Poverty and social inequalities; a gender perspective

Karina BATTHYÁNY

Universidad de la República de Uruguay

Introduction

The theoretical development of the concepts ‘poverty’ and ‘gender’ in recent decades has been very important; however in the case of ‘poverty’ the most frequent definition refers to lack of income, there has been a number of approaches in relation to the conceptualization and measurement of the concept. The concept of ‘gender’ as a theoretical approach on the cultural construction of the sexual differences, which refers to the distinctions and inequalities between the feminine and masculine, and the relations between them, has become a category of analysis ever important in the field of social sciences.

Considering the development of both concepts, analyzing poverty from a gender perspective allows understanding a series of processes that are involved in the phenomenon, its dynamics and characteristics in determinate contexts, which explain that certain groups of people, in function of their sex, are at higher risk of suffering poverty.
What is understood by poverty?

The theoretical conceptualization of poverty is and will be the motive of heated argumentations. This is fundamentally because the concept is built from a purely analytical perspective, aimed to reflect the lacks in satisfaction from a determinate set of needs considered basic for the development of life in society.

Not only in the form of measuring the lacks, also in the determination of the situation where a need is satisfied, and even in the very selection of the set of minimal lacks that will define the situation of poverty is there more than a viewpoint.

It is growingly pressing to recognize that poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon; by the turn of 1980’s decade, Altimir (1979) defined poverty as

a situational syndrome where infra-consumption, malnutrition, precarious conditions of life, low educational levels, insalubrious conditions, unsteady insertion in the productive apparatus, despondent attitudes and anomie, scant participation in the mechanisms of social integration are associated, and perhaps the adscription to a particular scale of values, somehow differenced from the rest of society.

To this we currently add considerations of the qualitative kind which make the concept deeper; “feeling poor is a relative concept that has much to do with having access to the necessary resources to satisfy the levels of life that are usual or approved in the society where one belongs”.

More recently, hand in hand with the understanding of poverty as an expression of lack of economic recourses or of the conditions of life which society considers basic, there is the reaffirmation on the importance of approaches such as social exclusion and capabilities to understand it as a phenomenon with multiple dimensions and causes (ECLAC, 2000). In this perspective, the definition of poverty is proposed as

the result of a social and economic process —with cultural and political components— where people and households are deprived from assets and essential opportunities by different causes and processes, both of individual or collective character, which gives it a multidimensional character” (Chant, 2003).

Hence, besides the material privation, poverty comprehends subjective dimensions beyond the approach of material subsistence (ECLAC, 2004: 12).

There is a certain consensus that considers poverty as the privation of assets and essential opportunities all human beings have the right to; poverty is related to the uneven and limited access to productive resources and with scarce participation in social and political institutions; poverty comes from a restrictive access to property, from low income and consumption, from limited social, political and labor opportunities, from meager accomplishments in education,
health, nutrition, and from the access, use and control of natural resources, as well as from the access to other areas of development.

In the perspective of Amartya Sen and his approach of capabilities and realizations, a person is poor if they lack the resources to be able to carry out certain minimal activities. In parallel, Desai proposes five basic and necessary capabilities: the capability to be alive and enjoy a long life; capability to secure biological and cultural intergenerational reproduction; capability to enjoy a healthy life; capability of social interaction (social capital); and the capability to have knowledge and freedom of expression and thinking (Social Watch/Control Ciudadano, 1997).

In this way, poverty is related to the dimension of the people’s right to a dignified life, which covers their basic needs, this is to say, the so called economic, social and cultural rights.

In these definitions there are elements that give an account of the multiple dimensions poverty alludes to: aspects related to alimentation, housing, education, health, insertion in labor market, social participation, as well as dimensions of subjective and symbolical nature. As Irma Arriagada states, six sources of wellbeing for the people and households may be identified:
1. Income
2. The rights to access free or subsidized governmental goods and services.
3. The property or right to use the assets which provide services of basic consumption (basic accumulated patrimony).
4. Educative levels, abilities and dexterities as expressions of capability to make and understand.
5. Free time for education, leisure and enjoyment.
6. People’s autonomy.

Thus, poverty is defined in its broadest version by the absence of income or low income, lack of access to public goods and services provided by the State, such as social security and health, lack of housing, low or absent formal education and training, lack of free time for educational, recreational and leisure activities, which is expressed as the lack of autonomy and as the absence or limited presence of familial and social networks (Arriagada, 2003).

**Poverty from a gender perspective**

Despite poverty affects men, women and children, it is lived in the quotidian in a different manner, in function of the parentage position, age and life cycle, ethnics and sex. Given the circumstances of women, associated to their biology (pregnancies, lactation, etc), their gender roles (mother, spouses, etc.) and their subordination culturally constructed, they face disadvantageous conditions which add to other effects of the very poverty.
Poverty analyzed from the conditioning of gender is a new perspective which gains important as of the 1990’s decade; the studies framed in this preoccupation examine the gender differences in the results and poverty-generating processes, particularly focusing on the experiences of women and wondering whether they are a disproportionate and growing contingent of the poor. This emphasis implies a perspective which stresses two different asymmetries that intersect: gender and class (Kabeer, 1992: 1).

From the theoretical point of view, the authors in this perspective wonder if the gender relations exacerbate or neutralize the inequalities associated to economic inequities. From a methodological perspective the conventional suppositions, whereupon the measurements and indicators of poverty are supported, are challenged. In particular, the supposition of the non-differenced internal nature of the household is criticized, which arises from the works that analyze household poverty.

The studies that verify the existence of gender inequalities, particularly those referred to access and the satisfaction of basic needs, allow stating that “feminine poverty cannot be understood under the same approach as masculine poverty” (Kabeer, 1992: 17).

By and large, the indicators of poverty are captured on the basis of household information, disregarding the acute differences inside them between genders and generations; although it is usual and useful to capture and utilize said indicators, from the gender perspective it is necessary to decode the occurrences inside the households, since these spaces are environments of coexistence of people who have asymmetric relations between one another, framed in internal systems of authority.

From these considerations it is deemed important to bear in mind the following elements:

• Observable gender inequalities in familial contexts, which create differenced access of the members to the resources of the domestic group, and make — mainly in poor households— the lack situation of women acute.
• Sexual division of labor, despite nowadays it undergoes large changes; it is organized very rigidly in the households.

The interest in analyzing the phenomenon of poverty from a gender approach is based upon the need to demonstrate there are factors of gender which influence to a different extent the propensity of people to experience poverty, and the differenced characteristics which it might acquire in the case of men and women.
The division of labor by sex, when women are assigned to house chores, determines inequality in the opportunities they have as a gender to access material and social resources (property of productive capital, remunerated labor, education and training), as well as to participate in the main political, economic and social decisions (Bravo, 1998: 63).

Indeed, not only do women have relatively scarcer material assets, but also more restricted social (income, goods and services which a person through their social links has access to) and cultural assets (formal education and cultural knowledge which allow a person to unfold in a human environment), which places them in a situation of higher poverty risk.

Both the access of women to resources due to the limited spaces assigned for them by the sexual division of labor and the social hierarchies built on the basis of this division determine a situation of inequality in different social spheres, fundamentally within three closely related systems: labor market, social welfare and households.

Taking into account the relational dimension of the concept of gender —to the extent that it pinpoints the relations between men and women—we analyze the poverty of women considering both the familial and social environments. In relation with the family, the gender perspective improves the comprehension of the household functioning, as it makes the hierarchies and distribution of resources evident, hence questioning the idea that the resources inside the household are evenly distributed and that the necessities of the members are the same. The questioning is yet more emphatic as we state the substitution of households by the individuals as analysis unit for poverty indicators. Taking the household as analysis unit presupposes the existence of an equal distribution of the resources in the household, that their needs are equivalent and decisions democratic and by consensus, without conflicts and negotiations; the studies developed in the region show the falsehood of these suppositions. Moving to the individuals as analysis unit allows identifying the people who lack own income and economic autonomy, both in poor and non-poor households; in this respect, let us remember that the last available data from ECLAC for the region speak of 43 percent (ECLAC, 2004a) of women older than 15 years in urban areas lacked an own income in 2002; while only 22 percent of men were in this situation. This information makes it evident that the lack of economic autonomy puts women in a more vulnerable situation and increases the probability that important groups of women face poverty situations if their familial or conjugal situations change.

Another contribution of the gender approach to the analysis of poverty has been the visualization of discrimination both in the public sphere and inside the household, showing at both places power relations and uneven distribution of resources.
This conceptual discussion on poverty has crucial importance to the extent that the definition of poverty also defines the indicators for its measurement—as stated by Feijoó (2003), “what is not conceptualized is not measurable”; on its own, it is the conceptualization of the phenomenon what determines the sort of policies to implement to alleviate it.

As it was mentioned, generally the indicators of poverty are captured from the households, disregarding the extremely large differences that exists inside them as for genders and generations; in spite of being usual and useful to analyze said indicators, from the perspective of gender it is necessary to decode what takes place inside the households.

Since the measurement of poverty is based on the socio-economic characteristics of the household as a whole, differences cannot be spotted in the access by gender to certain basic satisfiers in the household; to this difficulty we have to add the restriction in the way information is gathered in the surveys, where income is considered the only resource, leaving the time destined to the social production and reproduction of the household aside.

In this sense, for instance, Naila Kabeer (1994) warns that in order to correct the limitations in the way poverty is measured the information has to be disaggregated, taking into account the differences in the “being’s and making’s” inside the household. This would imply, according to the author, the need for indicators that recognize that the lives of women are governed by different, and on occasion, more complex social relations, entitlements and obligations than men, and that these are largely performed outside the monetary domain.

Other dimensions of poverty

In this broader conceptualization of poverty, other relevant dimensions are economic autonomy and gender violence; dimensions which are seldom accounted for in most of the analyses.

Economic autonomy

A fundamental aspect of poverty refers to economic autonomy, this is to say, to the fact that people have an own income that allows them to satisfy their needs. The inequality in opportunities which affects women to access remunerated labor affects their possibilities to become autonomous in economic terms; from this perspective it is possible to visualize the situation of poverty of some groups of people which usually remains hidden. An instance of this is the people, which even living in non-poor households, do not have individually own incomes that allow them to satisfy their necessities in an autonomous manner; this is the
situation of a high proportion of married women who live in both poor and non-poorest households, whose high rates of household activities place them in a position of dependence in relation to their male counterpart in the household.

Together with the limitations exhibited by women to access employment, there exist restrictions for their access to health, social networks and participate in political, economic and social decision-making processes, which compromises their physical (for example, exercise of sexual and reproductive rights), social (such as organizational capability) and political autonomy (capability to express opinions, for instance).

**Gender violence**

Violence is incorporated into the analysis of poverty from a gender approach because it is considered a factor that prevents people from enjoying autonomy to the extent that makes the access of women to labor market difficult, and thus reduces their possibilities to have economic autonomy; it is also a factor that disables people to exercise their citizenship.

To sum up, gender perspective makes a significant contribution to the problematization of the concept of poverty, understanding it in an integral and dynamic manner and identifying other dimensions where the phenomenon is expressed. In this way, and in coincidence with the criticism made from other approaches, it opposes a definition of poverty only based upon income and which rather emphasizes the fact that this phenomenon involves material and non-material, symbolical and cultural aspects, where fundamentally influence power relations (social hierarchies) which determine good or deficient access of the people, according to their sex, to material resources (material, social and cultural). In this sense, the sex of the people might become, under determinate circumstances, a condition that determines the degrees of severity of poverty and a higher risk of experiencing it.

**Measurement of poverty from gender**

The measurements of poverty have a relevant role in the process of visualizing the phenomenon and in the elaboration and implementation of policies; the methodologies of measurement are closely linked to the conceptualization of poverty, thereby the measurements may differ, as they point at different aspects of poverty. Several approaches, including the one of gender, have noticed that these methodologies are not neutral; all of them have subjective and arbitrary elements, even those which have the appearance of most precise and objective.
The contribution from the gender perspective to the broadening of the concept of poverty states the need to define new ways of measuring it so as to give an account of the complexity and multidimensionality of the phenomenon. In this sense, the debate on the methodological aspects of poverty does not propose to produce a single index that summarizes all the dimensions poverty comprises; on the contrary, we want to extrapolate different proposals of measurement that point at improving the most conventional measurements, distinguishing their advantages and limitations, as well as the elaboration of new measurements.

**Measurement of income per household**

The measurement of poverty by means of incomes is one of the most widespread methods; among their main strengths one can mention that it is a good quantitative indicator to identify poverty situations, and in the metric monetary logic there is no other method that delivers more than what the measurement by means of income delivers. On the other side, there is a wider availability of data in different countries to make a monetary measurement of poverty in comparison with data available to measure the phenomenon from other approaches (capabilities, social exclusion, participative). This method permits, additionally, making comparisons between countries and regions, as well as quantifying the problem of poverty for proposals of public policies.

Nevertheless, its objectivity and precision—criticized by different approaches to poverty—does not suppose the absence of judgments or subjective elements.

One of the most controversial aspects has to do with the capacity of the method to reflect the multidimensional character of poverty; one criticizes that the measurement by income emphasizes a single dimension of poverty, the monetary, and therefore only considers its material aspects, leaving the cultural differences aside, such as differences in power which determine the access of people to resources, and mainly, non-remunerated domestic work that is essential for the survival of the household, among other indicators which might reflect in a better manner the phenomenon of poverty and the differences in wellbeing between men and women.

Finally, another criticism for this measurement of poverty is that it does not take into account that people also satisfy their need by means of non-monetary resources, for example: community networks, familial support, among others.

From a gender approach, there is agreement with many of the criticisms stated and some other are postulated, which specifically pinpoint that the methodology based on the household per capita income, taking the household as analysis unit, is insufficient to account for poverty from a gender approach, this is to say, to
compare the situation of men and women, making their differences invisible and overlooking the real quantitative and qualitative magnitude of the phenomenon of poverty for women.

Indeed, the measurement of per capita income per household presents limitations to account for dimensions of poverty inside the household and that the processes lived in the households determine that men and women experience poverty differently.

Separately, the method also exhibits limitations to display gender inequalities as it does not take as an income the non-remunerated domestic work carried out inside the households. Non-remunerated domestic work may mean an important difference in the household income; households with a male head have higher possibilities to have free domestic work form the spouse and not to spend on household maintenance. The households with a female head have lower probabilities for this to occur and generally have private costs on domestic work, such as having less leisure and free time that affects mental and physical health, and less time to access better labor opportunities and social and political participation.

Neither does this method allow seeing the differences between men and women as for the use of time and spending patterns, central elements to characterize poverty from a gender perspective.

In relation to the distribution of time, as it will be detailed, the performed studies verify that women devote longer hours to non-remunerated activities than men, which indicate they have longer working days that go against their health and nutrition levels.

**Measurement of incomes from a gender perspective**

As previously stated, a dimension of poverty is economic autonomy, this is to say, that people have sufficient economic resources to satisfy their needs. To do so, we indicate the convenience to analyze inside the households the measuring of poverty by means of individual measurement. It is not about replacing a measurement with another, but we state to work with both measurements, as they work for different purposes; measurement at individual level allows accounting for the poverty of those people who do not have own incomes, even in non-poor households, and visualizing gender differences.

These measurements of individual poverty illustrate its advantages to visualize poverty situations which remain hidden for the traditional measurements of poverty, demonstrating the larger limitations of women to be autonomous in economic terms.
Non-remunerated labor

Non-remunerated labor is a central concept in the analysis of poverty from the gender perspective and it is part of what is known as ‘the economy of care’.

The study of non-remunerated work requires specific methodologies and measuring instruments; in general terms, it is possible to distinguish at least four modalities of non-remunerated work: subsistence work, domestic work, family care work and voluntary work or community service (Aguirre and Batthyány, 2005). The status of work of these activities has been broadly debated, for even if they do not respond to the monetary logic, satisfy necessities, allow social reproduction and therefore contribute to familial and social well being; it is a socially necessary labor, whose invisibility in official statistics in most countries comes from the fact that the concept of ‘production’ is tightly bound to that of ‘production for the market’ and the concept of ‘labor’ with that of ‘employment’. Their exclusion from the economic domain does not necessarily come from the nature of production, because when these two goods are produced outside the household, for the market, the labor which produces them is remunerated.

The need to measure non-remunerated labor has also been emphasized and to do so different proposals have been put forward; basically, the imputation of monetary value to domestic work and the incorporation of it into the national accounts. Its measurement, as mentioned, would besides make an important difference in the household income among those which have a person devoted to these tasks (households with a male head) and those which do not have this person and which must afford the private costs that implies this sort of labor (households with a female head).

Measurement of time devoted to non-remunerated work

Another way to measure and visualize non-remunerated labor is through the assignation of time; in this case, we propose a conceptualization of non-remunerated labor which comprises subsistence work (self-production of food, clothing and services), domestic work (purchase of assets and acquisition of services for the household, cooking, washing, ironing, cleaning, administration and activities outside the household: payments, procedures etc.), familial cares (look after children and elderly that implies material work and an affective and emotional aspect) and voluntary or community service (work for non-relatives, through a laic or religious organization) (Aguirre and Batthyány, 2005). By means of considering the time invested on each of them we manage to visualize them so that society values them and perceives the gender inequalities in the family and society. Moreover, this time assignation allows calculating the volume of the total workload, a concept that integrates both non-remunerated and remunerated work.
The case studies carried out in different countries of the region make it evident that women invest more time in non-remunerated actions than men, which determines women face longer working hours (remunerated and non-remunerated) than men, this takes time for recreation, social participation from them, in addition to the impacts on their health. An analysis of the quotidian activities of the households from the point of view of the use of time shows the uneven distribution of work inside the family. From the mid 1990’s, studies on the use of time are undertaken in different countries; in our region, this kind of studies have been carried out in Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua and recently in Uruguay. The three methods most used to gather information are direct observation, interviews based on the memory of the interviewee and registration performed by the very interviewee.

In the National Survey on Households on Measurement of Levels of Life of Nicaragua (ECLAC, 2004a), carried out in 1998, important differences between men and women are observable in time devoted to total daily work. To remunerated work men from poor and non-poor households in Nicaragua devote on average 7.7 daily hours, while women from poor households devote 4 daily hours and those from non-poor households 5.9 hours. To non-remunerated labor, poor women devote 5.4 daily hours, and those non-poor, 4.4 daily hours; whilst men devote 1.3 in poor households and 1.6 hours in non-poor households. The total workload is nine hours a day for poor men; 9.3 hours for non-poor men; 9.4 daily hours for poor women; and 10.3 daily hours for non-poor women.

The results of the National Survey on the Use of Time which in 2002 carried out the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Computing (INEGI, 2002) in Mexico showed similar tendencies. Mexican men devote almost three times as much as women to remunerated labor in the labor market, while women devote five times as much as men to domestic work. To remunerated labor Mexican women devote nine hours a week and men 24; to domestic work Mexican women devote on average 24 hours and men five hours a week.

On its own, the National Survey on the Use of Time carried out by the National Cuban Office of Statistics (ONE) shows the following results; women devote 3.4 daily hours to remunerated labor and 3.5 daily hours to domestic work, whereas men devote 5.6 daily hours to remunerated labor and barely 1.1 daily hours to domestic work.

Finally, in 2003, a pioneer study in Uruguay developed in the Department of Sociology of the Faculty of Social Sciences (Aguirre and Batthyány, 2005) allowed quantifying the global workload for Montevideo and its Metropolitan Area and observing the gender inequalities that exist. This study shows, among other data, that men devote 28 hours a week to remunerated labor and 13 to non-remunerated, while women devote 16 hours to remunerated labor and 32 hours a week to non-remunerated labor, the global workload for Montevideo men is 41.4
hours, and for Montevideo women is 47.6 hours a week. This study also shows that the households with the least economic resources are the ones which devote most time to domestic and care tasks.

Conclusions

The gender approach has made important conceptual and methodological contributions to the study of poverty; in conceptual terms, the gender perspective has broadened the definition of poverty stating an integral and dynamic conceptualization of the phenomenon which recognizes its multidimensionality and heterogeneity. The gender perspective proposes a strong criticism for a definition of poverty only based on income and distinguishes the components either material, symbolical and cultural where the relations of power influence and determine full or restricted access, according to their sex, to the resources (material, social and cultural). In this sense, it is possible to say that without the gender perspective, poverty is understood in an insufficient manner.

The conceptual breakages stated by the gender perspective to the study of poverty have led to check its most conventional measurements of the phenomenon and to explore new ones as well; an important place in this debate is held by the analysis of the measurement of the income per household.

Specifically, as for gender inequalities, it is indicated that the measurement of incomes per household does not account for the dimensions of poverty inside the households, as it supposes the existence of an even distribution among the members, thus homogenizing the needs of each one of them and considering them poor alike. It is also indicated that the method has limitations to show gender inequalities as it disregards in monetary terms the contribution to the households from non-remunerated domestic work. Finally, the measurements of incomes do not comprehend the differences in gender as for the use of time and the patterns of expenditure, aspects that help to characterize in a better way poverty and to design better policies.

The criticisms to the measurement of incomes per households have had as an object to restate the traditional measurement of poverty from a gender perspective; in this sense, a question that appears with special force is the need to impute value to non-remunerated domestic work, as a way to value the contribution of women to this work and to recognize the status of work in these activities which turn out to be fundamental to satisfy basic needs.

An element to underscore in the relations between gender and poverty is the possibility of understanding better the functioning of the households, visualizing the asymmetries existing between their members, in terms of power, decision making and redistribution of resources. The gender approach allows comprehending the household as a series of relations where not only are solidarity
and affection present, but also conflict, as well as understanding that not all of the members of the households have the same necessities, enjoy the same rights, access the same resources, etc.

The limitations reviewed by the gender approach for the conceptualization and measurement of poverty make it evident that without this approach poverty is understood and measured unsatisfactorily, which reinforces the idea of a tight bond between definition and measurement of poverty.

In spite of the contributions made in recent years from the field of gender studies to the studies on poverty, by and large an analytical framework has not been adopted, which relates gender inequalities and those related to poverty in the main studies in this respect. There is still a long way to go.

Bibliography


AGUIRRE, Rosario, 2003, Género, ciudadanía social y trabajo, Universidad de la República, Montevideo.

ALTIMIR, Oscar, 1979, “La dimensión de la pobreza en América Latina”, in Cuadernos de la Cepal, num. 27, Santiago de Chile.

ARRIAGADA, Irma, 2003, Dimensiones de pobreza y políticas sociales, mimeo, Cepal, Santiago de Chile.


CEPAL, 2000, Equidad, desarrollo y ciudadanía, Cepal, Santiago de Chile.


CEPAL, 2004b, Entender la pobreza desde una perspectiva de género, Unidad mujer y desarrollo, Cepal/UNIFEM/Republic of Italy, Santiago de Chile.

CHANT, Sylvia, 2003, New contributions to the analysis of poverty: methodological and conceptual challenges to understanding poverty from a gender perspective, Unidad Mujer y Desarrollo, Cepal, Santiago de Chile.

FEIJOÓ, María del Carmen, 2003, Desafíos conceptuales de la pobreza desde una perspectiva de género, ponencia presentada a la Reunión de Expertos sobre Pobreza y Género, Cepal/OIT, Santiago de Chile.
MILOSAVLJEVIC, Vivian, 2003, El enfoque de género y la medición de la pobreza, ponencia presentada a la Reunión de Expertos sobre Pobreza y Género, Cepal/OIT, Santiago de Chile.
SEN, Amartya, 1985, Commodities and capabilities, North Holland, Press.

Karina BATTHYÁNY

She holds a Ph. D. in Sociology from the University of Versailles Saint Quentin in Yvelines (France) and a Master degree in regional and local development. She has coordinated the research area of Social Watch, she has been consultant in the gender area of different international organizations such as UNFPA, UNIFEM, World Bank, European Union, IDRC, among others. She is a member of the National System of Research (Conicyt). She is currently a professor and a researcher at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of the Republic of Uruguay and also collaborates with the United Nations Population Fund at Uruguay. Some of her most important published works are: “Uso del tiempo y trabajo no remunerado. Encuesta en Montevideo y área metropolitana 2003”, as co-author with Rosario Aguirre Rosario, 2005; “Cuidado infantil y trabajo: ¿un desafío exclusivamente femenino? Una mirada desde el género y la ciudadanía social”, Montevideo, CINTERFOR-OIT, 2004; Politicas sociales, familias y equidad de género, FCS-Red Género and Familia-UNFPA, Montevideo, 2007; “Health, gender and poverty in Latin America”, in Ostin and Sen, Final report of the women and gender equity knowledge network of the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health, OMS, 2007
Email: kbatthyan@gmail.com; karinab@fcs.edu.uy