

Feminization of Poverty: Conceptualization and Realization

Tanya Singh*

Abstract

The feminization of poverty is a term used to highlight the disproportionate amount of socioeconomic precarity that women face when compared to men due to a plethora of factors such as gender stereotypes, systemic disparities such as unpaid domestic labor and gender-based violence, and institutional inequities such as the pay gap. Despite being widely used to signify the gendered nature of poverty, the term has most often been vaguely defined and understood. Combined with the fact that data on the issue has been difficult to collect, there is no concrete and solid evidence to support or refute the argument. This essay is dedicated to reviewing literature aimed at defining, conceptualizing and investigating the relevance of this concept.

Keywords: Feminization of Poverty, Women Empowerment, Gender.

In 1995, during the Fourth Women's World Conference held in the city of Beijing, the relationship between women and poverty was highlighted as a key concern. Most importantly, the conference saw a detailed discussion on 'the feminization of poverty', with some claiming that women constituted 70% of the world's poor and that this number was on the rise. The term 'feminization of poverty', though popularized by the Beijing conference, was actually coined by American sociologist Diana Pearce in 1976. Pearce's analysis focused on the gendered nature of poverty in the United States. She concluded that "poverty [was] rapidly becoming a female problem" in the United States and women were "falling" disproportionately into poverty even though they were increasingly participating in the labor force. She attributed this trend in poverty to mainly two factors - first, the gendered nature of job segregation, wherein women tend to get concentrated in the low-paying jobs, and second, the lack of institutional benefits for women such as child support. Her work led to a number of studies by social scientists that aimed at verifying her findings (Pearce, 1978)[1]. This concept thereafter was used innumerable times in development literature and became fixed in popular imagination. It highlighted the gendered dimension of income poverty to some extent, despite being vaguely defined and improperly used (Chant, 2015)[2].

* Post Graduate Student
King's College, London

Conceptualizing and Defining Feminization of Poverty

Though it has been hard to explain exactly what is meant by the feminization of poverty, the term has been interpreted in three ways; the first interpretation is rather simplistic, with some scholars arguing that the term simply refers to the fact that women tend to be poorer than men. This phenomenon has been attributed to the double roles of women - their productive as well as reproductive role - and to gender dynamics that give rise to 'secondary poverty' (Bradshaw, 2002)[3]. The latter refers to a situation wherein due to unequal distribution of resources within households, women may face poverty despite the household not being poor. This could happen when men might keep a large share of the household income for discretionary personal expenditures, in turn negatively affecting other household members (Chant, 2008)[4].

Another way to look at the concept is to analyze whether the incidence of poverty has been increasing among women relative to men over time. According to Brazilian economists Marcelo Medeiros and Joana Costa, this method is a better way of explaining feminization of poverty, as it emphasizes the dynamism that is intrinsic within the construct. According to them, the first interpretation highlights the existence of higher levels of poverty among women, which is a static state and focuses on poverty at a given moment. On the other hand, the term 'feminization' relates to the way poverty changes over time and is a process, which is better explained by the second tenet (Medeiros and Costa, 2006)[5]. However, this point of view has been difficult to investigate due to lack of reliable, sex-disaggregated long-term panel data on income poverty, especially from developing countries.

Allen (1992) further distinguishes between the feminization of poverty - which refers to an increase in the share of women among the poor, and the impoverishment of women - described as a fall in the standards of living of women, i.e. women in general are poor and poor women in particular are getting poorer. It is important to note that the former can result even when women are witnessing economic betterment, albeit at a rate slower than men, whereas the latter explains a situation of absolute deterioration of economic status (Allen, 1992)[6]. Indeed, economic development has been found to be quite often accompanied by a relative worsening in the situation of women, even as living standards improve in absolute terms for both genders. This pattern largely stems from the unequal sharing of the advantages of economic progress between men and women. Thus, feminization of poverty does not necessarily mean that women are becoming poor; it could simply mean that women are escaping poverty at a rate slower than men.

Lastly, the third viewpoint focuses on increasing poverty among women which is linked to female-headed households (Chant, 2008). Despite being the most studied and

debated of all aforementioned frameworks, it carries no clarity on the causal links and the direction of causality. In other words, it is difficult to establish whether increases in female household headship come about through poverty, or does female household headship itself contribute to the state of impoverishment? For example, it could be that due to selective mortality, poor households attain female headship. Or, on the other hand, it may be the case that the loss of a male member, which translates into female headship, causes a household to become poor as women tend to own fewer assets and are generally disadvantaged in the labor market as well as in the insurance, credit and land market (Klasen et al, 2015)[7].

The last of these frameworks was the most prominent of all during the 20th century, particularly the nineties. In fact, the Platform for Action from the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 mentions the concept of feminization of poverty mainly with respect to female-headed households, referring to women belonging to such households as the 'poorest of the poor' - belonging to what has been termed as the 'Fifth World' (Wennerholm, 2002)[8]. Empirical research done later highlighted the diversity within female-headed households and the problems in analysis that arise due to equating women and the poor, leading to a fall in the prominence of this structural framework (Baden and Milward, 1995)[9].

Given the above conceptual frameworks, Medeiros and Costa (2010)[10] argue in favor of one specific way of defining the phenomenon of feminization of poverty, wherein they systematize and simplify a complex as well as diverse debate, rather than proposing a totally different approach to the problem. They define feminization of poverty as 'an increase in the difference in the levels of poverty among women and among men, and/or an increase in the difference in the levels of poverty among female-headed households and among male- and couple-headed households'. What makes this definition convincing is that it emphasizes the dynamic as well as relative dimensions of the phenomenon and it offers enough flexibility that it can be applied to many other indicators of poverty such as assets, wealth, time deprivations, to mention a few.

Measuring Feminization of Poverty

Though the gendered dimension of poverty has been well emphasized at least since the 1970s, the measurement of poverty has been more or less gender-blind in nature. With poverty metrics and standard surveys usually ignoring intra-household distribution, there has risen a deep data problem. It has been mentioned on a number of occasions that the lack of disaggregated data makes it difficult to make comprehensive and convincing economic analyses. Nevertheless, there have been attempts to study the gendered dimensions of poverty, and the process of feminization of poverty, some of which have been elaborated upon below.

An early effort at counting the world's poor was made by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in the year 1992 in its report, *The State of World Rural Poverty*. According to the estimate, 60% of the world's poor are women. The IFAD arrived at the estimate by dividing the number of people living in poor households by half, and adding one-quarter of those living in female-headed households, whether poor or not (Ravallion, 1994)[11]. It is not very difficult to see that this is not a very convincing and logical framework for calculating the number of poor women in the world, though it does highlight that the number of poor women is intrinsically linked to the number of poor men, as poverty is often measured at the household level and men and women co-reside.

Another approach has been to study incomes from survey data for single-person households. Making use of such estimates, *The World's Women report for 2010* studies poverty among women, mainly for Europe (UN, 2010)[12]. Yet another way of approaching the issue has been to study important aspects of poverty for which individual data are available such as nutritional status or access to land (Brown et al, 2019)[13]. Lastly, feminisation of poverty may be measured using two kinds of groupings: first, based on the sex of individuals and second, on the sex of the head of the households. The focus on female-headed households is a result of the fact that in poverty literature, household has been the most common unit of analysis. This has meant that female headship has been the only gender-transparent factor when it comes to analyzing the gendered nature of poverty. However since poverty, traditionally, has been studied as a state of material deprivation in terms of income and/or consumption, some studies cast a doubt on whether there indeed is any universal relation between poverty and female headship (Flatø et al, 2017)[14]. It is important to note that poverty 'among female-headed households' and poverty 'among women' are not the same. They both capture a gendered aspect of poverty, but in quite significantly different ways. Even though the former captures a gender-related problem, it is not a proxy for the latter. Both grouping alternatives can reveal something important about the nature of feminization of poverty, but one must keep in mind that they represent different things (Medeiros and Costa, 2010).

Empirical Evidence: Moving Beyond Assumptions

As mentioned before, Pearce's work was amongst the first to draw attention towards the concept of feminisation of poverty. However, her arguments seemed to be backed more by theory rather than empirical evidence. Due to the resulting gap in theory and evidence, her analysis spurred a number of studies that aimed to confirm Pearce's theory by studying the ground realities. These studies substantiated many of Pearce's findings and confirmed that the phenomenon of feminization of poverty accurately captured

and explained the reality of many women in America in the 1980s (Fuchs, 1986)[15]. Now that even evidence had suggested the presence of such a trend in America, the question arose as to whether this was exclusively an American phenomenon or was it global in nature? (Goldberg and Kremen, 1987)[16]

Thenceforth, many cross-national studies confirmed that this was not just an American trend (Toynbee, 1994)[17]. For example, According to Mutua (2000)[18], the phenomenon of feminization of poverty can be very clearly observed in Eastern Europe for the 1990s, wherein the process of economic transition dismantled certain structures that were key to the employment of women. Also, economic instability that resulted from political conflicts led to a situation of mass employment wherein women were disproportionately laid off. But neither the economic transition that took place in Eastern Europe nor the developments occurring in the United States could be concluded as a strong global trend towards feminization of poverty. For some, the evidence that there was an increase in the number of female-headed households globally was enough to conclude that feminization of poverty was indeed a global phenomenon (Christensen, 2019)[19]. However, this conclusion rests on the assumption that female-headed households are essentially more impoverished relative to their male counterparts. Also, studying trends in poverty with respect to the head of the household suffers from some important limitations that have been discussed in the previous section.

In the late 1990s and 2000s, evidence started pouring in from other regions of the world, regarding both the level of, and the variation in the feminization of poverty overtime. Buvinic and Gupta (1997)[20], Chant (2007)[21], Lampiotti and Stalker (2000) [22], and Medeiros and Costa (2008)[23] found no systematic evidence of feminisation of income poverty in Western Europe and Latin America. Moreover, the results obtained tend to be robust to different measures of poverty. Due to lack of data, little is known about the gendered nature of poverty in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Ironically, the phenomenon that was propounded and voiced most profoundly for the third world showed no signs of its presence therein. Therefore, it would be wrong to depend on a smaller geographical coverage to generalize and make statements about global poverty and let those assumptions guide policy. To summarize, the idea of a global feminization of poverty has been partially discredited.

Conclusion

Though we can safely say that feminization of poverty lacks the backing of rigorous empirical evidence for it to be an important guiding factor when studying gender and poverty, one must beware of extrapolating the arguments to conclude that poverty is gender neutral. There are 105 girls for every 100 boys living in extreme poverty,

across all ages. This gender gap further widens with age as is evident from the fact that for every 100 men between the ages of 25 and 34, there are 122 women who live in poor households. Gender differences in poverty rates have been observed to even out between the ages of 40 and 65, but emerge again afterwards (Boudet et al, 2018)[24].

While many observed differences in poverty rates between men and women can be attributed to differences in age and life events, human capital and labor market structures, there are still a few that require deeper analysis and investigation. These unexplained gender differences, which have been termed as 'the poverty penalty' by Boudet et al (2018) disproportionately affect young women and girls up to age 30. This poverty penalty can explain why about 5 million more women live in extreme poverty across the world, more so in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. This tells us that there is a need to look beyond the traditional concepts that can explain the differences in poverty between women and men, and explore more areas for action to help women and men out of poverty. This would require detailed attention to theories that are supported by not only logic and observation, but also rigorous empirical evidence.

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Editor's Note

Females. working or non-working remain poorer as compared to their male counterparts. This has nothing to do with the social strata that they belong to and it can be due to a variety of reasons. For non-working women it may be simply that the earning male member keeps money power in his hands treating his mother/wife at his mercy, there only to work in return for food, clothing and shelter. It is that sometimes working women also are poor with no authority to spend at their will. Females like domestic servants have to hand over money to their husbands/sons to buy peace; women working at high positions may also face a similar situation. A family friend says she and her husband have a joint account in which she deposits her salary and needs consent from husband if she wants to use some money. A male teacher used to give only paise 50 a day (in early seventies) when she, a teacher herself, went for her job. Her salary was under full control of her husband – such was her position when she was earning the same amount. Pay disparity is, of course, prevalent all over the world where for the same work, females are paid less, something that can be taken care of by means of protests, through labour unions or through laws. If one studies this phenomenon at domestic level, honest responses cannot be ensured. Suffering women will not say a word as this is something they would like to keep under wraps. □□□

Dr. Prachi Bagla