
The Feminization of Poverty: Global Perspectives

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Mainstream theory and practice on the highly contentious term “development” has for too long been separated from marginal studies focused on women, gender, and feminisms. This separation brings scholars and activists to the ethical heart of Audre Lorde’s agonizing question: Can we use the master’s tools to change the master’s house?¹ For discourse, political, and policy analytic tools, this is possible. But ultimately, the master’s house itself must change for sustainable development. In Rounaq Jahan’s terms, transformation rather than mere integration is necessary.² Prioritizing anti-poverty strategies is one transformative approach.

If, by development, we accept the United Nations Development Program’s (UNDP’s) notion of expanding human capabilities as analyzed and reflected in its annual Human Development Report,³ then the disjuncture between “women” and mainstream “development” undermines the effectiveness of anti-poverty strategies, for women comprise the majority of the poor. The expansion of human capabilities necessarily involves policy strategies to reduce poverty. No policy strategies are gender neutral, for men and women are situated very differently with respect to productive and reproductive labor along with the control over what is valued therein. Of the numerous arenas of value, men monopolize authority to the greatest degree in politics and public affairs. This governmental control takes place through systems which allow those elected to appoint officers on national, regional, and local levels.

Though crossed by class, culture, and nationality, gender lines continue to permeate everyday life. Anti-poverty strategies must therefore be gendered—they must transform the ways that mainstream policies benefit and burden diverse women and men. These policies must be informed with the voices of diverse women and men in democratic processes. Ultimately, the borders defining national homelands, with different wage levels and poverty lines, must give way to regional and global citizenships wherein these obscene inequalities diminish.

The poor represent critical masses of people in countries of both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, regions that have come to be known respectively as rich and poor (First and Third World) and euphemistically as developed and developing. Southern Hemisphere countries comprise about four-fifths of the world's population, but only one-fifth of the world's wealth. Even more troubling, in 1997 the UNDP reported that the poorest 20 percent of the world's population controls a shrinking 1.1 percent of global income, revealing a top-to-bottom ratio of 78:1.⁴ But let us stick to national homelands⁵ for the purposes of this essay of modest length.

Poverty Lines: Feminized?

Different nations draw different internal dividing lines, above which poverty seemingly disappears. In general, national lines are based on the cost of feeding particular-sized families. We may take issue with who draws the lines, the reasons for drawing these lines, and the extent of their accuracy, broadness, or fairness. National lines, with their different standards, make international comparisons difficult. The World Bank uses an international income standard of one dollar per day per person, while the UNDP uses both an income standard, sensitive to regional income variations, and a broader index that includes longevity of life, literacy, and access to public and private resources (assets). The UNDP reports that in the South, a quarter of the population lives in income poverty, but a third in human poverty. Human poverty figures jump to 40 percent in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where large proportions of residents live in rural areas, at greater risk of poverty than urban areas.⁶

Clearly, the methodologies are crude and the statistical bases often thin or flawed. For individual countries, the national and international standards present anomalies: by its food-basket standard, 44 percent of Mexicans live in poverty, plus 16 percent in extreme poverty; the UNDP puts Mexico at 10 percent.⁷ While minimal numbers present a tractable problem, they may delude as well. In the South, the working poor are generally a majority of the population. One further anomaly is this: how and why do majorities perpetuate their poverty in the context of so-called transitions to full and partial democracies, now said to number more than a majority of nations? Political poverty, as a poverty that reflects both

power relations and political machineries, must surely count in any analysis of anti-poverty strategies, wherein anti-poverty policy agendas rarely rise to central political debates.

How does feminized poverty fit in? When the word “feminized” is attached to a term, it has generally denoted diminished value, as in feminized occupational groups whose comparable wage value is less than would be expected. First coined two decades ago, the phrase “the feminization of poverty” focused on women’s increasing and disproportionate presence among those in poverty. Two phenomena contributed to this trend: first, the overrepresentation of women among minimum-waged and unpaid workers; second, the rising percentage of women who headed households with dependent children.⁸

To focus on feminized poverty in the United States alone would be misguided, for all its residents represent a mere 5 percent of the global population. In many countries of the Southern Hemisphere, women have long occupied excessive space among those in poverty, whether heads of household or not. Women’s work remains central to subsistence agriculture, microenterprise and family business, whatever the meager or nonexistent pay. Varying national standards limit our knowledge of the poverty of female-headed households, often deemed so unimportant as to be uncounted; analysts’ estimates range from a fifth to a third of households.⁹ A better approach might be to calculate incomes and assets by gender. At the penultimate United Nations meeting that closed the international decade on women, startling figures in a UN document reported meager assets: women comprised a third of the formal labor force, but earned a tenth of world income and owned 1 percent of commercial property.¹⁰

As difficult as accurate summary figures are to come by, consider the comprehensive and substantive indicators that connect women with poverty. In making such a connection, we should keep in mind that most women are active agents, to paraphrase, making their histories in circumstances they have not chosen. These indicators show transcendent, relative inequalities, even in a global community of nearly two hundred nations and thousands of cultural groups. Gender lines are among the most compelling analytic categories; however, “women’s issues” are sidelined as an add-on policy matter. More women than men live in rural areas, where poverty is rampant. Women lack basic assets, such as control or co-ownership of land and housing, even amid land reform and housing programs. When they work for wages, they are disproportionately stuck in low value jobs and earn only 50 to 80 percent of men’s wages. The majority of the world’s illiterates are women, and male enrollment exceeds female enrollment, even in elementary schools. In the strong band of patriarchy that extends through parts of Asia, the very survival of women is threatened. Noting the uneven sex ratios in India (927 women to 1,000 men) and, to a lesser extent, in China, Amartya Sen poignantly declared that “100 million women are missing.” The UNDP estimates that a

third of married women are battered. As international agencies report with a grim annual regularity, about a half million women die annually in childbirth or from unattended abortions.¹¹

Ultimately, it is in the political process where decisions are made about policies and their enforcement, from crime and punishment to health, employment, and

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education. And here is where women’s poverty—political poverty—is most pronounced. Women occupy about one in ten parliamentary/legislative seats, and these ratios are even lower at cabinet and subcabinet post levels. Without critical mass numbers around which to coalesce, the lone woman or two can hardly “represent” gender, or connect with organizations who

seek accountability from governments in this regard.¹² But even more profound is the marginal position of “gender” or “poverty” in mostly men’s policy debates, for men do not universally seek to perpetuate the female-poverty link. Lacking much voice in the policy process, women may cooperate, withdraw, resist, or selectively comply with policies, however noble (or venal) those policy intents.

Public policies, to reiterate, are never gender neutral, whether we examine policies in the mainstream of enterprise, education, employment, land and agricultural arenas, or those viewed as “women’s issues,” including health and sexual and domestic violence. The section below makes the case that mainstream policies are gendered, and seeming women’s policies are mainstream. We close each section with some examples of promising policy and political initiatives that respond to gendered inequalities, particularly those inequalities that aggravate the circumstances of those in poverty.

Policies in the Mainstream: Gendered?

Mainstream policies on enterprise, education, employment, land and agriculture have often been made with nary a thought to their gendered consequences. Agriculture is a good place to begin, for women’s connection to food is well established in gathering, preparing, or purchasing for home consumption. Women’s prominence in production and marketing is less well known.

Agricultural and Land Reform Policies

In a massive overview of the gender division of labor, we learn of balanced gender

contributions to agriculture in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Balance persists even for animal care, if one takes into account livestock production, dairy work, and chicken, duck, and goat raising. Yet policies are made as if men do all the work, make all the decisions, and distribute the profits as privileged designates of payment in government-marketing schemes. Rational economic theories and practices perpetuate these delusions with calculations that assume that gender does not matter.¹³

Over time, agricultural agency information campaigns have gradually come to recognize women's predominance. Agencies recruit more female agents, though rarely more than a quarter, and direct their attention to women farmers as individuals or in groups. But if public agencies reform land without regard for gender asset sharing, or marketing and payment schemes, without regard for women benefiting from the value of their labor, they aggravate the injustice: more productive labor for less value.¹⁴ The female rational calculus is likely to revolve around options that undermine the partial attention to integrating women without transforming structures that privilege men: withdrawal, investment in more profitable labor, or escape to cities, where urban agriculture on vacant lots may set in motion other vicious circles of productive labor on unowned land on which revenue-hungry municipal officials seek to appropriate value.

Several promising policy and people's initiatives demonstrate how anti-poverty policies can transform agricultural agencies, provide legal leverage for women's asset sharing, and alter gender and class power relations.¹⁵ In Zambia, a mid-level agricultural official found allies in her agency that set balanced goals for field-level agents serving both men and women farmers; she helped build accountability through policies that stimulated farmers' groups. In India, a stone-breaking subcontractor gained quarrying legal rights that allowed her, and many others like her, to pay off debt bondage on her family's quarter acre plot. India's recent constitutional change sets quotas that one-third of local council seats be filled by women, opening political space for critical masses of women. In several Latin American countries, home-owner aspirants, who built shelters through self-help, applied for title without regard for gender. Title-holding had traditionally been restricted to men.

Employment and Microenterprise Generation

People aspire to work for pay, whether or not they earn a politically defined "minimum wage" and associated benefits. Self-employment, perhaps the oldest, most common occupation, generates paid work outside of government regulation. Existing regulations seem to disable more than enable microenterprise development. Loans rarely trickle down to those in poverty, with UNDP estimates at 2 to 5 percent of institutional credit.¹⁶ Employment generation increasingly occurs as a result of globalization, wherein foreign manufacturers establish export-processing

factories in low-wage nations. Women are sought-after workers in this industrial boom, comprising a majority of the work force in newly industrialized countries.

Promising policy and people's initiatives transform structures that exclude those in poverty from generating more profitable self-employment, through collective organization that provides voice for these workers in the political process.¹⁷ In South Asia, non-government organizations like the Grameen Bank and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee make cycles of loans available to the assetless poor, most of them women, whose peers guarantee repayment. The Self-Employed Women's Organization lobbies for relief from burdensome regulations over street vendors. In 1997, the Microenterprise Summit attracted heads of state, bilateral assistance agencies, and non-government organizations which pledged to raise capital. At the U.S.-Mexico border, a Mexican NGO supplies technical assistance to women's community banks in the United States.

The interdependent global economy with its free trade ideology operates in ways less accountable to national political structures. Yet minimum wages lock many workers in poverty. Until union organization and transnational union coalitions offer workers more leverage, many vote with their feet, seeking higher corporate benefits, but contributing to higher recruitment and training costs. Promising initiatives would foster corporate accountability to working people and the governments in which they are situated, responsive to enforceable international standards, for example, against child and slave labor.

Education

Education is one of the chief means to increasing human capacity, thereby attending to all the mainstream policies. Despite its significance, education is frequently a low-priority government budget item. The benign neglect of education surely relates to the largely female teaching work force and the marginalization of women and children. Per pupil annual expenditures of \$100 speak loudly to this matter, as do average class sizes that surpass fifty or more in a sizable number of developing countries. In many nations, public agencies spend a pittance on elementary compared to secondary and especially higher education.¹⁸

Supposed "equal opportunity" has long been a goal in education, but boys and girls, women and men, have very different experiences with formal education in terms of access and of content, which includes for the latter both the obvious and hidden curriculum. Governments are more attentive to recruiting all children to elementary school, so the different enrollment rates for girls and boys are drawing closer. In addition, glaring literacy gaps for men and women are diminishing. But classroom dynamics, broader cultural cues, and actual job opportunities continue to plague the content experience for females. Nelly Stromquist writes about the ways education transmits beliefs about a "natural" and "appropriate" social order that perpetuates men's hegemony, as found in textbook im-

ages and disabling expectations.¹⁹

Promising efforts in education dovetail with antipoverty approaches in ways that redistribute opportunities to learn more broadly. Zimbabwe encourages unitary curricula without gender biases, reforming tracking in vocational courses that had once trained girls in needlework and boys in woodwork. In Bangladesh, public schools recruit girls in ways that compensate families and reduce educational costs. International banks have jumped on the bandwagon of girls' education for the well-documented connection between years of schooling and lower fertility. Although such crude philosophical connections may turn stomachs, the relationship translates into more funding. Banks, in particular, are well under a UNDP goal of 20 percent spending for human development.²⁰

Women's Policies: Mainstream?

Reproductive health and domestic violence have long been viewed as "women's issues," relegated to the margins in many political cultures which celebrate men at the center. Even early women and gender advocates kept their distance from seemingly "radical" issues that did not attend to work and enterprise. More and more, though, people recognize the centrality of these issues for capacity building. Population policies, for example, once the domain of demographers and planners, have moved away from narrow, top-down considerations to broadened stakes in a variety of primary health programs. Such conceptions were consolidated at the 1994 Cairo meetings, but not before a "user-responsive" focus began to take hold in health programs.²¹

Domestic violence and sexual battery have moved from the periphery of women's issues to human rights and security considerations.²² Public institutions have moved least in this area, however, for codified laws that privilege men remain in place in many countries. The rule of law and its enforcement is weak in many others. In two cases elevated above national mire to international human rights communications, rapists in Peru need only marry their targets to avoid prosecution; in Mexico, a woman wasted away in jail as a "murderer" for a year after she shot her attacker. Grim statistics from New York show the prominent threat that intimates pose to their alleged lovers. Yet the International Court of Justice finally recognized rape as a war crime after persistent outcry over systematic violence in the Balkan region. The world-famous women's police stations of Brazil do not go far enough to address widespread tolerance of violence against women.

Women's Voices in Mainstream Policy Making

While the mainstream policies we have discussed address economy and society, it is clear that that decisions made about those policies occur in the political process in representative bodies, bureaucracies, and nongovernment organizations. Until

diverse women's voices operate within these spaces, with authority and in partnership with coalescing voices, can we expect much far-reaching change? A question like this asks us to reconsider what we have long called democracies—those representative institutions that operate under basic freedoms with rights-bearing members. Are they democracies without women's presence or voice or, especially, without accountability to women for their gendered practices?

In a number of countries, promising initiatives are occurring which open political space to a more diverse group of women.²³ Multiparty parliamentary systems have pioneered in these practices which include party quotas that establish critical masses of female candidates on electoral lists, such as those in Scandinavian countries. In India, through constitutional amendment, all local councils (panchayats) must seat a third women representatives, opening up a pool of 800,000 spaces. In Argentina, all political parties must have 30 percent women running for winnable seats. The more diverse the women (not only in background but in priorities that are pro-poor), the more likely they are to conceive of and implement diverse and effective anti-poverty strategies.

But more than demographics of male and female are at work here. In those political spaces, people must be able to engage in policy debates wherein gender is as central to discussions as class inequality. In such spaces, conditions exist to build coalitions for change that merge anti-poverty with gender equality strategies. These two powerful forces overlap considerably, as discussed in this essay. Together, they lay the groundwork for a new century of change that builds human capacity in sustainable ways. ♀

Notes

1. This is Audre Lorde's famous, but agonizing question in her essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984): 110-113. I answer the question, still agonizing, in a reluctant but affirmative way in *Policy, Politics & Gender: Women Gaining Ground* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, forthcoming 1998), a book on which some of the ideas in this article are developed more fully.

2. Rounaq Jahan, *The Elusive Agenda: Mainstreaming Women in Development* (London: Zed 1995). Jahan differentiates between "integrationist" mainstreaming ("builds gender issues within existing development paradigms") and "agenda-setting" mainstreaming which implies the "transformation of the existing development agenda with a gender perspective" (13). Clearly the latter is a more visionary agenda than the former, more modest approach.

3. The UNDP produces an annual Human Development Report 1997 (NY: Oxford University Press, 1997, 1996 through 1991), a counterpart to the economist-dominated World Development Report from the World Bank. The emphasis on human capacity building draws on work by an economist (ironically), Amartya Sen.

4. The UNDP HDR 1997 (NY: Oxford University Press, 1997): 9.

5. Christine Sylvester uses domestic- and apartheid-like imagery (homelands) in *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1994).

6. The UNDP's HDR 1997 is focused on anti-poverty strategies for its theme; pp. 3, 5, 13, 16. In 1990, the World Bank focused on poverty in its World Development Report (NY: Oxford University Press, 1990).

7. Wayne Cornelius discusses this for Mexico, as cited in Kathleen Staudt, *Free Trade? Informal Economies at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), as does Staudt drawing on border statistics. Contrast that figure with UNDP, p. 21.

8. Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg and Eleanor Kremen, eds., *The Feminization of Poverty: Not Only in America?* (New York: Praeger, 1990), for a comparison of 'northern' countries.

9. See Chapter 5 in Staudt, forthcoming, on work. One of the first studies to provoke attention to female-headed households and all the measurement difficulties was one done by Mayra Buvinic and Nadia Youssef, *Women-Headed Households: The Ignored Factor in Development Planning* (Washington, D. C: International Center for Research on Women Report to the Agency for Women in Development/Women in Development Office, 1978).

10. See the interesting discussion of the Nairobi women's meeting (1985) report in Sally Baden and Anne Marie Goetz, "Who Needs [Sex] When You can have [Gender]? Conflicting Discourses on Gender at Beijing," in Kathleen Staudt, ed. *Women, International Development and Politics: The Bureaucratic Mire* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997, second edition): 37-58, esp. 41-42.

11. Among the many figures in this paragraph, see Staudt, forthcoming Chapters 5-7 and/or UNDP, UNESCO, World Education Report 1995 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) (which focuses on gender), and UNICEF data on maternal mortality, reported by the International Planned Parenthood Federation IPPF Charter on Sexual and Reproductive Rights (London: IPPF, 1995). Amartya Sen's famous article, "More Than 100 Million Women are Missing, is found in the *New York Review of Books* (20 December 1990): 61-66. See also Martha Chen, "A Matter of Survival: Women's Right to Employment in India and Bangladesh," in Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover, eds. *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities* (drawing on some of Sen's work) (New York: Clarendon/Oxford, 1995) and for China, "Discovering the Positive Within the Negative: The Women's Movement in a Changing China," Naihua Zhang with Wu Xu, in Amrita Basu, ed., *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective* (Boulder: Westview, 1995): 25-57. On wage gaps, see Linda Lim's work on that and the International Labour Organization (ILO), *More & Better Jobs for Women: An Action Guide* (Geneva: ILO, 1996).

12. The UNDP's Human Development Report 1995 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) focused on gender, bringing political representation into the analysis as well. See also Kathleen Staudt, "Political Representation: Engendering Democracy," in *Background Papers for the Human Development Report* (New York: UNDP, 1996): 21-70. The most recent insights can be found in Jane S. Jaquette, "Women in Power: From Tokenism to Critical Mass," *Foreign Policy* 108 (Fall 1997).

13. For reviews of the research, see Helen Henderson, *Gender & Agricultural Development: Surveying the Field* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995).

14. Developed in Staudt, forthcoming, Chapter 5; also see "Uncaptured or Unmotivated? Women and the Food Crisis in Africa," *Rural Sociology* 52, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 37-55. On the dangers of women 'doing more for less,' as agricultural extension reaches them, (for even the World Bank is now on this bandwagon), without necessary fruits for their labor, see Maria Nzomo, and Kathleen Staudt, "Man-Made Political Machinery in Kenya: Political Space for Women?" in Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowhury, eds., *Women and Politics Worldwide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994): 415-435.

15. On Zambia, see Janice Jiggins, with Paul Maimbo and Mary Masona, "Breaking New

Ground: Reaching Out to Women Farmers in Western Zambia," in Anne Leonard, ed., *Seeds 2: Supporting Women's Work Around the World* (New York: Feminist Press, 1995): 17-40. On India, see UNDP (1997): 96. On housing, see selections in Caroloine O. N. Moser and Linda Peake, eds., *Women, Human Settlements and Housing* (London: Tavistok, 1987).

16. UNDP (1997): 62, the percent drawn from the "500 million poorest households."

17. See selections in Anne Marie Goetz, ed., *Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development* (London: Zed 1997) and Susan Holcombe, *Managing to Empower: The Grameen Bank's Experience of Poverty Alleviation* (London: Zed 1995). On SEWA and the Microenterprise Summit, see Staudt, forthcoming.

18. UNESCO 1995. Also see selections in Nellie Stromquist, ed., *Women and Education in Latin America* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner).

19. Ibid. Also Staudt, forthcoming, Chapter 4.

20. UNESCO; UNDP's HDR in 1996 and 1997 on proportional spending.

21. Staudt, forthcoming, Chapter 6; IPPF; selections in Gita Sen, Adrienne Germain, and Lincoln C. Chen, eds., *Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment, and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). A fine series exists, *Quality/Calidad/Qualite*, ed. Ann Leonard, published by the Population Council, One Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, New York, NY 10017. For a pioneer on user perspectives, see Judith Bruce, "Users' Perspectives on Conceptive Technology and Delivery Systems," *Technology in Society* 9 (1987): 359-383.

22. Staudt, forthcoming, Chapter 7. See good collections, including Miranda Davies, *Women and Violence: Realities and Responses Worldwide* (London: Zed, 1994) and Elizabeth Fisher and Linda Gray McKay, *Gender Justice: Women's Rights are Human Rights* (New York: Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, 1996). Sara Nelson writes about the Brazil initiative in "Constructing and Negotiating Gender in Women's Police Stations in Brazil," *Latin American Perspectives* 23 no.1 (1996): 131-148. The HURINet (Human Rights Information Network) is a useful listserv herein. On post-communist transitions, see Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizenship, Gender and Women's Movements in Eastern and Central Europe* (London: Verso, 1993).

23. Staudt, 1996; Jaquette, 1997; selections in Basu and in Nelson and Chowdhury.