

The evolution of gender and poverty in Britain: solo-living men are emerging as a new poor group

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Esther Dermott examines the relationship between gender, age and living arrangements in Britain over the period of 1999-2012. Her analysis finds that older women have gone from being one of the poorest groups to being relatively advantaged. Meanwhile, men living alone are an emerging poor group in Britain.



As we approached the new millennium, the relationship between gender and poverty was clear – being a woman in Britain meant you were more likely to be poor. In 1999 the [Poverty and Social Exclusion \(PSE\)](#) survey found a significant 6 per cent gap between poverty rates for men and women in Britain. But just over a decade later this gap had almost disappeared; the 2012 results showed a non-significant difference between men and women’s levels of poverty.

To explain this change we need to look beyond the headline finding to examine the relationship between gender, age and living arrangements. Older women who were the big cause for concern in the past no longer stand out as an especially poor. In fact their situation has so substantially improved that they have gone from being one of the poorest groups to being relatively advantaged. Meanwhile solo-living men are emerging as a new poor group. Hardly noticeable a decade ago, they now stand out for their high rates of poverty compared both to other men and solo-living women.

Nine per cent of older women are now living in poverty, a huge reduction compared to the figure of 28 per cent recorded in 1999. In the earlier period there was also a large gap in poverty rates between older men and women (10 per cent) but this has almost disappeared by 2012. The improvement in poverty rates for older women can be explained by a combination of policy, and a cohort effect which means that the older women of today are fundamentally different in terms of current and historical employment, and relationship patterns to those being surveyed in the later 1990s.

New Labour responded to concerns over pensioner poverty with a raft of measures designed to promote the financial security of older people: means-tested Pension Credit guaranteed a minimum level of income regardless of individual’s national insurance contributions for those aged 60 and over, but there were also winter fuel payments and free TV licences and off peak travel cards. The current government has continued this commitment with the ‘triple lock’ on the value of the state pension guaranteeing that it will be increased at the higher of inflation (Consumer Price Index), average earnings, or a minimum of 2.5 per cent. The impact of these measures will be gendered. The simple presence of more older women in the population means that they will improve the lives of more women. Yet since it is the relative risk of poverty that has changed, the critical point is the extent to which women may have proportionately benefited from such policies. As women are more reliant on a basic state pension than men the improved value of means tested social security payments should have benefited them more.

But there are other significant shifts too. In 1999, just over 2 per cent of women aged over 64 were in employment, but by 2012 this figure had risen to 11 per cent in response to recent economic pressures, the rising age of official retirement, and improved life expectancy. This means that there is a substantial group of older women who are now accessing their own independent income, which supplements or replaces reliance on other sources. In addition, this cohort of older women, has had greater involvement in paid labour across the life-course and therefore increased opportunities to accrue private pensions, and acquire savings and other assets. We know that pooling resources and sharing costs by living together leads to increased living standards so maintaining a single household is more expensive. Over the last decade higher rates of cohabitation and remarriage among older people in the UK mean that there are now fewer older women living alone, so this too may have contributed to women’s improved situation.

In previous research on gender and poverty, the situation of men has rarely been discussed as they have not appeared especially vulnerable to poverty. Our new analysis identifies men living alone as an emerging poor group in Britain. The 2012 data from the [Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey](#) shows that men living alone are the poorest and most deprived male group. Moreover, they are much poorer than women in this category; one in three men living alone is living in poverty compared to one in five women. Unpacking the explanation for this phenomenon is not straightforward but there are plausible reasons. First though to discount the possibility that this rise is due to the marginalised position of young adults – especially men – who are experiencing educational and labour market disadvantage. It is not youth poverty which explains the existence of this group as very few young men are living alone.

Instead, men living in single adult households have a distinct combination of socioeconomic characteristics. For men, not working full-time, having poor general health, and having non-resident children (in addition to living alone) were all significant for increased rates of poverty. The solo-living poor men seem to be a mixture of older, widowed, retired men; men who have withdrawn from the labour market prematurely due to permanent sickness; and middle aged fathers who do not live with their children. Of single household men who had dependent children living in other households, 67 per cent were living in poverty, suggesting that men's experiences as non-resident parents until they re-partner may entail economic hardship.

The bigger picture in thinking about the relationship between gender and poverty (indeed for understanding poverty in general) is that the situation isn't static, we need to look at men as well as women when we think about gender and policies really can make a difference, as do shifts in how we organise our living arrangements and involvement in paid work.

This article draws on 'Gender and Poverty in Britain: changes and continuities between 1999 and 2012' in the *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* by Esther Dermott and Christina Pantazis.

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