security is to demand a 'wage' from their husbands for processing their crops, a demand which represents a reinterpretation of Islamic norms of wives' entitlements for breastfeeding. In Malaysia, too, Hart points out how women from middle-income households generally abstained from the market and upheld the norms of the male breadwinner to press their claims on their husbands. Poorer women shrugged off the notion of the male breadwinner since few of their husbands could afford to look after dependent wives.

Gender norms thus have very practical outcomes, not only within the arena of family and kinship, but also in the wider social context. In addition, it appears that such norms have a particular relevance to the analysis of poverty in that they are often 'elite' constructions and hence carry special costs for the poor. Men and masculinity were clearly as much an aspect of this problem as women and notions of femininity. While the norms through which masculine identities were constructed often underpinned men's privileged access to jobs in the labour market, to state protection and to community based networks, they also led men to behave in ways which exacerbated family poverty. For instance, it was pointed out that men, even from very poor households, often forbade their wives and daughters to work for a living. Sylvia Chant suggests that this was one reason which explained why female-headed households are not always poorer than male-headed ones: they had lower dependency ratios. She also suggests that the disproportionate share of intra-household resources claimed by men for their personal expenditure, documented both in her study and elsewhere, could be partly explained as an attempt to bolster their sense of masculinity in contexts where such identity was undermined by repeated unemployment and chronic uncertainty. However, the costs of such behaviour are borne disproportionately by women and children so that the emergence of female-headship in her study

sometimes represented the decision by women to forego the higher level of resources that a husband potentially offered in exchange for exercising greater power over resources. In terms of their autonomy, and often in terms of household welfare, female heads could thus be better-off than they were in a male-headed household.

Drawing on her empirical findings from Malaysia, Gillian Hart offers an interesting version of the 'docile labour' argument which serves to remind us that such 'docility' is not an essential attribute of either gender but shaped by the norms and opportunities embedded in local gender-differentiated systems of entitlement. Whereas in much of the literature on the feminisation of the industrial labour force, it is women's docility that has been invoked by way of explanation. Hart points out how poor men's greater integration into local systems of patronage defused their incentive to pose a direct challenge to their employer-patrons, even when their interests as workers were under threat. She also points to the contradictions that poor men faced between the obligations of the male breadwinner inscribed in the models of masculinity promoted by state agencies and their own inability to provide for their wives. It was poorer women who, excluded from the male-dominated circuits of patronage, adopted a far more militant stance in their relations with their employers and in their attitudes towards notions of female dependency within marriage. Indeed, middle class men often contrasted their capacity to provide for their families and maintain domestic harmony with the tension and conflict among poor couples, which they attributed to the irresponsibility and inadequacies of poor men.

Chant also notes the disjuncture between normative obligations entailed in masculinity and the possibilities dictated by material realities. Thus while the 'good father' would in normative, legal and social terms, honour his economic obligations to his children, material conditions of intermittent unemployment appear to have produced a situation where women tend to assume responsibility for children themselves. Lockwood makes the point that poverty disadvantages men as well as women in their ability to manage their social relationships: poor men are less likely than wealthier men to successfully enforce their children's loyalty and are

more likely to be abandoned by wives who see the opportunity of more promising relationships elsewhere.

These contributions to this Bulletin help to point to an important limitation in much of the existing literature on poverty which has tended to focus on women's (or men's) poverty in isolation from the social relations in their lives. By contrast, greater attention is paid here to understanding how women and men negotiate norms, entitlements and relationships in contexts of scarcity. However, if gender norms imposed certain kinds of costs for poor women and men, because of their disjuncture with material reality, a number of contributions also provide evidence that these norms impose a different kind of cost on women from better-off households. One important point which comes out of Razavi's paper is that women's subordinate status within and outside the family can generate an insecurity which is not related to poverty or wealth or indeed to the actual likelihood of male abandonment. Indeed, contrary to some of the other contexts described in this volume, Razavi stresses the remarkable stability of marriages in rural Iran. Rather, such insecurity arises out of women's awareness of the vulnerability which goes with their status as economic dependents within the family. Thus while growing prosperity in rural Iran led to the adoption of urban, middle-class norms of female seclusion and the withdrawal of women from waged work, Razavi documents the series of strategies by which women sought to reassert some arenas of autonomy in their lives. Beall also cites the loss of autonomy experienced by some of the middle class women she interviewed for whom her ability to conduct research 'on the rubbish dump' was perceived as a metaphor for freedom. She points out how in some middle income households, women sought to derive an income from the sale of waste items, despite extremely low returns, partly to demonstrate their thrift but also to have some purchasing power of their own. Men from such households rarely demeaned themselves by association with waste. Rogaly too notes the greater autonomy and communitarian values among poorer scheduled tribe women compared to constraints imposed on the mobility of women from better-off households. In short, choice and status may diverge in women's lives in ways that they do not in men's.

4 Gender, Poverty and Development Practice

Unpacking the relationship between gender, scarcity and inequality helps to point to some of the methodological limitations of conventional approaches to poverty to capturing the ground realities of gender and poverty. Given the importance of social relationships, within and across households, in the lives of the poor, and of poor women in particular, both impoverishment as well as accumulation are likely to have a long-run, relational dimension which Lockwood suggests is likely to elude single-round expenditure or income surveys based on the household unit. Rogaly shows how the attribution of low female labour force participation rates documented in West Bengal census data to the practice of female seclusion misses both the significance of seasonal migrant labour – the census is carried out in the slack season while migrant female labour force participation rates are high in the peak season – as well as the caste/class specificity of seclusion – poor *adivisi* women, who make up the female labour force, do not observe *purdah*. Chant's paper challenges any automatic association between female headship and poverty. Her conclusion that female-headship is an indicator of extreme poverty in some contexts but not in others bears out Lockwood's suggestion that the analysis of social relationships in different contexts will help to differentiate between societies where women are marginalised and impoverished because they are outside relationships with husbands or children and those where they are marginalised within marriages and family networks. Razavi's analysis shows how improvements in household income and reductions in gender differentials in mortality – both positive indicators – fail to capture the loss of autonomy reported by women for whom improvements in household income brings greater seclusion. Indeed, it could be argued that greater attention to the voices of poor women and men would help to deconstruct the complex interlinkages between scarcity, gender and discrimination more effectively than any set of statistics. The preoccupation with the measurement of poverty in official policy circles may explain why the link between gender and poverty has so often been interpreted in narrow and misleading ways.

In addition, the analysis in these contributions points to the divergence between the very real

diversity in the interactions of gender and poverty in different contexts, on the one hand, and the uniformity imposed by the 'replicability imperative' in much of policy discourse, on the other. If there is a single collective lesson to draw out from the analysis, it is that despite the increased visibility of the category 'women in poverty' in the international agenda, there does not appear to have been a commensurate increase in attention to the realities of poor women, sensitivity to their constraints or respect for their priorities. Nor has there been much attention to how women or men view the apparent exclusion of male family members from official forms of entitlement (through the provision of women-only credit, literacy, training etc and the formation of women's groups etc), given that it is often poor men who have to deal with the emasculating contradictions between the norm of the male provider and the realities of male unemployment. Instead, what the contributions suggest is that the search for replicability has led to the formulation, design and delivery of a range of interventions which embody values, assume priorities, attribute benefits and require conditions which are far removed from the realities of those the intervention is purportedly intended to benefit.

Subrahmanian's paper, for instance, takes on the prevailing commonsense in Indian policy, as well as World Bank, circles that the benefits of formal education are self-evident to all so that low enrolment rates among the poor may be attributed to inadequate investment in the delivery of education services rather than to uncertainties about its benefits. She uses personal testimonies by women and men in low-income households in rural Karnataka to demonstrate how that their reluctance to invest in children's education reflected their perceptions about the payoffs to such an investment which were in turn grounded in the political economy of their own lives. Yet the educational system presently on offer takes little cognisance of these factors: in its timing, its location and its content, it embodies a model of time, space and knowledge which reflects the worldview of a westernised, middle-class, urban elite. However, restructuring the delivery of educational resources may still not overcome the 'risks' attached to educating girls. Here she suggests that greater investment in changing gender norms could have far-reaching effects and this is being attempted by Mahilya Samakhya, a government/non-

government collaboration which promotes literacy for poorer adult women, using feminist principles of collectivity and consciousness-raising.

Yates also challenges the 'self-evident' nature of benefits to education, this time in the form of literacy programmes for adult women in Ghana devised as one means of mitigating the social costs of adjustment in the country. She notes, in particular, two claims made about the benefits of literacy for women: technicist arguments linking investments in women's education with raised productivity and lowered fertility and Freirian arguments about its 'empowering' potential. However, despite an early commitment to learner-designed programmes, pressures to scale up and maximise targets led to literacy primers designed by Accra-based resource persons whose gender biases permeated the texts. While women's learning needs did receive more attention as the pilot phase progressed and the goal of empowering women was given greater visibility, Yates questions the values embedded within agency discourse which equated empowerment with literacy and portrayed illiterate women as poor, powerless, voiceless and 'dangerously' ignorant. Her own research in the area revealed a highly active but illiterate group of women fish traders who relied on oral, collective and contextual recording of their trading transactions and had little faith in formal book-keeping skills which male boat keepers often used to try to dupe them.

In addition, she also noted the 'unruly practices' embodied in the delivery of these literacy classes which served to subvert their stated goals of entitlement and achievement. The overwhelming predominance of men among the facilitators, the attitudes they expressed, the commitment to achieving numerical targets and the unrealistic assumptions made about the opportunity costs of women's time all added up to the exclusion of poorer, and the inclusion of more affluent, women. Also unsurprising in the light of Yates's observation of the content of the literacy classes, the attitudes expressed by the facilitators and the class background of participants is the divergence between how literacy was assessed by those who attended and the impacts assumed by the project. Rather than feminist empowerment or Freirian conscientisation, the acquisition of literacy was valued as a 'positional good', signalling social status,

knowledge of etiquette and domestic propriety. Greater attention to the needs of poorer women may not only have helped to reach them in larger numbers but may also have helped to challenge some of the values embedded in the delivery of literacy.

While both Hart and Yates point to the importance of poorer women's collective action around their interests as workers or traders, Harrison highlights the unintended consequences of the artificial imposition of group formation where the only apparent rationale for group identity is gender. Evidence of male membership in many of these women's clubs suggests that gender may not always be the most relevant basis for collective organisation and may indeed be over-ridden by perceived shared interests between women and men from similar economic backgrounds. Harrison points out how the association of 'clubs' with donor assistance in a number of African contexts has lent office holding and membership the characteristics of a 'positional' good, which is associated with modernity, donors and status and which can primarily be afforded only by members of better-off households. She also offers examples of how a divergence between official rules of membership entitlement and the unofficial practices of implementation served to exclude poorer sections of the local population.

Her paper supports one of the underlying themes of this Bulletin, namely that apparently similar phenomenon will have quite different meanings in different contexts. While different forms of collectivity have been promoted by feminist activists as well as those working with the poor as a way of building solidarity and organisational strength, women's groups which are imposed on a population as a vehicle for poverty alleviation may serve the interests of their members up to a point but may not necessarily meet the intended policy goals. Solidarity either emerges out of self-evident shared interests or it has to be built up over time through the exploration of potential affinities of interest, but the idea that it can be imposed by policy fiat is clearly untenable. The apparent assumption that women will somehow fall 'naturally' into group-based activity ignores the material forces which makes for competition between women. While the poorer women that Hart writes about in her paper were landless waged labour who could use their

collective strength to bargain with wealthy landlord-employers, and the women Yates writes of were independent traders who used collective methods to bargain with middle men, the poorer women in Harrison's study worked on family-based agricultural production as members of conjugal units. For them, there were few economic gains from cooperating with women from other households.

The difficulties of implementing a gender-equitable land reform in the post-apartheid era documented in Meer's paper echo some of the earlier points made about the gap between official rules and actual practice. Although the Department of Land Rights has written gender into some of the key measures through which land is to be redistributed, no provision has been made to ensure that this will occur. Given that women are generally more likely to be rural than urban, illiterate rather than literate and constrained by patriarchal norms and domestic responsibilities compared to men, without additional efforts at outreach, Meer points out that they are most likely to be sidelined in the distribution process.

As should be clear by now, the key message from this collection is a challenge to the universalising tendencies of official development discourse: its construction of the composite 'poor Third World woman' and of simple, universalistic solutions to her needs. Jackson's paper returns us to a more critical universalism, one which recognises that local social relations embody not only the most positive aspects of local culture but also its most negative and oppressive aspects, and which insists on a broad framework of basic human rights as an essential step towards restoring gender politics to the poverty agenda. Taking on a particular genre of postmodernist argument which sees all attempts to tackle poverty and gender discrimination as manifestations of the colonising mission of development and the relegation of Third World cultures to the status of the inferior 'other', Jackson challenges this simplified division of the world between 'the local' as the site of truth and 'the universal' as its denial. Meanings and entitlements are indeed constituted by, and embedded in, localised social relations and so they will also embody the inequalities, divisions and conflicts which characterise local realities. There is no reason why the struggle to give

meaning to the notion of human well-being should incorporate, rather than transcend, these local inequities. But, as Jackson suggest, this would move us in the direction of a model of objective interests which subjects the idea of the local to the same critical deconstruction as the idea of the 'universal'.

The political dilemmas embedded in this discussion between locally constituted realities and overarching inequalities, between the 'manifested' and the 'underlying', are not confined to 'official' policy making bodies, but encompass a range of social movements and women's organisations who are pursuing the goal of gender equity in development. The dilemmas involved are aptly illustrated by considering some of the broader political issues raised in the papers by Gillian Hart and Shamim Meer. As Hart notes, purposive efforts to channel resources to poor women often have unpredictable consequences which have little to do with intended goals. They may be used by women to strengthen their bargaining position *vis-à-vis* other family members or overt control over such resources may be surrendered to male family members, while covert control is retained and used it as a means of enforcing norms of male responsibility. However, even allowing for this unpredictability, it is probably the case that if the discursive and material practices embedded in re-allocative efforts do little to expand the range of identities and opportunities available to women – to expand the terrain of struggle, in other words – the underlying structures of gender disadvantage are likely to remain intact and so continue to throw up new forms of old inequalities.⁵

On the other hand, the problem with attempting to tackle these deeply-entrenched, underlying structures, as Meer points out in her discussion, is that they are not constituted singularly but are bound up with other forms of inequality and legitimised by long-standing practice. In the context of South Africa, there are considerable ambiguities in how women's land rights should be formulated, given

that poorer rural African women share a need for secure tenure with male family members, given their joint exclusion from any rights to land in the past, but at the same time, experience gender-specific insecurities attendant on their dependence on male family members: 'The issue is clearly complex. Land reform cannot be made conditional on ending a patriarchal system that has been in place for centuries. But not to challenge it is to lose a critical opportunity. The question is how' (Meer citing Hornby (1996), this volume).

This fundamental question 'how' encapsulates a number of dilemmas. How can women's shared interests with men – of their family, of their class, caste or ethnic group – be reconciled with those strategic interests which arise out of gender-specific modes of economic marginalisation and social devaluation? How can a sensitivity to the bleak 'trade-offs between different forms of privation' that poor women must make be reconciled with attempts to tackle the deeper structures of their subordination which may go against their expressed priorities and make terms of their trade-off even bleaker in the short-term? And, finally, how can one devise transitional strategies which help to bridge what is possible in the short term with what is desirable in the long term?

These are large questions and the contributions in this volume can only go some way towards answering them by pointing to the need for a more empirically-grounded and politically-nuanced approach to the overall project of gender equity. In addition, it is important to note the question raised by Meer regarding the appropriateness of different kinds of agencies for the task of tackling deep-seated, culturally-sanctioned forms of gender inequality, when many of these agencies do not have the long-term commitment, the sustained contact or even the local level knowledge necessary to see the process through. This question has a wider resonance. In an era where a range of different organisations –

⁵ From an advocacy point of view, we have found that Molyneux's 'practical/strategic' distinction (Molyneux, 1985) lends itself usefully in helping to try and disentangle the more visible or 'surface' manifestations of subordination and its deeper underlying causes, and hence to bridging the gap between need-based approaches and justice-based ones (Kabeer and Subrahmanian, 1996). While the more immediate

manifestations of gender asymmetry, and the practical imperatives which they may give rise to, are simplest to respond to on political, administrative and indeed humanitarian grounds, unless such responses also go some way towards addressing the underlying structurally-entrenched causes of gender inequality, within and across class divisions, these deeper inequalities will re-surface in new forms

bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, governments, women's organisations, non-governmental organisations, social movements and political parties – all claim to be working for women's empowerment, some limits to public intervention into the most intimate and personal arenas of relationships in people's lives needs to be kept in mind. Given the potential for forms of intrusiveness which many of us would not tolerate in our own lives, we need to constantly to review the politics of 'comparative advantage' of different kinds of agencies when it comes to questions of women's 'empowerment' and 'autonomy'. While democratisation, accountability, transparency, participation and a basic respect for human rights are desirable characteristics for all interactions between people and organisations in

creating an 'enabling' environment, some organisations may be best suited to campaigning for a broad human rights framework, others to the effective delivery of basic resources and services in ways which do not reinforce dependence and yet others, who are committed to a longer-term and ground-level engagement, to take the struggle for human rights into everyday life. But in all this activity, it is important to remember that some space must be allowed for women themselves – in all the diversity of circumstances in which they live – to negotiate their own versions of autonomy on terms which they themselves find acceptable. Interventions which do not recognise this may end up becoming just one more set of constraints on women's struggle for self-empowerment.

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