

The links between gender and poverty are over-simplified and under-problematised: a time of economic crisis is an opportune moment to re-think the 'feminisation of poverty' and address the 'feminisation of responsibility'.

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/03/10/gender-poverty-links/?pfstyle=w p>

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Women's poverty levels are at the centre of political discussions around the world as governments put into place deficit reduction plans. These discussions often fail to take account of the complex relationship between gender and poverty, argues [Sylvia Chant](#), and a renewed focus on the time and labour that women invest in bearing the burden of dealing with poverty is now needed.

As countries around the world attempt to lessen the financial and political woes caused by the global economic crisis, discussions by policy makers and development organisations have again focused on the 'feminisation of poverty'.

Most recently in the UK this has been visible in a focus on [pension poverty](#), which many women may come to experience due to not having been able to save enough over their lifetime.

The term 'feminisation of poverty' is usually associated with research conducted by [Diana Pearce](#), who in the late 1970s used it to refer to a growing (post-1950) concentration of income poverty among women relative to men in the USA, and especially among African-American female-headed households. Use of the term went global in the mid-1990s, largely as a result of the [Fourth Women's World Conference at Beijing](#) in which alarm about an alleged 70 per cent of the world's poor being female led to the '[persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women](#)' to be adopted as one of the Beijing Platform for Action's twelve critical areas of concern.

Many would say that a focus on women's income poverty within this context is a positive sign that gender issues are high on the international political agenda. It is true that women worldwide have to contend with low incomes as a result of labour force discrimination, and prejudicial gendered biases in resource allocation within their homes and communities. However, this focus only tells part of the story and there is a real need to move beyond unproblematised assumptions about the interconnections between women and poverty, as expressed in this all too readily adopted construct.

It is of vital importance that we conceptualise poverty as multidimensional with many contributing factors, taking into account the following.

- [Gender differences in earnings](#) play an important part in women's poverty, but other factors such as gender disparities in land and property ownership, gender divisions of labour within and beyond the home, gender differences in [power and decision-making](#), and women's vulnerability to [gender-based violence](#) are also integral to understanding the complex tapestry of gendered disadvantage in different times and places.
- Time and labour deprivations build on one another; women are prone to be particularly exposed to [time poverty](#) as a result of multiple labour burdens, many of which are unpaid or underpaid, and which impact heavily on their scope to exit poverty through engaging in activities with higher returns.
- The significance of gender's close links with other axes of social differentiation such as age, 'race' and 'migrant status', form a critical component of understanding individual and group experiences of gendered poverty, helping to move thinking beyond reactive monolithic stereotypes and narrow and simplistic female/male binaries.
- The imperative of broad-ranging social policies which address the processes which lead to gender-biased outcomes in economic and social well-being. For example, micro-credit

schemes prominently in the Global South are often harnessed to 'women's empowerment', but appear in practice to [reinforce the gender-stereotyped roles](#) that put women in a situation of disadvantage in the first place.

- The critical necessity for men as well as women to be brought on board in poverty reduction initiatives, both politically and practically. Without [engaging men](#) in policies and projects to alleviate poverty, women's unpaid labour will continue to be used as the answer to weakening or non-existent welfare states and merely add to the burdens they are currently carrying.

Considering the time and labour that women often have to invest in bearing the burden of dealing with poverty, it is arguably critical to acknowledge the dangers of a '[feminisation of responsibility and/or obligation](#)'. Since gendered dimensions of people's daily lives and livelihoods tend to be marginalised in official statistical assessments of poverty, the extent of gendered poverty remains under-represented and under-addressed through policy interventions. These problems are compounded by neglect of the processes generating poverty and inequality, or which sustain male power and privilege and class differences, and pervasive assumptions about the source of, and solutions to, poverty as residing with the poor themselves.

At a time when the current economic meltdown is regarded by many feminist organisations, not least the [newly-launched UN-Women](#), as an 'opportune moment' to re-think and re-organise visions for future world economic development, it is hoped that productive connections and interchanges can now be made that help to move the abiding pattern of global poverty to one of global prosperity (broadly defined) in which women and men alike are able to share in the benefits of a more egalitarian social and economic order. It is a shift in focus from the 'feminisation of poverty' to a 'feminisation of responsibility' which is required.

[Gender and Poverty in the 21st Century](#) is the subject of a forthcoming panel discussion at the LSE on 11th March 2011. The speakers are Professor Diane Elson (Sociology, Essex) on the topic of gender and the current global economic crisis, Professor Nancy Folbre (Economics, Massachusetts) on gender and the care economy, and Professor Maxine Molyneux (Institute for the Study of the Americas, University of London) on gender and conditional cash transfer programmes.