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To cite this article: Sarah Bradshaw, Sylvia Chant & Brian Linneker (2019) Challenges and Changes in Gendered Poverty: The Feminization, De-Feminization, and Re-Feminization of Poverty in Latin America, *Feminist Economics*, 25:1, 119-144, DOI: [10.1080/13545701.2018.1529417](https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2018.1529417)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2018.1529417>



Published online: 23 Oct 2018.



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CHALLENGES AND CHANGES IN GENDERED POVERTY: THE FEMINIZATION, DE-FEMINIZATION, AND RE-FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY IN LATIN AMERICA

Sarah Bradshaw, Sylvia Chant, and Brian Linneker

ABSTRACT

Despite reductions in poverty generally, recent trends in Latin American countries show processes of both de-feminization and re-feminization of poverty. A rise in the numbers of women to men living in income-poor households has occurred despite feminized anti-poverty programs, most notably conditional cash transfers (CCTs), which target resources to women. This paper shows that methodological differences in what, how, and who is the focus of measurement may influence patterns of poverty “feminization.” It also suggests that feminized policy interventions might in themselves be playing a role in the re-feminization of poverty, not least because of data and definitional limitations in the way female-headed households and, relatedly, women’s poverty are understood. The somewhat paradoxical interactions between the feminization of household headship, the feminization of poverty, and the feminization of anti-poverty programs present interesting challenges for redressing gender gaps in poverty within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

KEYWORDS

Latin America, gender, feminization of poverty, conditional cash transfers, female-headed households

JEL Codes: I32, B54, D1

INTRODUCTION

While at a global level income poverty and inequality between countries have fallen since 2000 (World Bank/International Monetary Fund [IMF] 2015), within many countries income inequality has also risen (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN-DESA] 2013). Wealth inequality seems to be solidly entrenched, with the richest 1 percent of the world’s population having accumulated more wealth than the rest of the world’s population put together (Oxfam 2016). Latin America

has long been considered a region of high inequality, and despite most of its constituent countries gaining “middle income” status over recent decades, inequalities persist. In the World Income Inequality Database for 2017, Latin America stood out in that most national Gini coefficients were consistently in the top two highest categories (United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research [UNU-WIDER] 2017).

Income inequality is also apparent along gendered lines, although the means of measuring gaps between female and male poverty remain limited on account of the paltry data available to feed into composite indicators of gender inequality. For example, the United Nation Development Programme’s (UNDP) Gender Development Index (GDI), which covers attainment in health, education, and income dimensions of human development (UNDP 2016), and the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), which measures the size of the inequality gap across health, education, economic participation, and political empowerment (WEF 2016), only include estimates of women’s and men’s earned income per capita, based on gross national/domestic income, labor force participation, and average earnings.

Within these indicators, gender income disparities are often expressed as the ratio of female-to-male income, but the extent to which these are captured in overall composite indicator scores depend on which other dimensions are included and the relative weight attached to them. Despite estimated gender earnings gaps existing in all countries, these can be overshadowed by dimensions such as health and/or education. In Venezuela, Uruguay, Brazil, and Colombia, for instance, women’s higher attainment relative to men in these spheres has led to GDI scores greater than 1, where 1 is gender parity (UNDP 2016). In terms of the GGGI, despite very large gender income gaps, Nicaragua ranks tenth highest at a world level, having apparently closed its educational attainment and health disparities, and narrowed the political gap. In light of the above, the ability of official metrics to capture the extent of gender inequality and deprivation is extremely questionable.

Notwithstanding the above caveats, there has been a persistent, popularized notion since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, that poverty has a “female face.” The Beijing conference restated the UNDP claim that women are “70% of the world’s poor” (1995: 4) and called for the eradication of the “persistent and increasing burden” of poverty on women (Chant 2008: 166). This suggested not only a feminized poverty but also a “feminization of poverty” – or a rise in numbers of women relative to men among the poor over time. More recently UN Women has qualified the veracity of these assumptions by stating explicitly that “it is unknown how many of those living in poverty are women and girls” (2015: 45; see also World Bank [2017]). This is partly explained by

the fact that headcount sex-disaggregated data are often only available at the household level, and gender poverty indicators only measure the ratio of numbers of women to men in households which are deemed to be poor (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC] 2014). Moreover, comparisons between men and women are often restricted to male- versus female-headed households, even if female heads cannot be a “proxy” for all women (Lampietti and Stalker 2000: 2; see also Jackson [1996]; Kabeer [1996, 2003]). The prominence of female-headed households in reviews of gendered poverty has also been associated with the charge that they are the “poorest of the poor.” Yet for nearly as long as the “poorest of the poor” notion has been accepted, so has it been contested (Chant 1997a, 1997b; Kabeer 1997), and, as this paper will highlight, current evidence does not necessarily clarify the issue.

While the actual situation of women and female household heads may not be determined with any degree of accuracy, in policy circles they have become a target for social safety nets and other welfare programs. A recent report by WEF (2015: 9) notes there have been “better policies” applied in some countries – citing Rwanda, Brazil, and Mexico as three such examples – highlighting in particular their effective targeting of cash transfers. Cash transfer programs tend to target women as “conduits,” whose assumed “altruistic” behavior means the resources provided are used more effectively to improve household well-being and reduce poverty (Molyneux 2006, 2007). A discernible “feminization of poverty alleviation” (Roy 2002), has arguably led to a “feminization of responsibility and/or obligation” (Chant 2008, 2016b) whereby women’s already weighty burdens of dealing with poverty have become heavier and less negotiable over time. This has been marked in Latin America where two conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs initiated by national governments, *Progresar/Oportunidades* in Mexico and *Bolsa Familia* in Brazil, were copied and rolled out across the South with World Bank support. The popularity of these women-targeted programs in Latin America has been such that in the early 2000s it was found that the percentage of women participating in poverty reduction schemes was actually much higher than the percentage of women identified as poor (ECLAC 2004). While more recent estimates of this discrepancy are elusive, the female focus of poverty reduction strategies remains largely unabated.

This paper uses Latin America as a case study to explore what we know about gendered poverty and poverty alleviation. It focuses on two of the main studies that have attempted to assess women’s poverty to date (notably by Medeiros and Costa [2006] and ECLAC [2014] – see below), comparing and contrasting their methods and results while also presenting some new analysis of our own. We find that while there had been a “de-feminization” of poverty in many countries in the region in the 1990s/early 2000s, more

recently some nations have witnessed a “re-feminization” of poverty. This process has occurred in the face of the sustained or increasing orientation of anti-poverty programs such as CCTs toward women, and our discussion attempts to explore what might be regarded as an ostensibly paradoxical relationship between the (re)feminization of poverty and the feminization of poverty alleviation.

CONCEPTUALIZING WOMEN’S POVERTY

While income poverty remains a key indicator of global “development,” there is a major question about whether income poverty is necessarily the only or most important element in addressing poverty generally, and feminized poverty in particular. Research by Christoph Bader et al. (2016), based in Lao PDR, highlights that there is not always an overlap between monetary poverty and multidimensional poverty, with some people who do not qualify as income-poor being “overlooked.” Although income may be implicated in poverty among women and girls, other privations might be of equal (or greater) importance, such as time poverty, asset poverty, and power poverty, all of which interrelate to some extent (Chant 2007, 2010). For example, while more and more women might be engaging in income-generating or “productive” activities, potentially reducing their income poverty, the fact that they generally have to combine productive activities with reproductive work means they are increasingly “time poor.” Heavy workloads and inability to properly rest and recuperate can have negative implications for health, and in turn rebound on monetary poverty (Chant 2007, 2010, 2016b; Gammage 2010; Noh and Kim 2015). Moreover, societal gender norms play out in households and often constrain women’s ability to translate income into voice and agency in the home (Rakodi 1999; Bradshaw 2002, 2013; Kabeer 2003; Murphy 2015). This can lead to feminizing “power poverty,” where women have limited control over household assets and decision making. It is not just income that provides voice and choice but other assets too, such as land and property ownership (Deere, Alvarado, and Twyman 2012). If these, along with less tangible “assets,” such as time, were entered into the poverty equation, then estimates of women’s relative privation might be even greater.

Assessments of women’s relative poverty are as much subjective as factual, with levels and depth of gendered poverty depending on what is measured, how it is measured, and who is the focus of measurement. Given the lack of sex-disaggregated data available within households, relative deprivation is generally measured between households and in this way renders female-household heads unduly prominent (Kabeer 1996; Chant 1997b; Lampietti and Stalker 2000).

The long-held view in the literature that female-headed households (FHHs) are poorer than male-headed households (MHHs; Buvinic and Gupta 1997; Chant 2007, 2008; Moser 2016), is highly likely to be an artifact of measurement based on household aggregates of income poverty, with the typically smaller average size of FHHs according them greater visibility in poverty statistics (Kabeer 1996; Chant 1997a, 1997b; Quisumbing, Haddad, and Peña 2001). Despite this caveat, the assumption that female-headed households are particularly prone to penury carries objective *a priori* traction insofar as if women as a whole are disadvantaged by gender equality, then it might be expected that they are more disadvantaged still through “male-deficit” household arrangements (Chant 2003b, 2016a; Barrow 2015). Female-household headship might pose barriers to exiting poverty among women and their household members given the formidable array of social and economic disadvantages which un-partnered women in particular are likely to face (see Chant [2003b]). In short, a “two-way-relationship” between female household headship and poverty may well pertain, with additional downstream effects such as a “transmission of inter-generational disadvantage” purportedly accruing to younger members of households headed by women (Chant 2007; see also Milazzo and van de Walle [2015]). However, evidence as to the extent to which FHHs are poorer than MHHs is mixed and fraught with definitional and data-related issues.

A number of qualitative studies have shown that optimizing household labor utilization, and ensuring equitability of income distribution and consumption, may be greater in FHHs than in MHHs. In the latter, for example, a situation of “secondary poverty” is commonly observed, whereby women and children are adversely affected by men’s retention of their own earnings (or indeed appropriation of the earnings of other household members) for personal consumption (Chant 1997a, 1997b; Moghadam 1997; Fukuda-Parr 1999; Bradshaw 2001; González de la Rocha and Grinspun 2001; Quisumbing 2003). Moreover, women’s inability to rely on regular financial inputs from male spouses, not only on account of the precarity in men’s employment, but because of variable and often arbitrary levels of wage retention, can lead to excessive stress and vulnerability, impacting women’s wider well-being (Chant 1997a). In MHHs it thus seems we are more likely to witness gendered “power poverty,” whereby women and girls are unable (because of fear of violence or abandonment) or unwilling (because of deeply embedded gendered norms that emphasize female altruism and servitude) to contest or resist male privilege or prerogatives (Kabeer 1999; Chant 2007, 2008; Brickell and Chant 2010). In addition, even if the amounts of income flowing into FHHs might be lower in objective terms, the ability to exert control over income is plausibly worth more to female-household heads and their members than income alone, and thereby influence their perceptions of hardship and vulnerability.

This signals the importance of recognizing perceived as well as actual poverty, and *ipso facto*, its subjectivity (Chant 2003a, 2003b, 2009; Wisor et al. 2014).

While FHHs are often construed as a homogenous group, they are actually a fluid and diverse constituency, varying a great deal in respect to their composition and the drivers that lead to headship. In turn, they are subject to multiple intersecting axes of heterogeneity, including age and life-course, and the nature and degree of “male absence” (Chant 2016a). As such, defining what constitutes a FHH is a complex issue. The decision to classify a unit as “female-headed” may come down to the interpretation of individual researchers themselves, and in light of responses by women (and/or other household members) to questions such as “who is the household head?” (Milazzo and van de Walle 2015: 5–6; Chant 2016a: 23). Whatever the case, FHHs appear to be on the rise across Latin America. In countries such as Costa Rica, for example, where the share of the household population headed by women rose from 16.8 percent to 27 percent between 1987 and 2005, research has pointed to the probability that a range of gender equality and female-oriented anti-poverty interventions introduced during this interlude conceivably afforded women greater possibilities of avoiding or exiting problematic male co-resident household arrangements via non-marriage, separation, or divorce (Chant 2009). Another factor, however, appears to be a growing propensity for women to declare themselves as household heads, regardless of union status (Liu, Esteve, and Treviño 2017). In a longitudinal analysis of 35–45 year old women in fourteen Latin American countries from the 1970s, Liu, Esteve, and Treviño (2017) suggest that a shift away from use in censuses of the patriarchal value-laden term *jefe* (head, implicitly male), to more flexible gender-neutral wording such as *jefa/jefe* or *persona responsable* (person responsible) may have encouraged greater levels of self-declaration by women.

This represents an important step forward given that the default option in many statistical surveys is for households only to be classified as “female-headed” where there is no co-resident male partner (Chant 2016a). In this light, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that in its latest *Progress of the World’s Women 2015–16* report, UN Women introduces a new classification in the form of “female only households” (FOHs), which describes households lacking a male adult (ages 20–59 years). As we argue elsewhere, this move to a narrower conceptualization of female headship appears to occur as a result of data and definitional limitations rather than being theoretically or grassroots driven (Bradshaw, Chant, and Linneker 2017a, 2017b). In short, while female headship is often presented as objective fact, it is often the outcome of a subjective process, as is also the case for how women’s relative poverty is measured and understood.

As intimated earlier, measuring women's relative poverty is no simple task. The World Bank notes that there is a "need to look ... not just at the decomposition of global poverty by gender but at non-monetary dimensions that may be more readily measured on an individual basis" (2017: 47). Several multidimensional measures of poverty have been developed (Alkire and Santos 2010; Alkire and Foster 2011; Alkire, Conconi, and Seth 2014; World Bank 2017), but with the notable exception of Scott Wisor et al.'s (2014) attempt to construct a gender-sensitive "Individual Deprivation Measure," many are yet to be disaggregated by sex (see also Bader et al. [2016]). Even relatively straightforward measures of income poverty are not gendered since totals refer not to individual poverty, but to numbers of people living in households defined as poor. Sex-disaggregation is accordingly at household level and pertains only to numbers of women living in income-poor households. Given these data limitations, it is difficult to establish if a "feminized" poverty exists at any point in time and whether feminized poverty persists, is intensifying, or indeed is "de-feminizing" over time. Calculations are rendered more difficult by the fact that short-term fluctuations may mask longer-term changes in the direction and magnitude of gendered poverty, including its dimensions. This raises issues around the extent to which the "feminization of poverty" is "real" or "statistical" and, in turn, questions what we can know about the impact of policies designed to alleviate women's poverty.

METHODOLOGY

Much of the global monitoring of poverty reduction is based on household living standard surveys, which contain information on household income and expenditure. These have been used widely to monitor poverty rates and extreme poverty rates, as well as to track changes in gender poverty ratios in Latin America. Two major pieces of research to date have attempted to document such changes – notably those by Marcelo Medeiros and Joana Costa (2006, 2008) and the UN's ECLAC (2014) in its *Social Panorama of Latin America* (see also below).

The two investigations use similar sets of annual harmonized household income data, but different poverty line cut-offs to define the poor. While the poverty indicators constructed by the studies differ (see Table 1), given the commonality of the datasets used, the overall country trends regarding the feminization of poverty might be expected to be similar.

Our analysis comprises two elements. It compares the findings of the two studies to explore differences and similarities in their estimates of the magnitude and direction of feminizing poverty over time. To do this, it compares what are reported to be changes in relative poverty for the

Table 1 Feminization of poverty indicator method comparison

	Medeiros and Costa (2006)	ECLAC (2014)
Data	Household surveys	Household surveys
Age group	All persons	Ages 20–59
Time periods	Mid 1990s to early 2000s	1990–2013 incomplete time sequence
Poverty indicator	Difference $(Pf - Pm)$, where P is the poverty rate incidence, $Pf = \text{Poor Women} / \text{All Women}$, $Pm = \text{Poor Men} / \text{All Men}$, within the population. Likewise for different household headed units $(Pfhh - Pmhh)$ where $Pfhh = \text{FHH poor} / \text{FHH all}$, $Pmhh = \text{MHH poor} / \text{MHH all}$.	Ratio $GPI = A/B = Pf/Pm$, where $A = \Sigma (\text{Number of women in poor households}) / \Sigma (\text{Number of men in poor households})$, $B = \Sigma (\text{Number of women in all households}) / \Sigma (\text{Number of men in all households})$ expressed as the number of poor women per 100 poor men
Feminization of poverty (FoP) decision	$(Pf - Pm) t < (Pf - Pm) t1$	$(GPI) t < (GPI) t1$
Poverty line used	40th percentile of household per capita income	Extreme and general poverty income lines per capita
Female headed households – FHH	Yes, for household heads with children	Yes
Number of LA counties	8	18
Household units/types	Male, female, FHH, couples with and without dependent children, FHHs with and without children, other household types	Men, women, FHH

general population (all women compared to all men or what we term “person poverty”), and the changes when measured between female- and male-headed households (which we term “household headship poverty”) to establish if there is consensus over the direction of the feminization trend. It then takes the methodology used by ECLAC and applies it to the Medeiros and Costa data, which allows a more direct comparison to be made between the findings of the two studies. Such a comparison also permits interrogation of the extent to which what is measured, and how it is measured, matters for determining who is “poor.” Before this, we briefly outline the respective studies in more detail.

The research conducted by Medeiros and Costa (2006) aimed to show differences in gendered income poverty in a range of Latin American countries between the 1990s and early 2000s, and to explore whether a

“feminization of poverty” was occurring both among the population in general, and among households according to sex of headship (see also Medeiros and Costa [2008]).

The research is a household income-based study of the feminization of poverty. A distinction is drawn between women’s overrepresentation among the poor (static point in time feminized poverty), and an increase in women’s relative poverty over time (feminization). Medeiros and Costa’s income poverty indicator is derived from household surveys, which were conducted by national governments and were comparable over time for eight Latin American countries between the mid 1990s and early 2000s, and covers most of the Latin American population. Their research presents two working definitions of the feminization of poverty: (a) an increase in the difference in the incidence of poverty among women and among men, and (b) an increase in the difference in the incidence of poverty among FHHs and MHHs (Medeiros and Costa 2006).

The feminization of poverty indicator used by Medeiros and Costa is defined as a growing difference between the female (Pf) and male (Pm) poverty rates over time (t and $t1$, Table 1).

In the Medeiros and Costa study, the poverty rate depends on the value of the income poverty line. Various levels were tested but found to be insensitive to 30th and 50th percentile lines. Results were then presented for the 40th percentile (poverty line), which approximates most national poverty lines for women and men, and five household types. As long as the number of women to men among the poor is falling over time this represents a de-feminization of poverty. This can come about through a relative rise in male poverty, or a relative fall in female poverty, with a de-feminization of poverty being equivalent in this sense to a “masculinization” of poverty, as there are fewer women per man (or more men per woman) among the poor.

The ECLAC study uses the same national household survey data sources but considers data from 1990 to 2013, representing a longer time frame than the Medeiros and Costa study. While Medeiros and Costa use the 40th percentile poverty line from the respective living standards surveys, the ECLAC analysis uses an absolute income poverty line based on national prices of food and other items. In comparisons by household headship the Medeiros and Costa poverty rates are for households with children only, while ECLAC’s calculations pertain to all households.

In terms of the indicators constructed, ECLAC (2014) uses a ratio indicator (*Indice de Feminidad*), which we term here as the “Gender Poverty Indicator” (GPI), which is a ratio of women to men’s poverty at a given moment and how this changes over time (Table 1).

The GPI is routinely expressed as the number of poor women per 100 poor men and standardizes for more women than men in the general

population. Changes in the indicator over time are also capable of showing a feminization of poverty. If the number of women to men among the poor is rising over a given period, this represents a feminization of poverty ($t \text{ GPI} < t1 \text{ GPI}$). The study also uses the national household living standards surveys from a range of Latin American countries to construct a “simple average” measure for the region as a whole, which allows regional trends to be discerned year on year.

At the country level, ECLAC’s ratio formulation is more sensitive to change compared with Medeiros and Costa’s difference indicator. For example, if $t \text{ Pf} 0.60 - \text{Pm} 0.56 = 0.04$, and $t1 \text{ Pf} 0.46 - \text{Pm} 0.42 = 0.04$, this would suggest neutral change under the difference indicator. However, the GPI ratio (expressed per 100 men) would suggest a feminization of poverty since $\text{Pf} / \text{Pm} = t 107.1$ to $t1 109.5$, while the change in poverty rates may be the same for men and women over the period ($\text{Pft} - \text{Pft1} = 0.14$ and $\text{Pmt} - \text{Pmt1} = 0.14$ declines), women are still overly represented among the poor, and increasingly so given the differing poverty base rates in t , and the same rates of change. The Medeiros and Costa difference indicator is not as sensitive as a ratio indicator of gendered poverty change over time, and it is for this reason that we apply the ECLAC GPI indicator to the Medeiros and Costa data, since there are similarities between the measures. The ratio of the female to male poverty incidence of Medeiros and Costa (2006) is equivalent to the ECLAC (2014) feminization of poverty indicator and that used by UN Women (2015).

DOES EXISTING RESEARCH ON LATIN AMERICA POINT TO A FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY?

Despite general falls in the person poverty rates in Latin American countries, ECLAC’s (2014) aggregate regional indicator shows that between the 1990s and 2013, a feminization of poverty has also been occurring as evidenced by rising numbers of women to men living in income-poor households. With the exception of Costa Rica, this is the case for both extreme and general poverty measures (“GPI All” in Table 2). In both cases, patterns are clearer for urban than for rural areas, with evidence showing a greater share of poverty among urban-resident women, increasing from 107.6 in 1990 to 119.8 in 2013.

Looking at gender poverty according to sex of household head shows poverty rates among both FHHs and MHHs to have been falling between 1990 and 2013 for the region as a whole. However, the household head gender poverty indicator (“GPI HH” in Table 2) shows more mixed trends by country. Some countries show strong feminization trends for both “general” and “extreme” poor households, particularly in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Colombia between 1990 and 2013. However, for the region as a whole, extreme poor households show an initial de-feminization trend

CHALLENGES AND CHANGES IN GENDERED POVERTY

Table 2 Latin America poverty rates and gender poverty index, 1990–2013

Country	Persons								Households					
	General poor				Extreme poor				General poor			Extreme poor		
	GPI	GPI	GPI		GPI	GPI	GPI		Rate	Rate	GPI	Rate	Rate	GPI
Year	Rate	All	Urban	Rural	Rate	All	Urban	Rural	MHH	FHH	HH	MHH	FHH	HH
Latin America														
1990	48.4	na	107.6	na	22.6	na	117.3	na	na	na	na	na	na	na
1999	43.8	108.1	109.9	106.5	18.6	112.9	118.2	108.1	45.1	46.5	103.1	22.5	22.3	99.1
2010	31.1	113.5	116.5	110.7	12.2	116.9	125.5	112.5	34.9	36.3	104.0	16.2	15.6	96.3
2013	28.1	116.9	119.8	112.8	11.7	120.9	129.4	114.6	31.4	32.5	103.5	14.1	13.8	97.9
Argentina ^a														
1990	21.2	na	105.4	na	5.2	na	119.3	na	21.6	18.1	83.8	4.8	7.2	150.0
2000	25.8	na	109.0	na	8.4	na	120.0	na	25.2	28.1	111.5	7.5	11.7	156.0
2010	8.6	na	132.5	na	2.8	na	135.4	na	7.0	12.4	177.1	2.1	4.3	204.8
2012	4.3	na	144.6	na	1.7	na	129.6	na	3.2	6.7	209.4	1.3	2.6	200.0
Bolivia														
1989 ^a	52.6	na	105.2	na	23.0	na	109.4	na	51.1	58.5	114.5	21.9	28.1	128.3
2000	63.3	103.6	104.6	105.2	38.8	104.4	109.3	106.7	64.5	56.1	87.0	39.9	31.0	77.7
2011	36.3	109.2	109.5	111.4	18.7	110.8	113.4	113.1	36.7	34.1	92.9	19.0	17.2	90.5
Brazil														
1990	48.0	105.4	107.5	106.4	23.4	109.6	115.4	110.7	47.2	51.1	108.3	23.3	23.6	101.3
2001	37.5	104.2	106.3	104.8	13.2	103.7	108.1	106.8	37.9	35.8	94.5	13.6	11.7	86.0
2011	20.9	112.2	116.8	107.8	6.1	118.7	131.2	110.5	20.2	22.4	110.9	5.6	6.9	123.2
2013	18.0	111.7	117.7	105.3	5.9	114.7	128.6	104.3	17.0	19.9	117.1	5.4	6.7	124.1
Chile														
1990	38.6	107.4	105.3	119.2	13.0	112.5	110.4	126.6	38.0	40.0	105.3	12.5	15.2	121.6
2000	20.2	109.1	108.5	115.6	5.6	114.7	116.3	114.7	19.5	22.6	115.9	5.2	7.0	134.6
2009	11.5	128.1	128.3	126.1	3.6	128.8	132.0	117.4	9.6	15.8	164.6	2.8	5.5	196.4
2013	7.8	136.7	136.3	138.7	2.5	133.7	133.0	140.6	6.2	10.8	174.2	1.8	3.8	211.1
Colombia														
1991	56.0	106.7	105.2	110.2	26.1	111.8	115.2	113.3	55.3	56.8	102.7	25.6	26.9	105.1
2002	49.7	105.3	106.6	106.5	17.8	109.1	114.5	113.8	49.7	48.3	97.2	18.0	16.6	92.2
2010	37.3	113.0	115.2	115.8	12.3	119.5	132.4	122.6	36.2	39.5	109.1	11.6	13.9	119.8
2013	30.7	117.0	120.6	116.8	9.1	125.7	139.0	127.5	29.0	34.0	117.2	8.3	10.7	128.9
Costa Rica														
1990	26.3	118.2	115.4	121.1	10.1	126.5	124.2	131.2	25.3	31.2	123.3	9.1	15.2	167.0
2000	20.3	122.9	128.3	120.1	7.8	136.1	150.6	132.0	18.5	27.0	145.9	6.5	12.5	192.3
2010	18.5	119.0	120.2	118.4	6.8	122.4	131.3	118.4	17.6	20.3	115.3	6.2	8.1	130.6
2013	17.7	117.0	120.6	113.3	7.2	120.5	138.8	108.0	16.6	19.9	119.9	6.6	8.6	130.3
Mexico														
1989	47.7	102.5	105.3	98.5	18.7	103.5	110.7	97.4	48.2	41.2	85.5	18.8	17.1	91.0
2000	41.1	104.7	103.3	106.1	15.2	107.2	103.3	108.2	41.9	35.3	84.2	15.6	12.7	81.4

(Continued).

Table 2 Continued.

Country	Persons								Households					
	General poor				Extreme poor				General poor			Extreme poor		
	GPI	GPI	GPI		GPI	GPI	GPI		Rate	Rate	GPI	Rate	Rate	GPI
Year	Rate	All	Urban	Rural	Rate	All	Urban	Rural	MHH	FHH	HH	MHH	FHH	HH
2010	36.3	105.9	107.2	104.1	13.3	105.0	111.2	100.6	37.0	33.4	90.3	13.7	11.4	83.2
2012	37.1	107.7	109.3	105.1	14.2	110.6	110.7	109.6	38.1	33.2	87.1	14.8	11.9	80.4
Venezuela														
1990	39.8	119.4	119.3	123.7	14.4	142.4	145.8	138.6	36.9	51.6	139.8	12.1	24.1	199.2
2000	44.0	111.3	na	na	18.0	120.0	na	na	42.5	47.9	112.7	16.8	21.3	126.8
2010	27.8	122.0	na	na	10.7	138.0	na	na	26.4	30.9	117.0	9.3	13.7	147.3
2013	32.1	122.2	na	na	9.8	142.7	na	na	31.1	34.4	110.6	8.5	12.2	143.5

Notes: Persons are ages 20–59; rate is the proportion of the population (households) below the poverty line by percent; GPI persons is the Gender Poverty Index; MHH = Male-Headed Households; FHH = Female-Headed Households; Gender Poverty Indicator GPI (HH) = $(P_{fhh} / P_{mhh}) \times 100$; All = urban and rural areas in national territories; All = national simple averages; urban and rural = simple averages; a = urban only, otherwise national; na = data not available.

Source: ECLAC (2014: Statistical Annex, Tables 4, 10, 10.1, and 11).

between 1999 (99.1) and 2010 (96.3) with fewer FHHs to MHHs among the extreme poor, but a recent re-feminization trend between 2010 and 2013 (97.9), with rising numbers of FHHs to MHHs.

The general feminization of poverty trajectory suggested by ECLAC's analysis is in contrast to the analysis presented by Medeiros and Costa for the early 1990s to 2000s, which provided little support for the feminization of poverty thesis based either on comparisons of women and men, or between FHHs and MHHs (see Table 3).

To examine trends further, the data in the statistical annex of the ECLAC (2014) report for individual Latin American countries were extracted for the same or similar years as in the Medeiros and Costa (2006) study. First, the ECLAC method was used to calculate a GPI based on the Medeiros and Costa data, and this was compared with Medeiros and Costa's original findings. Second, the GPI derived from the Medeiros and Costa data was compared with the ECLAC GPI. Tables 3 and 4 show these comparisons for the numbers of women relative to men in poor households, and for female-headed versus male-headed households.

The general poverty trend comparison between all women and men (Table 3) reveal ECLAC's (2014) findings to diverge to quite a large extent from those of Medeiros and Costa (2006) for person poverty in the

Table 3 Comparison of gendered person poverty results in selected Latin American countries, early 1900s to 2000s

Country	Year	Medeiros and Costa (2006)					ECLAC (2014)			
		Incidence		Difference	Ratio	Result	Poor		Result	GPI agree?
		Male	Female				Year	GPI		
Argentina	1992	0.26	0.25	− 0.01	96.2		1992	106.9		
	2001	0.41	0.39	− 0.02	95.1	De-feminization	2001	106.8	De-feminization	Yes
Bolivia	1999	0.40	0.41	0.01	102.5		1999	105.2		
	2002	0.40	0.40	0.00	100.0	De-feminization	2002	104.8	De-feminization	Yes
Brazil ^a	1983	0.54	0.54	0.00	100.0		1990	105.4		
	2003	0.40	0.40	0.00	100.0	Neutral	2003	104.6	De-feminization	No
Chile	1990	0.53	0.55	0.02	103.8		1990	107.4		
	2000	0.40	0.40	0.00	100.0	De-feminization	2000	109.1	Feminization	No
Colombia ^a	1995	0.34	0.34	0.00	100.0		1994	104.1		
	1999	0.40	0.40	0.00	100.0	Neutral	1999	105.0	Feminization	No
Costa Rica	1990	0.51	0.52	0.01	102.0		1990	118.2		
	2001	0.39	0.41	0.02	105.1	Feminization	2001	125.3	Feminization	Yes
Mexico	1992	0.45	0.45	0.00	100.0		1992	99.8		
	2002	0.40	0.40	0.00	100.0	Neutral	2002	107.3	Feminization	No
Venezuela ^a	1995	0.37	0.39	0.02	105.4		1994	117.0		
	2000	0.39	0.41	0.02	105.1	Neutral	2000	111.3	De-feminization	No

Note: ^aTime periods differ between countries.

Sources: Adapted from data in Medeiros and Costa (2006: Annex Table A-1) and ECLAC (2014: Statistical Annex Table 11).

Table 4 Comparison of gendered poverty results by sex of household head in selected Latin American countries, early 1990s to early 2000s

Medeiros and Costa (2006)							ECLAC (2014)			
Country	Year	Poverty rate		Difference	Ratio	Result	Poor			GPI agree?
		MHH	FHH				Year	GPI	Result	
Argentina	1992	0.27	0.29	0.02	107.4		1992	na		
	2001	0.43	0.48	0.05	111.6	Feminization	2001	na	na	na
Bolivia	1999	0.41	0.35	− 0.06	85.4		1999	94.7		
	2002	0.42	0.34	− 0.08	81.0	De-feminization	2002	81.6	De-feminization	Yes
Brazil ^a	1983	0.56	0.59	0.03	105.4		1990	108.3		
	2003	0.44	0.45	0.01	102.3	De-feminization	2003	96.2	De-feminization	Yes
Chile	1990	0.56	0.60	0.04	107.1		1990	105.3		
	2000	0.42	0.46	0.04	109.5	Feminization	2000	115.9	Feminization	Yes
Colombia ^a	1995	0.36	0.32	− 0.04	88.9		1994	101.5		
	1999	0.42	0.38	− 0.04	90.5	Feminization	1999	98.4	De-Feminization	No
Costa Rica	1990	0.52	0.54	0.02	103.8		1990	123.3		
	2001	0.40	0.47	0.07	117.5	Feminization	2001	150.5	Feminization	Yes
Mexico	1992	0.47	0.37	− 0.10	78.7		1992	73.1		
	2002	0.42	0.41	− 0.01	97.6	Feminization	2002	94.4	Feminization	Yes
Venezuela ^a	1995	0.38	0.42	0.04	110.5		1994	117.9		
	2000	0.41	0.43	0.02	104.9	De-Feminization	2000	112.7	De-feminization	Yes

Notes: ^aTime periods differ. Among the extreme poor, the ECLAC (2014) GPI for Colombia shows feminization of poverty among households headed by women.
Sources: The Medeiros and Costa (2006) poverty rates are for households with children from Appendix Table A-1, the ECLAC (2014) calculations pertain to all household heads and are derived from Table 10 of the statistical annex.

individual countries, but seem closer when considering household heads (Table 4).

In terms of all women and men, the Medeiros and Costa (2006) data show a neutral or a predominant de-feminization of person poverty in the majority of the eight countries studied, for the 1990s–early 2000s (Table 3). In contrast, the ECLAC (2014) data reveal a split, with half the countries showing trends of feminization and half a de-feminization of person poverty. Given that the two studies are based on the same household survey data source, reported gender poverty disparities may partly depend on the methodology relating to poverty line cut-offs and age cohorts used (Table 1). The two studies only agree on the direction of change in gendered person poverty in three countries – Argentina, Bolivia, and Costa Rica. Costa Rica is the sole country to demonstrate a pattern of feminization of poverty across both studies when looking at all women and men (Table 3). However, it also highlights that care needs to be exercised in interpreting meaning, and findings need to be understood within country and policy context.

In terms of household headship poverty change rates, applying the GPI indicator to the Medeiros and Costa (2006) data (Table 4) shows poverty to be feminizing in five out of eight Latin American countries and de-feminizing in Bolivia, Brazil, and Venezuela. This result differs from Medeiros and Costa's (2006) own findings, using their poverty rate difference indicator, which are that poverty by household headship was feminizing in only three out of eight Latin American countries (Argentina, Costa Rica, and Mexico), but was neutral or de-feminizing in the other five countries under consideration.

Comparing the household GPI derived from the Medeiros and Costa (2006) data and that from ECLAC (2014) data indicates that the trends in gendered poverty were the same in six out of seven countries during this interlude, except in Colombia, where there was trend disagreement in the direction of change. Over the period, both household headship studies suggest that poverty was feminizing in Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico, and de-feminizing in Bolivia, Brazil, and Venezuela. This suggests that the comparison of GPI poverty trends by household headship show more agreement consistency than the general person poverty rate trends. The two studies demonstrate consensus in terms of the direction of change in GPI headship poverty over the period, but also highlight differences among countries within the region.

In most Latin American countries, the period 1990–2013 saw a general reduction in the number and share of people in income poverty. However, more recent ECLAC evidence suggests poverty to be feminizing insofar as there are more women to men among those that remain in poverty. To this extent women's poverty may be more difficult to reach than general household poverty. UN Women suggests that part of the reason

for the reported general global decline in poverty is “new social policies” (2015: 45; see also Gender Equality Observatory of Latin America and the Caribbean [GEOLAC; 2013]). However, these policies might also be important in explaining the seemingly paradoxical findings of a concerted decline in general poverty but checkered shifts in feminized poverty.

FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Prominent among the various new social policies being implemented across the globe are CCT programs, which were launched initially in Latin America. CCTs were described as perhaps the most important innovation in social policy in the region over the past fifteen years (Levy 2015) and began with the Mexican government’s *Progresa/Oportunidades* program (formerly *Solidaridad*), before similar programs began to emerge in Brazil (*Bolsa Familia*), Colombia (*Familias en Acción*), and then in Honduras, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Ecuador, among other nations. They have a twofold aim – to address immediate material deprivation and to tackle the intergenerational transmission of poverty (González de la Rocha and Escobar Latapí 2016). The programs provide the resources needed for children’s education, such as uniforms and books, with cash transfers to women conditional on ensuring their offspring’s attendance at school and health clinics. The assumption is that this will improve employability and productivity in the future.

CCTs have a wider reach than the alternative popular social policy option for the region – social insurance programs. Despite recent efforts in a number of countries to provide state-sponsored social insurance, it is often confined only to those in formal employment, vastly reducing the numbers involved, with differential coverage by gender and age also being an issue. However, even within CCTs, UN Women notes that outcomes vary “depending on the reach of the programmes and the size of transfers” (2015: 45). For example, Nicaragua’s CCT program, the Social Protection Network/*Red de Protección Social* (RPS), was modeled on the *Progresa/Oportunidades* program of Mexico and shared many features. Sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank, the RPS was critiqued for its narrow reach, low cash payments, and punitive approach (Bradshaw 2008; Bradshaw and Quirós Viquez 2008). Despite this, the RPS is cited as one of the most successful CCTs (Rawlings 2004). The evidence to support this claim focuses on improved school enrollment and a decline in the number of children with stunted physical growth (Maluccio and Flores 2004).

When considering changes in women’s well-being, including their income poverty, there are virtually no data available from evaluations of the RPS. A dearth of quantitative measurement of the impact of CCTs

on women is not unusual for such programs since their main aim is to reduce the poverty of children, rather than that of women per se. Indeed, it is somewhat salutary that ECLAC data suggests a feminization of poverty in Nicaragua over time (a change in GPI from 101.7 in 1993 to 104.3 in 2009). The literature on CCT programs generally tends to focus on the “empowering” rather than income poverty reducing nature of cash transfers for women, assuming that as the programs provide women with money of “their own,” this will allow them to make decisions over what is purchased for the household (Adato and Hoddinott 2010). Even if some qualitative studies, such as that of the Nicaraguan RPS, claim the scheme to have brought about a “profound difference in the lives of the female beneficiaries” (Adato et al. 2004: 97), it should also be noted that the success of these programs relies on women’s socially constructed altruistic behavior to use increased decision-making power to improve household well-being in the short term, and through increased investment in the human capital of children, gains in children’s well-being in the longer term. It is this same altruistic behavior that may limit well-being gains for women (see Brickell and Chant [2010]; Chant [2016b]). While CCTs have reduced the gap between women’s income and poverty thresholds, the contribution is small, at 12 percent of the extreme poverty line and 7 percent of the general poverty line (GEOLAC 2013).

The nature of the specific CCT program is conceivably important in determining the impact on women. Two of the oldest and largest Latin American programs are *Progrresa/Oportunidades* in Mexico, and *Bolsa Familia* in Brazil. Given their extensive coverage, and the fact that they have targeted women, they might be expected to have had an impact not only on national-level poverty indicators, but on narrowing gaps in gendered poverty and well-being. Yet from our data analysis above, when comparing women with men, there appears to have been a feminization of income poverty in Mexico over time, compared with a recent de-feminization in Brazil. In Mexico, the priority was building human capital, while the main objective in Brazil was transferring resources to poor households. As with the Nicaraguan case, this suggests that measures that target resources at women with the aim of building human capital of children may lead to general poverty decline, but do not necessarily benefit women, nor reduce their relative income poverty. It might, of course, be that women’s gains will be indirect and lagged – with mothers benefiting from the increased income-generating capacity of their children in the future. Yet projections of additional future earnings attributable to the Nicaraguan program were calculated to be only US\$42 per year (Morley and Coady 2003), which questions the ability of children to “pay back” mothers with increased earnings. Moreover, while the academic literature suggests that adult children are even more likely to share income with mothers who head

their own households (Chant 2007, 2016a), as we posit below, children growing-up in FHHs may not stand the same chances of CCT inclusion as those in MHHs.

To avoid creating “dependency,” the size of the income transfer in CCTs is not meant, by itself, to raise households out of poverty, but instead to complement earned income (Levy 2015). Thus, adult women potentially have to choose between income-generating activities and participating in the scheme (Feitosa de Britto 2007; Hernández Pérez 2012). Female heads of household may face a particularly difficult choice since the absence of a male wage earner conceivably means that they are more likely to be engaged in income-generating ventures, and thus the opportunity cost of their participation may be highest. However, CCTs do not specifically target female heads, but instead endeavor to reach “the poor” in general using various methods to locate them, including geographical location and proxy-means testing. Aside from the fact that differences within, rather than between, households are seldom, if ever, taken into account, one of the biggest shortcomings of targeting methodology is that it does not adequately embrace the multidimensional nature of poverty (Azevedo and Robles 2013). Once again, how poverty is measured will determine who is deemed poor and whether a household is included in the program or not – at least in those programs where aid is targeted rather than universal. While FHHs are constructed as the poorest of the poor in wider policy discourse, and FHHs may potentially have the most to gain from CCTs, they are not necessarily a target group. If the opportunity cost of lost earnings from participating is too high, then female heads may also effectively be “priced out” of CCTs.

That CCTs can undermine the economic participation of women is interesting given that policymakers often present women’s increased labor force participation as a pathway out of poverty (Chant 2014). CCT programs do not promote women’s involvement in income-generating activities, nor provide the education and skills to facilitate or improve this. Instead, they promote women’s non-income generating role as mothers and carers. The main barrier to women’s labor force participation is the organization of unpaid care work – and CCTs may in fact act as a further barrier. “Co-responsibility” contracts demand not only that women ensure that their children graduate through school and attend health checks, but also participate themselves in training sessions, perform voluntary labor, and physically collect the monies, all of which can involve long journeys and protracted waits (Molyneux 2006, 2007; Cookson 2016). For women who withdraw from productive work or work less in income-generating activities, their own poverty situation may worsen further, as “non-earned” income such as cash transfers may afford them fewer opportunities for voice in the home than income from self- or other employment (Bradshaw 2008). Evidence suggests that female CCT “beneficiaries” spend less time in the

labor market and more time doing unpaid domestic work and caregiving than women who do not receive cash transfers (GEOLAC 2013). This has led to the suggestion that:

the capacity of the CCTs for transforming the lives of poor women through the transfer of monetary income (one step forward) is more than neutralized by the consolidation of their caregiver role, which has multiple negative implications (two steps back). (GEOLAC 2013: 61)

Women's caregiving responsibilities, which constitute one of the main structural causes of female poverty, are not challenged by CCT programs but instead reinforced. Women beneficiaries are being constructed not just as mothers, but as "good" mothers, and cash is conditional on modeling of appropriate female behavior (Roy 2002; Molyneux 2006, 2007; Bradshaw 2008; Chant 2008, 2016b). This includes the provision of basic household goods now constructed by the programs as the responsibility of women, or more specifically the responsibility of mothers – suggesting a "motherization" of policy (Molyneux 2006) within a more general "feminization of responsibility and/or obligation" (Chant 2007, 2008, 2014). The feminization of the provision of basic goods and services may bring about a decline in the value placed on their fulfillment relative to other household obligations, which continue to be deemed primarily men's concerns. Despite women's contributions to household resources, the way these are generated and not "earned," and the fact that they are constructed as part of their mothering role, means male partners may not value them accordingly (Bradshaw 2008). As such, there may be little change in the relative position of women and men within the home and continued gender gaps in relative "power poverty." As many detailed micro-level studies have revealed, when women start "complementing" household income, male partners may retain more of their earnings for their personal use (Bradshaw 2002, 2013; Chant 2007, 2016b). In light of this, CCTs may also do little to unseat the relative income poverty of women within male-headed households.

For all women who seek to juggle income-generating activities, carer roles, and participation in CCTs, household income poverty may be reduced, but women's personal income poverty may remain the same or increase, which, along with related rises in time poverty and power poverty, may partly account for why the feminization of poverty alleviation programs do not necessarily bring about a de-feminization of poverty. However, on top of inadequate data to assess the extent to which poverty is feminized, and since poverty alleviation programs rarely measure their impact on women, we also lack data on their implications for the feminization of poverty. As our discussion has highlighted, this is perhaps not surprising

since the feminization of poverty alleviation programs should not be assumed to be driven by a feminization of poverty.

CONCLUSION

As feminist scholars have long argued, the basis of women's poverty and gender inequalities lie in patriarchal gender roles and relations. However, the subjectivity of how poverty is experienced remains largely ignored. Anti-poverty programs that seek solely to address income deficiencies will not challenge existing gendered roles and associated relations and may ultimately reinforce them. Even addressing women's income poverty is a complex issue given that gendered poverty is more often assumed than known. Despite the many advances in data collection over the years, sex-disaggregation continues to reveal a discernible reluctance to go beyond the front door of domestic units and only refers to numbers of women living in poor households. The call to disaggregate data by sex as standard also seems to fall on deaf ears. The seeming inability or unwillingness to "enter" households and to gather information as to how resources are distributed among the men, women, boys, and girls who reside within them means that information on who is "poor" persists largely in being modeled rather than collected. As poverty within households is seldom measured, it is poverty between households that feeds policy prescriptions, and female heads become a marker for all women, even if, paradoxically, the requirements of CCTs often exclude them by default, if not by design. The feminization of poverty accordingly persists in being closely linked with the feminization of household headship.

Attempts to better understand the extent of women's poverty must draw on available data, recognizing that the degree to which women are presented as poor depends on what is measured, how it is measured, and who is the focus of measurement. This provokes questions around whether the feminization of poverty is real rather than statistical, and raises uncertainty around the existence of a feminized or feminizing poverty. The Latin American data reviewed show various patterns across time and space and suggest there has been a recent re-feminization of poverty after periods of de-feminization. This is at a time when there has been an overall pattern for declining poverty, often attributed to dedicated poverty alleviation programs. Poverty alleviation programs are frequently and increasingly feminized insofar as they channel resources through women. However, how these three feminizations – of headship, of poverty, and of poverty alleviation – interact is complex and may not automatically bring positive changes for women. More than anything, the analysis here of the three feminizations highlights how little we know about each of these processes individually and how they intersect. Yet it is this interplay that may help to explain why a feminization of poverty alleviation does not necessarily

bring about a de-feminization of poverty and urges more investigation in the future. This is particularly important in the context of Agenda 2030's intention to eliminate all forms of poverty everywhere, including and especially along gender lines.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The collaborative research underpinning this article was funded by an Urban, Development and Planning Cluster Seed Grant awarded to Sylvia Chant in 2016 by the Department of Geography and Environment at the London School of Economics and Political Science. We are grateful for this financial assistance. We would also like to thank the reviewers and editors at *Feminist Economics* for their many valuable inputs and suggestions.

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