

## Chronic poverty, girls and social institutions



### What is Chronic Poverty?

The distinguishing feature of chronic poverty is extended duration in absolute poverty. Therefore, chronically poor people always, or usually, live below a poverty line, which is normally defined in terms of a money indicator (e.g. consumption, income, etc.), but could also be defined in terms of wider or subjective aspects of deprivation. This is different from the transiently poor, who move in and out of poverty, or only occasionally fall below the poverty line.

### Key points

- Policy interventions to tackle chronic poverty should take account of the gendered and generational experiences of chronic poverty.
- Childhood, adolescence and early adulthood are critical in determining the life-course potential of girls and young women, and shape the life-chances of their children. Promoting gender equality and empowerment across the lifecycle makes sound economic and development sense, and is key to alleviating chronic poverty.
- Social institutions – the collection of formal and informal laws, norms and practices that affect human capabilities and agency – significantly impact on developmental outcomes.
- Promoting progressive social change requires reforming those discriminatory social institutions which harm girls and young women, inhibit agency, and prevent the realisation of their capabilities.
- In the lead up to 2015, 'culture' and 'the social' must become much more visible in debates on the MDGs and post-MDG frameworks. Culture and societal norms and practices must be taken seriously to break the poverty traps that girls and young women face across the life-course and inter-generationally.
- Different combinations of context-specific policies and programmes, involving an array of actors, which address both the immediate and longer-term causes and consequences of gender discrimination, are necessary.



## Introduction

Up to 443 million people are now trapped in chronic poverty – poverty that they have experienced for many years, often their entire life, and which has irreparably damaged (or threatens to damage) their capabilities and those of their children. Tackling chronic poverty is the fundamental moral and political challenge for this generation<sup>1</sup>. Women and girls are disproportionately chronically poor, and social discrimination has been identified by the CPRC as one of the main traps that keeps people locked in chronic poverty throughout their lives. Recently, partly because of the child-related focus of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the 2007 World Development Report, there has been growing attention paid to the need to include girls (and boys) more prominently in development debates. Nevertheless, there remains a knowledge-gap on how to do this, particularly in debates around chronic poverty.

Girls' and boys', men's and women's experiences of poverty differ in important ways. Understanding this is important for tackling the greater levels of poverty and deprivation that girls and women routinely face, and for alleviating poverty more broadly<sup>2</sup>. The CPRC report 'Stemming girls' chronic poverty: Catalysing development change by building

just social institutions' highlights the particular vulnerabilities of girls in relation to poverty dynamics, and emphasises the importance of taking culture and social norms and practices seriously to make progress on breaking the poverty traps that girls and women face potentially across the life-course and generations. It looks at the ways in which five critical social institutions inform and determine the life opportunities and agency of girls and women<sup>3</sup>. These are: discriminatory family code, son bias, limited resource rights and entitlements, physical insecurity, and restricted civil liberties. The report argues that social institutions can and should enhance human capabilities; when they do not, action must be taken to either reform or overhaul them. This policy brief draws on the key policy messages of this report.

## Girls and discriminatory social institutions

Investing in girls is one of the smartest moves a country can make – today's girls will be half of tomorrow's adults and investing in them offers returns that will go to all of humanity. As girls and young women become more visible in debates and action, it is critical that policy and programme design are informed by a deeper understanding of

### **Box 1: Stemming girls' chronic poverty: Catalysing development change by building just social institutions**

A recent report by the CPRC highlights the importance of taking account of gender and age dynamics in development agendas. The report highlights the ways in which five context-specific social institutions – discriminatory family codes, son bias, limited resource rights and entitlements, physical insecurity, and restricted civil liberties – inform and determine the life opportunities and agency of girls. It identifies a range of emerging policies, programmes, and practices aimed at reforming or overhauling discriminatory social institutions, and makes the following policy recommendations:

- Develop and enforce context-sensitive legal provisions to eliminate gender discrimination in the family, school, workplace, and the community.
- Support measures to promote children's, and especially girls', right to be heard and to participate in decisions in areas of importance to them.
- Invest in the design and implementation of child- and gender-sensitive social protection.
- Strengthen services for girls who are hard to reach, because of spatial disadvantage and age- and gender-specific socio-cultural barriers.
- Support measures to strengthen girls' and young women's individual and collective ownership of, access to, and use of, resources.
- Strengthen efforts to promote girls' and women's physical integrity and control over their bodies, especially in conflict and post-conflict settings.

*Source: Jones et al. (2010)*



## **Box 2: Definitions of gendered institutions**

### ***Discriminatory family code***

The formal and informal norms and practices that influence the capabilities and related decision-making power of women and men, boys and girls in the household. For instance, includes parental authority, inheritance laws, marriage practices, family structure, and resulting rights and responsibilities.

### ***Son bias***

Unequal investments in the care, nurture, and resources allocated to sons and daughters within the household.

### **Limited resource rights and entitlements**

Girls' and young women's access to and control over land, microfinance, property and natural resources. Lack of entitlements, rights, and access to resources.

### ***Physical insecurity***

Laws, norms, and practices that condone or fail to challenge gender based violence in the household, school, workplace and community. Physical insecurity as a consequences of gender-based violence is also a particular risk in times of conflict and social upheaval.

### ***Restricted civil liberties***

Laws, norms and practices which result in restrictions vis-à-vis freedom of movement, freedom of association and participation in collective action.

*Source: Jones et al. (2010)*

the discriminatory social institutions that constrain their life opportunities and their agency. Girls' vulnerabilities in relation to poverty dynamics are different to those of boys and women, partly due to their relative powerlessness and the particularities of their life stage. Childhood, adolescence and early adulthood are critical in determining life-course potential. However, this remains for many girls and young women a period of deprivation, danger and vulnerability, resulting in lack of agency and critical development deficits. What happens at this crucial time in girls' and young women's lives can reinforce their own poverty status through the life-course and that of their offspring.

Girls are often subjected to multiple forms of discrimination based not only on their age and gender, but also on other factors such as caste, ethnicity, class, disability, and sexuality. In many cases, overlapping experiences of deprivation, foregone human development opportunities, and abuse or exploitation, perpetuate and intensify poverty for girls and young women over the life-course. There is growing recognition among international development actors that promoting gender equality and empowerment across the lifecycle makes both economic and development sense, impacting significantly on the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Social institutions significantly affect development outcomes, impacting on girls' agency and capabilities. Social institutions are not inherently 'good' or 'bad'. However, when they result in processes that lead to inequality, discrimination, and exclusion, they become detrimental to development and increase vulnerability to chronic poverty. For example, discriminatory family codes can result in early marriage; the separation of girls from maternal presence, influence, and authority; a lack of decision making influence by girls; the denial of vital material assets through ownership and inheritance; and physical harm. The negative development outcomes of this include reduced capabilities, educational attainment, and employment potential; and increased fertility and maternal infant mortality. Similarly, the negative development outcomes of son bias range from mortality through to human capital deficits; time-poverty linked to labour roles; deficits in girls' health and nutrition statuses, educational opportunities and attainment, and self-esteem; and a lack of protection from exploitative and abusive forms of labour.

Discriminatory social institutions that deny girls and young women voice and choice, and inhibit the realisation of their human capabilities, reduce their capacity to cope with 'shocks' and increase the likelihood that they will slide into chronic poverty.



### Box 3: Girls and chronic poverty

- More than 100 million girls will marry between 2005 and 2015, with girls under 20 facing double the risk of dying during childbirth compared with women over 20, and girls under the age of 15 five times as likely to die as those in their 20s. This leads to 60,000 to 70,000 girls aged 15 to 19 dying from complications of pregnancy and childbirth every year (Temin et al., 2010).
- Over half of new HIV infections worldwide are occurring among young people aged between 15 and 24, and more than 60 percent of HIV-positive youth are female .
- Two-thirds of the 137 million illiterate young people in the world are women (UNFPA, 2007), and in 2007, girls accounted for 54 percent of the world's out-of-school population (UN, 2009).
- Over 100 million girls aged between five and 17 are involved in child labour, with the majority engaged in hazardous work, including domestic service (ILO, 2009).

Source: Jones et al. (2010)

An understanding of the root causes of gender inequality, particularly that of discriminatory social institutions, can help identify the points at which a girl or woman is most at risk of being propelled into chronic poverty during her life-course. This can in turn make for more effective anti-poverty interventions that could address both the causes and the consequences of chronic poverty, and help girls and women avoid or overcome poverty traps.

### Analytical and programming challenges

The CPRC has found that while the recent focus on girls in development circles is positive, there exist a number of analytical and programming challenges:

- Gender and age-disaggregated data on girls' poverty experiences over time in developing country contexts is very limited, constraining well-tailored interventions.
- Female youth in particular are not adequately covered in international legal and human rights frameworks – e.g. the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW). More consideration must be given to developing or strengthening specific measures to protect girls and young women from poverty traps.
- Definitions and understandings of childhood, adolescence and youth vary considerably according to cultural different context. More attention must be paid to these differences, and to the challenges and opportunities they present for interventions.

- The specific poverty and vulnerability experiences of boys and young men – particularly the role they can play in dismantling gender discriminatory social institutions – must be considered.

### The way forward

Promoting progressive social change requires the need to think carefully about reforming or dismantling discriminatory social institutions which shape the realm of the possible for girls, their families, and communities. Social orders reflect social and political relationships of power and patronage<sup>5</sup>. Addressing discriminatory social institutions entails challenging deep-seated beliefs, perceptions, behaviours, and practices. However, gender is a social construct and culture is malleable, and while addressing discriminatory social institutions entails many challenges, there is compelling evidence that progressive social change can be achieved. Political will backed by adequate resources, is fundamentally important, as is encouraging participation and support among community leaders, men and boys, and women and girls. Action on developing public services for the hard to reach, promoting individual and collective assets, expanding social protection, strengthening measures for anti-discrimination and empowerment, and addressing migration and strategic urbanisation, must take into account age and gender dynamics if they are to benefit the poorest and most vulnerable<sup>6</sup>. Policies and programmes must tackle both the immediate and longer-term consequences of gender discrimination, through social institutions. A multi-pronged approach that takes account of the specific context, entails a combination of diverse models of change, and involves a wide range of actors working at different levels, is vital to bring about broad-based change.



The CPRC supports the following recommendations for policy, programming, and advocacy action:

**1. Develop and enforce context-sensitive legal provisions to eliminate gender discrimination in the family, school, workplace, and community.**

Legal reforms to harmonise national legal frameworks with international commitments to gender equality (especially CEDAW and the Beijing Platform) are critical, as is ensuring that customary laws and codes are harmonised with more formal legislative approaches<sup>7</sup>. For example, bans on sex-selective abortion; promotion of gender equality frameworks; gender-based violence prevention, penalisation and rehabilitation; and reform of family codes (including age of marriage and inheritance laws). Measures must be put in place to ensure that gender-sensitive laws are enforced. For example, enhanced monitoring efforts and capacity development for police and judicial personnel. Attitudinal changes among girls/boys and women/men are also critical and require innovative approaches, informed by a careful understanding of cultural dynamics and sensitivities. For example, through creative use of the media, alliances with traditional authority structures, and the development of girl-friendly schools and community centres.

**2. Support measures to promote children's and especially girls' right to be heard and to participate in decisions in areas of importance to them**

Empowerment programmes for adolescent girls, which provide a 'safe space' to participate in decision making to promote girls' voice and agency, and involving mentors to form and structure such participation are important. Programmes targeting girls should be complemented by educational programmes for boys and young men to challenge aggressive understandings and practices of masculinity and raise awareness on different ways of relating to girls and women. Participatory research initiatives are important to promote fuller articulation of different voices in development debates and in the design of policies and programmes.

**3. Invest in the design and implementation of child- and gender-sensitive social protection**

Child- and gender-sensitive social protection in particular can support investments in girls'

**Box 4: Reshaping masculinities**

Program H ('homens' is 'men' in Portuguese), has been adapted to the Indian context and piloted with young low-income men in Mumbai through the collaboration of the Horizons Programme, Brazilian NGO Instituto Promundo and Indian NGO Coro for Literacy. Given that India has the second largest population of HIV/AIDS globally, and that young people aged 15 to 24 account for 37 percent of those who are HIV positive, tackling traditional gender norms and aggressive masculinity is critical to reducing risks among both young men and young women. The Mumbai programme, Yaari-Dosti ('Friendship/Bonding between Men'), seeks to challenge and change attitudes towards gender relations, reproductive health, condom use and partner, family and community violence. The programme aim is to reduce young men's HIV risk and violence against women by promoting a model of a 'gender-equitable man' – one who supports relationships based on equality and respect, engages in household and child care activities, shares responsibility for reproductive health and opposes partner violence and homophobia. The pilot evaluation found that, compared with the initial 36 percent, only nine percent of men continued to believe that a woman should tolerate violence; only three percent agreed that beating a wife who refuses sex was a male right (initially 28 percent); only 35 percent continued to believe that child care was a maternal responsibility (63 percent); and only 11 percent said that a man should have the final word in household decisions (24 percent). Sexual harassment of girls had declined considerably, and violence against partners had also declined, from 51 to 39 percent.

*Source: Verma et al. (2006), cited in Jones et al. (2010)*

human capital development and minimise deficits in their protection from exploitation, abuse, and neglect. Care must be taken to integrate a gender and age lens into the design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of such programmes. Selection of a particular social protection instrument should begin with a systematic assessment of contextualised gender- and child-specific vulnerabilities. Women and girls should also be included in the design and implementation of social protection measures. Demand-side initiatives to promote girls' schooling and delay marriage and childrearing appear to be especially effective. For example: cash transfers, school feeding



### Box 5: Empowering girls through livelihood and life-skills

Kishori Abhijan ('Adolescent Girls' Adventure') has offered livelihood skills (including life skills lessons, savings account options, access to credit and vocational training); mentoring to develop self-esteem and leadership skills; and training in health and nutrition, legislation and legal rights and gender equality to 15,000 adolescent girls in three districts of rural Bangladesh. Initiated by UNICEF in collaboration with the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in 2001 to 2002, the programme has been implemented by two national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and the Centre for Mass Education and Science. An evaluation showed the following results: increased employment; improved school enrolment; delayed marriage; improved health knowledge; and enhanced mobility reducing social isolation. The life skills component has been scaled up to enrol more than 250,000 girls in 58 districts

*Source: Amin and Suran (2005), cited in Jones, et al. (2010)*

programmes, take-home supplements for girls, and girls' scholarship programmes. Conditional cash transfers can also be a useful mechanism to empower parents and communities to protect their children – particularly daughters – from the risks of harmful forms of early marriage, child labour, and human trafficking. Social health protection (e.g. social health insurance and health fee exemptions) and asset transfers (e.g. small livestock such as goats) are also critical.

#### 4. **Strengthen services for girls who are hard to reach, because of both spatial disadvantage and age- and gender-specific socio-cultural barriers**

Promoting coverage of the 'hard to reach' must be expanded from spatial disadvantage to include girls who remain hard to reach because of socio-cultural barriers, especially those that restrict mobility and limit public participation in community affairs. For example: initiatives aimed at promoting girls' access to, and use of, existing services should focus on innovative and gender-sensitive means of extending microfinance, vocational training and income-generating opportunities; health and reproductive health services; nutrition support; education; legal and paralegal services; and protection from abuse, exploitation and neglect (e.g. shelters, counselling). Provision of affordable, culturally appropriate and accessible child care services is critical too, for young mothers and for girls who often shoulder the care work burden of younger siblings at the cost of educational achievement. Greater effort must be made to bring services to girls. For example: ensuring that schools are closer to communities in order to minimise the risk of physical violence, supporting the

development of a female teaching corps, creating safe spaces for girls in communities; and offering home-based or mobile services.

#### 5. **Support measures to strengthen girls' and young women's individual and collective ownership of, access to, and use of, resources**

Strengthening girls' and young women's ownership of, access to, and use of, resources especially in terms of inheritance and physical resources (water, land, energy sources) is critical to promoting their empowerment and to reducing time poverty and vulnerability to violence and exploitation. Given their relative powerlessness and severe resource constraints, collective access to resources may be especially empowering for girls and young women (e.g. in group access to financial services).

#### 6. **Strengthen efforts to promote girls' and women's physical integrity and control over their bodies, especially in conflict and post-conflict settings**

Investing in the provision of culturally sensitive, affordable, and accessible reproductive health information and service provision is important. Efforts should include innovative approaches that work through girls' and young women's self-help groups, and that involve men as partners. Programmes to raise public awareness about the problems of female foeticide in high prevalence countries are essential. Educational and empowerment programmes that raise girls' and young women's awareness of their right to be protected from violence and to seek redress are also important. Efforts to counter the culture of impunity surrounding gender-based



## Box 6: Demobilising girl combatants – the Liberian case

In 2003, following the end of 14 years of conflict in Liberia, UN Security Council Resolution 1509 provided the guidelines for the peace-building process: it established a peacekeeping force, asked for a DDR programme with 'particular attention to the special needs of child combatants and women' and, in accordance with the groundbreaking Resolution 1325, reaffirmed 'the importance of a gender perspective in peacekeeping operations and post-conflict peace-building' (Para 3(f)). At the end of 2004, when the disarmament and demobilisation processes were complete, 22,000 of the more than 103,000 participating ex-combatants were women and 2,740 were girls. However, this was only a small fraction of the overall number of women and girls who actually participated in the conflict: many chose not to participate in DDR for fear of stigmatisation, others were misinformed, and yet others were manipulated by their commanders, who denied the existence of child soldiers. Nevertheless, a study of the programme stressed that girls accounted for 30 percent of demobilised children in Liberia, which compared favourably with only 8 percent in neighbouring Sierra Leone and must thus be counted a success. UNICEF coordinated the process for under-18s and was actively involved in raising girls' awareness about DDR and encouraging them to participate. There were 29 Interim Care Centres all over the country and children were offered sex-segregated shelter, health services, counselling, life skills training and recreational activities. Family tracing and reunification services were also offered by the Red Cross. When the centres closed, 90 percent of the children had already returned to their communities. In areas lacking infrastructure and resources to create a centre, drop-in centres were created, offering children support and psychosocial care. Overall, the centres 'were impressive for the comprehensive nature of their efforts to address the needs of the child ex-combatants and, in their provision of gender-specific and age-appropriate programme activities, their compliance with Security Council Resolution 1325 was readily apparent.'

Source: Delap (2005); Hanson (2007); Human Rights Watch (2005); Williamson and Carter (2005), cited in Jones, et al. (2010)

violence in conflict and post-conflict settings are vital, and should be informed by context-specific understandings of the political economy dimensions of gender-based violence. Involving

girls and young women in age- and gender-sensitive disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes is critical.

This CPRC Policy Brief was written by Dhana Wadugodapitiya

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## Endnotes

- 1 see Shepherd, A. (forthcoming).
- 2 see Brauholtz-Speight *et al.* (2008).
- 3 This entailed broadening and modifying the social institutions of the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) developed by the OECD (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development).
- 4 see [http://www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/hiv\\_aids/facts\\_figures.php](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/hiv_aids/facts_figures.php).
- 5 see CPRC, 2008
- 6 see CPRC, 2008
- 7 This is a complex and challenging issue that has been the subject of much debate.

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