

Poverty in Fiji has been a subject of various studies in recent years, all of which have focused on definitions and measurement of poverty at the household level (Narsey et al. 2010; World Bank and FIBOS 2011). The household aggregation of incomes forms the basis of household income and expenditure surveys to estimate the number of people living below the poverty line. The Fiji household income and expenditure survey (as with most such studies across the Pacific) uses income of the male household head and therefore begins with a gender bias. While this may be appropriate at an aggregate level, it is not accurate for analysis at the level of the individual. Poverty is not a gender-neutral condition, as men and women might experience poverty in different ways and much can also be learnt from considering the 'individual' experiences of poverty (Chattier 2011). However, the fact that households and individuals cannot be equated in poverty analysis is still far from being accepted universally (Alkire and Santos 2010). Certainly, there are conceptual, methodological and data collection challenges in moving from the household to the individual. But there are compelling reasons to take on such an exercise. If the goal of poverty reduction is a serious consideration, then the assumptions within household aggregates need revisiting, while also grappling with the complexities of an individual-level approach.

This *In Brief* highlights some of the ways in which gendered social expectations, roles and responsibilities, and gender discrimination, shape and are shaped by poverty. These gendered differences, which do not come to light at the household level, have important policy implications for poverty reduction in Fiji and the Pacific. This paper draws from a transnational feminist research project¹ that is motivated by the realisation that, until we have a dependable measure, we cannot know in what sense, if any, poverty is a gendered phenomenon.

The research in Fiji began with a qualitative approach to learning about women's and men's experiences of poverty. Participants were selected by gender, age, and ethnicity, and included people in a range of life situations, such as married, widowed or single, pregnant or not, able-bodied or living with a disability, from a large or a small household, and from different levels of poverty. Data were collected from three sites representing three types of communities: a poor urban community (*iTaukei*) in Central Division, a poor rural community (Fiji Indian) in Northern Division and a highly marginalised community in Suva city (a squatter settlement with mixed groups of *iTaukei* and Indian participants). A total of 162 individuals with a mix of males and females from each community were selected for the first phase of the study. The situation for women and men in Fiji is not the same, and there are differences with regard to the roles and controls of *iTaukei* versus Indo-Fijian households in rural and urban communities. But male-dominated hierarchies were common themes regardless of ethnicity and location, and have compromised women's roles in Fiji society.

Asking about the circumstances and perspectives of individuals rather than households revealed how burdens and hardships are influenced by gender and family context, and where these factors intersect to deepen vulnerability and deprivation. An adult woman from an urban community said:

Poverty is different [for women] because when a woman is abandoned by her husband she ends up poorer because [she] cannot build a house or support [her] children alone.

On the other hand, men felt increased pressure to provide for their families due to their status as breadwinners. An older man in a rural community observed how this role gendered hardship in poverty:

It sometimes becomes very hard for him [my son] to look after me and his own family since I lost one eye and am unable to do any work.

In some ways, men saw the breadwinner expectation as a burden because they were poor; their poverty was a sign that they were unsuccessful in fulfilling this role. There were also some noteworthy gender differences in participants' expectations for their children with respect to education. For women and girls the choices were often restricted. In a large family, it is a norm that the eldest daughters have to drop out of school if the parents cannot afford the education of all the children. In a rural community, participants noted that parents place more emphasis on educating sons. Girls are disadvantaged by domestic chores and their education is often sacrificed in households with limited finances.

Unequal spending patterns between women and men within the household frequently give rise to domestic violence as well. Adult males and females from the marginalised community mentioned:

When a couple is in tension and they fight all the time, it is a sign of poverty and lack of money in the house because the men spend all their money on kava and alcohol.

What became especially apparent through this qualitative research was the importance of context in understanding poverty, and the ways in which variables such as gender can affect deprivation, and how they interact with the collective context of the household.

The Contribution of Gender and Feminist Analyses

The diversity of individual circumstances reflected here highlights what is lost in household-level measurement. I am not suggesting that poverty is necessarily worse for women in Fiji or that women are poorer than men. What I do say is that poverty is different for men and women, and girls and boys, depending on both individual and collective contexts, and that it is imperative that we measure

poverty in a way that reveals rather than obscures these differences. Current approaches to measuring and understanding poverty in Fiji not only fail to account adequately for the relationship between poverty and gender, their gender-blindness is likely to reinforce rather than redress existing inequalities. It can therefore be concluded that substantial gender differences emerge at the individual-level analysis of poverty. The next *In Brief* will present findings from the second phase of research confirming the relative gendered priorities of women and men regarding dimensions of poverty in Fiji.

Author Notes

Priya Chattier is a Pacific research fellow with the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, ANU. She is a team member of a transnational feminist research project, based in Canberra, for Fiji-based fieldwork.

Endnote

- 1 This publication was supported by the Australian Research Council-funded linkage project, 'Assessing Development: Designing Better Indices of Poverty and Gender Equity', made possible with partnerships with the Australian National University, Oxfam Great Britain Southern Africa, International Women's Development Agency, Philippines Health and Social Science Association, the University of Colorado at Boulder, and femlinkPacific. Reports of the qualitative research conducted as part of the project are available at <www.genderpovertymeasure.org/publications>.

References

- Alkire, S. and M.E. Santos 2010. Acute Multidimensional Poverty: A New Index for Developing Countries. *OPHI Working Paper* No. 38. University of Oxford.
- Chattier, P. 2011. Exploring the Capability Approach with the Bargaining Model: New Methodologies for Gender-Sensitive Poverty Measures in Fiji. *Journal of Pacific Studies* 31(1):13–30.
- Narsey, W., T. Raikoti and E. Waqavonovono 2010. *Preliminary Report: Poverty and Household Incomes in Fiji in 2008–09*. Suva: Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics.
- World Bank and FIBOS (Fiji Bureau of Statistics) 2011. *Poverty Trends, Profiles and Small Area Estimation (Poverty Maps) in Republic of Fiji (2003–2009)*. Washington: The World Bank and FIBOS.

