Empowerment, Gender and Poverty

Gita Sen

Professor, Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore

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Outline of presentation

- Empowerment in the new social policy agenda – opportunities and openings
- Challenges to a gender analysis of poverty – why is gender so 'difficult' to understand or implement?
- Poverty policies and gendered power **structures (differentiated by ethnicity, race, caste) – poverty as a group experience**
- Implications for poverty policies and programs

- *Caveat*:

  Sometimes our focus on poverty is too micro; larger macro changes – processes of economic liberalization – can create poverty with the full backing of some parts of the state, even while other parts of the state are trying to alleviate or remove poverty! Example: Dharavi slum in Mumbai

I. Empowerment in the new social policy agenda

- Origins of empowerment in the women's movement in Latin America and Asia – 1970s and 1980s

- Em-power-ment defined as a process of transforming power relations

- Viewed as affecting both external **structures** of control over resources and knowledge, and internal subjective transformation towards agency and citizenship

Empowerment in the new social policy agenda…..

- Seen to require changes in women's access to resources, capabilities and subjectivity
- Also seen to require transformations in the *other* side of power relations – for women, this means the gender-blind or biased structures of state, markets, society, and families, differentiated by race, ethnicity, caste

Empowerment in the new social policy agenda….

- The world-wide critique of structural adjustment policies by women's organizations culminated in the Beijing conference which had this critique as its *leit motif (*at least in the large NGO Forum)

- By this time also, critiques of the absence of a human face to adjustment and the reduction in social expenditures had gained ground in the policy arena.

Empowerment in the new social policy agenda….

- By the mid 1990s, a new terminology for anti-poverty and social policies began to be adopted in the multilateral system (led by the World Bank)

- New approach married the critique of the state (from both left and right) with the language and practice of participation, empowerment, and beneficiary responsibility, decentralization (World Devt Report of 2000/01 has a different tone from WDR 1990)

Empowerment in the new social policy agenda….

- WDR 2000/01 emphasized sustainable poverty alleviation through social risk management

- This new approach also gave a role to both NGOs and the private sector

- In a sense one can say that the new social policy agenda was the culmination of the critique of policies from both the left and the right (NB: this is not the same as cooptation; it is a terrain of continued contestation)

Empowerment in the new social policy agenda….

- Empowerment of poor women seen as critical to making social and anti-poverty programs work

- However, official including World Bank interpretations tended, with exceptions, to 'sanitize' it to focus on improving women's capabilities and subjectivity, and carefully controlled and limited changes in resources

Empowerment in the new social policy agenda….

- "Social risk management" focused on altering the characteristics of women and /as the poor – develop their capacity to cope, mitigate or reduce risks
- What tended to get left out? (*go back to slide 4)*
- Serious changes in resources, and systematic tackling of the structures of gender power - *the other side of power*

Empowerment in the new social policy agenda….

- Reminder: Power is a relationship that characterizes not only the poor but their relationship with the rich, not only women but also men. One side of the relationship cannot be changed by itself…..

- Imagine a see saw with a very heavy person on one side, and where also the fulcrum is tilted towards that side!

II. Gender analysis of poverty

- Why is gender so difficult to understand or implement?
- New language of feminization of poverty is usually interpreted to mean that the poor are mostly women
- This may be true in some instances, but may not always be the case, and isn't even really the point
- Difference between seeing the poor as mostly women versus seeing poverty as a gendered experience

Poverty as a gendered experience

- Understanding how gender relations work to define the experience of poverty requires focusing on:
  - Who gets or has access to resources ?
  - How roles and relationships of work, responsibilities, cooperation, sharing or conflict define both women's and men's living and working conditions within households (differentiated by race, ethnicity, caste)
  - How structures and programs of the state and other actors (private, civil society) reinforce or transform those roles and relationships?
  - How normative frameworks are challenged or reinforced by policies and programs?

Poverty as a gendered experience…

- Why is gender so difficult to understand or implement?....
  - For poverty analysis, it means more than simply finding the best possible measure of who is poor – this is important and necessary but not sufficient
  - Needs qualitative as well as quantitative understanding of the division of work, responsibilities, norms, authority, control within and outside the household
  - Actually not so difficult to understand, but there are barriers of mindset sometimes of those who benefit from power itself

Poverty policies and gendered power structures

- Focus on only one critical dimension of these relations: what feminists have called the care economy

- How does a focus on care affect our understanding of the feminisation of poverty?

- Very simply, women's responsibilities for care fundamentally affect their own (and men's) ability to participate in social programs, in labour markets, to derive benefits from household resources

- Crucial to recognize that these responsibilities also structure the relations *among* women by race, ethnicity, caste

Poverty policies and gendered power structures…

- The functioning of what has been called the 'care economy' has been very well documented by feminist economists, sociologists and others but its implications for social policies and programs have been largely ignored

- For poor people, time is often the most valuable resource, and poor women's time is so much taken up by caring work that they remain caught in a vicious circle of poverty

Poverty policies and gendered power structures…

- Even worse, social policies often profit from this gendered division of work and its associated norms (Molyneux calls this putting 'mothers at the service of the state')

- Thereby reinforcing the gendered norms and roles that are at the root of women's poverty and within-household inequalities

Poverty policies and gendered power structures….

- Putting mothers at the service of the state represents a convenient marriage of new social policies built on downsizing and decentralizing the state while ensuring 'community' (largely women's) responsibilities for the success of programs
- Not so convenient for women….

Implications for poverty policies and programs

- How to change this situation?
- Collection of new types of information, e.g., the Observatorio as a way of improving the working of *Progresa*
- Using the information collected to understand better the way in which the care economy and gendered poverty are affected by social policies, e.g., Indian National Sample Survey's huge unused data on domestic work

Implications for poverty policies and programs …

- Building policies based on this information
  - Policies should not reinforce the gendered responsibilities for care as these are at the core of gendered poverty e.g. targeted cash payments for housework or caring versus more universal payments
  - Programs for transforming masculinist norms and behaviours – schools, public education, child and adolescent programs focused on not only girls but also boys and young men

Implications for poverty policies and programs …

- Systematic benefits for girls and women in higher education and in labour markets in order to break the cycle of gendered low-end work
- Consistent attention to violence and to its more subtle forms such as workplace sexual harassment
- Serious attention to transforming mindsets within government bureaucracies – need for practical and participatory approaches

Implications for poverty policies and programs…

- Much of what has been said up to now is more powerful in the context of race and ethnicity
- Much more information needs to be gathered about this to make policies more sensitive to this critical dimension