

What Do We Mean by “Feminization of Poverty”?

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The “feminization of poverty” is an idea that dates back to the 1970s. It was popularized at the start of the 1990s, not least in research by United Nation agencies. The concept has various meanings, some of which are not entirely consistent with its implicit notion of change. We propose a definition that is in line with many recent studies in the field: *the feminization of poverty is a change in poverty levels that is biased against women or female-headed households.*

More specifically, it is an increase in the difference in poverty levels between women and men, or between households headed by females on the one hand, and those headed by males or couples on the other. The term can also be used to mean an increase in poverty due to gender inequalities, though we prefer to call this *the feminization of the causes of poverty.*

The precise definition of the feminization of poverty depends on two subsidiary questions: what is *poverty*? and what is *feminization*? Poverty is a lack of resources, capabilities or freedoms that are commonly called the dimensions of poverty. The term “feminization” can be used to indicate a gender-biased change in any of these dimensions. Feminization is an action, a process of becoming more feminine. In this case, “feminine” means “more common or intense among women or female-headed households”.

Because it implies change, the feminization of poverty should not be confused with the prevalence of higher levels of poverty among women or female-headed households. Feminization is a process, whereas a “higher level of poverty” is a state. Feminization is also a relative concept based on a comparison of women and men, including households headed by them. What is important here is the difference between women and men at each moment. Since the concept is relative, feminization does not necessarily imply an absolute worsening in poverty among women or female-headed-households. If poverty is reduced sharply among men and only slightly among women, there would still be a feminization of poverty.

Relative changes in poverty levels can be measured in terms of poverty “among female-headed households” and “among women”. These indicators, however, do not reflect the feminization of poverty. Both these and “feminization” capture a gender dimension of poverty, but in distinct ways. They differ by the unit of analysis and by the population included in each group, and obviously they have different meanings. There are reasons to consider both. The

goal of headship-based indicators is to show what happens to specific vulnerable groups of women and their families, and thus their unit of analysis is the household. The population considered includes both men and women (and children) living in those households. It excludes women and men living in other household formations.

Indicators of poverty among females completely separate men and women as individuals, and include or exclude children as a gendered group in their aggregations. In determining the feminization of poverty, interpretation of results drawn from individual measures of poverty may not be accurate. Since poverty is usually measured at the household level, male poverty is intrinsically associated with female poverty and vice versa.

The feminization of poverty can also be defined as “an increase in the share of women or female-headed households among the poor”. In contrast to our proposal, this definition focuses on changes in the profile of the poor and not on poverty levels within gender groups. Thus it has a potential disadvantage. It is difficult to interpret the results from this approach because measures of the feminization of poverty can be affected by changes in the demographic composition of the population. For instance, the impoverishment of female-headed households can be offset by a decline in the total number of such households, and thus the result in terms of feminization can be zero. The definition we propose gives rise to indicators that are not affected by these composition effects, which can be analyzed separately.

The feminization of poverty combines two morally unacceptable phenomena: poverty and gender inequalities. It thus deserves special attention from policymakers in determining the allocation of resources to pro-gender equity or anti-poverty measures. If poverty is not being feminized, resources can be redirected to other types of policies. Of course, whether or not the feminization of poverty is occurring in each country is a matter of empirical analysis. We propose a definition of the feminization of poverty that sees the phenomenon as a change in poverty levels that is biased against women or female-headed households. This definition provides a simple but effective tool for conducting policy analysis.

Reference:

Medeiros, M. and J. Costa (2008). “Is There a Feminization of Poverty in Latin America?” *World Development* 36(1): 115–127.