**Gender, Justice, and Statistics: The Case of Poverty Measurement**

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The last two decades have seen a welcome proliferation of the collection and dissemination of data on social progress, as well as considered public debates rethinking existing standards of measuring the progress of societies.[[1]](#footnote-1) These efforts are to be welcomed. However, they are only a nascent step on a longer road to the improved measurement of social progress. In this paper, I focus on the central role that gender should take in future efforts to measure progress in securing human rights, with a particular focus on anti-poverty rights.

I proceed in four parts. First, I argue that measurement of human rights achievements and human rights deficits is entailed by the recognition of human rights, and that adequate measurement of human rights must be genuinely gender-sensitive. Second, I argue that existing systems of information collection currently fail rights holders, especially women, by failing to adequately gather information on the degree to which their rights are secure. If my first two claims are correct, this failure represents a serious injustice, and in particular an injustice for women. Third, I make recommendations regarding changes to existing information collection that would generate gender-sensitive measures of anti-poverty rights. Fourth, I conclude by responding to various objections that have been raised regarding the rise of indicators to track human rights.

**Section 1: Rights (of Women) Entail (Gender-Sensitive) Measurement**

*Conceiving of Rights*

One of the most remarkable aspects of the post-war period is the normative agreement on human rights. Human rights are recognized (at least nominally) by almost all governments, are a foundational concept in international law, the central language for describing struggles for social and global justice, and a common currency of international politics.[[2]](#footnote-2) The rights revolution is to be welcomed, and pushed forward. But what are human rights, and what do they entail?

On one prominent conception of human rights, to stipulate a human right to X is to assert “that any society or other social system, insofar as this is reasonably possible, ought to be so (re)organized so that its members have secure access to X.”[[3]](#footnote-3) To have a human right to a decent standard of living, for example, is to have secure access to adequate resources needed to maintain oneself in a decent state of nourishment, health, and shelter. Secure access entails not simply that I currently have those resources, but also that my future access to needed resources can be reasonably expected to continue. Secure rights therefore require not just access to adequate resources at a given point in time, but access to an institutional environment and forms of social organization which guarantee (insofar as possible) that I will continue to have access to needed resources to guarantee adequate nourishment, health, shelter, etc..[[4]](#footnote-4)

For example, I might currently have adequate shelter. But if the institutional environment is such that my neighbour could easily take my shelter with no repercussion, or the government reserves the right to evict me from my neighbourhood without notice or compensation, or I am at high risk of floods with no access to insurance or protection, then my right to shelter is not secure. I suffer from a human rights deficit because of the deficiencies of my institutional environment that fail to provide me secure access to shelter.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This approach is consistent with existing international law. Major international agreements recognize a range of first and second generation rights, and Article 28 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights implicitly endorses the institutional conception of human rights, stating that, “Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.”[[6]](#footnote-6) It also shares consistency with the instruments of the international legal system, in which reporting requirements include requests for quantitative data on social and economic achievement. Other soft law instruments also lend support the view that states must improve data collection and make this data collection gender sensitive.[[7]](#footnote-7)

*Rights and Measurement*

How can it be known whether rights are secured in a given institutional environment? There are two general methods by which to evaluate formally individual’s security of access to X. The first is to allow formal channels where human rights complaints may be registered and violations be recorded. For example, one source of data on violent assault is the reporting of violent assaults to police and other relevant authorities. I’ll call this *administrative* information. The second way to gather information on human rights achievement, absent such reporting, is by investigating through a range of methods, both quantitative and qualitative, participatory and not, whether rights are secure. Let’s call this *survey* information.[[8]](#footnote-8) These survey methods may involve both representative sampling methods and participatory exercises. In some instances, other techniques may be required.[[9]](#footnote-9) For a government to know that citizens have secured their right to freedom from violence, it must a) open administrative channels to permit the registration of violent incidents and b) collect information on violent incidents through a range of survey techniques. Failure to generate an adequate system measuring freedom from violence constitutes a failure to secure the right to freedom from violence.

*Rights and Gender-Sensitivity*

An adequate conception of rights, and the endorsement of both first and second generation rights, requires sensitivity to the gender-specific ways in which rights tend to be violated. Gender-sensitivity to rights violations is a response to differential need that results from gender based biological and social differences. Biologically, women have specific needs throughout the course of their lives that men do not have. For example, article 25 of the UDHR specifies a right to a standard of living adequate for the “health and wellbeing of himself and his family.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Women may, as a matter of international human rights law, then be entitled to additional resources to address health needs surrounding menstruation, pregnancy, and child care.[[11]](#footnote-11) In other words, to secure an adequate standard of living a woman may require greater adequate resources depending on certain biological features she possesses. Article 23 specifies the right to work and the right to ‘just and favourable conditions’[[12]](#footnote-12) in employment. Such conditions may require that, for example, accommodations be made for pre and post-natal women. Here both social circumstances and biological need will determine the level of resources a person needs to secure his or her rights. A woman who bears greater responsibility for child rearing (because of her socially prescribed role) may face greater rights deficits when water is not nearby (because she is responsible for cooking food and cleaning children) than her male partner who gets water from the same source.

All individuals are, as a matter of justice, entitled to an institutional environment in which their core rights are protected. They are therefore entitled to systems of information collection that adequately track human rights deficits. Proper measurement of rights achievements must be suitably gender sensitive, taking account of differences in biological need and social location.

**Section 2: Poverty Measurement and Gender**

Existing systems of information collection, analysis, and publication fail people in general, and women in particular. There is a great deal to be said about what we measure and why, at the local, national, and international levels, but given limited space here, I will focus on the gender-specific failures of poverty measures that track anti-poverty rights.

2.1 *Monetary Poverty Indices*

Most national governments use a monetary poverty line measured as household income or, in many developing countries, household consumption-expenditure. These monetary poverty lines are often, though not always, based on either the cost of obtaining a minimum level of calories or, more expansively, the cost of obtaining a larger basket of both food and non-food goods needed to meet basic needs.

Monetary poverty lines fail to reveal gender disparities in a number of ways. First, by taking the household as the unit of analysis, it is impossible to know whether there is a gendered distribution of poverty. At best, such poverty lines can reveal whether female-headed households are poorer than male-headed households.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, all household based poverty lines implausibly assume an equal distribution of resources within the household, thereby attributing the same poverty status to all members of the household. Second, even if consumption-expenditure were measured at the individual level, these measures are insensitive to what Sen calls the differential conversion factors of differently located individuals.[[14]](#footnote-14) A person’s biological makeup or social location will affect their ability to convert consumed resources into actual achievements. For example, a pregnant woman may need to consume more and different calories to remain adequately nourished for decent health, and need to spend greater resources to have decent pre-natal care. Similarly, a man who works in a physically demanding job, like carrying a rickshaw or working as an artisanal miner, will need to consume a higher level of calories to reach adequate nourishment. By using a flat rate measure of deprivation monetary poverty lines are insensitive to these differential biological and social needs.

2.2 *Multi-dimensional poverty measures*

Multi-dimensional poverty indices might be thought to fare better than their monetary counterparts. By taking account of a range of dimensions in which deprivation can occur, they might be more sensitive to gender-specific deprivations that are difficult or impossible to reflect in income or consumption measures. However, multidimensional poverty indices also fail to reflect adequately the core deprivations that women face. The only other poverty measure purporting to give a global headcount of the number of poor individuals, the Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index, is calculated at the household level.[[15]](#footnote-15) It therefore fails to reveal when deprivation is distributed unequally within the family. Furthermore, even though it does collect information on a range of dimensions (education, health, and standard of living), it still does not include dimensions that are particularly important for women, such as freedom from violence, time-use or labour burden, or access to contraception. It therefore cannot reflect when a woman is more deprived than her male counterpart because of shortfalls in these areas.

**Section 3: Improving Poverty Measurement**

If current measurement of anti-poverty rights falls short, what is a better approach to gender-sensitive poverty measurement?[[16]](#footnote-16) To develop a gender-just and pro-poor system of measurement, we must first have in place a theory of how to think about concepts, a procedure for constructing adequate accounts of these concepts, and substantive recommendations for how better measurement can occur.

*3.1 Theory*

Poverty is an essentially contestable concept.[[17]](#footnote-17) There is no conception or measurement of poverty that is correct to the exclusion of all competitors. This does not mean that all uses of the term are equally legitimate or that it permits of any use whatsoever. Rather, it is in the nature of the concept that it be subject to legitimate dispute by its users.

In the academic literature, there are five competing approaches to the conception and measurement of poverty: monetary approaches (both income and consumption-expenditure),[[18]](#footnote-18) basic needs approaches,[[19]](#footnote-19) capabilities approaches,[[20]](#footnote-20) social exclusion approaches[[21]](#footnote-21) and rights based approaches.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Given the essential contestability of both conceptions and measures of poverty, how are we to seek conceptual clarity for the purposes of poverty measurement? If we seek to provide a sound conceptual basis for measuring and thus assessing poverty, how should we proceed? Following Sally Haslanger, we can distinguish three approaches to the analysis of concepts.[[23]](#footnote-23) In the first *conceptual approach* one “looks to *a priori* methods such as introspection for an answer. Taking into account intuitions about cases and principles, one hopes eventually to reach a reflective equilibrium.”[[24]](#footnote-24) On the conceptual approach, one asks ‘what conception of X do I have?’ On the second *descriptive* approach, one is concerned with ‘what kinds (if any) our . . . vocabulary tracks. The task is to develop potentially more accurate concepts through careful consideration of the phenomena, usually relying on empirical or quasi-empirical methods.’[[25]](#footnote-25)

On the third *ameliorative* approach, rather than examining *a priori* principles and cases or empirical information on what our vocabulary tracks, we

begin by asking: What is the point of having the concept in question . . . What concept (if any) would do the work best? . . . If we allow that our everyday vocabularies serve both cognitive and practical purposes that might be well-served by our theorizing, then those pursuing an ameliorative approach might reasonably represent themselves as providing an account of our concept—or perhaps the concept we are reaching for—by enhancing our conceptual resources to serve our (critically examined) purposes.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Haslanger argues that, for some concept F, “Ameliorative analyses elucidate ‘our’ legitimate purposes and what concept of F-ness (if any) would serve them best (the target concept). Normative input is needed.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Elsewhere I have argued at length that the ameliorative approach should be used for the conception and measurement of poverty.[[28]](#footnote-28) Briefly, because poverty is an explicitly normative concept that is deeply shaped by existing social and linguistic practice, but permits of a variety of interpretations and uses that serve various normative and political purposes in the world, we must consider not only semantic considerations but also political considerations in using the term. Just as limited consumption and income measures may obscure gendered distribution of deprivation, thus serving one particular political purpose (arguably unintentionally permitting the perpetuation of patriarchy), revised conceptions and measures of poverty may serve different political purposes and reflect a different set of values. We must therefore not take as granted these purposes and values but rather subject them to critical scrutiny. If it is axiomatic that poverty should be reduced, what are the things that ought to be included in the set of deprivations that ought to be reduced? What values should be brought to bear on answering this question? And what purposes should be served by poverty measures and systems of poverty measurement?

Feminist philosophers have long argued, in my mind decisively, that questions about value are not gender neutral. The selection and use of values frequently privilege certain ‘masculine’ values (rationality, efficiency, power) and disvalue ‘feminine’ values (trust, reciprocity, care). Furthermore, the interpretation and use of values in moral discourse is frequently gendered as well. Feminist philosophers generally do not, and ought not, abandon the use of standard moral values present in contemporary moral discourse. Rather, they call for a reexamination of the selected (and excluded) values, their interpretation, and their use from a critical gender perspective that is informed by an explicit opposition to gender-based oppression and a critical consciousness of the exclusionary nature of much of the history of western philosophy.[[29]](#footnote-29) It is therefore necessary for gender to be central to future analysis of the values informing poverty measurement.

Taking gender seriously in poverty measurement may therefore require engaging not just in theoretical discussions and hypothetical thought experiments to determine how poverty should be conceived and measured, but also a critical engagement with the lived experiences of those who are deprived to determine what preferences, interests, and values they believe should be reflected in systems of poverty measurement and measures of poverty.[[30]](#footnote-30) This engagement should be sensitive to, among other things, features of an individual’s situation that may inform the experiences from which she or he draws—including gender, race and/or ethnicity, religion, geographic location, social location, disability, and so on. [[31]](#footnote-31)

3.2 *Procedure*

Procedurally, making poverty measurement serve the interests of poor men and women requires determining what preferences, values, and interests they have that should be reflected in poverty measurement. Public reason is well suited to address questions of poverty measurement. [[32]](#footnote-32)

Participatory research has a strong and frequently distinguished--though not uncontested--history in development theory and practice.[[33]](#footnote-33) At its best, participatory research empowers marginalized poor men and women to evaluate their deprivations and design poverty reduction plans or strategies, placing greater authority in the hands of those best positioned to understand their deprivations and most frequently excluded from official decision making in development. At worst, participatory research places excessive burdens on the most burdened members of society, taking their time without ensuring any real authority or accountability for participants, thus legitimating the predetermined vision of external actors while continuing the exclusion of oppressed and marginalized men and women.

Parallel to the participatory turn in development studies has been the deliberative turn in political philosophy and democratic theory. Whereas more standard analyses of democracy focus on elections and government structure (such as the rule of law and systems of checks and balances), deliberative democrats argue that the essence of democracy is public deliberation. To rule by discussion means that citizens are not simply engaged in democratic activity on election day, but rather the act of governance, and of living in a democratic society more generally, is characterized by public deliberation on key issues about which reasonable participants may disagree.

Taking a critical gender perspective on both participatory research and deliberative democratic procedures requires sensitivity to the degree to which power relations influence deliberative and participatory exercises. Deliberative spheres are not detached from the real world in which preexisting inequalities, norms surrounding participation and voice, threats of violence, and multiple vulnerabilities all shape who is free to speak, who is heard, and who influences final decision making.[[34]](#footnote-34) These power hierarchies in participation are frequently gendered, and nominal participation and empowerment can often serve to reinforce or even strengthen gender hierarchies.

The mere fact that participatory research and deliberative exercises can perpetuate or even exacerbate preexisting power inequalities does not mean that these exercises should be abandoned.[[35]](#footnote-35) Rather, the exercises should be structured so as to account for these potential exclusions and marginalization in public reasoning, to privilege the most marginalized voices as a compensatory move towards more equitable deliberation. A variety of tools are available to protect and promote marginalized voices in deliberation to ensure that marginalized individuals have impact in deliberative exercises. First, safe spaces can be created where participants can deliberate among fellow group members who are similarly marginalized in the broader public sphere. Second, the rules and governance of deliberation can be used to constrain those who would interfere in deliberation and ensure the full participation of each member. Third, final aggregative or concluding exercises or analyses may give greater weight to those individuals who are most marginalized. Finally, marginalized individuals or groups could be assigned some veto power to ensure that deliberative exercises do not override their interests or preferences or be permitted to register dissenting opinions formally.

In the realm of poverty measurement, the processes of public reason protecting and promoting the voices of poor men and women can be used to reflect on a number of key questions. First, what interests do poor men and women have that relate to the measurement of deprivation? Second, what preferences do they have? Third, what values do they believe should inform poverty measurement? Fourth, what conceptions of poverty and deprivation do they hold? While each of these questions will produce a multitude of answers and there is certainly no more agreement among deprived and marginalized communities than there is in the academic community, it is nonetheless the case that engaging poor people in deliberative participatory exercises can provide important contributions into the process of creating a poverty measure even in the absence of full agreement among participants.

We should also note that the importance of procedure extends beyond the development of pro-poor, gender sensitive poverty measures. Systems of poverty measurement must provide opportunities for concerned citizens to actively use systems of information collection to advocate for deprivation reduction. This means that information systems must make all gathered statistics publicly available, free, and easily accessible. Data should be presented in a manner that makes clear and transparent how it was collected, what the measurement represents, and what limitations exist in the information provided.[[36]](#footnote-36)

3.3 *Substance*

Substantively, gendering poverty measurement requires revisiting a) the unit of analysis b) dimensions and indicators of deprivation and c) sensitivity to individual needs and context.

*3.3.1 Unit of Analysis*

The unit of analysis for a gender-sensitive poverty measure must be the individual. If the individual is not the unit of analysis, it is impossible to interrogate intra-household distribution of resources, opportunities, and burdens. Not only does this leave key questions about the feminization of poverty unresolved, it also leads to gender neutral—and thus potentially gender biased—conceptions and measures of poverty.

Making the individual the unit of analysis would require substantial changes in existing systems of data collection. Ideally, these systems would collect information on a range of deprivations for each member of the household, allowing for intrapersonal assessment of deprivation before aggregating to interpersonal assessments of deprivation.

There are some good reasons why the individual has to date not been the unit of analysis. First, the level of deprivation an individual faces will be highly determined by the level of deprivation in the household in which she finds herself. But it will not be fully determined by the household. Furthermore, using households is easier than capturing individual levels of deprivation, which require different practices of survey enumeration. Second, many household resources are not easily attributed to any individual member. For example, a shared roof or a refrigerator may benefit all household members, and the lack of adequate shelter or the capacity for food storage may lead to deprivations for all members. And the debts incurred by one member may eventually burden all. But the fact that many household resources are shared among members is not an objection to making the individual the unit of analysis. It merely points to the fact that individual measures should be sensitive to each household member’s access to, use of, and control over collective resources.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Although it is critical that the unit of analysis move from the household to the individual, individual level poverty measures need not have exclusive purview in broader systems of poverty measurement. It may be that assessing deprivation at the household level can complement individual measures of deprivation. It may also be that some important indicators of deprivation cannot be collected at the individual or household level, at least as components of an intrapersonal or household measure of deprivation. For example, the measurement of maternal mortality or infant mortality is an extremely useful indicator of human development. Indicators on sex selective abortions play a critical role in revealing the perceived (dis)value of females in some societies. But none of these indicators can be included in an intrapersonal measure of deprivation. So while the unit of analysis for pro-poor gender sensitive poverty measurement should be the individual, and while it is important to reveal multiple deprivations when they occur for a single individual, individual-based measures of poverty need not and ought not exclude a host of other measurements that constitute a full national system of information collection and poverty measurement.

*3.3.2 Dimensions and Indicators*

The dimensions of human life considered relevant for poverty measurement and the indicators that are measured for those dimensions should be revised through an ameliorative approach to conceptual analysis that takes gender as of central importance to poverty, deploying deliberative procedures that promote the voices and authority of the worst off men and women. Narrow lists of the dimensions of poverty frequently include income, health, and education, while broader lists also include sanitation, water, shelter, and sometimes electricity and assets. Taking gender seriously means both revisiting these lists of dimensions[[38]](#footnote-38) and (in the next section) revisiting standards of assessment for deprivation in each of these areas. Given my commitment to deliberation and public reason as the most appropriate way in which to establish and/or revise lists of dimensions of deprivation for poverty measurement, I shall only briefly describe here potential dimensions that should be considered relevant for an intrapersonal assessment of deprivation, and are particularly important for revealing the gendered distribution of deprivation. Public deliberation may endorse or reject these recommendations.

Freedom from violence is a core human interest that should be included in any individual multi-dimensional measure of poverty. It is a deprivation that affects both men and women but in very different ways with very different impacts, is inadequately measured in existing national statistics systems, and is causally related to a host of other deprivations that are constitutive of poverty.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Time-use indicators are increasingly important for measuring individual deprivation.[[40]](#footnote-40) Specifying what should be captured in time-use—hours of leisure, hours worked (in paid or unpaid work), or the quality and kind of labor one is required to do-- remains contested. Recent work on time-use has shown that it can be an important tool in evaluating the distribution of burden, as well as the adequacy of existing institutional arrangements.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The access to, use of, and secure control over assets is a critical indicator for revealing how poor a person is, and how vulnerable she may be. Many women are particular disadvantaged by a lack of assets. For example, Agarwal and Panda find that the ownership of land is a critical determinant in whether women are free from violence in India. They find that the important factor in determining rates of violence against women is not whether a woman actually uses the exit option that immovable property provides, but that the very existence of that option can deter the husband from abusing her. And if violence does occur, she can escape further abuse:

As high as 49% of the women who owned neither land nor house reported long-term physical violence. In contrast, the figure was 18% for those owning land, 10% for those owning a house, and 7% for those owning both. Moreover, not only is the incidence of violence lower if a woman owns property, but such a woman is also more likely to leave home and stay away if violence occurs, since *she has somewhere to go.[[42]](#footnote-42)*

Secure control over assets is related not simply to violence, but to a host of other social, economic, and political opportunities. It therefore deserves consideration in an intrapersonal assessment of deprivation that can reveal gender disparities.

Though I recommend these three dimensions for inclusion in an intrapersonal assessment of deprivation, there are other dimensions and indicators that deserve consideration. These include: kind and quality of labor; access to contraception; ability to control one’s life and influence decisions; secure sexual and reproductive rights, including freedom from sexual exploitation, and so on.

One might object that this is too expansive: including dimensions like freedom from violence, leisure time, and sexual and reproductive rights in intrapersonal measures of deprivation risks making poverty too big a concept and diminishing the importance of other core deprivations like hunger and a lack of education. On this view, poverty ‘inflation’—that is, the incorporation of a wide range of deprivations in the term--is implausible in light of how the term poverty is standardly used in English.[[43]](#footnote-43) However, as noted above, an ameliorative approach to poverty conception and measurement does not mean abandoning either conceptual or descriptive approaches to the conception of poverty. The concepts we have and the phenomenon they track may constrain the use of the ameliorative approach. Furthermore, if being time-poor is reachable from common conceptions of poverty, and adding this dimension can well serve the purposes we have set for ourselves (which include revealing the gendered distribution of deprivation), then it ought to be included in the measure.

*3.3.3 Agent and Context Sensitivity*

One key question in poverty measurement debates (and debates about the best public criterion of justice) is whether the assessment of individual disadvantage should be sensitive or insensitive to personal heterogeneities. Personal heterogeneities, for our purposes here, can be understood as the variations in personal characteristics that a relevant to the differential ability of an individual to convert resources into achievement. Personal heterogeneities, for Sen, are one of several factors that can affect an individual’s ability to convert income or commodities into actual achievements or deprivation reductions.[[44]](#footnote-44) He categorizes them as “disparate physical characteristics connected with disability, illness, age or gender” that “make [an individual’s] needs diverse.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Other authors, like Thomas Pogge, believe personal heterogeneities include not just differential needs but also differential endowments.[[46]](#footnote-46) Personal heterogeneities are thus understood as divergences in both needs and capacities from some age and gender specific standard.

If we take the grounded experiences of poor men and women as playing an important justificatory role in debates over poverty measurement (agreeing with the argument above that poor men and women should be given authority to resolve key debates in poverty measurement), we find that poverty measurement should be sensitive, in so far as possible, to the unique needs of individuals. Poor people repeatedly say that they are poor by virtue of not having enough resources to meet their specific needs. These people are referring to their particular needs, not the age and gender specific average needs of people with roughly similar situations.[[47]](#footnote-47)

What can a focus on gender add to this debate? First, men and women have different biological needs. Second, men and women have different needs on account of their social location. Consider the case of water. Everyone needs water. But different people need different amounts of water for different purposes. In assessing the deprivation of drinking water, for example, measurements should take account of how much water a person requires to meet their biological and social needs. Both men and women need water for drinking and cleaning. But women need more water for personal cleaning, particularly as a result of menstruation. Given women’s social role in child rearing, household chores including cooking, and ensuring the health of the family, they may have much greater needs for water than men. That is, in order to meet their individual need for water in their socially prescribed roles, women require more water than men. Therefore, in assessing how much water is needed, and when one can be said to be water deprived, assessment should be sensitive to unique individual needs. Women are also much more likely to be responsible for fetching water, and are therefore arguably more greatly burdened when safe water is not easily available in the home. This may then indicate that for purposes of assessing the relative deprivation of men and women, a deprivation of safe water may ‘count’ for more when a woman is water deprived than when a man is deprived.[[48]](#footnote-48)

If poverty measurement should be sensitive to specific individual needs, rather than just age and gender specific needs, does this mean each individual person will have her own poverty line? And would his or her poverty line change over time? Would this system be workable?

We must recognize some practical constraints in poverty measurement. To make poverty data quickly attainable and useful, there may sometimes be tradeoffs between usability and relevance in poverty measurement[[49]](#footnote-49). That is, the more tailored a means-based line is to a person’s unique biological and social needs, the less useful it becomes: it would too costly in time and money to determine their exact social and biological needs. However, there are a number of ways to engage in poverty measurement that are sensitive to differential needs while still maintaining usability.

One strategy would be to have a large number of poverty lines tailored to ‘clusters’ of individuals categorized by the specific needs they face. A crude version of this approach operates in the US context, in which 61 poverty thresholds are maintained based on the number and age of household members. I don’t find this strategy very promising, as it excessively complicates poverty measurement for policy makers, poor people, and advocates. The US has 61 lines, and that merely takes account of differences in household makeup by age and number—a more fine grained approach with the individual as the unit of analysis would potentially have an even larger number of poverty lines.

A second strategy would measure achievements, rather than resources or means, in at least some dimensions. For example, rather than measuring the amount of calories available for consumption, measurement can focus on nutritional outcomes, including whether one has eaten, or more ambitiously whether one has reached certain standards of good nourishment (such as height, weight, and sufficient micronutrients in the blood). The downside to measuring achievements is it fails to distinguish between individuals who have sufficient resources to, say, eat enough food but choose to spend their resources on entertainment, alcohol, and tobacco, and those who lack the resources to meet their nutritional needs.

**Section 4: Common Objections to Measurement**

Is the focus on measurement misguided? In recent years, the increased measurement of rights has met scepticism and resistance.[[50]](#footnote-50) In my view, healthy scepticism about specific indicators, how they are used, and how they are publicized is deserved and productive. However, resistance to the spread of indicators and the development of better gender-sensitive systems of measurement is not only misplaced, but dangerous. I will categorize these sources of scepticism or resistance in four possible objections, and refute each.

*4.1 Indicators mislead or deceive*

One might object to the rise of indicators because they are understood to be often mistaken or misleading. For example, the World Bank’s International Poverty Line is internally inconsistent. More damning, the higher lines of $2.00 per day and $2.50 per day portray entirely different pictures of progress in poverty eradication.[[51]](#footnote-51)

This is not an objection to the use of indicators for rights measurement. It is merely an objection to misleading or deceptive indicators. The response should not be to abandon measurement, but rather to measure with great care. This requires transparency and accessibility in the construction and publication of indicators, and a healthy scepticism when using indicators. To guard against indicators that are misleading or deceptive, institutions tasked with information collection must have established formal channels of accountability where critiques can be aired and responded to, using public reason (again) to make measurement work better. The objectivity of an indicator depends on part on the ability of the institutions which create and maintain the indicator to permit transformative criticism. [[52]](#footnote-52)

*4.2 Indicators are subject to manipulation*

Relatedly, one might object to the use of indicators as they are easily subject to manipulation and abuse. The common adage that there are three kinds of lies, “lies, damned lies, and statistics” reflects the widespread concern that published statistics are so easily manipulated so as to allow the producer to say whatever she pleases.[[53]](#footnote-53) On this view, statistics are too easily manipulated to play a meaningful role in governance. The problem is not simply that indicators can mislead or deceive, but that adjusting them to make this happen is far too easy for powerful elites that control access to information.

Again, this is an argument for ensuring that statistics are presented in transparent manner, that agencies responsible for collecting them are subject to accountability, that power over information collection is spread across a range of stakeholders, and that mechanisms for transformative criticism are established. It does not mitigate against the rise of more and more indicators. In fact, a proliferation of indicators probably makes it less likely that elites are able to manipulate information to portray a picture of rights achievement more favourable to them.

*4.3: Indicators reflect background power inequalities*

A weaker form of this objection holds that commonly used indicators reinforce existing power inequalities, whereby over privileged white men construct global indicators that depict ‘the other’ as failures according to their preferred quantitative measure.

There is one valuable insight in this objection. Namely, that concerns for procedural justice and adequate (diverse) representation in a process of public reason matter. Social evaluation will be “starved of valuable insights”[[54]](#footnote-54) if left to isolated statistical experts. However, it should be noted that there isn’t much truth in the objection. First, there is a proliferation of data collection which is driven not exclusively by ‘northern’ interests. Second, many measures of social welfare portray northern Europeans and North Americans as better off than most people in the global south simply because there are objective disparities in life chances and opportunities for those individuals—in health, education, income, security, and more. For example, infant and maternal mortality rates are very useful ways to evaluate the health system and disease burden in a country. The fact that these numbers portray many African countries as worse off than many European countries is not evidence of any institutionalized racism or some Eurocentric view of the world embodied in the measurement exercise. It is simply a reflection of the objective fact that there are glaring health disparities in the world. Finally, the national statistics agencies are populated by co-nationals of the people often deemed deprived according to official systems of measurement.

*4.4 Indicators as excessively reductionist*

The fourth objection is related to the third. Indicators may be charged with excessive reductionism. For example, in the field of academics, the number of academic papers a researcher publishes, or the number of classes she teaches, or the number of committees she serves on certainly doesn’t portray the full contribution of her work. These measures may be insensitive to the quality of teaching or the size of the contribution of the published work.

It is correct that indicators are inherently reductionist. In most systems of evaluation, indicators should be complemented by other methods of evaluation. Participatory exercises, deliberation, and in-depth anthropological investigation all offer opportunities to enhance our understanding of whether people have secured their rights. But indicators can also be impartial, robust, and are in a variety of ways necessary for the enterprise of social science and social evaluation. The reductionist nature of many indicators requires complementing quantitative research with qualitative research, and using democratic forums to debate the content, use of, and response to gathered statistics.

**Conclusion:**

As a matter of justice, people are owed institutions that protect their basic rights. The protection of rights entails systems of measurement that reflect the degree to which these basic rights are secure. Any adequate system of measurement must be sensitive to the various ways in which gender shapes the degree to which an individual has secured her rights. Theoretically, the development of adequate systems of measurement must reflect on the values and purposes served by measures under consideration. One important purpose is to reveal gender disparity. Procedurally, systems of measurement should be developed according to a process of public reason. Citizen deliberation that privileges the perspectives of the most marginalized offers one promising mechanism for ensuring that systems of information are democratically developed and responsive to the stated views and preferences of marginalized individuals.[[55]](#footnote-55) Substantively, systems of measurement must collect information on a range of dimensions of human life, make the individual the unit of analysis, and be sensitive to differential need resulting from biological or social difference. Improved measurement of rights in general, and anti-poverty rights in particular, should be welcomed rather than opposed.

1. See, eg, Joseph E., Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, *Mismeasuring Our Lives: Why GDP Doesn't Add Up* (New Press, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Polity, 2002), 2 and Charles Beitz, *The Idea of Human Rights* (Oxford University Press, 2009) on normative changes. On the political and legal changes, see Daron Acemoglu, ‘The World Our Grandchildren Will Inherit: The Rights Revolution and Beyond’ in Ignacio Palacios-Huerta (ed), *In 100 Years: Leading Economists Predict the Future* (MIT Press, 2013), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pogge, above n 2, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. These resources may be material (food, water, a hospital) or non-material (the rule of law, social norms, etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The proponent of the institutional conception of rights may remain neutral on other debates regarding the nature of rights. Arguably, rights language covers both important interests of persons and the autonomy of persons. This ‘pluralist’ or ‘several functions’ view entails that humans have rights in a range of spheres—civil, political, economic, social, and cultural. Rights protect both the interests that humans have in living well and their ability to act autonomously. Regardless of the position one takes on these other debates, they may endorse the institutional conception of rights. On the pluralist view of what rights protect, see Leif Wenar, ‘The Nature of Rights’ (2005) 33 (3) *Philosophy and Public Affairs 223*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, GA Res 217A (III), UN GAOR, 3rd sess, 183rd plen mtg, UN Doc A/810 (1948). See also, Thomas Pogge, ‘Recognized and Violated By International Law: The Human Rights of the Global Poor’ (2005) 18(4) *Leiden Journal of International Law* 717. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, eg, the Millennium Development Goals and their associated reporting efforts at both international and national levels. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. My use of the term here is not restricted to formal survey exercises, but rather intends to capture the broader connotation of survey, to look closely and examine. Survey information includes a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods to gather information on whether rights have been secured. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For example, some human rights violations, such as sex trafficking or child prostitution, require unique investigative methods given the inherently hidden nature of the right violation in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, above n 6, art 10. Presumably the gendered pronoun here applies to all human persons. *C.f.* Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, ‘Gendering the Declaration’, (2009) 24 *Maryland Journal of International Law* 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, eg, *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, above n 6, art 25(2*); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, opened for signature 16 December 1966, 999 UNTS 3 (entered into force 3 January 1976), art 12(2)(a); *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, opened for signature 20 November 1989 (entered into force 2 September 1990), art 24(2)(d). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, above n 6, art 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For critical extensive discussion, see Sylvia Chant, ‘Female Household Headship and the Feminisation of Poverty: Facts, Fictions and Forward Strategies’ (NewWorking Paper Series, Issue 9, London School of Economics, Gender Institute, 2003) and Sylvia Chant, *Gender Generation and Poverty* (Edward Elgar, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Ingrid Robeyns, ‘Justice as Fairness and the Capability Approach’ in Kaushik Basu and Ravi Kanbur (eds), *Arguments for a Better World: Essays in Honor of Amartya Sen* (Oxford University Press, 2009) Vol. 1, 397, 404 and Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Sabina Alkire and M. E. Santos ‘Acute Multidimensional Poverty: A new Index for Developing Countries’, (Working Paper 38, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Section 3 develops ideas and themes, but extends them in important ways, first published in Scott Wisor *Measuring Global Poverty: Toward a Pro-Poor Approach* (Palgrave, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Walter Gallie, ‘Essentially Contested Concepts,’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1955) 56.

    for his original statement on essentially contested concepts, and Wisor, above n 16, ch 3 for an application to the case of poverty. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Shaohua Chen and Martin Ravallion ‘The Developing World is Poorer Than We Thought, But No Less Successful in the Fight Against Poverty’ (2010) 125 (4) *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 1577. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Frances Stewart ‘The Basic Needs Approach’ in D. A. Clark (ed.), *The Elgar Companion to Development Studies* (Edward Elgar, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Sabina Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms: Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction* (Oxford University Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Anthony Atkinson and Eric Marlier, *Analysing and Measuring Social Inclusion in a Global Context* (United Nations, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. David Woodward, ‘How Poor is Poor: Towards a Rights Based Poverty Line’ (New Economics Foundation, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Haslanger also considers a fourth approach, the genealogical approach. I leave this approach aside for our purposes here. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Sally Haslanger, ‘What Are We Talking About? The Semantics and Politics of Social Kinds’ (2005) 20(4) *Hypatia* 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Wisor, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For a canonical statement on these issues see Alison M. Jaggar, "Feminist Ethics" in C. Becker and L. Becker (eds), *Encyclopedia of Ethics* (1992) 361–70. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Of course, there may be considerable disagreement amongst participants regarding which values and interests should be considered. See this volume’s contribution from Sari Kuovo and Corey Levine, ‘Law as Placeholder for Change? Women’s Rights and Realities in Afghanistan’. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. I am fortunate to be a part of one such project. Over 3 years, across 18 sites in 6 countries in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, we have undertaken participatory and deliberative exercises with poor men and women to construct a new measure of poverty that is capable of revealing gender disparity. See genderpovertymeasure.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, above n 14, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For an insightful starting point spanning a career in participatory development, see Robert Chambers, *Provocations for Development* (Practical Action Publishing 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Susan Moller Okin, ‘Poverty, Well Being, and Gender: Who Counts? Who’s heard?’ (2003) 31 (3) *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 280; Andrea Cornwall ‘Whose Choices? Whose Voices? Reflections on Gender and Participatory Development’ (2003) 31 (8) *World Development* 1325. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. On the promise and limitations of Participatory Poverty Assessments from a gender perspective, see Chant, above n 2, 65–68. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. This includes transparency regarding any methods of weighting or aggregation. Ideally, when possible, such information should also be provided in a way that the user can test (and visualize) the data. For example, the Social Institutions and Gender Index allows users to create different SIGI indices based on their own selected weights. The World Bank’s PovCalNet allows users to calculate the distribution, depth, and trend of poverty using different purchasing power parity (‘PPP’) poverty lines. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. More on this below. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. On selecting gender-sensitive lists of dimensions in developed countries, see Ingrid Robeyns, ‘Sen’s Capability Approach and Gender Inequality: Selecting Relevant Capabilities’ (2003) 9 (2-3) *Feminist Economics* 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Garcia-Moreno, Claudia, et al. *WHO Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women: Initial Results on Prevalence, Health Outcomes and Women's Responses*, World Health Organization, 2005; Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) *Women’s Economic Opportunity Index: A New Pilot Index and Global Ranking* (2010) The Economist. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See, as representative, Sarah Gammage ‘Time Pressed and Time Poor: Unpaid Household Work in Guatemala’(2010) 16 (3) *Feminist Economics*, 79-112. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Robert Goodin, James Riche, Antti Parpo, Lina Erikson, *Discretionary Time: A New Measure of Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Bina Agarwal and Pradeep Panda, ‘Toward Freedom from Domestic Violence: The Neglected Obvious’ (2007) 8(3) *Journal of Human Development* 366–72. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. This objection might follow critics of economic and social rights, who argue that it this amounts to ‘rights inflation’ beyond the core concept traditionally embodied in civil and political rights. The worry about rights inflation was first made by Maurice Cranston, *What are Human Rights?* (Taplinger Publishing, 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. The others are diversities in the physical environment, variations in social climate, and differences in relational perspectives. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, above n 14, 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1999) 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Sen accepts, and Pogge rejects, that personal heterogeneities should be relevant for the assessment of individual disadvantage and the subsequent claims of justice one can make against others. See Thomas Pogge, ‘A Critique of the Capability Approach’ in Harry Brighouse and Ingrid Robeyns (eds) *Measuring Justice: Primary Goods and Capabilities* (Oxford University Press, 2010) 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Though we did not ask this question directly, I find some confirmation for this view in a participatory research project of which I was a part. Participants referred to the specific needs they have as individuals in specific contexts, such as not having enough food to feed themselves and their families, or enough water to cook and clean themselves and their families, rather than referring to age and gender specific standards for food and water. More information on the project is available at [www.iwda.org](http://www.genderpovertymeasure.org).au . [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. If a composite multidimensional measure was used, this might mean assigning greater weight to this deprivation in female aggregation than male aggregation. The risk, of course, is that this makes the male and female figures less comparable. I’ve argued elsewhere that it might be best to set one weighting system for purposes of comparison across context and over time, and allow variations in weighting in specific local and national contexts. Individual analysts concerned to give greater weight to the deprivation of water, for example, can simply do this should it serve their particular research purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Amartya Sen, ‘The Standard of Living: Concepts and Critiques’ in Geoffrey Hawthorne (ed) *The Standard of Living* (Cambridge University Press, 1987) 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. The most articulate critic of the measurement of human rights is Susan Engle Merry, who, fortunately for readers, is developing a book on the topic, tentatively titled *The Seduction of Quantification: Human Rights and the Rise of Indicator Culture*. For a recent balanced consideration of the arguments for and against human rights indicators, see AnnJanette Rosga and Margaret L. Satterthwaie, ‘The Trust in Indicators: Measuring Human Rights’ (2009) 27 *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. On the weaknesses of the International Poverty Line, see Thomas Pogge, *Politics as Usual:* *What Lies Behind the Pro-Poor Rhetoric* (Polity, 2010) chs 3–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. On the possibility of transformative criticism as an objectivity conferring feature of science, see Helen Longino, ‘Values and Objectivity’ in J.A. Cover and Martin Curd (eds) *Philosophy and Science: The Central Issues* (W.W. Norton, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See Bjorn Hoyland, Karl Moene, and Frederick Willumse, ‘The Tyranny of International Index Rankings’, (2012) 97 (1) *Journal of Development Economics* 1; Martin Ravallion, ‘Mashup Indices of Development (World Bank Policy Research Paper No. 5432, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, above n 14, 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. On this see Scott Wisor, ‘After the MDGs: Citizen Deliberation and the Post 2015 Development Framework’ (2012) 26 (1) *Ethics and International Affairs* 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)