

Gender and Poverty in Brazil

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The origins of studies on gender and poverty can be traced back to Pearce (1978). She coined the concept of ‘feminization of poverty’ which means that women are becoming poorer because of their gender. She has attributed this impoverishment process to the following facts: (1) women are concentrated in relatively few, generally low-paying occupations; (2) very few of them receive alimony from former partners; (3) in work-related benefits women are underrepresented among the beneficiaries; (4) the benefits from the welfare system perpetuate their poverty instead of helping improve their lives.

Pearce has taken into consideration only women head of families, leaving out of consideration poor women who live in men headed families. Her argument for that choice is that the proportion of families headed by women among the poorer was increasing since the 1950s. So, she has limited the feminization of poverty phenomenon to women who have to raise their children without a partner to share household expenses.

Since Pearce’s work, various surveys on feminization of poverty have been done in United States and Europe as well as in developing countries. These surveys have the following characteristics: (a) they are concerned exclusively with women head of families; (b) the data collected and analysed are related to household income; and (c) their purpose is to support public policies for women head of families concerned with their empowerment (understood as training to work force).

However, some researchers have criticized Pearce’s approach to study poverty among women. They have said that its object -women heads of families, is too restrained, leading to a partial picture of poor women’s situation. They have also said that its focus on income (earned and transferred) hides intra-household disparities as well as household production and consumption habits. Another target of their criticism is its proposal for public policies restricted to a specific kind of poor women. These public policies leave behind a large number of poor women (old and young) who need to be empowered too.

Fukuda-Parr (1999), for instance, has argued for the use of the concept of human poverty introduced by United Nations to support an analysis of the burden of poverty

among women. According to this approach, it must be included in the analysis not only poor women head of households but also poor women living in another kind of household arrangements. Besides, poverty, to this conception, is not only a lack of decent income but also lack of the opportunities and choices most basic to human life that are the possibility to lead a long, healthy, and creative life, and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem, and respect from others.

These different conceptions form the basis for our survey, which comprehends: (1) the establishment of an analysis framework for each conception (Pearce's and Fukuda-Parr's) compounded by a set of indicators and variables; (2) the building of a data bank containing information extracted from Brazilian Census 2000 about Brazilian women belonging to the last quintile of income; (3) the carrying out of a series of multivariate analysis taking into account: (a) sociodemographic variables and income indicators and variables of women head of household –for the first framework; (b) sociodemographic and social participation indicators and variables –for the second framework; (4) comparison and criticism of the results of both frameworks application; (5) if it would be the case, proposal of an outline for a new framework.

The expected achievement of this work is to outline a framework to study gender and poverty that could support public policies concerned with to enhance the social participation of poor women as well as to assess the level of social participation of Brazilian poor women.

Bibliography

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