



Focusing on poor women



Symposium on the harmonisation of  
gender indicators  
Canberra, 15-16 June 2006

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“The fact that tracking progress on gender equality and women’s rights is on the agenda is, itself, a sign of progress. But for commitments to have an impact, we need accountability, action, and political will.”

Noeleen Heyzer, *Progress of the World's Women 2002, Volume 2: Gender Equality and the Millennium Development Goals*, UNIFEM 2002, p. viii

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## Where are we today?

“Despite much progress in recent decades, gender inequalities remain pervasive in many dimensions of life—worldwide.”

The World Bank Group (2006)

*World Development Indicators 06*



## Where are we today?

- “...there has been very little progress in the official reporting of sex-disaggregated data in the past three decades,” with Africa and Oceania lagging behind other continents.
- “...official national data on basic demographic and social statistics relevant to gender are at times deficient, out-of-date, fragmented or simply unavailable.”

*The Worlds Women 2005: Interim Report*





## Recording women's existence an issue

- Reporting of births and deaths is 'quite bleak' with the need for action 'especially urgent in the LDCs, where data on births is acutely lacking and appears to have deteriorated with time.'

*The Worlds Women 2005: Interim Report*

- Though we can estimate the millions of 'missing women' (Sen) from skewed male - female ratios.





## Opportunities & challenges...

- The focus on accountability & aid effectiveness presents a strategic opportunity for more systematic review of commitments & implementation, what works & what doesn't, including in relation to gender equality
  - measuring inequality & change is central to this
  - but significant statistical needs & challenges
  - and capacity & commitment varies



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...that are political, technical & practical

- Can the sector harmonise its collective efforts so that we establish a common basis for measuring the gender impact of development work? If we can
  - we will have a better idea of what works well
  - contemporary learnings can be shared & incorporated in sector practice, improving quality, effectiveness & impact
  - we will enable greater progress on all the MDGs



## Our task

- Put forward some ideas and issues to help frame and prompt a focus on poor women in the discussions that follow
- Encourage reflection on what we mean by poverty
  - Timor Leste anecdote: how can you call us poor?



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so that we focus on ...



- Substantive outcomes we think are most important for enabling quality gender work, the impact of which we can measure
- What we can do at and through these discussions and afterwards
- But especially, investments that make a real difference to the lives of poor women

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## Three priority groups

“...action on the seven priorities is particularly important for three subpopulations of women:

- Poor women in the poorest countries and in countries that have achieved increases in national income, but where poverty remains significant.
- Adolescents...
- Women and girls in conflict & postconflict settings.”

UN Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality (2005), *Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women*.





## UN Millennium Taskforce's rationale

“Gender inequalities exist among the rich and the poor, but they tend to be greater among the poor, especially for inequalities in capabilities and opportunities.

Moreover, the wellbeing and survival of poor households depend on the productive and reproductive contributions of their female members. Also, an increasing number of poor households are headed or maintained by women. A focus on poor women is therefore central to reducing poverty.”



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## Gender inequality & poverty

✿ Gender inequality is part ... of the processes of causing and deepening poverty ✿ and must therefore be part of measures to eradicate it.

Naila Kabeer *Gender Mainstreaming in Poverty Eradication and the Millennium Development Goals*

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## Who are 'poor women in the poorest countries?

- UN Millennium Taskforce report doesn't define
- More generally, goes to how we understand poverty
- Conceptual debates underline
  - the complexity of poverty
  - & of the factors that affect and reproduce poverty
  - hence the need for multidimensional understandings and responses



## What is poverty? - in brief...

- Not just about income / GDP (which obscures or under-values women's contribution & activity levels by defining out areas of (unpaid) work where women dominate, such as child rearing or housework, & work in the informal or non-market sector)
- Human development = development of human capabilities - the process of expanding 'the range of things that a person could do and be in her life,' ie 'the real freedoms that people enjoy' (Sen)
- Not just about the means to survive but the capability to thrive
- Poverty is redefined as the deprivation of basic capabilities



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## So not being poor means women...

- can sustain the capabilities, assets, and activities required for a means of living
- have the ability to cope with stresses and shocks
- and can maintain and enhance these capabilities and assets without undermining the natural resource base
  - A person's capabilities reflect 'her empowerment, the power that she has to be the person she wants to be and to have the kind of life she wants to lead' Robeyns 2001

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- Can we really say this describes the situation of most (or even many) women in the developing contexts in which we work?
- Need to see the focus on the poorest **in context**
- Millennium Taskforce Report is all about the importance of a focus on women in order to achieve the MDGs
  - with an emphasis on interventions that particularly benefit the poorest - those whose capabilities are most constrained

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## Seeing poverty differently

- If poverty is understood as limiting opportunities to live a life one has reason to value, then in a world where gender is a significant barrier, focusing on women itself can be a way to reach the very poor.
- Defining poverty differently shifts who we see as experiencing poverty





## Reaching poor women

- It's not just measuring the impact of what you do but also of how you do it
  - Eg, a defining characteristic of very poor women is their exposure/vulnerability to shocks. When you have no buffer, it's hard to take risks or see beyond the short term.
  - If we want to involve very poor women, consider incorporating ways to mitigate or socialise aspects of risk
  - and recognise and address their opportunity costs - for example, by providing food or child care
- ➔ Indicator = meaningful participation of women in determining goals, objectives & performance indicators



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## Participation

- Involve women, especially poor women, because they stand to benefit most from investments in community infrastructure (and public goods in general)
  - We know, we know - but still it doesn't happen enough
  - A World Bank evaluation of 122 water projects found that the effectiveness of a project was **six to seven times higher** where women were involved than where they were not.
- ➔ Indicator = meaningful participation of women in issue diagnosis, decision making, implementation & management of community infrastructure

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## Sounds obvious?

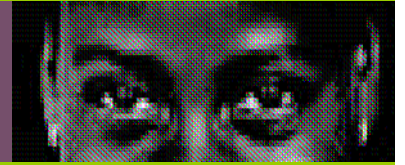
- But not always what we do
- Often supply-driven, institution-driven, expert-driven - focus on technical inputs, services, production

### Need to think holistically about:

- Things that poor women might be very vulnerable to
- The assets & resources that help them thrive & survive
- The policies & institutions that impact on their livelihoods
- How poor women respond to threats & opportunities
- What sort of outcomes poor women aspire to

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## Focusing on poor women means



- Seeing development from the perspective of poor women
- Understanding the specificities and complexity of their context
- Potentially, has major implications for how we work
  - as specialists
  - as donor agencies
  - within country programs
  - with other donors



## Ways of working

- More information, more analysis, better partnerships ... and more time
  - Especially more and better **gender analysis**
  - Participatory methods for impact analysis
    - eg wealth ranking – communities can provide a context-specific understanding of who is really poor and what has changed
  - Better **monitoring** of development impact (and of organisational performance to address 'policy evaporation')
- Indicator = process indicator?



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## Reaching poor women: invest in basic infrastructure

“Lack of basic sanitation & safe water is an acute problem for the women & girls who live in poor & overcrowded urban slums and in the rural areas of the developing world. Many... have to wait to relieve themselves until dark, sometimes confronting the fear & the reality of harassment & sexual assault...

In many countries, school attendance by girls is lower and drop-out rates are higher in schools that have no access to safe water and no separate toilet facilities for boys and girls... ”

*For her it's the big issue: Putting women at the centre of water supply, sanitation and hygiene, Evidence Report, WASH Campaign, March 2006*

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## Reaching poor women: invest in basic infrastructure

“ ... women and girls in low-income countries spend 40 billion hours every year fetching and carrying water from sources which are often far away and may not, after all, provide clean water. From this standpoint, it is simple to understand that a woman could be empowered by having a nearby pump that conveniently supplies enough safe water for her family.”

*For her it's the big issue: Putting women at the centre of water supply, sanitation and hygiene, Evidence Report, WASH Campaign, March 2006*

➔ Indicator = hours per day (year) women spend collecting water



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## Focus on the informal sector

- The poorest women in the world are employed in agriculture or the informal sector and their work is vastly undercounted in employment statistics.
- Women's share of self-employment and informal sector employment is increasing faster than that of men
- Indicators here will capture circumstances of poorest women





## Focus on the informal sector

- Track employment in the informal economy
- Develop a decent work indicator
- Measure extent to which women are paid a living wage
- Number of women agricultural workers who own land
- Sex differentials in income from employment
- Occupational segregation
- Effect of small children in household on work participation  
(reflects differences in family care responsibilities)





## References / links

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