

SUPPORT MATERIAL: PANEL N° 1

The Changing Faces of the Feminization of Poverty

By Diana M. Pearce, Ph.D., U.S.A.

Prepared for the Seminar on the Feminization of Poverty, Valparaiso, Chile, March 7, 2011

The feminization of poverty is really two ideas, for the “price” of one phrase, related but different. The first meaning of the feminization of poverty is that it is a *trend*, a change over time in the composition of the poor; the second is that the feminization of poverty is about differential poverty rates, resulting in the *over-representation* of women, or women-maintained families, among the poor.

When I wrote the original article in 1978 (from which comes the phrase, the “feminization of poverty”), the startling news then was that women-maintained families had doubled their proportion among poor families, increasing from less than one in four to more than half of all poor families, all in just one generation.

At the same time, this trend had led to an *over-representation* of women, or women-maintained families, among the poor. That is how it was taken to mean at the UN Beijing Conference on Women, in the Platform for Action. For this conference, and for countless individual women, community organizations and multinational initiatives, the feminization of poverty means something very personal, very real...and very wrong.

But whether *trend* or *poverty rate*, this is not just a demographic shift, but it also signals an increased role for gender as a *cause* of the feminization of poverty. This provides a profound challenge for policymakers. Not only are women, and the families they head or support, disproportionately poor, but they are poor precisely *because* they are women. Put a different way, women’s poverty is fundamentally different than men’s poverty. This means that anti-poverty policy that is gender-neutral, or ignores gender impacts, which often means that it is built on a male model, based on what effectively addresses men’s poverty, will be ineffective against women’s poverty, and can even reinforce feminization of poverty.

The feminization of poverty in the United States and Developed Countries

In a sense, the feminization of poverty is nothing new: women have always been overrepresented among the poor. Indeed, in ancient times the Judeo-Christian scripture refers to “poor widows and orphans”. What was new, however, in the United States was the rapid increase in the *numbers* of women-maintained families. Without much change in their poverty *rate* – for a long time about one in three women-maintained families have been poor – increasing numbers of women-maintained families, and fewer married-couple families, combined with a much higher poverty rate, meant they rapidly came to dominate the poor.

Just looking at the feminization of poverty as a trend, however, misses the important phenomenon here: *why* are they overrepresented among the poor? Is this just a demographic shift, or is this fundamentally about the gender of the head? In my analysis, I answered that question by asking what was distinctive about women who were poor, or put another way, I inquired as to what was distinctive about women's poverty compared to that of families headed by males, or married couples?

What I found was that while many poor women maintaining families alone shared characteristics with poor men—such as low education or living in poor rural areas—there were two distinct constellations of issues that were directly related to their gender.

#1. The first of these was that these women were almost all raising children alone, with little or no financial support from the fathers of their children.

#2. The second was that women experienced gender-based disadvantage in the labor market, so that their earnings (and benefits) were less than those of men because of gender-specific factors. These factors include: the wage gap (due to various kinds of gender-based discrimination), occupational sex segregation, part-time/seasonal/contingent status as workers, and sex and gender-based harassment.

Since about 1980, there has not been a feminization of poverty “trend” in the United States. Once the proportion of poor families who were women-maintained families reached about 50%, it has stayed at that level, more or less, for about three decades. This is in spite of some significant changes that *should* have decreased the feminization of poverty: American women are having fewer children, and are having them later (so they have more chance to finish their education, and get work experience), work more years and take less time off, experience less occupational segregation, and their educational levels now are equal to and in some cases, higher than that of men. So why has the feminization of poverty not decreased?

One answer is the role of government, particularly income supplements and subsidized work supports. This role was highlighted by the studies of a number of researchers that focused on other high income developed countries, mainly in Europe, but also Japan, Australia, and Canada, comparing the situation of women workers/working mothers in various countries. While these countries also experienced the surge of women-maintained families, in some cases in even greater numbers than in the United States, the big difference was in the government response. While the failing marriage market and discriminatory labor market left single mothers without financial support in the United States, and therefore disproportionately poor, the story is quite different in Europe.

- To support mothers raising children, these countries provided generous children's allowances, as well as subsidized or free child care. This substantially “leveled the playing

field” between one and two parent families, as well as supported women’s entry into the labor force.

- Other supports for families reduced costs for low income families, through subsidized housing, paid leaves, unemployment benefits, etc.

That is, although the labor market delivered unequal incomes to women, including single mothers in European and other developed countries, just as in the United States, these effects were effectively counteracted by substantially more generous social supports. In contrast, the supports for mothers—particularly single mothers—in the United States are very low in amount and reach only a minority of those eligible—and have eroded in the last 15 years in both value and coverage considerably. Particularly in terms of supporting children, reliance is primarily on individual child support from the noncustodial parent (usually the father, but not always), which is unevenly enforced, and thus not dependably and not universally received, and small in amount. Of those children who are supposed to receive it, about half receive it, and only half of those receive the full amount owed; the average amount received is something under 10% of the minimum income needed for a typical family – less than many noncustodial fathers spend on their car payment. Although there is now a child tax credit, it only goes to workers, so does not reach the very poorest families, and at \$1000 per year per child, it provides even less support than child support.

In short, as gender inequality decreased on some dimensions – closing the wage gap, for example— in poverty-related policy arenas such as welfare programs, access to job training and education, and work supports, programs deteriorated, maintaining and reinforcing the feminization of poverty (in the sense of overrepresentation of women among the poor).

The feminization of poverty in Developing Countries

The situation of the feminization of poverty trend is quite different in developing countries. A major difference is that in many instances, there has not been the same dramatic change in family composition; that is, there is not yet and indeed there may never be, the same growth in independently domiciled “nuclear” women-maintained families as seen in the West. In most developing countries (there are exceptions, such as the Caribbean), there is either not a similar increase in non-marital childbearing and/or divorce, or it does not result in independent women-maintained families. Indeed, in some of these countries, the only groups where there have been increases of independent single mother families are among the middle class and affluent. In contrast, the more traditional and poorer sectors of society maintain traditional family forms, absorbing the single/abandoned mothers into three-generation families, or breaking them up, which I will turn to below. Under such circumstances, poverty would seem not to be feminized at all, as those who are (independent) single mothers are not disproportionately poor.

This, I believe, is hiding a much more extensive increase in the numbers of “de facto” single mothers. If we define as “de facto” single mothers those who are responsible for supporting the family with little or no help from their husbands/fathers, then there are clearly increasing numbers

of women who may be legally married, but whose spouse is no longer present and/or supporting the family financially, or is only intermittently involved (especially financially). This is the first “face” of the new feminization of poverty.

A major factor behind this is migration, both internally (rural to urban), and internationally. Worldwide, 175 million people are living outside their countries of birth, and uncounted millions more are internal migrants, some temporary/seasonal, some long-term/indefinite. Among the fathers, many do send money home, enough that remittances are a substantial portion of GDP for some countries, such as Mexico. But inevitably, some stop sending money, find new partners and/or stay in their new homes, leaving their wives back home in limbo (neither married nor divorced). An important fact of migration is that the receiving countries benefit more than the sending countries, even under the best of circumstances; that is, the receiving countries, because of low wages paid, benefit more than the sending countries, even with remittances.

Even for those who continue to support their families at home, there is an increasing divergence of opportunity, as the migrating father gains skills and joins a modern dynamic economy, leaving his wife/mother of the children to get by, but not further her education or skills to the same extent. Writ large, this means a divergence in education and opportunities into the next generation, as the remittances are at best enough to support consumption, but not development of the families and communities left behind. Even in the best of circumstances, the “limbo” created by the uncertainties of illegal or semi-legal migration prevents commitment to ongoing education or improvement for the families and communities in the sending country. Furthermore, because so much of migration for the migrating workers happens in a context of restricted rights, discrimination, with migrants in the shadows legally, migrants are subject to substantial exploitation and low wages. At the same time, there is little opportunity for the families left behind to secure the promised support or prevent outright abandonment. Not only are sending countries less powerful in terms of defending their nationals’ rights, these countries are also in a difficult position: when the remittances are providing a substantial income to the country, relative to the sending country’s GDP, they are reticent to jeopardize that income stream or opportunities for their citizens.

When a substantial proportion of the male population migrates, this also affects the sending country’s ability to develop; for example, about 25% of Tajik men work outside the country, many in Russia, or other Central Asian countries such as Kazakstan. For those not married when they leave, this creates a shortage of potential husbands, resulting in pressure for women to marry as second or third wives to the remaining males, particularly in countries where polygamy is tolerated, even if not legal. Clearly such women are experiencing multiple dimensions of inequality: often very young when they marry, with much older husbands, they lack the protection of legal marriage, and are vulnerable to abuse. Because they are married by religious ceremony, they are “married”, but in the eyes of the law, they are single parents. If abandoned or not supported by their absent/deserting husbands, they become another “face” of the

feminization of poverty. In other cultural contexts, there are other forms that result in the same kind of economic vulnerability and poverty.

Poverty also creates another kind of “single mother” family that is in effect “invisible” to poverty counters, and is the most tragic. In the United States, we do not count homeless individuals or families among the poor (because our poverty counts are based on household surveys, and if you are not in a household, you are simply not counted). Likewise, families that break up because of severe poverty are not counted because they no longer exist as a family. In the United States and the West, when parents cannot care for their children because of too low income, services and supports are provided, although these are woefully inadequate, and children cannot be removed because of poverty alone in the United States, by law. For the most part, poor families do stay together (unless there is abuse/neglect), although increasingly they may double up with relatives or friends. In many countries of the world, however, when parents’ poverty is such that they cannot support their children, the children are taken or sent to an orphanage. It is one of the terrible “secrets” of both our past history and much of the world today, that the majority of children in orphanages are not actually orphans. A substantial number of these children have parents, many of whom are single mothers, who simply are too poor to keep their children. Whether this is because of HIV/AIDS or other reasons, once the child is in the orphanage, there is no longer a poor family, women-maintained or otherwise – just poor adults, perhaps homeless, perhaps absorbed into other relatives’ or friends’ homes, and poor children cut off from their mothers or parents. And once children are in the orphanage, unlike Western temporary foster care, they are very unlikely to leave. This is another face of the new feminization of poverty. That is, these are single mothers who lose their children because of their poverty, so they no longer “count” as poor single mothers when calculating the feminization of poverty, yet they are in many ways the most extreme, and most tragic result of deep poverty. (Note that at least in the countries of the former Soviet Union, these mothers may still occasionally have contact with their children, but most cannot get them back, as they are seen as unfit because of their poverty, and there are not support programs that would supplement their income in order for them to recover their children.)

Of course, not all migrants are men, and not all women are mothers who are not in the formal workforce. Globalization has impacted women’s poverty on the labor market side as well, just as in the West. Even though joining the paid workforce has the potential for increasing and equalizing women’s status, the dynamics of gender and globalization have sometimes perpetuated, even exacerbated gender inequality and the feminization of poverty. Briefly, here are three aspects of that relationship between women’s incorporation into the modern, paid, labor force and the feminization of poverty:

1. Migration

As pointed out above, women too are migrants, but with quite different effects. Women migrate to work as nannies, maids, and health care workers. While nurses may be able to

work at reasonable wages, with some autonomy, many of those working in homes as domestics or child care workers, are exploited even more than male migrant workers. Some in fact are victims of trafficking, and may lose their passports and effectively, freedom, particularly if they are working in underground or illegal sectors, such as prostitution.

But even for those who are not being trafficked, the impact on the families left behind, economically as well as emotionally, should be counted as part of the feminization of poverty. Often separated from their own children for years, these children may end up in the care of relatives, such as grandparents or aunts and uncles—most often women relatives—in what some have called the “global chain of care”. Too often, these surrogate caregivers of the migrating caregivers do not have sufficient resources to support the children adequately. In the worst cases, when the caretakers fall ill or are unable/unwilling to continue to be substitute parents, children end up in orphanages.

2. Modern Factory/sweatshops:

As countries have modernized, women, particularly young women, have been incorporated as workers, but overwhelmingly at the bottom, in the lowest paid sectors. Just as in the nineteenth century in the West, textile and clothing factories, canneries and fisheries are often staffed predominantly by women, with men in the supervisory/ownership roles. Whether it is export zones, or Shanghai factories, often women come to work when they are young, and then return to the village to become wives/mothers. In Taiwan, girls are sometimes pulled from school and sent to work in factories, in order to support their brothers being able to continue their education. They are temporarily, contingently, and marginally part of the modern workforce, then they return to traditional roles, maintaining and perpetuating their inequality and poverty; at the same time their brothers are enabled to continue their schooling, and marry (often a woman like their sisters, with much less education, and hence less autonomy), enhancing the gender inequality.

3. Homework/cottage industry:

In some countries, women become part of the modernizing economy without ever leaving their homes, as they do piecework, such as lacemaking or jewelry making, in their own homes. With middlemen controlling both inputs and output prices, they have little opportunity to either enhance their skills/education, or make enough money to substantially improve their economic status.

Finally, there are additional factors that impinge to a much larger degree on women in developing countries, contributing to their inequality and poverty.

1. War, civil disturbances, and violence. A century ago, only a minority of those killed/injured in war were civilians, now there are estimates that 90% of casualties are civilian, many of them women and children. Of course, war and violence creates widows. In addition, the disruption of war results in unplanned migration, internal and cross-

national, of refugees, often breaking apart families and impoverishing them. Finally, as rape and forced impregnation have become instruments of warfare, this has created stigmatized and impoverished women-maintained families, many in societies decimated by years of warfare, with social institutions and economies unable to provide support for these families.

2. Natural disasters; poor societies do not have the resources to respond, so as with war, there are many families who never recover, and all too often international aid falls far short of that promised or needed. As with migration, those most affected are families dependent upon women, who are responsible as “de facto” heads, or actual heads due to widowhood or divorce/desertion.

Emerging Economies

Above I have briefly sketched, and for sake of argument, starkly contrasted countries of the West such as the United States and Europe, with those who are much lower in income. Of course, there are many countries that do not fall clearly into either group, such as Latin America, Turkey, and at least parts of India, China, and other Asian countries. What seems to be happening in these countries is a complex mixture of the two scenarios sketched above, with increasing numbers of independent women-maintained households, but at the same time, many aspects of developing countries, such as migration-induced “de facto” single mothers.

A Note on Elderly Women

In the United States and other countries of the West, elderly women are disproportionately poor, compared to elderly men. Analyses have found that this results from some of the same causes of the feminization of poverty, having accumulated over a lifetime: disadvantaged status in the labor market results in lower pensions, both public (Social Security) and private, and widowhood resulting in being dependent solely on their own income/living alone. In contrast, in developing countries, the elderly are less likely to be dependent on their own income alone, nor are they as likely to be living alone; without pensions, the family is the “social security” system as well as providing health care. However, as societies age, birth rates decline, and young adults migrate, and at the same time these trends are not counteracted by the development of a robust pension system, the problems of elderly—disproportionately women— are beginning to emerge.

Some Concluding Thoughts on What This Means for Anti-Poverty Strategy

As stated at the beginning, the feminization of poverty is not just a demographic trend or disproportionate levels of poverty among women and women-maintained families, but is about the importance of gender as a cause of poverty among women. I think this has implications in a number of areas:

1. Bringing women into the formal labor force is positive in general for poverty reduction, but without attention to the kinds of jobs and opportunities available to women, compared to men, this trend could well lock in gender inequalities.
2. Providing support and protections for “de facto” single mothers and their children is an important investment to both counteract feminization of poverty today, and prevent impoverishment in the next generation.
3. Stepping up efforts to control and restrain the many abuses of migrating workers, both men and women, especially those being trafficked, is key to making migration economically but also socially positive for women and their children. The levels of hypocrisy on this issue are especially high in my own country, where employers offer jobs “under the table”, with low wages and exploitative conditions (and no protections, pensions, etc.) while officials pontificate about “illegal immigrants” breaking the laws.
4. Within each of our own countries, it is important to pay attention to how newly emerging industries structure job hierarchies and promotion opportunities are gendered, and to counteract these tendencies in as many ways as possible, in laws, development plans, etc.
5. Aid in emergencies, particularly to refugees fleeing violence and disaster, should take advantage of the opportunity to create and enhance gender equality, not reinforce gender inequalities. For example, some time ago it was discovered by an American congresswoman that in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, schools had been set up for boys, but not girls.

Thus whether we are talking about trends or over-representation, the feminization of poverty highlights the darkest side of gender inequality. At the same time, it helps us to ask the right questions, and get the answers, as to why it is, worldwide, that women are overrepresented among the poor. I congratulate you all today for tackling this most difficult and most important topic. Thank you for your attention.