



# The more gender equity, the less child poverty? A multilevel analysis of malnutrition and health deprivation in 49 low- and middle-income countries



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## ABSTRACT

Mothers are often perceived as key agents in safeguarding the interests of children. If the assumption that women, given the opportunity, are more likely than men to see to the interests of children is true, children can be expected to be less exposed to severe forms of deprivation in countries where women have a relatively strong position in society.

The hypotheses that fewer children are exposed to health deprivation and to severe forms of food deprivation in countries where there is a high degree of gender equity are tested.

A combination of country-level data and micro-level survey data, makes it possible to analyze whether and to what degree gender equity in a country only benefits children of mothers who have been able to take advantage of a high degree of gender equity or if it also benefits children of less resourceful mothers. The analysis is based on a combination of macro- and micro-data (N = 391,817) from 49 low- and middle-income countries to analyze the relationship between gender equity and malnutrition, and gender equity and health deprivation among children.

The results indicate that gender equity in education and employment decreases child malnutrition, and that women's empowerment decreases health deprivation for children with unschooled mothers.

The results support the notion that women are instrumental in children's welfare. Even when we control for a whole range of both country-level and individual-level factors, gender equity at the country-level still comes out as an important determinant of children's nutrition and access to health care. Thus, strengthening women's position is important if we wish to improve children's living conditions.

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## 1. Introduction

In the present paper, we investigate whether gender equity in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) affects living conditions among children. More specifically, we analyze whether and how women's status in society, measured as overall gender equity in education, economic activities and women's access to political power, is related to malnutrition and lack of healthcare among children. The analysis is based on a combination of harmonized survey data from 49 developing countries covering children 0 to 4 years old (N = 391,817) and country-level data on, among other things, gender equity.

The reason for focusing on women and women's status in societies is that women, or more precisely mothers, often are perceived as key agents in safeguarding the interests of children (Branisa,

Klasen, & Ziegler, 2013). If the assumption that women, given the opportunity, are more likely than men to see to the interests of children is true, we would expect children to be less exposed to severe forms of deprivation in countries where women have a relatively strong position in society. Because we combine country-level data with micro-level survey data, we can analyze whether and to what degree overall gender equity in a country only benefits children of mothers who have been able to take advantage of a high degree of gender equity or if it also benefits children of less resourceful mothers. The aim of the present paper is to test whether or not this is the case.

Women's position in a society affects most aspects of people's lives (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). First, women are not just one group among various disempowered subsets of society (the poor, ethnic minorities, and so on); they are a cross-cutting category of individuals that overlap with all these other groups. Second, household and interfamilial relations are the central locus of women's disempowerment in a way that is not true for disadvantaged groups.

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It is a common assumption that empowering women and increasing the resources women control have a positive impact on children's living conditions (Branisa et al., 2013; Bornstein, Putnick, Bradley, Lansford, & Deater-Deckard, 2015). The notion that mothers assume greater responsibility for the daily household economy and household members', especially children's, wellbeing is not only a general belief, but also based on empirical observations from all around the globe (Halleröd, 2005; Molneux, 2008; Nyman, 2002; Vogler & Pahl, 1994). Moreover, the assumption that women will safeguard the interests of children has long had an impact on social policies. When, for example, introduction of the general child allowance was discussed in Sweden in the 1940s, it was argued that, in order to ensure the money would actually be used to improve conditions among children, the allowance should be given to the mother not the father (Nyman, 2002). Empirical evidence that this assumption is actually true was provided in the 1970s when Britain replaced the tax deduction for families with children, which mainly went to the father, with a child allowance that went directly to the mother. Analyses based on expenditure surveys showed that the change was related to an increase in child-related consumption (Lundberg, Pollack, & Wales, 1997). Today, different versions of so-called Conditional Cash Transfers programs have been introduced in a large number of LMICs, the perhaps best known being the Brazilian program Bolsa Família and the Mexican program Oportunidades. A basic assumption guiding this type of program is that mothers are more likely than fathers to assume responsibility for children, and thus transfers are typically given to mothers who are made responsible for meeting the program demands to guarantee school attendance, health, and nutrition among children (Molneux, 2008).

Another strand of research has shown that when women achieve political power they prioritize issues of particular importance to women, such as gender equity, family policy and social policy in general (Lovenduski, 2008; Wängnerud, 2009; Wängnerud & Sundell, 2011; Wängnerud, 2015). In LMICs, previous research has found that women prioritize poverty alleviation (Gottlieb, Grossman, & Robinson, 2016), health care (Gottlieb et al., 2016), access to safe water (Gottlieb et al., 2016; Olken, 2010) more than men do. Previous studies have also shown that women's empowerment, measured as political office in the local community, significantly increase children's access to health care (Kumar & Prakash, 2017), water taps (Beaman Lori, Esther Duflo, Rohini Pande, & Petia Topalova, 2011), and improve their school results (Pathak & Macours, 2017), and significantly reduce the extent of water borne diseases (Dongre, 2010) and neonatal mortality (Bhalotra & Clots-Figuera, 2014).

The discussion above indicates that women's command of resources, degree of empowerment and ability to assume responsibility for children's everyday life are essential to children's wellbeing. Thus, it would seem to be important to understand women's position in society in relation to between- and within-country differences in poverty and deprivation among children. Earlier studies have shown a clear relationship between mother's educational attainment and children's nutritional status (Abuya, Ciera, & Kimani-Murage, 2012). One central question here, which is impossible to address in comparative analyses based on country-level data only, is whether gender equity affects all children or only children to relatively resourceful mothers? Because we rely on a mixture of country-level data and survey data, we will be able to address this issue as well.

## 2. Analytical approach and hypothesis

We will look at two specific forms of child deprivation: malnutrition and lack of access to basic healthcare. These are two out of

the seven specific forms of severe child deprivation that have previously been used in estimations of global child poverty (Gordon, Nandy, Pantazis, Pemberton, & Townsend, 2003; Nandy, 2009) and analyses of the relationship between democratic institutions, quality of government, and child deprivation (Halleröd, Rothstein, Daoud, & Nandy, 2013). We focus on these two forms of child deprivation because they are strategic in relation to our specific research question and because they concern the individual level and hence priorities made within the household. Most of the remaining indicators (lack of: sanitation, safe water, adequate housing, and access to information) measure outcomes observed at the household level.

We will investigate two distinct aspects of gender equity:

- the population level gender gap in education and earned income.
- the proportion women in key positions in political institutions and higher professions.

We hypothesize that the first aspect will decrease the probability of child malnutrition, since increased command of the resources of the household for mothers will likely lead to more resources spent on the children in the household. Furthermore we hypothesize that the second aspect will decrease the probability of health deprivation, since women who hold office are more likely than men who hold office to prioritize health care for children.

One central question is whether gender equity benefits only children who have, what we can call, a resourceful mother or if it benefits all children. Even if gender equity benefits all children, we still expect that children of mothers who have no or only primary education will be more deprived compared to children of mothers who are better educated. If, after controlling for mother's education, there is still an effect of the country-level indicator of gender equity, the policy implication would be as follows – If you increase women's educational attainment and economic activity, the children who are worst off will likely benefit.

To test whether overall gender equity has a different impact on children of less resourceful mothers than on children with more educated and resourceful mothers, we will model a cross-level interaction between the country-level overall gender equity score and, at the individual level, mother's education.

### 2.1. What we need to control for – country level

Although we know that economic growth is only one of many factors influencing the realization of welfare efforts, e.g. (Korpi & Palme, 2004; Okunzi, 2004; Sen, 1981), we also know that economic development is crucial to access to resources, by both individuals and households, and to raising the public funds necessary to finance welfare (Wilensky, 1975). A recent analysis, for example, has shown that economic growth is associated with a reduction in malnutrition among children even over relatively short periods (Headey, 2013). According to Ingelhart and Norris (2003), women's status and gender equity are closely related to a general trend towards modernization, which in turn is related to economic growth. Thus, not least because women's relative participation in economic activities is one of the components of our gender equity measure, we need to control for differences in economic development between countries and we therefore include GDP per capita in our analyses.

Apart from economic activity, the ratio of women's and men's educational attainment is the other component of our gender equity measure. Because there is a correlation between countries' general educational level and the ratio of women's and men's education, we also need to control for this factor. We therefore include the average years of education among men in the analysis.

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