
The Feminization of Poverty in Developing Countries

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The feminization of poverty constitutes a dynamic process that mainly affects women in developing countries, especially those living in rural areas. In these countries approximately 564 million rural women live below the poverty line.

Both structural and socio-cultural factors influence the feminization of poverty and contribute to its expansion. The first among these is related to the economic configuration of these countries. After the debt crisis of the 1980s, structural adjustment measures in the economy generally affected women more deeply than men. A prime example of this tendency was the distribution of government finances in general budgets, where cutbacks often affected programs that served mainly women, such as support services, education, and health. In addition, high unemployment rates, which resulted in the dismissal of both less-qualified and highly trained personnel, had drastic effects on women, particularly the urban poor.

In response to the crisis, rural women were forced to supplement reduced agricultural incomes through other endeavors. These efforts were carried out in addition to the everyday tasks of family life, such as taking care of the young, the elderly, and the disabled; growing crops and raising livestock; and obtaining water and firewood for everyday use. By taking responsibility for the needs of the household, women became the cornerstone of the family. Despite the vital role of women, men continued to control financial and technical resources; this unequal access further elevated the status of men within the household.

Today both urban and rural women continue to work in the informal sector of developing economies, most often in micro-enterprises. Women with professional training are limited to low-level positions. Even within largely female fields, men are given the most privileged positions. While many women work in education and health as schoolteachers, doctors, and nurses, research positions are occupied by men. This pattern prevails despite the trend of changing economic activity. According to statistics from the United Nations, the percentage of economic activity performed by men dropped by several percentage points between 1970 and 1990; this was accompanied by a corresponding increase in the percentage of women working. It must be noted that these data do not include information on the work of housekeepers or businesses run from the home.

Even in developed countries, cultural pressures lead to the marginalization of women. In both developed and developing regions over the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of female-headed households. Because women in developing countries have fewer opportunities to educate themselves and acquire the skills necessary to succeed in the workplace, the family income of female-headed households is considerably lower than that of traditional families. In developed countries working women still must tend to domestic tasks and hence limit their working hours. Despite such difficulties, the women of these households feed and educate their children better through more effective resource management.

In order to develop effective responses to the feminization of poverty, its contributing factors must be identified and examined.

Environmental Damage

Environmental damage contributes to the feminization of poverty. Two traditional female duties are collecting firewood and providing water for the family. Yet with the current degree of environmental damage, collecting firewood takes several hours, as is the case of women in Concepción, Paraguay, who must go out in canoes to find trees. Still worse is the situation of the women of Chaco, who must work up to four hours in order to get water.

In developing nations, women are most often given plots of land with soil damaged through environmental carelessness. When women do receive land with fertile soil, they are not provided with the knowledge of how to maintain it. Further, it is notable that due to certain structural problems, the poor in developing countries are generally cornered into areas with less fertile soil.

As reflected in health care statistics, women in developed countries face other problems. One is the contamination of the air with smoke, which results in acute bronchitis and respiratory infections. Other similar factors contribute to acute poverty, perhaps due to the increased difficulty of production-based work

and a higher incidence of illness, which shortens the time these women can dedicate to domestic responsibilities. Clearly, the degradation of soil limits production and serves to make these women even poorer.

Migration

Migration provoked by war, hunger, and unemployment contributes to and accentuates the poverty of women. In Latin America, circumstances force many women to move to the cities. The majority of women in both developing and developed countries live in cities.

In Paraguay, statistics place the annual growth rate at 4.87 percent between 1980 and 1992, while that of the rural sector was 1.63 percent. Reflective of the rural sector's inability to support its population, this trend results in a high population of itinerant women who generally occupy low-level jobs.

In populations affected by war, women are often refugees, and they and their children have perhaps the most difficult role of any group in the nation.

Education

It is important to evaluate the ability of women to educate and empower themselves when studying the feminization of poverty. Data from the UN show that in both developed and developing countries, a larger proportion of illiterate women is concentrated in rural zones.

This situation arises for various reasons. Some parents fear the freedom their daughters would gain through education, while other choose not to school children not registered with the government. In addition, due to the lack of social

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security in most developing countries, parents choose to invest in the education of their sons. While women marry and leave the household, men have are bound by greater filial obligation. Social inequalities also place them in a better position to care for their parents.

Nonetheless, in many developing countries women often stay in school until the middle of high school. In some regions, such as Latin America and the Caribbean, about 10 percent more women than men educate themselves through to the middle of high school. However, as this observation only measures the age of those attending classes, it does not mean that such advances have reached all populations.

It is important to consider figures from post-secondary education. In Western Europe, ninety-three women are enrolled in school to every one hundred

men, while in other developed regions in Latin America and the Caribbean more women are enrolled than men. However, according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, of every ten women with professional or technical background, only four find jobs in the informal sector, while very few obtain jobs with potential for advancement. This data reflects employment realities discussed earlier in this article.

Health

Women and children suffer more from illnesses preventable through immunization, proper hygiene, and early detection. One notable illness avoidable through early detection is uterine cancer, more common in developing than in developed countries. Quite often pre-natal medical attention is unavailable. When such care is accessible, many choose not to use it; more than 50 percent of births take place outside of health facilities. Hence women in these regions are more prone to greater risks of lesions and maternal deaths—more than half a million women suffer or die from these each year, not including neo-natal deaths.

Family planning resources are a significant factor in the study of the feminization of poverty. Urban women are considerably more likely to take advantage of such strategies, which are notably absent from the lives of rural women. Although women living in cities generally use contraceptives as often as European women, rural women tend to have larger families. This burden limits the ability of these women to rise to profitable positions and ultimately results in a low income and thus lower quality of life for the entire family.

Structural Factors

Certain structures in a country also contribute to the feminization of poverty. These include social programs stemming from an inefficient public sector; legal bodies that ignore the necessities and present situation of women; and policies and plans for development that fail to take into account issues of gender, often because of the lack of the active participation of women in decision-making bodies.

It is not easy to find solutions to resolve these problems. However, a close examination of the status of women could improve the current landscape.

Helping Poor Women

On the most basic level, states must incorporate a gendered perspective in the analysis of various situations, as well as in the design of policies and plans at the macroeconomic level. In order to grant women decision-making power, measures

must be taken to integrate women in the work teams of ministerial technical cabinets and high governmental bodies. The consolidation of democratic processes is one plan that would allow women, particularly those in more unprotected sectors, greater participation and representation.

Policies advocating sustainable development would result in real benefits, not just improvement of economic statistics, for the general population and consequently for women. Also, national budgets must carefully evaluate the social, educational, and medical needs of women. They must also allocate economic resources in a way that improves the condition of impoverished women.

Legislative reforms constitute a fundamental element in achieving equity between women and men. To allow women more freedom in their decisions and also improve their living conditions, the patriarchal laws that favor the discrimination of women must be changed.

In programs to be formulated, job sources benefiting women must be created to grant women access to positions of power and higher incomes. This is especially important in largely female fields like health and education. Despite the irreplaceable services women provide for the community in these fields, they receive minimal salaries.

In the same way, education programs must be designed to integrate women through taking into account the reality of their condition and offering choices other than those defined by traditional education. Literacy programs for adults are especially important, as practical experience shows that in a team, literate people are more likely to assume positions of leadership or even simply participate more than the illiterate. Other efforts must be made to provide women with skills necessary to get ahead in the workplace. Capacitation will allow many women to work under better conditions than those at present. New skills are vital to allowing women to assume higher-level position as well as to improve effective production in micro-enterprises.

Credit programs must also be reviewed and changed to incorporate women. Although they play a main role in the well-being of the whole family, women have very limited ownership power and are largely unable to participate in economic transactions. Other mechanisms, such as the rotary funds with solidarity guarantees often used by NGOs, must be employed. Since NGOs are critical to helping women, working teams should enhance effectiveness through integration with more grassroots organizations.

Technical assistance is necessary for the success of producer women, especially in the area of commercialization. The creation of support services for the care and education of minors, such as foster homes, pre-school classes, and full-time schools, will grant women greater freedom from their domestic duties and thus increase their work productivity. As those who provide for their families through work in the non-structural sector, women must be acknowledged as the

heads of their households. In particular, women in the informal sector must be recognized as primary providers. It is necessary, then, to provide these women with basic worker benefits such as social security and medical insurance.

Women constitute an integral position in society; if the feminization of poverty is not targeted today, poverty will eventually pervade the general population. According to estimates issued by the FAO, 50 percent of the income in farm-families is generated by women. In 25 to 30 percent of these cases women have brought their families out of extreme poverty, while in 15 percent of cases women manage to provide daily feeding. Urban women have adopted diverse strategies for survival throughout the crisis, such as lowering domestic expenses through use of homemade instead of store-bought products and entering the work market.

In light of the critical role women play in both productive and domestic capacities, supporting women will raise the quality of life in almost the entire population.

Re-Engineering Our World

This is a ripe time, a time of global change. It is a time to redefine our priorities and to reconsider ethics and solidarity as human values that shall bring the best to each and every one of us. Together we can build a better world in which to live.

