



Gender and multidimensional poverty in Nicaragua: An individual based approach

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ABSTRACT

Most existing multidimensional poverty measures, such as the global-MPI and the MPI-LA, use the household as the unit of analysis, which means that the multidimensional poverty condition of the household is equated with the multidimensional poverty condition of all its members; accordingly, these measures ignore the intra-household inequalities and are gender-insensitive. Gender equality is, however, at the center of the sustainable development, as emphasized by Goal 5 of the SDGs; therefore, individual-based measures are indispensable to track progress in reaching this Goal. We contribute to the literature on multidimensional poverty and gender inequality by proposing an individual-based multidimensional poverty measure for Nicaragua and estimate the gender gaps in the three I's of multidimensional poverty (incidence, intensity, and inequality). Overall, we find that in Nicaragua, the gender gaps in multidimensional poverty are lower than 5%, and poverty does not seem to be feminized. However, the inequality among the multidimensionally poor is clearly feminized, especially among adults, and women are living in very intense poverty when compared to men. We also find that adding a dimension (employment, domestic work, and social protection) under which women face higher deprivation into the analysis leads to larger estimates of the incidence, intensity, and inequality of women's poverty. Finally, we find evidence that supports earlier studies that challenge the notion that female-headed households are worse off than those led by males in terms of poverty.

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1. Introduction

Poverty is one of the major sources of unfreedom (Sen, 2000a); it can involve not only the absence of necessities of material well-being but also the negation of possibilities of living a decent life (Anand & Sen, 1997). The removal of poverty is consequently a central goal of development and remains at the top of the world's development agenda, as it is reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nation General Assembly on September 25th, 2015: “End poverty in all its forms everywhere” [Goal 1 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)] (UN, 2015, p. 15).

As the Goal 1 of the SDGs indicates, the conceptual understanding of poverty has been enhanced and deepened considerably in

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the past decades, grounded especially on Amartya Sen's influential work on his capability approach (Thorbecke, 2008),² and there is currently a widespread consensus that poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon (Atkinson, 2003; Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009a, 2009b). Accordingly, poverty analysis and its measurement should not be based solely on income since this monetary indicator is unable to capture key well-being dimensions such as, for example, life expectancy, the provision of public goods, literacy, security, and freedom (Bourguignon & Chakravarty, 2003; Chakravarty & Lugo, 2016; Kakwani & Silber, 2008a; Whelan, Nolan, & Maître, 2014); as noted by Sen (2000b, p. 18): “Human lives are battered and diminished in all kinds of different ways”. As a result of this awareness, poverty research has shifted the emphasis from a unidimensional to a multidimensional approach (Chakravarty & Lugo, 2016; Duclos & Tiberti, 2016; Pogge & Wisor, 2016), which has been considered by Kakwani & Silber (2008a) as “the most important development of poverty research in recent years” (p. xv), and diverse approaches

² See, e.g., Sen, 1984, 1985, 1992, 1993, 2000a, 2008.

have been proposed in the literature for the measurement of poverty in a multidimensional setting.³

Yet, it should be mentioned that there does not seem to be a universal agreement on whether the multiple dimensions of poverty should be brought together into a single measure (Lustig, 2011); for instance, Ravallion advocates a dashboard approach, although he also recognizes that poverty is multidimensional (Ravallion, 2011).⁴ Particularly, in this paper, we start from the premise that a composite index and a dashboard approach can be complementary; there is no reason to choose between them (Ferreira & Lugo, 2013). The latter might be particularly useful for policy purposes, while the former is helpful to take advantage of the information from the joint distribution of deprivation, when the target is, as in our case, to quantify the incidence of many deprivations within the same individuals (Yalonetzky, 2014).

On the other hand, most existing empirical investigations concerned about multidimensional poverty analysis have used the household as the unit of analysis (Bessell, 2015; Franco, 2017; Klasen & Lahoti, 2016; Pogge & Wisor, 2016; Rogan, 2016a), meaning that the household has been utilized to determine who is multidimensionally poor and who is not. The general assumption adopted is that all persons in the household are multidimensionally poor if the household is identified as such; that is, the multidimensional poverty condition of the household has been equated with the multidimensional poverty condition of all individuals in the household (Klasen & Lahoti, 2016). Poverty is, however, a characteristic of individuals, not households (Deaton, 1997), and, furthermore, perhaps the most relevant thing, such an assumption overlooks important within-household features and ignores the intra-household inequalities that have been suggested to exist: Much of the inequalities are generated within households (Asfaw, Klasen, & Lamanna, 2010; Bradshaw, 2002, 2013; Bradshaw, Chant, & Linneker, 2017a, 2017b; Chant, 2008; Klasen & Wink, 2002, 2003; Rodríguez, 2016). Besides, potential inequalities among different age groups living in the household (e.g., inequalities between children and adults) would be also hidden when such an entity is used as the unit of analysis (Atkinson, Cantillon, Marlier, & Nolan, 2002), which might lead to underestimations of the extent of overall poverty and inequality in the society and, in turn, to biased assessments of social policies and targeting (Deaton, 1997; Rodríguez, 2016).

In addition to the stated above, within-household inequality is a significant problem that deserves fuller research, especially because of its significance to the poverty analysis by gender (Atkinson et al., 2002); as observed by Sen (2000a, p. 15), “inequality between women and men afflicts—and sometime prematurely ends—the lives of millions of women, and, in different ways, severely restricts the substantive freedoms that women enjoy”. Yet, multidimensional poverty measures that take the household as the unit of identification of the poor are not sensitive to gender either; they are gender-blind and, consequently, incapable of revealing gender differentials within the households (Bessell, 2015; Pogge & Wisor, 2016). By definition, households containing both a female and a male cannot contribute to a gender gap in poverty (Wiepking & Maas, 2005); therefore, a gender difference cannot be estimated, and a gender analysis cannot be performed using household-based measures.

Gender equality is at the center of sustainable development as well (ECLAC, 2016), as it is demanded by the SDGs: “Achieve

gender equality and empower all women and girls” (Goal 5 of the SDGs) (UN, 2015, p. 14). There are many intrinsic and instrumental grounds to be concerned about existing gender inequalities in different well-being-related dimensions (Klasen & Lamanna, 2009).⁵ On one hand, from a well-being and equity view, gender inequalities diminish the individuals’ well-being and are a form of injustice (Klasen, 2007, 2002; Klasen & Wink, 2003); on the other hand, from an instrumental perspective, gender inequalities have an impact on economic growth and economic development (Klasen, 1999, 2006; Klasen & Lamanna, 2009). However, for the reasons discussed previously, assessments of gender inequalities cannot be based on household-based measures; individual-based measures are therefore indispensable to track progress in reaching the Goal 5 of the SDGs (Bradshaw, Chant, & Linneker, in press).

Although, in principle, assessing individual-based poverty seems to be more feasible in a non-income multidimensional framework than in a monetary one (Klasen, 2007), since attainments in many non-monetary dimensions, such as education and health, can be ascribed to individuals, and the information on these attainments are often available in the household surveys, most popular multidimensional poverty measures, such as the Multidimensional Poverty Index (global-MPI)⁶, are estimated at the household level (Duclos & Tiberti, 2016); they are therefore not sensitive to the intra-household distribution of deprivation and are thus unable to measure gender differentials in deprivation and individuals’ multidimensional poverty (Pogge & Wisor, 2016). In fact, in the literature on multidimensional poverty analysis, only a few papers have assessed individuals’ multidimensional poverty, as well as gender differences, but the vast majority of them have been focused on a specific population subgroup, such as children (e.g. Roche, 2013; Rodríguez, 2016; Roelen, Gassmann, & de Neubourg, 2010, 2011), women (e.g. Alkire et al., 2013; Bastos, Casaca, Nunes, & Pereirinha, 2009; Batana, 2013), and adults (e.g. Agbodji, Batana, & Ouedraogo, 2015; Bessell, 2015; Mitra, Posarac, & Vick, 2013; Pogge & Wisor, 2016; Rogan, 2016a; Vijaya, Lahoti, & Swaminathan, 2014); that is, they have not evaluated multidimensional poverty at the individual level for the whole population.

As far as we know, there are only two papers that have assessed individual-based multidimensional poverty across the entire population. The first one is the work by Klasen and Lahoti (2016), who propose a framework to measure multidimensional poverty and inequality at the individual level. They find that in India, multidimensional poverty among females is 14 percentage points larger than among males when using an individual-based measure, but it is only 2 percentage points higher when employing a household-based one; they also suggest that in India, the neglect of intra-household inequality underestimates poverty and inequality in deprivation by some 30%. The second one is the work by Franco (2017), who constructs an individual-centered multidimensional poverty index considering three age groups, children (<18 years old), adults (between 18 and 59 years), and elderly (60 years or older), and uses it to estimate multidimensional poverty in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. She finds that Chile is the country with the best performance in poverty and, overall, the elderly,

³ See, e.g., Alkire & Foster, 2011a; Alkire, et al., 2015; Atkinson, 2003; Bourguignon & Chakravarty, 2003; Chakravarty, Deutsch, & Silber, 2008; Deutsch & Silber, 2005; Duclos, Sahn, & Younger, 2008; Kakwani & Silber, 2008b; Klasen, 2000; Lemmi & Betti, 2006, 2013; Rippin, 2013, 2016, 2017; Tsui, 2002.

⁴ For more information about this discussion, see Alkire and Foster (2011b); Lustig (2011) and Ravallion (2011).

⁵ There are considerable and persistent gender differences in many indicators of well-being across the world. They include gender gaps in control over economic resources, education, earnings, mortality, access to employment, pay, time use, safety, and power in the public and the private sphere (Klasen, 2007). As noted by Klasen (2007, p. 167), “perhaps the most egregious form of gender inequality is that of gender inequality in survival in parts of the developing world, most notably South Asia and China where millions of females are “missing” as a result of these inequalities”.

⁶ The global-MPI has been developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) in collaboration with the Human Development Report Office of the United Nation Development Program (UNDP) (Alkire & Santos, 2014). Since 2010, it has been included in the Human Development Reports.

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