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# Construction of gender sensitive poverty line based on local perception: Evidence from Habra-II Block of West Bengal state in India

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### ABSTRACT

This study employs participatory well-being ranking (PWBR) exercise with men and women separately for generating gendered poverty line in Habra-II Block of West Bengal state of India. Men and women differ in a number of themes related to the experience of poverty. We quantify the gender disaggregated qualitative information collected through PWBR from eight village segments to arrive at poverty lines, followed by the generation of poverty statistics. Women and men differ in a number of themes related to poverty. Women use land, house type, dependent in the family, occupation and infrastructure to characterize poor households, and men use sanitation, business, land holding, farming, and occupations for the same. The differential gender perception results in different poverty lines and poverty statistics for men and women in most of the study villages. For most of the study villages women generated higher number of below poverty line households than men.

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## 1. Introduction

Poverty alleviation is an important objective of many development programs, projects, and policies (Laderchi, Saith, & Stewart, 2003). To design or evaluate activities meant to alleviate poverty, the stakeholders involved must understand what it means to be poor, appreciate how the conditions of the poor differ from those of the non-poor, and be able to assess the number of poor people in a targeted area (Ravnborg, 2002). Hence, poverty appraisal is essential for targeting, prioritizing and planning poverty reduction measures, and for monitoring the impact of these

measures over time (Foster, Fozzard, Naschold, & Conroy, 2002). A credible measure of poverty can be a powerful instrument to influence policy makers regarding the living condition of the poor (Ravallion, 1998).

Historically, there has been huge diversity in conceptualization and methodological applications in poverty assessment, and a unanimously accepted approach of poverty measurement has remained far from reality. Scholars have expanded dimensions of the concept of 'poverty' – from money-metric measurements to non-monetary proxies and then to capability approach – and have employed qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods to approximate it. Of late, there is experimentation with participatory methods and local perceptions in poverty studies since these are believed to provide rich insight of poverty and put poor people at the center of poverty eradication process.

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But, unlike the formal methods, the quantification and scaling up of participatory methods for larger geographical areas have remained largely elusive. Recent researches suggest that incorporation of local perception is able to define poverty, can assign poverty line and summarize poverty statistics (Hargreaves et al., 2007; Leclerc, 2010). But, explicit consideration of gender perception in such analysis is an outstanding issue. This is important, since both qualitative and quantitative school of poverty research has developed strong paradigms of gendered poverty analysis but, this has not been employed to examine the outcomes of qualitative poverty assessments based on gendered perception. Putting simply, we need to examine—‘Do women and men perceive poverty differently?’ If yes, then ‘what is its implication in the outcome of perception-based poverty assessment, for example in the generation of poverty statistics?’

To appreciate these research questions and associated novel methodology, we have briefly described the paradigms employed in poverty research with special reference to participatory poverty assessment and associated gender considerations. Finally, we have rationalized the need of the study in Indian context.

### 1.1. Participatory assessment of poverty

Individuals and institutions have widely used participatory and qualitative poverty assessments, particularly after 1990s (Narayan, 2000; Robb, 2002; White & Pettit, 2004). The greatest advantage of these methods is its grounding on internal standards of poverty such as living with dignity or reduction of vulnerability, unlike the standard money-metric external standards. Such assessments have helped in developing insights into dimensions of poverty previously examined by household surveys, such as vulnerability, gender, crime and violence, and seasonality (Narayan, Patel, Schafft, Rademacher, & Koch-Schulte, 2000). This has also helped in in-depth understanding of poverty, explaining the processes of impoverishment, conveying the priorities of the poor, and assisting in analyzing poverty beyond the household unit (Norton, Bird, Brock, Kakande, & Turk, 2001). However, there are questions regarding the genuineness of people’s participation (Booth, Holland, Hentschel, Lanjouw, & Herbert, 1998) and the perceived lack of “scientificity” of the methods and their subjective nature. The heterogeneity of community also jeopardize the inclusion of its marginalized section in the process. Nevertheless, the contribution of participatory poverty assessment as alternative and people-centric approach has gained momentum in recent times (Narayan, 2009).

However, the central challenge of employing participatory methods is expanding participatory techniques from the project level to policy processes (Laderchi, 2001). Participatory processes are usually subjective and small scale, and the results are difficult to generalize or compare across contexts (Hargreaves et al., 2007). Poverty identified through PRA may also converge or diverge in their findings (Mukherjee, 1992). But, no single proxy indicator is appropriate to replace people’s perception. Researchers now suggest that participatory techniques, such as partic-

ipatory wealth ranking, are suitable to generate poverty statistics (Barahona & Levy, 2002). Standardized method of large scale application of wealth ranking is able to produce comparability of the information produced across contexts (Leclerc, 2010; Ravnborg, 2002; Simanowitz, Nkuna, & Kashim, 2000). Hargreaves et al. (2007) successfully assign poverty line on the basis of local perception and quantify qualitative data generated through participatory wealth ranking exercise.

### 1.2. Gender consideration in poverty research

There is a strong presence and example of gendered analyses of poverty in development economics (Chant, 2003, 2006; Cornwall, 2003; Razavi, 1999). Unlike many studies, where wealth rankings come close to economic surveys, women’s responses differ most significantly from the survey data. This suggests the importance of gender as an important variable in knowledge and values of poverty (White & Pettit, 2004). Gender perspective in poverty measurement triggers the broadening of indicator base, concentrates on individual within the household and stresses on the incorporation of peoples’ perception in poverty study (Chant, 2003). It helps in broadening the concept of poverty and is more useful than focus on household income levels as it provides better grasp of the multidimensional aspects of gender disadvantage (Razavi, 1999). During poverty analysis, practitioners take care of the gender differences in the experience of poverty, and if one find that women as individuals are poorer than men, such information becomes important for designing policy (Cagatay, 1998). This requires gender-disaggregated statistics and capacity building in gender analysis. Noticeably, a large section of literature on gender and poverty revolves around women headed households and their comparison to men-headed households (Buvinic & Gupta, 1997), which needs to focus on intra-household disparity (Cagatay, 1998). Kabeer (1996) observes that both the qualitative and the quantitative methods are gender biased, although careful designing of qualitative methods using the criteria that poor people themselves put forth may address the concerns (Chambers, 1996). Thus, poverty assessment needs to employ multiple methods and should ensure that women’s voices are heard (Cagatay, 1998).

### 1.3. Application of gender concern in local perception based studies

Most of the studies (mentioned in Section 1.2) report affirmative to the question—‘Are women poorer than men?’ However, these are mostly questionnaire-based surveys. Putting gender concern at the centre of local perception based study on poverty suggests that large scale application of wealth ranking, if conducted with an explicit gender consideration, would generate gender sensitive outcome for poverty assessment. We want to inquire if women perceive poverty differently from men and in what respects they do differ. This will help us examining the outstanding question in poverty study with local perception—‘Will the poverty line and poverty statistics be different if we explicitly consider gender during perception-based stud-

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