

Disaggregated Data to Measure the Status of Women in Society - - The Case of Developing Countries

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1. Introduction

Women's status in society implies their status in social, economic, political and cultural areas and is determined by the human rights they enjoy. These include access to basic social services, education, (especially for girls and young women), information, quality health services including reproductive health, employment, income, land and credit facilities; their participation in decision making both at home (on reproductive rights too) and in public life; and an enabling environment and freedom from violence of any kind. Thus women's status in society is a reflection of their empowerment. Indicators of women's status with respect to all these factors are therefore needed to study their status in society. This is elaborated further in the following paragraphs using the examples of their access to education and health.

Education of girls and young women has been repeatedly highlighted in the International Conferences on women, population and social development and by policy researchers as one of the most crucial priorities to women's and girls' advancement since it is the first step towards women's empowerment. Educated girls have more choices in life, they marry late, have fewer children, and have better opportunities for work. The level of education achieved by a woman is strongly associated with both lower infant mortality and lower fertility. Education makes women aware of their rights and needs and empowers them to participate in decision-making at all levels.

Health care for women and children is another important prerequisite for women's empowerment. Access to quality health care services and reproductive health care including family planning services with the full range of safe and effective modern methods of family planning for both women and men enables women to lead a long, healthy, well-nourished and creative life. Girls postponing the birth of their first child to age 20 or over have an increased access to educational and professional advancement. Good prenatal and postnatal care prevents low birth-weight infants, reduces infant and under-5 child mortality, can prevent most of maternal deaths and lowers fertility. The reduced child-bearing and child-care increases their participation in other activities.

This paper is an attempt to show the need for gender-disaggregated statistics in all socio-economic areas related to women's status so as to facilitate the calculation of indicators of women's status for different groups of women in a country instead of a single indicator for all women. Such separate indicators calculated regularly enable policy makers to make suitable interventions for the needy groups of women in a country.

2. Aggregated and Disaggregated Indicators.

Various studies have shown that no society treats its women as well as men. In every country there is gender inequality in capabilities and opportunities available to its people. Thus Shiv Kumar (Human Development Report, 1996) stated, '-there may also be disparities in female capabilities among regions or ethnic groups in a country, or between urban and rural areas', and that disaggregated gender-related development index (GDI) may reflect this phenomenon.

In all countries women thus have a lower status than men. However, the status of all women in a country cannot be expected to be the same. There may be disparities among different groups of women in respect of various socio-economic variables related to women's status. Gender gaps are generally greater in certain regions/states, in the rural areas, among the poor, in certain ethnic groups, among the married population and among the older population. Hence it is necessary to disaggregate gender statistics and calculate a number of separate indicators for different groups of women in a country by regions/states, urban-rural areas, ethnicity, age/cohort, income class, and marital status. Some available aggregated and disaggregated indicators in respect of relevant variables for a few developing countries are presented below to illustrate this point further.

Recent studies in 16 States of India have revealed significant **disparities among different States**. Women's overall share of earned income in India was 25% (1993), but in Kerala it was only 12%, and 38% in Himachal Pradesh. The overall gender disparity in adult literacy rates in India was 28 percentage points, but only 11 percentage points in Kerala, and more than 30 percentage points in most of the 16 States.

The **rural-urban disparities** among women in developing countries are also quite pronounced. The overall percentage of illiterate women in these countries is 40% - but as high as 66% in rural areas and only 38% in urban areas.

These data clearly show that the impression created by aggregated indicators for all women in a country/countries is quite different as compared to that revealed by the indicators for different groups of women such as women of different states, of urban and rural areas.

Wide **disparities** also exist **between poor and rich** in a country. In urban Kenya the net primary enrolment ratio in the 1980s was 45% for the poorest 10% and 72% for the richest 10%. In Viet Nam **ethnic minorities** living mainly in the northern uplands and central highlands earn only 60% as much as the Kink, or Vietnames. The point I am making here is that it is very likely that further disaggregation by gender would reveal disparities between women of different income group and ethnicity, since girls in poor families are often discriminated against their brothers for food, health care and education.

The wide disparities revealed by these disaggregated indicators clearly point to the need to calculate separate indicators for different groups of women in a country in respect of all socio-economic variables relevant for measuring the status of women in society in a country. These disaggregated indicators can show policy makers the disadvantaged groups of women to be targetted for improvement and for formulating regional plans and developing and fine-tuning policies and programmes to benefit them.

3. Inadequacy of Data

A major problem with regard to measuring the status of women is the lack of data on variables relevant to women's status by age, gender, region, urban-rural, ethnicity, marital status and economic status. Even basic social and economic statistics are not always disaggregated by gender. Data on health of populations ignore women's reproductive health and data on labour force participation consistently underreport women's work. Women in developing countries mostly work in informal sector and in small-scale agriculture. Most women and girls particularly in rural areas of these countries also do the unpaid household work including carrying water, collecting wood, processing and cooking food and caring for children. Lack of information on such unpaid work makes most of women's work 'invisible' to both the statisticians (in national accounts and census data) and to the policy makers.

Available data in most developing countries are inadequate for disaggregation. This makes it difficult to design appropriate programmes and direct resources to those who need it most. Accurate information and statistics are necessary to study women's status in different population groups of a country. The collection and appropriate analysis of data on the complex interactions are indispensable if policy makers are to formulate suitable policies to address the needs of women. There is, therefore, urgent

need for statistical systems in the developing countries to collect such data if women's status is to be studied in depth and suitable policy changes are to be implemented to improve the situation of the disadvantaged groups of women in all developing countries.

Moreover, there are other variables (some mentioned earlier) on which disaggregated data are needed and which should be analysed to better understand the status of women in society and to know how to change and improve it:

- Sex-ratio at birth is an important indicator of gender bias and discrimination in society. Ratios less than 100 show gender bias even from before birth due to deep-rooted traditions of son preference, and reveal women's low status in society.
- Higher under-five mortality rate for girls than that for boys is an indication of gender discrimination. Traditions of son preference lead to neglect of girls as compared with boys in a family.
- When infant and under-5 child mortality are high women tend to have more children, particularly in rural areas. This additional child-bearing reduces their role in other activities including their labour-force participation and perpetuates their lower status in society
- Lack of basic social services such as access to clean drinking water and sanitary facilities implies a very heavy time burden on girls and women in fetching water from a long distance. This adds to their long hours of child-care and other unpaid household work and also prevents them from attending school. Moreover, in rural areas the percentage of people lacking access to these facilities is higher than in urban areas.
- HIV/AIDS infection is threatening the health of women and girls in developing countries, especially in Sub Saharan Africa and in Asia, an indication mostly of their social powerlessness.
- Women with disabilities are more deprived than their male counterparts in the use of their capabilities. They also tend to live longer with disability as their life expectancies are longer than men's.

The ICPD (1994,Cairo) Programme of Action emphasized the urgent need for gender-disaggregated data in order to provide a more accurate picture of women's economic contributions to society, including their unpaid labour in the family and in the informal sector. UN System and UNFPA also have stressed the need to include gender perspective in the design of data collection instruments of countries in all regions of the world (1996).

5. Conclusion

Disaggregated indicators in respect of various variables related to women's status in society for a number of developing countries reveal that these indicators generally differ significantly for various groups of women e.g. by regions/states, urban/rural areas, age-groups, marital status, ethnic groups and by income class. Such disaggregated indicators therefore provide better comparisons between different countries and may show for example, that some countries have made considerable progress over the last few decades in reducing gender inequalities among girls and boys and the younger adults in urban areas as compared with the inequalities among the older populations in these areas. Or, that serious disparities still persist among girls and boys in rural areas, between young and old women, between age groups, by State, urban/rural, income class, marital status and ethnicity.

Such findings could then lead to increased confidence of those concerned with policy decisions in statistical methods and also point out to policy makers those groups of women where serious disparities still persist and who need to be targeted for further improvements and urgent policy decisions in order to reduce gender inequalities and improve their status in society. Hence the urgent need for collection of all required disaggregated data for the calculation of disaggregated indicators for measuring the status of different groups of women in a country.

An added advantage is that when population structures and disaggregated indicators/rates by age/category (eg,rural-urban) are known it will also be possible to calculate the standardized

indicators/rates for countries. Such indicators would not only provide better comparison between countries, but also be useful to study the impact of policy- induced changes in the disaggregated rates on the overall rate for a country. For example, if access to education for women in younger age groups is improved, the impact of that on access to education for all women in the country could be studied.

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RESUME

Cette communication a pour but de montrer la necessite'e des statistiques desaggreg'e par genre dans tous les espaces socio-economiques des status des femmes; ce qui permettrait le calcul des indices du statut des femmes des groupes differentes d'un pays au lieu d'un seul indicateur pour tous les femmes. Des pareils indicateurs calcule' regulierement seraient tres utiles pour les decideurs politiques afin d'intervenir aupres des groupes des femmes en besoins d'un pays.