New Knowledge on the Gendered Nature of Poverty and Wellbeing

A Synthesis of Evidence from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and UK Department for International Development (DFID) Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research

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A gendered understanding of poverty is crucial for exploring its differing impacts. Women, in particular, may be vulnerable to the effects of poverty and the causes of women's poverty, and how poverty is experienced, may differ from men. Neither women nor men, however, are a homogenous group and how poverty is experienced depends on other intersecting issues such as age, class, ethnicity, disability etc. Issues which poverty alleviation research also needs to take into account in order to get a more nuanced picture of people's lived experiences to help shape policy responses that are relevant and appropriate.

Since 2005, the ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research has commissioned high quality social science research addressing the international development goal of reducing poverty amongst the poorest in the world. Evidence from this research has improved understandings of the gendered nature of poverty and how differing identities impact people's lived experiences of poverty. In particular the research has provided valuable insights in a number of key areas:

• On social norms – the unwritten rules of societies – and how these impede or dictate women's mobility and employment access. Studies also point, however, to how gender relations are complex and shifting in the face of new crises.
• Challenging the assumption that gender equitable access to higher education is enough in the process of women's empowerment.
• The impacts of disease and ill-health on men and women and what hinders their access to services.
• Differing experiences of poverty and well-being, in particular introducing the important, but often overlooked, concepts of shame and dignity.

The evidence report provides an assessment of 122 research grants awarded by the ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research covering research in Central Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, South East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

It found that 28% of all awards had an explicit gender focus and a further 32% included women as part of the study or disaggregated findings by sex.
The studies that did have an explicit gender focus provided important new insights into the lived experiences of women's poverty and wider wellbeing. They also demonstrate how a gender analysis can be applied to a 'mainstream' topic such as education to provide insights into wider societal concerns such as violence, and how a gender lens can provide additional interesting insights into how social norms impact on the wellbeing of women and men and girls and boys.

Such insights could have particular relevance as governments focus on working towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that include commitments on gender equality across the board.

1. The SDGs call for equal access to education for all by 2030, but to ensure equal access governments also need to look at journeys to school and the power structures that impede learning whilst at school. See for example:

- [Morley](#) on how violence and the fear of violence affects girls' access to school.
- [Walker](#) on how university structures can perpetuate rather than challenge patriarchy.
- [Unterhalter](#) on how understandings of gender and how it is 'performed' can have negative impacts on education for both girls and boys.
2. Social norms impede women’s equal access to decent work and economic resources. Even when women move into ‘traditional male’ areas of work they lack resources and often earn less than men doing similar work. See for example:

- Kantor on the continued gender inequities women face in accessing employment due to social norms.
- De Neve on while flexible work might be a first ‘choice’ for women due to care responsibilities it often brings lower wages and less security.
- Ansell on the obstacles women face in terms of training pathways, and finding markets and suppliers in ‘traditional male’ areas of work.

3. The SDGs call for the use of enabling technology to promote women’s empowerment. The studies found, however, that whilst advances in transport and technology could provide opportunities to improve the safety and mobility of girls and women, restrictive social norms still hampers progress in this area.

- See Porter on how new mobilities are linked with old fears around sexuality and assumed promiscuity.

4. The studies introduce new knowledge of how poverty is understood and how household functioning can influence how poverty is experienced. They also show how crisis and issues such as migration have the potential to shift gender roles. See for example:

- Alkire, Walker and Noble on contributions to broadening our understandings of poverty as well-being, introducing new elements such as shame and dignity.
- Jackson and Kebede provide insights into household functioning that question established ideas, including gendered altruism as being only ‘female’.
- Attanasio on how household crises provoked by economic shocks impact girls and boys differently, yet the impact on girls is not always as expected or always negative.
- Locke on changing gender roles in migration and how that affects what it means to be a mother or father. Double standards can still exist, however, particularly around sexual behaviour.

Further reading


The Impact Initiative for International Development Research exists to increase the uptake and impact of two programmes of research funded through the ESRC-DFID Strategic Partnership. These are: (i) The Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation, and (ii) The Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems programme. The Initiative helps identify synergies between these programmes and their grant holders, and supports them to exploit influencing and engagement opportunities and facilitates mutual learning. The Impact Initiative is a collaboration between the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the University of Cambridge’s Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre.

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