

THE IMPACT INITIATIVE

For International Development Research

New Knowledge on the Gendered Nature of Poverty and Wellbeing

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

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

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

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

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

It found that 28% of all awards had an explicit gender focus and a further 32% included women as part of the study or disaggregated findings by sex.



Key research findings

- The starting point for creating change in the gendered experience of work is not about highlighting women's participation in paid work, but rather understanding the social conditions that confine women to the private sphere.
- Whilst women are moving into 'traditional male' areas of work, they still face social stigma for transgressing gender norms, so it is important to explore how employment does, and does not, have the potential to change lives and livelihoods over time. More exploration is also needed on male attitudes to women's income generating activities and the power issues entailed.
- Women suffer more and deal with more diverse forms of shame than men and the studies highlight how shame can compromise women's very sense of humanity. Shame and loss of dignity can be an unintended outcome of social protection programmes and can potentially limit the effectiveness of donor or government responses to poverty.
- While schools and universities can offer opportunities for transforming gender inequalities, sexual harassment and sexual violence may be prevalent in education institutions. To better understand this and to capture the ways in which gender norms are shifting over time in these settings, more funding for longitudinal studies would be useful.
- Health providers must do more to ensure women's access to services, recognising how social norms and carer responsibilities may limit women's mobility. The stigma associated with disease may also be gendered; limiting women's appetite to seek medical attention in the first place. A more thorough understanding of the role of male relatives in women's decision-making processes would also lead to better health outcomes.
- Little is still known about how economic and environmental crises impact on women and men but the studies question the idea that women will be most vulnerable and point to how household crises can negatively impact boys as they are expected to take up the breadwinner role. What emerged from a number of studies was the importance of transactional sex as a livelihood strategy for many women.
- Many women and girls face violence or the threat of violence on a daily basis and this limits their life chances. Establishing legal frameworks to address gender based violence is an important first step to addressing this issue, however, on its own it is not enough, and changing attitudes is key to bringing change.
- Women should not be seen only as victims. So called 'at risk' groups such as sex workers demonstrate levels of agency and power that should be supported and promoted via collective actions and organisation.

The studies that did have an explicit gender focus provided important new insights into the lived experiences of women's poverty and wider wellbeing. They also demonstrate how a gender analysis can be applied to a 'mainstream' topic such as education to provide insights into wider societal concerns such as violence, and how a gender lens can provide additional interesting insights into how social norms impact on the wellbeing of women and men and girls and boys.

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

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

- [Morley](#) on how violence and the fear of violence affects girls' access to school.
- [Walker](#) on how university structures can perpetuate rather than challenge patriarchy.
- [Unterhalter](#) on how understandings of gender and how it is 'performed' can have negative impacts on education for both girls and boys.

2. Social norms impede women's equal access to decent work and economic resources. Even when women move into 'traditional male' areas of work they lack resources and often earn less than men doing similar work. See for example:

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

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

- See [Porter](#) on how new mobilities are linked with old fears around sexuality and assumed promiscuity.

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

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

Further reading

- Bradshaw, S., Linneker, B., Nussey, C. and Sanders-McDonagh, E. (2015) 'Gender Evidence Synthesis Research Award (ESRA) ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research', September, Middlesex University



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

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