

Conceptual note No.5

Intra-household Poverty

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The issue of intra-household poverty has been conceptualised by the existing literature mainly as a matter of gender inequality. In this framing, intra-household poverty is theorised as a product not just of inter-personal relations of inequality and power between women and men but also of social and economic relations, practices and institutions. The essence of the argument is that because of power relations women and children may have differential access to resources within the family/household and therefore that their poverty may be hidden, leading also to under-estimation of the extent of poverty generally.

Quite a large literature emphasises that a gender-sensitive methodology is required to capture intra-household poverty (Daly 1992; Glendinning and Millar 1987; Pantazis and Ruspini 2006). This has been most developed as an issue of empirical practice and accuracy of information. The spotlight has especially been turned on the individual vs collective orientation of data, the unit of analysis (individual, household or family) and the identity of key respondents. Using a collective unit like the household or family and conceiving of it as a totally solidaristic entity has two consequences: no one can be counted as poor in households above the poverty line; all are assumed to be equally poor.

Empirical research has exposed three relevant factors which are invisible in household level surveys:

- the unequal (and in many cases unfair) distribution of income within the household or family;
- the significance of women's role as the money managers in poorer households especially;
- the known willingness of mothers to forego their own material needs in favour especially of their children (Warburton Brown 2011: 19).

In sum, both quantitative and qualitative studies have found that household-level variables are not necessarily optimum predictors of individual well-being and poverty status. They ignore gender and other forms of inequality (such as that based on age or generation for example) within the household and the possibility that non-earners may be poorer than other earning adults in the same household. However to assume no pooling is equally problematic. The consensus now is that both household and individual income data need to be used and actively compared. In addition to this, data is needed on the consumption process within the household. One of the key variables in the PSE is the mode of distribution of resources within the household. We can only approximate this however with the now standard question(s) inquiring into the general system of money management prevailing in the household or family.

A second methodological issue arising from a gender approach concerns the reliance on income. Feminist researchers have pointed both to the limitations of income and the need to operate with a broader conception of resources. Income is a market resource and relying on it alone ignores two things especially: there are other forms, arenas and currencies of resources and exchange; income does not convert simplistically into standard of living (Daly 1992). The latter point refers to the fact that a conversion process is involved in turning income into standard of living. We know very little about that and the resources ('capitals') which influence it. That conversion process may be a signature influence on poverty. Again we can only approximate this process and to do so the PSE utilises a range of non-monetary indicators, among which time is very important to get at resources. Data on time use, and intra-household inequities therein, will help us approximate this internal 'conversion process' and give us an insight on likely trade-offs as regards access to and chances of expenditure on other resources.

Intra-household inequalities in poverty also need to be conceptualised from a generational perspective. Even though generation, too, may be a relation of inequality and indeed a source of inequality, it is rarely theorised as an aspect of intra-household poverty. The finding of the willingness of mothers (and also fathers) to sacrifice aspects of their own consumption and well-being in favour of their children hints at a form of generational inequality that seems especially important. There may be also another type of generational inequality in that older people may have greater or lesser flows of resources in comparison to family or household members younger in age.

On the basis of this rationale, the following therefore are the relevant variables in the PSE study pertaining to intra-household issues:

- System of money management and partner responsibilities;
- Time expenditure;

- Economising behaviour (for personal consumption and the consumption/well-being of children).

References

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