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Intrahousehold Inequalities in Child Rights and Well-Being. A Barrier to Progress?

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Summary. — This paper uses UNICEF's Multiple Indicators Cluster Surveys cross-country data to shed light on unequal investments in the wellbeing of children (boys and girls) within the household. The paper proposes a new methodology to measure the extent of gender intrahousehold inequality and its contribution to overall levels of inequality using an L-Theil index decomposition. The individual and joint distribution of inequality in four key indicators of child wellbeing is analyzed: stunting, birth registration, school attendance, and time spent on work and chores (working hours) in the search for evidence of gender bias. Evidence from various separate county studies had shown that the direction of the gender bias is not universal. Such conclusion holds when using a consistent methodology and comparable cross-country datasets; this paper shows that disparities inside households do not follow the same bias toward one or the other gender in all countries and the direction of the bias is not the same across indicators of wellbeing. While progress in improving child wellbeing has occurred in many countries, inequalities remain. Intrahousehold inequalities might still be considered a priority in an agenda focused on closing these progress gaps.
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Key words — intrahousehold, inequality, children, multidimensional well-being, decomposition

1. INTRODUCTION

Non-unitary models of household behavior—where households do not have a unique set of preferences and are not assumed to jointly maximize some household welfare function—have long been acknowledged in the economic literature. Collective models of household behavior, that explicitly incorporate the interactions that occur within households in the determination of the internal resource allocation, are useful to explain the presence of different outcomes for different household members, particularly children and along gender lines. Still, many empirical measures of wellbeing have treated households as if their members enjoy an equal share of all household resources. For analytical convenience, most policy analysis assumes that, within households, individual wellbeing is the adult-equivalent average of the household to which the individual belongs; this can lead to an underestimation of overall poverty and inequality (Haddad & Kanbur, 1990). When household resources—whether money, consumption goods, or investments—are not equally distributed among household members, particular individuals may be worse off than others, and could effectively be in poverty, even when household averages indicate the contrary. In terms of child wellbeing, the neglect of intrahousehold inequalities conceals the outcomes for those children who fare below their household average, affecting the assessment of the levels and trends of child poverty. This paper attempts to measure the extent of gender inequality within households and to show how it contributes to overall inequality in child outcomes.

Examining and tackling the differences that occur within households is important for ensuring children's wellbeing and the realization of their rights. Unequal household investments in children tend to carry over into adulthood. Although other factors can still affect wellbeing over the life-course, systematic biases against boys or girls during childhood are linked to poverty traps and to the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Bhalotra & Rawlings, 2011; Harper, Marcus, & Moore, 2003).

Girls and women are believed to bear a heavy share of the burden of poverty, yet good data and detailed analysis for a wide range of countries are needed to corroborate this claim (Marcoux, 1998). Preferential treatment of some children is evident in many societies, resulting in unequal outcomes in child development with life-long implications. Patterns of bias in favor of boys or girls, however, differ across wellbeing indicators and countries. For instance, biases in land and productive asset inheritance have been found to favor boys (Bird, 2011; Cooper, 2011; Doss, Troung, Nabanoga, & Namaalwa, 2011; Estudillo, Quisumbing, & Otsuka, 2001), while girls have relatively low survival rates in Asia (Klasen, 2008; Sen, 1992) [1] and perhaps in Africa as well (Klasen, 1996). Despite expansion in general education, they still also have lower education participation rates in India (Azam & Kingdon, 2013),

and are subject to lower parental aspirations in India and Ethiopia (Dercon & Singh, 2013). However, this last study also found that in the other two countries analyzed, Peru and Vietnam, the bias ran in the opposite direction. Similarly, nutrition indicators show a bias against boys, especially for younger children in Sub-Saharan Africa (Sahn & Stifel, 2002; Svedberg, 1990), and also in India (Andhra Pradesh), Ethiopia, Peru, and Vietnam (Dercon & Singh, 2013). At the same time, nutrition indicators have also been found to be biased against girls in some South Asian countries (e.g., for India, see Deaton (1989), Sen (1988), Sen and Sengupta (1983); for Bangladesh, see L. C. Chen, Huq, and D'Souza (1981)), highlighting that the direction of the bias can vary across different countries. Among the mechanisms that have been singled out as leading to intrahousehold inequalities are those that affect the bargaining power of the household decision makers. In particular, those affecting mothers' bargaining position have been shown to be highly relevant, perhaps because there is some evidence that female-headed households prioritize investments in children to a greater extent than households headed by men (Chant, 2007). Women's bargaining position can improve through higher employment rates (Mammen & Paxson, 2000; Rosenzweig & Schultz, 1982), command over productive resources (Udry, 1996), or even as a result of men's migration (Chen, 2013). The expected return of investing in girls, as well as the opportunity cost for households also play an important role (Song, Appleton, & Knight, 2006).

Despite this wide range of country evidence on gender biases, systematic evaluations of cross-country evidence of the extent and the direction of the bias of intrahousehold inequality in child wellbeing are uncommon. In addition, inequalities in different dimensions may balance each other out, for example when parents compensate underinvestment in one area with overinvestment in another. Estudillo *et al.* (2001) for instance, found in the Philippines, that parents compensate lower inheritance transfers of land with higher investments in schooling for girls, resulting in very little difference in lifetime incomes between sons and daughters. A multidimensional approach to the measurement of inequalities in child wellbeing is necessary to gain a fuller understanding of these biases and is an important aspect of diagnosing the barriers to progress.

The aim of this paper is to use existing cross-country data to shed light on unequal investments in the wellbeing of children (boys and girls) within the household. The individual and joint distribution of inequality in four key indicators of child wellbeing is analyzed: stunting, birth registration, school attendance, and time spent on work and chores (working hours). Knowing more about inequalities inside households, as well as about inequalities occurring across multiple aspects of wellbeing would be of great value to enhance our understanding of the magnitude and nature of child poverty and gender inequality. The next section briefly reviews the key measurement issues that this article engages with, namely the measurement of multidimensional wellbeing, of multidimensional inequality, and of intrahousehold inequality. Section 3 presents the methodological approach situated in this literature. Section 4 presents the results of the analysis for 20 developing countries. The final section discusses some of the implications of these results and avenues for future research.

2. MEASUREMENT ISSUES

(a) *Multidimensional child wellbeing*

The first point of departure for this study is an interest in measuring inequality in child wellbeing from a multidimensional perspective. New ground was broken in the measurement of child poverty and wellbeing with UNICEF's 'Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities' (UNICEF, 2007), which combined the household income poverty measure with the multidimensional Bristol deprivations approach (Gordon, Nandy, Pantazis, Pemberton, & Townsend, 2003), the methodology used to produce the first internationally comparable estimates of child poverty across a large number of developing countries. [2] Although it captured the multidimensionality of child deprivation and was useful for analyzing disparities across countries, this study adopted a household-level approach to measurement, which could mask disparities within households, and thus not suitable for an intrahousehold inequality analysis.

The use of household-level data not only conceals differences between household members, particularly children, but also poses an additional problem: if child poverty is made equivalent to overall household poverty, policy responses may address the main underlying causes of poverty but fail to account for child-specific concerns and experiences as well as for intrahousehold inequalities. In the multidimensional poverty context, Vijaya, Lahoti, and Swaminathan (2014) show how this matters. In their Indian illustration, gender differences in poverty are virtually non-existent when individuals are assigned their household poverty status, but they are large when individual-level information is used to define poverty. Furthermore, they show how many poor men and women can live in non-poor households.

A crucial discussion then concerns the space in which to measure gender inequalities in child wellbeing. Some spaces may be more problematic than others. For example, measuring inequality in income poverty may be suitable for comparing households but less so for capturing intrahousehold distributions. A monetary metric would be even more unfit for the focus on children. This paper measures inequality in a multidimensional space. This follows the multidimensional definition of child wellbeing set by the 1990 Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC) and the tradition of child wellbeing studies since the aforementioned UNICEF and Bristol studies. A key difference arises from the concern for intrahousehold inequality, which requires the measurement to be carried at the individual level.

(b) *Multidimensional inequality*

A key issue in the debates over how to measure gender inequality is whether composite indicators add value (Klasen, 2007). This is especially relevant in the multidimensional case where the consideration of the correlation between the various dimensions is important in the analysis. Some authors have restricted the analysis to each of the individual distributions of the dimensions of wellbeing, without regard to its correlation with other dimensions. This approach is widely used by studies focused on non-income inequalities, particularly health and education (e.g., Gakidou and King (2002) in health; Thomas, Wang, and Fan (1999) and Checchi (2000) in education; and Sahn and Younger (2006) in both health and education). Others have attempted to aggregate the various dimensions into a uni-dimensional index of deprivation and then analyze its distribution for different sub-groups. The Alkire–Foster counting method (Alkire & Foster, 2011), applied in Roche's (2013) study of child poverty in Bangladesh and in UNICEF's Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (MODA) to construct an aggregate deprivation index using the corresponding dimensions outlined in the Bristol approach, are examples of such approach.