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Forthcoming in Gender, Place and Culture

Gender and Poverty: What We Know, Don't Know and Need to Know for Agenda 2030

Sarah Bradshaw, Sylvia Chant and Brian Linneker

Abstract

Drawing on historical debates on gender, poverty, and the 'feminisation of poverty' this paper reflects on current evidence, methods and analysis of gendered poverty. It focuses on initiatives by UN Women, including the *Progress of the World's Women 2015-16*, which represents one of the most concerted attempts by an international agency to reflect on what we know about the contemporary state of women's poverty in various parts of the developing and transitional world. Our analysis of the data compiled by UN Women raises questions about what might account for the over-representation of women among the poor in official accounts of poverty, and how this is plausibly changing (or not) over time. The paper highlights that analysis of what is measured and how needs to be understood in relation to who is the focus of measurement. The lack of available data which is fit for purpose questions the extent to which gender poverty differences are 'real' or statistical. There is a continued reliance on comparing female with male headed households, and the move by UN Women to adopt the notion of Female Only Households reflects available data driving conceptual understandings of women's poverty, rather than conceptual advances driving the search for better data. Wider UN processes highlight that while sensitivity to differences among women and their subjectivities are paramount in understanding the multiple processes accounting for gender bias in poverty burdens, they are still accorded little priority. It is recognised that to monitor advances in Agenda 2030 will require more and better statistics. Our review suggests we know little about how poverty is experienced by women and men and that we are still far from having a set of tools able to adequately measure and monitor gendered poverty.

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1. Introduction

In September 2015 a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were announced as part of the wider United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030). These goals included a stand-alone goal on 'gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls', and women and girls are also mentioned in the targets related to the headline goal to 'eradicate extreme poverty'. The key UN entity focussed on development – UNDP - suggests more than 800 million people continue to live in poverty and that 'women are more likely to live in poverty than men'.¹ This notion that poverty has a 'female face' was established as 'fact' during the Fourth Women's World Conference in Beijing in 1995, when it was stated that women were '70% of the world's poor, and rising'. This assertion gave rise to the notion of a (global) 'feminisation of poverty', a notion popularised through research by UN agencies (Medeiros and Costa, 2008). A 'feminised' or 'feminising' poverty has also often been associated with the 'feminisation' of household headship, with female heads being constructed as the 'poorest of the poor'. That this conjuncture of albeit flawed statistics and concepts has been reiterated in countless academic publications, policy documents and website items ever since, has meant it has gathered disproportionate scholarly and policy clout (see Chant, 2008:16, 2016b:2). As recently as 2016 the deputy director of UN Women noted that 'sustainable development is not possible if feminisation of poverty continues' (Puri 2016).

UN Women, a shorthand for the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, was created in July 2010 from an amalgamation of four existing UN entities. As the foremost international agency responsible for promoting gender equality, it brings together 2000 staff in more than 90 countries with an annual budget of \$690million, and, as documented on its webpage, 'stands ready' to

¹ <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-1-no-poverty.html>
last accessed 24/08/17

provide technical support to those countries that request it, and highlights a key role in monitoring UN processes.² UN Women's main monitoring tool is the *Progress of the World's Women* report, generally published every 2-3 years, with the theme of the latest published report (2015-16) being 'Transforming Economies, Realising Rights'. In the context of focusing on the multiple challenges of creating an 'enabling' macro-economic environment to benefit women, it aims to put the 'spotlight' on 'redressing women's socio-economic disadvantage' (UNW, 2015a:42). While UN Women begin from the assumption that women are economically disadvantaged, the *Progress Report* cautions that although around one billion people in 2011 were estimated to be 'extremely poor', "it is unknown how many of those living in poverty are women and girls" (ibid.:45, Box 1.4). Moreover, in a footnote to this statement it is signalled, "the much cited 'factoid' that 70% of the world's poor are women is now widely regarded as improbable" (ibid.:307, 92n).

UN Women's admission of uncertainty raises questions around how much we know about gendered poverty and around the extent to which a global 'feminisation' of poverty is an indisputable conventional wisdom applicable to all women everywhere. While to monitor progress in the SDGs suggests the need for holistic and geographically and gender sensitive data to be collected, UN Women's uncertainties raise questions about how much we can know given current methods for measuring poverty.

This paper utilises the 2015-16 *Progress of the World's Women* report as a 'case study' to explore how much we know about gendered poverty. It analyses the data contained within the *Progress Report* to explore how 'official' knowledge about gender and poverty is currently constructed, highlighting the lack of clarity in its

² [http://www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/about-UN Women](http://www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/about-UN-Women) accessed 08/08/17

formulation and the limits to our knowledge. It suggests a discord between how UN Women understand women's poverty and how they measure feminised poverty over time and space. Through consideration of the feminisation of household headship rhetoric in the *Progress Report* it explores how available data may drive conceptual understandings of women's poverty, rather than conceptual advances driving the search for better data. Finally, it explores what UN Women themselves are doing to advance understandings of gendered poverty in the post-2015 context. As a prelude to this, we begin with a discussion of how poverty has been conceptualised, especially in scholarly feminist literature.

2. Understandings of Gendered Poverty

Feminist scholarship on poverty since the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) has stressed that gender-differentiated privations are manifest in numerous intersecting forms and dimensions, span across a range of 'private' and 'public' sites and scales, and owe to a multiplicity of gender-discriminatory structures and processes (A2, 2002, 2011, 2013; A2 and A3, 2014; A1, 2003a,b, 2010, ed.). Recognising that gendered poverty is an outcome of gendered power inequalities, it has also been acknowledged that addressing income poverty will not necessarily improve gender equality even if advances in gender equality may reduce poverty (Jackson, 1996). Scholars have also highlighted the dynamic nature of poverty, with Murphy (2015: 87) drawing an important distinction between 'transitory poverty' and 'structural poverty' (also Shaffer, 2008, 2013 on 'transitory' and 'chronic' poverty). While the former can come about through 'random shocks' and shortfalls in social support for emergencies, the latter 'arises as a result of unfair and unjust social arrangements', in which gender features prominently (Murphy, 2015: 87). Thus while women may suffer 'transitory poverty' - a temporary worsening in their situation from shocks such as 'natural' disasters (Bradshaw, 2013) – for some this may represent only a

temporary deepening of existing 'chronic poverty' which arises from their position within invidious societal inequalities. In this context, and given the subjectivity of experiences of poverty, it is clearly difficult to 'know' and 'measure' gendered poverty.

What further hinders the measurement of poverty is the unit of measurement. Within official statistics there is a continued reliance on 'the household' as the standard unit of measure, and sex-disaggregated data have only been available at the household level leading to the situation whereby female-headed households have become a 'proxy' for all women (Lampietti and Stalker, 2000:2). This is interesting since differences in access to, control over, and use of resources within households has been a key feature in feminist research. That men may withhold a sizeable portion of their income for their own personal consumption has been well documented (Chant, 1997a,b; Fukuda-Parr, 1999; González de la Rocha and Grinspun, 2001; Moghadam, 1997; Quisumbing, 2003), frequently leading to 'secondary poverty' among women and children in 'non-poor' households. Indeed, in male-headed households it seems we are more likely to witness what might be described as gendered 'power poverty', whereby women and girls are unable (because of fear of violence or abandonment) or unwilling (because of deeply embedded gendered norms) to contest or resist male privilege or prerogatives (Brickell and Chant, 2010; Chant, 2007, 2008; Kabeer, 1999). Regardless of increased access among women to education and employment, and their growing contributions to household income, women's disproportionate burdens of unpaid labour can often lead to exacting demands and women's relative 'time poverty'. This burden of reproductive and productive work precludes allowance for the restorative rest and recreation activities essential to human wellbeing (Chant, 2007, 2008; Gammage, 2010; Noh and Kim, 2015) and this in turn can impact on earning capacity and 'income poverty'. Thus 'power poverty' and 'time poverty' often interrelate with one another and may be more important in perceptions of poverty than limited access to income per se.

That intersections of 'power' and 'time' poverty may explain income and asset privations would suggest these issues should be a key focus, even if they imply a non-numeric or a complex numeric approach which entails entering into the household and questioning intimate relations of power therein. However, the household remains a 'taboo site'. Policymakers seem happy to target women within households as deliverers of policy outcomes, yet less willing to support studies that seek to better understand the allocation of intra-domestic resources. Some household forms also remain 'taboo' and heteronormative assumptions of what constitutes a household mean that non-normative, same-sex households are rendered invisible. In contrast the existence of single mother/female-headed households has become accepted, if not socially, at least as an evaluative category, and when comparing men and women's relative poverty what we are actually comparing is often poverty of male-headed vis-à-vis female-headed households.

A 'feminised' or 'feminising' poverty has often been associated with the 'feminisation' of household headship in developing regions, with Naila Kabeer (2003:81), noting that "Female headship rapidly became the accepted discourse about gender and poverty in international agencies" (also Chant, 2003a; Jackson, 1996). In effect, the typically smaller average size of female-headed households (FHHs) gives them greater visibility in poverty statistics (Kabeer, 1996:14; also Quisumbing et al, 2001). However, the common assumption that FHHs are the 'poorest of the poor' has some a priori traction insofar as if women as a whole are disadvantaged by gender equality, then it might be expected they are more disadvantaged still through 'male-deficit' household arrangements (Barrow, 2015; Chant, 2003b, 2016a). Not only are FHHs regarded as disproportionately likely to emerge among poor populations, for example through involuntary labour migration, conjugal breakdown under financial stress, lack of formal marriage and so on (Fonseca, 1991:138), but female household

headship itself might prejudice the prospects of women and their household members to exit poverty given the stack of social and economic disadvantages which women when unpartnered, are likely to face (Chant, 2003b: 9 et seq). In short, a 'two-way-relationship' between female household headship and poverty is thought to pertain, with additional downstream effects such as a 'transmission of inter-generational disadvantage' purportedly falling upon the shoulders of younger members of households headed by women (Chant, 2007; also Milazzo and van de Walle, 2015:3). This said, evidence on the extent to which FHHs are poorer than male-headed households (MHHs) is mixed and frequently fraught with definitional and data-related issues.

Definitions of household headship and FHHs vary from those which use self-declared headship in household surveys, to those imposed by the enumerator or researcher (Chant, 2016a: 23; Liu et al, 2016; Milazzo and van de Walle, 2015: 5-6). In reality, however, FHHs are a fluid and diverse group, varying in respect of their composition, age structure, access to support from ex-partners and the state, as well as in the drivers that lead to headship. Although FHHs are often equated with lone mother households, they may also be grandmother-headed households, women-only, and lone female households, and ipso facto include widows, divorced, separated, abandoned, and single women and/or mothers, not to mention married women with absent male spouses who have migrated for work and provide remittance support (Chant, 1997, 2007; Liu et al, 2016; Youssef and Hetler, 1983).

In light of these multiple axes of heterogeneity, it is perhaps no surprise that evidence is often mixed regarding levels of poverty between male- and female-headed households. Notwithstanding that some FHHs are at an above-average risk of privation, for example when they comprise a lone woman and dependent children, a number of studies reveal little difference in poverty between FHH and MHHs (Chant,

2007). In Africa recent statistical evidence indicates that FHHs seem to have contributed more to GDP growth and to have reduced poverty at a faster rate than MHHs (Milazzo and van de Walle, 2015:3). In Latin America, there continues to be a very uneven picture, requiring cognisance of the diverse array of circumstances in which women end up 'heading' households through self-reported or instrumental criteria (Liu et al, 2016). Even if levels of income flowing into FHHs may be lower in objective terms, the ability to exert control over that income may influence perceptions of hardship and vulnerability. This signals the importance of recognising perceived as well as actual poverty, and ipso facto, subjectivity (see A1, 2003a,b, 2009; Wisor et al, 2014).

Given the different ways that women's poverty can manifest itself and the differences suggested by available data regarding the extent and nature of women's poverty, there is a question around what we actually know. We might assume that the main UN agency charged with promoting gender equality would provide the most reliable assessment of what is known and can be known, and that its *Progress Report of 2015-16*, which claims to put the 'spotlight' on 'redressing women's socio-economic disadvantage', would be the place to find this assessment, as we turn to in the next section.

3. Understanding Gendered Poverty: The *Progress of the World's Women 2015-16*

UN Women's 2015-16 *Progress Report* states that it draws on 'experiences, evidence and analysis from diverse national and regional contexts' to explore the extent to which the vision of gender equality set out in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has become a reality (UNW, 2015a: 26). A review of the report highlights the continued dominance of quantitative studies and statistical analysis. Although the imperative of listening to the 'voices of the poor' has been accepted by

mainstream development actors since the 1999 World Bank report of the same name, the desire among policymakers to make numerical assessments of relative privation remains key, as witnessed by Target 1 of 'headline' SDG 1 to 'eradicate extreme poverty' - as measured by the \$1.25 poverty line³. The desire to know the world, and in this case, the world's women, through numbers is linked to mainstream ontology and epistemology and traditional models of scientific 'objectivity'. While the belief in the possibility of objective knowledge produced from a 'perspective-free' viewpoint has long been critiqued (Fox Keller 1985; Haraway 1991), the continued focus on scientific methods presents quantitative evidence as 'objective fact' leaving little room for discussion and silencing other, more qualitative, findings as 'anecdotal'. This said, care needs to be taken not to construct feminist research as 'naturally' or necessarily qualitative in nature, or romanticise the ability of qualitative studies to reveal 'truths'. As Baruah (2009: 179) has articulated: "over-reliance on simple interview and focus group techniques are as capable of producing uncontextualised single-stranded results that are open to multiple interpretations as are simple correlation and regressions using a few variables".

While supporting mixed methods, feminist economists have stressed the need to use the same tools that invisibilise women to make them visible, including the use of statistics. Accepting then there is justification for presenting quantitative data in the *Progress Report*, it is worthy of note that the report does move away from presenting purely income poverty measures and makes use of USAID's 'wealth asset index' derived from its Demographic and Health Surveys (DHSs). The DHS data include information on private and public assets such as dwelling type, water, sanitation and energy, but has no direct income component measure (see USAID, 2016). The wealth index is constructed using factor analysis as a composite measure of a

³ The \$1.25 a day poverty line is that used in the original documentation around the SDGs and is often the figure still cited despite the fact the current line is set at \$1.90

household's cumulative living standard at a particular point in time, calculated on the basis of a household's ownership and/or access to selected assets. Poverty is defined as those households in the bottom quintile of the wealth asset distribution, and individuals within households are ranked according to the score of the household in which they reside. In short, all individuals within a household are 'ranked' according to the household 'score', which arguably gives women in male-headed households a false 'wealth' compared with female heads. It ignores the fact some household assets may be more important to the well-being of women than men, and different asset bundles may have a differential impact on gendered poverty. It is possible that reductions in poverty could be driven by accumulation of certain private, and gendered, assets such as bicycles rather than by improvements in essential public services such as drinking water.

In considering current differences in gendered poverty UN Women (2015a) refer to both static point-in-time (state) measures, and changes over time measures (trends). Dynamic changes over time are income-based, while static measures are based on wealth asset poverty among women and men aged 20-59 years. In static measures gender and age are combined, but not through the adoption of an 'intersectional' approach, but instead limiting analysis to one 'economically active' group and effectively making invisible young and elder cohorts – both of which may well be economically active but do not fit (Western) notions of age-appropriate behaviours.

Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are excluded from UN Women's static review of wealth asset poverty, but are included as the sole point of reference for dynamic income-based measures. The lack of transparency in how indicators of development are constructed has been discussed in the literature, including those related to inequality (Syrovátka and Schlossarek, 2017). The exclusive use of LAC countries for establishing poverty trends in the *Progress Report* is explained as due

to LAC being the only region where analysis of the poorest households by gender composition has been undertaken over time (UNW, 2015a:45). However, the lack of comparable measures of gendered poverty between LAC and other developing regions also played a major part in this omission.⁴ Why available data for a sample of LAC states could not have been included in UN Women's (2015) 'snapshot' review is not explained, despite the fact that comparable data on gender and wealth asset poverty do exist for four countries in LAC (ibid.:307, 98n). Thus while the data on point-in-time wealth is presented as depicting global patterns the geographical specificities of gendered poverty are actually made invisible on account of a whole region being absent from the analysis.

3.1 How Far is Poverty Feminised?

UN Women (2015) use information from DHS surveys across a wide range of countries and regions to determine the degree to which poverty is feminised, and "In the absence of data on individual poverty rates, a proxy measure of women's risk of poverty has been developed where the percentage of working age women living in poor households (defined as the bottom 20% of households) is compared to the percentage of working age men in poor households" (UNW, 2015a:45). Their methodology is based on work first developed by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2004:133-70) as the 'Poverty Femininity Index' (ibid.: 307, 93n). UN Women use a gender poverty ratio indicator (GPI), which standardises for the number of women and men in the general population when comparing the numbers of women to men in the poorest households. The indicator is expressed as the number of poor women per 100 poor men. Values above 103 suggest that women are overly represented among the poor, values below 97 indicate that men are overly represented, and values between 97 and 103 indicate gender parity. While UN Women do not specify why these cut-offs are used it may

⁴ Personal communication with Drs Shahra Razavi and Silke Staab, Sept 2016

be assumed they have their basis in confidence intervals, even of the subjectivity of the latter are not discussed.

Calculations of the GPI were derived by UN Women (2015) from 75 countries for which data were available, notably in South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Analysing the data presented suggests there are negligible differences in relative poverty in 18 countries, and there were more men than women in the bottom poverty quintile in 16 countries. There is scant discussion of these patterns and little attempt to locate the findings within discussion of the nature of the countries and regions included in the analysis (or discussion of those excluded). That is, while different places are named and recognised, the specificity of the geographical spaces they represent is not recognised. Instead the report notes that the absence of disaggregated data makes it difficult to establish if women 'across the board' are more likely to live in poverty than men and then goes on to present reasons why there might be a feminised poverty, highlighting men's greater engagement in paid work, the gender pay gap and women's engagement in unpaid care work.

Figure 1 - Here

The main statistical evidence is confined to a box, and here it states women are more likely to live in poverty in 41 out of the 75 countries. That is, there is a feminised poverty in only 54.6% of the countries, which questions the existence of a global feminised poverty. Data from other studies such as that by Wisor et al (2015) in the Philippines using a newly-developed, empirically-informed gendered Multi-dimensional indicator, also questions that women always suffer greater deprivation than men, while research by Bader et al (2016: 178) on Lao PDR, found ethno-linguistic group rather than sex was the most important explanatory factor in poverty.

As for gendered poverty by sex of household headship, Moser's (2016) longitudinal study in Guayaquil, Ecuador dating from the 1970s indicates that FHHs over time do better than MHHs in terms of income poverty. However, by 2004 MHHs had accumulated larger asset portfolios, especially in respect of property, than their female-headed counterparts. While not suffering from greater income poverty, FHHs may then have a greater 'asset poverty' than MHHs over time.

3.2 Is There a Feminisation of Poverty Over Time?

Changes in gendered shares of poverty are vitally important in establishing whether feminised poverty persists, or is undergoing a process of further 'feminisation' or indeed 'de-feminisation' over time. UN Women (2015: 307, 97n) note that 23 countries outside LAC now possess sex-disaggregated data on wealth that permit comparison between the early 2000s and c2007-2013. These range from only one in the Middle East and North Africa, two in Asia, and four in LAC, but as many as sixteen in sub-Saharan Africa (ibid.:98n). Paucity of the data, coupled with the short time frame, raises questions over the extent to which the 'feminisation of poverty' reported may be 'real' or only 'statistical'.

Drawing on the Annual Report published by the Gender Equality Observatory of Latin America and Caribbean (GEOLAC, 2013) and ECLAC's *Social Panorama Report 2014* (ECLAC, 2014), the *Progress Report* (UNW, 2015a:45) points out that against a backdrop in which there is declining poverty overall in LAC - from 44.8% of people living below the poverty line in 1997 to 32.7% in 2012 - feminised poverty seems to have increased, with an upward share in the proportion of women versus 100 men in income-poor households from 108.7 to 117.2 between 1997 and 2012 (ibid.). This is simultaneously striking and paradoxical. Many countries in LAC have promoted large and ambitious social protection programmes aimed at reducing poverty with cash and resources targeted at women. UN Women suggest that part of the general

decline in poverty can be attributed to these 'new social policies' (UNW, 2015a:45). Over and above a feminisation of poverty occurring during an era of overall poverty decline, what is very interesting – and arguably alarming -- is that poverty appeared to be 'de-feminising' in Latin America prior to the widespread implementation of female-directed anti-poverty initiatives, but has been 're-feminising' since. While the report has a whole chapter dedicated to discussion of social policy as a means to transform women's lives, it does not explicitly discuss this seeming paradox.

3.4 Poverty and 'Female Only Households'

Among the key findings of the Progress Report are that women of 'prime working age' (20-59 years) are more likely than their male peers to be represented in the poorest quintile of households and what UN Women (2015a:45) denominate as 'female only households' (FOHs), are also suggested to be more likely to be in this poorest quintile. This then does little to trouble conventional wisdoms pertaining to global feminised poverty, and links to female household headship.

Our analysis of the data in Annex 1 of the *Progress Report* indicates that in all countries for which data are available in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa, FOHs are more likely to be in the poorest quintile than households in general, and in some cases differences are quite marked. For example in India, the ratio of FOHs in the poorest quintile is as much as 152 for every 100 FOHs among all households, 157 in Palestine, and 161 in Lebanon (UNW, 2015a:252 & 254).

Although in the majority of sub-Saharan African countries (18 out of 25) FOHs are again likely to be at greater risk of poverty, it is interesting that the gap narrows in East Asia and the Pacific, where in 4 out of 9 countries FOHs are less likely to be in the poorest quintile, and as many as in 8 out of 14 countries (more than half) in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This highlights the 'poorest of the poor' label cannot be generalised across the globe and that there is a need to explore

further differences between countries and to better understand the experiences of different women in different geographical and social contexts. While geography matters, it is not explicitly explored in this 'global' report.

Comparisons between the likelihood of women's poverty in general and FOH poverty rates show significant positive associations (Table 1). However, while there is a general tendency for FOHs to be at greater risk of poverty than women in general, this is not always the case. For example in 3 out of 9 countries in East Asia and the Pacific (Mongolia, Philippines and Vietnam) and in 5 out of 25 countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Zambia) FOHs are at less risk of poverty than women in general (UNW, 2015a:252).

Table 1 - Here

While the extent to which UN Women's data on FOHs shows them to be the poorest of the poor, this notion can be questioned, as can the very notion of FOH itself. FOHs refer to domestic units lacking an adult male, and the focus of analysis in this case is households lacking a 'prime working age' male adult (aged 20-59 years). The rationale for adopting 'FOH' as a unit of measurement is not clear and in fact 'female only households' are not, sensu strictu, 'female only', since they may contain boys or men younger or older than the UN Women age thresholds. While the 20-59 year male cohort may well be of 'prime working age', on one hand, boys and male youth may make significant economic contributions to household livelihoods (Co-Author and A1, 2009), and on the other, working and contributing income into old age is frequent and necessary among poor populations (Vera-Sanso, 2010). Given these conceptual anomalies it might have been better to retain the term 'female-headed household', which, while problematic, plausibly better reflects the different lived realities of women and that female 'headship' is as much a subjective, lived

experience as an objective ‘fact’ (see Liu et al, 2016).

Moreover, the new nomenclature of ‘female only households’ and its exclusion of men aged 20-59 years may simply serve as a ‘Trojan horse’ for FHHs, perpetuating, if not exacerbating the tendency for them to be clustered in the poorest quintile given enduring gendered wage gaps among ‘prime working age’ adults. The move from FHHs to FOHs raises the question of the extent to which incomplete data is driving ever more ‘narrow’ conceptualisations of poverty and the households it is anticipated to most affect, rather than more refined conceptualisations being explored and evidenced via data.

4. Influencing Understandings of Poverty: UN Women initiatives

While the *Progress Report* reflects what UN Women suggest we know about women’s poverty at this juncture, they are also working to improve what we know over time, through influencing on-going methodological innovations in assessing gendered inequalities. Addressing gendered inequalities is the key aim of UN Women, but poverty reduction is not on UN Women’s ‘what we do’ list.⁵ Instead they aim to invest in women’s ‘economic empowerment’, which, they argue ‘sets a direct path towards gender equality, poverty eradication and inclusive economic growth’. Poverty eradication is then seen as an outcome or an indicator of advancements in women’s ‘empowerment’. While not working directly to reduce poverty, they do work to measure advancements in women’s well being, including changes in gendered poverty. Indeed, they suggest they have a ‘comparative advantage’ when it comes to gender statistics and see themselves as a ‘credible and respected voice and partner’ (to other UN agencies) on the matter of gender statistics (UNW, 2016: 27).

⁵ <http://www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/about-un-women> last accessed 24/08/17

Since the process to design a new set of development goals began, UN Women have been involved in attempting to influence the shape of the goals and related targets and indicators. In their 'post-2015 position paper' of 2013 they called for a stand-alone gender goal and suggested this should consist of three components: Freedom from Violence; Capabilities and Resources; Voice, Leadership and Participation. While the restriction to three components might suggest a somewhat limited vision of gender equality, the fact that between them the three components covered 15 targets to be measured by 49 indicators, suggests an ambitious call - ideologically and methodologically speaking. By far the broadest component was the second - Capabilities and Resources – with 8 targets and 25 associated indicators. It is here we find reference to poverty with the first target mentioned in this component being 'Eradicate Women's Poverty'. The focus on women's poverty rather than gendered experiences of poverty is interesting, and suggests all women suffer more and greater poverty than men, rather than understand women experience poverty differently from men, and from each other. This lack of consideration of differences between women is a recurrent theme in the document, not least in the call for disaggregation of indicators by sex only, constructing the world as determined by biological binaries, and ignoring other intersecting characteristics of inequalities.

The discourse around the poverty target in UN Women's 2013 document is focused on income and social protection. They do note poverty is also influenced by women's capacity to retain control over income and briefly discuss the notion of secondary poverty, although do not name it as such (UNW, 2013: 25). However, control over income is not reflected in their proposed indicators: Percentage of people earning their own income, Ownership of a dwelling, Nutrition levels, and Access to old age pension, all disaggregated by sex. A second target in the Capabilities and Resources component - 'Access and Control over Assets' – sees indicators focused on land ownership and credit. While no reliable figures exist

around the gendered distribution of landownership, a recent study of ten African nations suggests the pattern that women own less land than men, regardless of how ownership is conceptualised, was ‘remarkably consistent’ (Doss et al, 2013), suggesting a focus on better monitoring land ownership is to be welcomed. That women’s uptake of credit/finance is a good indicator of gender equality, however, is much more contested (see AWID, 2012). Time poverty is also addressed in this component with the target to ‘Reduce Women’s Time Burdens’. Power poverty is not explicitly addressed within the Capabilities and Resources component but is covered in ‘Voice, Leadership and Participation’, which includes a target to ‘Promote Equal Decision Making in Households’ with a focus on women’s lack of bargaining power. It proposes a series of indicators of women’s contribution to household decisions including around ‘large purchases’, their own health, decisions around visiting relatives, and the percentage of people who think important decisions in the household should be made by both men and women, all disaggregated by sex.

While the 2013 document calls for monitoring elements of income, asset, time and power poverty, albeit not naming them as such, their 2015 document making recommendations on indicators for the SDGs sees a narrower focus. It is framed by the suggestion that the regular collection of income data for both women and men in developing countries can be ‘challenging’ and because they are collected at the household level, ‘attribution to individuals is impossible’ (UNW, 2015b: 20). They suggest there are some proxies that can be used to capture ‘women’s greater vulnerability to poverty’. These are rather standard measures: Proportion of the population living below \$1.25 (PPP) per day disaggregated by sex and age group and employment status; and the Proportion of the population living below the national poverty line, by sex, age and employment status. They also suggest the use of ‘proportion of people who have an independent source of income by sex, age’. These indicators are interesting choices since they, in the *Progress Report*, move

away from purely income poverty measures and make use of the Demographic and Health Surveys and a focus then on asset poverty. Accepting household rather than individual measures as reasonable proxies for gendered poverty is also interesting given a recent World Bank (2017: 47) review on 'Monitoring Poverty' concluded that there is a need to look "not just at the decomposition of global poverty by gender but at nonmonetary dimensions that may be more readily measured on an individual basis", otherwise, estimates of global poverty while not 'useless', are likely to remain 'flawed' (ibid.:xvi).

While UN Women accept in the supporting text of their document providing recommendations for SDG indicators that the measures they propose do not address women's control over or the intra-household distribution of resources, they do not recommend any further indicators to capture gender differences in control over resources within households. The attention given to control over income and assets apparent in UN Women's 2013 document is then not reflected in the 2015 report, nor is it reflected in the Minimum Set of Gender Indicators (2017) - a product of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Gender Statistics (IAEG-GS) of which UN Women is a member – which sees no mention of intra-household distribution of assets as a key global indicator of relative poverty, at least for women within male-headed households. It is interesting to note also that while the *Progress Report* highlights FOHs as a specific group for poverty analysis, and the methodology used, as discussed above, almost ensures they are constructed as the 'poorest of the poor', there is no specific mention of female heads in UN Women's policy discourse around the SDGs and Agenda 2030, nor in terms of suggesting indicators to specifically monitor their seemingly greater poverty.

That UN Women are seeking to influence existing global goals and related processes might explain the rather unambitious tone of their recommendations for monitoring

gendered poverty. Their own initiatives to assess gendered poverty might better reflect their aspirations. In September 2016 UN Women launched a new Flagship Programme Initiative' (FPI) that aims to bring about a 'radical shift' in how gender statistics are used, created and promoted, through a 'groundbreaking' public-private venture. The five-year FPI – Making Every Women and Girl Count - will cost US\$65 million and aims to provide technical and financial support to countries to improve the production and use of gender statistics in order to monitor the implementation of gender equality commitments in the 2030 Agenda. As UN Women (2016: 4) suggest the lack of statistics to enable comprehensive and periodic monitoring of issues such as gendered poverty arises both from a failure to prioritise gender equality in data collection and from a lack of resources, this FPI should go some way to address both these constraints.

The new FPI builds on the 'Evidence and Data for Gender Equality' (EDGE) project which is a joint initiative of UN-Stats and UN Women and which to date has had a focus on gendered access to and control over assets. In terms of asset ownership it suggests that at a minimum, countries should collect information on three core assets: Principal dwellings, Agricultural land, and Other real estate, including non-agricultural land, disaggregated by sex (see UNW, 2017: 5). It presents three options around how to collect this data, and the first two suggest gender differences will be explored not through interviewing both the man and the woman in a household, but from interviewing either a man or a woman about asset ownership of the household. There is an evident move from the call for the development of a wide range of indicators in the 2013 document, which included the means to measure income, asset, time and power poverty, to the call to better measure a limited notion of asset poverty in later initiatives. This is interesting given wider global moves in measuring poverty have focused on multi-dimensional asset measures and a drive toward individual measures of deprivation.

Among an increasing plethora of Multidimensional Indicator (MDI) approaches, many follow the methodology developed by Alkire and Foster (2011) which is the basis for the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) of the UNDP (2010) (see also Alkire and Santos, 2010). Here deprivation is measured against a number of different criteria with assets falling into three main categories: health (nutrition and child mortality), education (child enrolment and years of schooling), and living standards (cooking fuel, sanitation, electricity, floor, water and assets). Generally this method first identifies who is poor, and then aggregates to obtain overall measures that reflect the multiple deprivations those designated as poor experience. The importance of these multidimensional asset-based measures is made clear in Bader et al's (2016) study which found a differential overlap between monetary poverty and multidimensional poverty, with some non-income-poor people being 'overlooked', despite their MDI measure showing they suffer privations in other aspects of their wellbeing. Another advantage of the MDI method is its potential amenability to disaggregation, including by sex. However, with some notable exceptions (Alkire et al, 2013; Bader et al, 2016; Rogan, 2016; Wisor et al, 2014), there have been few sex-disaggregated MDIs.

While it might be assumed that UN Women would be spearheading the 'engendering' of measures such as those developed by Alkire and colleagues, these methods are not referred to in any of the UN Women documents reviewed here. Perhaps this reflects the fact that the UNDP are championing this methodology and a desire to avoid overlap and the competition between agencies that has been noted of the UN more generally (A2, 2016). The Australian government has recently funded the team behind one MDI study (Wisor et al), to pilot a survey that seeks to measure time, asset, power and income poverty of adult women and men within households. This suggests we will soon have a reliable methodology to better 'know' how women experience poverty. It will be interesting to see if and how UN Women utilises this

new gender-MDI in monitoring advances in Agenda 2030. A recent report prepared by the EDGE team (2017: 30) recognises that to understand differences in asset poverty between men and women would involve interviewing all adult household members, and that this “was difficult within the constraints of a typical survey program since it is resource intensive and increases costs”. This suggests that for the UN and UN Women, practical issues may preclude strategic aims and the inevitability of making do with the data we have.

5. Conclusions

For many years feminist scholars have sought to problematise the received wisdom of a feminised poverty and the associated notion of a ‘feminisation of poverty’, together with its persistent identification of female heads as the ‘poorest of the poor’. In the process, conceptual advances have been made in understanding poverty as a gendered experience and as one characterised by complexity and differences among women, highlighting the interconnectedness of processes which create the structures that produce and reproduce female poverty across time, space and place. Yet despite these advances, the data to explore these other than via small-scale studies have often lagged behind, and even as the Agenda 2030 SDGs were being agreed ‘simple’ income based measures of poverty dominated. In turn, and notwithstanding the nominal straightforwardness of these measures, sex disaggregation remains rare. It is little surprise, therefore, that we have trouble moving past measuring point-in-time differences between men and women (the extent to which poverty is feminised) to better understand the extent to which this is on-going (feminisation of poverty), and even less to understanding the factors that drive change.

New measures that focus on multidimensional aspects of privation are welcome, not least if they are able to reveal women’s relative asset poverty and importantly their time poverty and how the latter frequently interacts with income poverty, albeit in

complex ways. Yet measures which seek to understand causes, such as the 'power poverty' women within male-headed households may face, are even more difficult to formulate, not least since they demand that research enters the household and engages with unequal power in intimate relations. In the absence of more refined and systematic data to allow a comparison of women and men within households, there is a continued focus on comparisons between households, and especially between male-headed and female-headed units. The thorny question of how to define 'female headship' is often ignored and UN Women's move to focus on 'female only households' seems to be a move to fit available data, rather than more and better data informing understandings of how women and men live and experience poverty.

All this is important as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development gets underway, and, as we have argued in this paper, highlights the need for clarity in how data are collected and used. Not only does the need for monitoring progress within the SDGs make it imperative to produce data fit for purpose across all regions, but ideally these data should be improved so as to respond to some of the concerns raised in feminist literature about the multiple forms of poverty experienced by women and men across different sites, including within the home. To ensure that adequate data is gathered and harmonised across space and time might suggest a key role for UN Women in developing new and ambitious indicators better able to measure the diverse dimensions and manifestations of gendered poverty. A review of initiatives to date suggests this to be a role they have yet to fully embrace. As such rather than conceptual advances driving the search for better data, the absence of data up to the task of measuring differences in how women and men experience poverty is driving ever more narrow conceptualisations of gendered poverty.

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Table 1 – Factor Influences on Feminised Poverty in the Global South
Number of Women for every 100 Men in Poorest Households (GPI - Dependent Variable) a

| Independent Variables | A (Forced Entry) | | | B | | | C | | | D (Stepwise) | | |
|---|------------------|--------|---------------|--------|--------|---------------|--------|--------|---------------|--------------|--------|---------------|
| | B | t | Sig. | B | t | Sig | B | t | Sig | B | t | Sig |
| Constant | 64.492 | 2.011 | 0.055 | 90.732 | 13.584 | 0.000 | 93.600 | 17.170 | 0.000 | 80.900 | 12.790 | 0.000 |
| Number of 'female only' households for every 100 poorest households c | 0.186 | 3.089 | 0.005* | 0.118 | 2.715 | 0.008* | 0.111 | 2.620 | 0.011* | 0.227 | 4.270 | 0.000* |
| Women % with no education | | | | 0.027 | 0.323 | 0.748 | | | | | | |
| Women % with only primary | 0.078 | 0.412 | 0.683 | | | | | | | | | |
| Women % with secondary or higher | -0.041 | -0.265 | 0.793 | -0.053 | -0.613 | 0.542 | -0.120 | -3.550 | 0.001* | | | |
| Men % with no education | 0.028 | 0.119 | 0.906 | 0.015 | 0.151 | 0.880 | | | | | | |
| Men % with only primary | -0.014 | -0.117 | 0.908 | | | | | | | | | |
| Men % with secondary or higher | -0.047 | -0.210 | 0.835 | -0.043 | -0.475 | 0.636 | | | | | | |
| Women % not employed d | -0.055 | -0.616 | 0.543 | | | | | | | | | |
| Women % employed but with no pay | -0.050 | -0.403 | 0.690 | | | | | | | | | |
| Women % employed with pay (either cash, cash & in kind, in kind only) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Men % not employed d | 0.338 | 1.865 | 0.073 | | | | | | | | | |
| Men % employed but with no pay | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Men % employed with pay (either cash, cash & in kind, in kind only) | -0.136 | -0.987 | 0.333 | | | | | | | | | |
| Women's earnings MORE than Spouses % d | 0.134 | 0.472 | 0.641 | | | | | | | | | |
| Women's earnings LESS than Spouses % d | 0.349 | 1.466 | 0.155 | | | | | | | | | |
| Women's earnings about SAME as Spouses % d | 0.370 | 1.466 | 0.155 | | | | | | | | | |
| R2 | 0.548 | | | 0.357 | | | 0.342 | | | 0.324 | | |
| F | 2.424 | | | 7.320 | | | 17.950 | | | 18.240 | | |
| Sig F | 0.026 | | | 0.000 | | | 0.000 | | | 0.000 | | |
| N | 40.000 | | | 72.000 | | | 72.000 | | | 40.000 | | |

Source: Authors' own calculations of tabulated data in UN Women (2015: Annex 1, 250-7).

Notes: B = regression coefficient, t = t statistic, Sig = Significance (*p<0.05),

b,c,d, notes are from original source;

a- This indicator is the GPI = A / B = where;

A= Σ (females in poor households) / Σ (males in poor households), B = Σ (females in all households) / Σ (males in all households)

'Poorest households' refers to the bottom 20 per cent of households, using the wealth asset index in Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).

b- Data refer to women and men aged 20-59.

c- The indicator is calculated as follows: $(\Sigma('female-only' \text{ household in lowest quintile})) / (\Sigma(\text{total households in lowest quintile})) / (\Sigma(\text{All 'female-only' households})) / (\Sigma(\text{All households}))$. 'Female-only' household refers to households with no male adults. The indicator represents the likelihood of 'female-only' households being among the poorest. Values above 103 indicate that 'female-only' households are overly represented in the poorest quintile. Values below 97

indicate that 'female-only' households are underrepresented in the poorest quintile. Values between 97 and 103 indicate that the share of 'female-only' households in the poorest quintile is proportional to their overall share in the entire sample. 'Poorest households' refers to the bottom 20 per cent of households, using the wealth asset index in DHS and MICS.

d- Data refer to the population aged 20 to 49.