

FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

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men have too much power and women too much work

(Polish Commentator: Piven, 2000)

Poverty is a national and an international social impediment. However, women tend to be most vulnerable to poverty. The term "feminization of poverty" was first used by Diana Pearce in 1976 following her observation of women among women in America. She observed that two thirds of the poor were women over the age of 16 and an increasingly large number were from the economically disadvantaged groups (Strahan, 1993). The discourse on "feminization of poverty" holds that as a result of recession and

reduced public spending by governments, women are increasingly represented among the world's poor (Pearce, 1978). Women and economic development are at the core of the discourse on feminization of poverty. The notion that poverty has only recently been feminized has been challenged on the grounds that traditionally women have always been poorer than men but that they have been ignored for decades (Payne, 1991). The high visibility of poor women as a result of changing demographics (single parent families; female-headed households) makes it easier for women to be counted although, the extent of their poverty still remains hidden.

Defining Poverty

Spicker (1999:157) defines poverty as consisting of "serious deprivation" where people are conceived to be poor when their "material circumstances are deemed to be morally unacceptable". This definition implies a moral imperative and a value judgement which means that something needs to be done about the situation. While it is acknowledged that the core elements of definitions of poverty may differ, the underlying assumption is that this deprivation is detrimental to the well-being of those who are subjected to it. The topic "feminization of poverty" calls for an analysis into the definition of poverty and an understanding of the way it is experienced by women. In South Africa, and in most developing countries of the world, poverty is inextricably linked to inequality. The experience of poverty shows that it is multi-dimensional and is affected by gender and age as well as cultural, social and economic factors (Spicker, 1999). The multi-dimensional phenomena of poverty is evident by the way it is variously experienced. The analysis of definitions of poverty can be facilitated by examining assumptions and arriving at a suitable framework for understanding poverty. Firstly, it is important to commence with the knowledge that many factors converge to make poverty a complex, multi-dimensional phenomena (Spicker, 1999). Essentially it is defined as a lack of necessary material items for the physical well-being of people, such as food, shelter, land etc. The lack of material items results in physical deprivation which also reveals important psychological aspects as well. Poor people are acutely aware of their voicelessness, powerlessness and lack of independence. Poverty has the tendency to expose people to humiliation, rudeness, and inhumane treatment by public and private agents of service. The personal experience of poverty permeates all aspects of an individual's life including his/her family and community. The inability to participate in community life and in the development of basic infrastructure are critical factors in the experience of poverty. Poor people tend to focus on assets rather than on income.

They link their lack of physical, human, social and environmental assets to their vulnerability and exposure to risk. The fundamental conceptualization of feminization of poverty from a feminist perspective is that women suffer discrimination because of their sex and, their special needs largely remain negated and unsatisfied (Delmar, 1986). This paper explores the feminization of poverty from three major perspectives, namely, women work and the family; women's right to reproductive autonomy and women and economic development. Flowing from this discussion the paper will propose ways in which women can become catalysts for change.

Women, Work and Family

Women's position in society is dictated to by the various roles they play. In most, if not all, situations women have the dual responsibility of maintaining a household and working. Generally, most women spend a greater number of hours working than men. However, their work is not calculated in terms of monetary gain or contribution to the economic development of society, Much of the work women are involved in include child care, domestic and other related chores. Despite the vastly different circumstances among developing and developed countries a remarkable similarity exists in the role fathers play in child care. A study of ten countries revealed that on average it was found that men spend less than one hour per day in solo child care (Owen in Lips 1999). The mobility of women into the economic sector has not been accompanied by a complimentary shift of males in the participation of household and child care responsibilities (Baxter, 1992; South & Spitze, 1994). For women in developing countries a greater deal of unpaid subsistence work, such as carrying water and firewood, doing food gardening and housework, are prevalent (United Nations, 1995). Similar trends are evident in South Africa. Vast numbers of households are still without clean drinking water, energy, health care and education (May, 1998). Female-headed households are common among poor families. According to UNIFEM (2000) women make up 70% of the world's 1,3 billion poor and this figure is constantly increasing. In South Africa, the poverty rate among female-headed households is 60% compared to 30% for male-headed households (May, 1998). Some researchers argue that women experience deprivation despite living in households which fall above the poverty line. This has been demonstrated where women use every effort to spare their family from the effects of poverty before meeting their own needs. Such action subjects them to even greater degrees of poverty (Payne, 1991). The all encompassing nature of gender division of labor is central to the understanding of the underlying and immediate causes

of poverty. Daly (1989) argued that the division of labor is linked to poverty in one of two ways. Firstly, that full time household chores may prevent women from being gainfully employed and secondly, that employment is generally confined to and mirrors the type of work they perform at home, and is generally low paid. Economic powerlessness implies voicelessness within the family, as equal access to resources, rights and benefits are denied to women. Of particular significance is the non-contribution by women toward pension which has grave consequences for them in their old age.

The impoverishment of women has ramifications for their role in society. By and large, poverty limits this role to one of child rearing, earning a subsistence income and maintaining the household. The impact of poverty must, therefore, be understood from a broader perspective, especially its implications for the upbringing of children. Children who grow up in families headed by women, especially those of colour are more vulnerable to the effects of extreme poverty. One of the most pertinent factors in the feminization of poverty is the system of social security and its accessibility to the most vulnerable families. In South Africa the cost of the existing grant system was R1,2 billion with only two out of every 1000 black African children benefitting from it...(Lund, 1997). Although a new system of child support has been instituted, it is no more than an attempt to provide a safety net for the most vulnerable. The new child support grant has raised the consternation of many women's organizations who fear that this only serves to further entrench the poverty of women with negative consequences for children (Naidoo & Bozalek, 1997).

In South Africa the multiple deprivation faced by black women living in rural areas include little or no access to health care, education and basic amenities for survival. The patriarchal system is still very prevalent in rural contexts. Rural women are trapped in tradition which men perceive as their right and responsibility to uphold. In addition women's lack of access to land is linked to traditional systems of patriarchy. Women are viewed as subordinates and are accorded the status of a minor. Their access to credit, land, technology and resources are prohibited or limited by this status which is prevalent in many conservative, rural traditions. In some instances, for example, in India both customary and the main legal systems prohibit women from inheriting ancestral property (Agarwal, 1989). This power imbalance within the family is an inflection of the macro-political order. The patriarchal system has wide ramifications for women's right to reproductive autonomy.

Women's Right to Reproductive Autonomy

The status accorded to women's reproductive labour appears to be similar to their household and child care chores. As long as economies fail to take account of women's critical reproductive role, they will continue to be negated in the national accounting system of a country. Criticisms have been levelled against South Africa's economic policy, namely, Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) for not taking into account women's reproductive labour, which ultimately leads to the invisibility of their position and of their contribution to the economy. The United Nations Development Programme (1995) Human Development Report estimated the invisible contribution of women globally to be \$11 trillion. Women are at the crossroads in terms of their critical contribution to "social capital" yet their activities are non-monetized (Taylor, 1997: 18). Given the lack of recognition by the state and the absence of significant steps to address the exploitation of female and child labour, South Africa's economic plans will continue to reinforce the feminization of poverty (Taylor, 1994).

Neo-Malthusian analysts associate global poverty and women's poverty to women's fertility. In essence their stance is one of blaming the victim, that is poor Third World women for the global crisis (Bandarage, 1998). They argue that pregnancy leads to suffering, low status and powerlessness. Similar thinking has been elucidated by the Population Crisis Committee and UNFPA. According to these organizations women's social status is strongly correlated to their fertility. The assumption is that pregnancy is fundamental to women's poverty and powerlessness. Hence, fertility control is estimated to be the primary solution to poverty alleviation and women's empowerment. Most feminists and social activists advocate for the control of women's fertility as one of the most important solutions to the problem of feminization of poverty (Bandarage, 1998). The new reproductive rights agenda calls for improved quality of services for women's health. The pre-requisite for gender equality include family planning and reproductive health interventions which are expanded to maternal and child health, prevention of STDs and HIV/AIDS. Despite the deterioration of basic health care and the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS and projections of massive population losses as a consequence, the emphasis continues to be on fertility control.

Contrary to the above expectations, increased feminization of poverty has been noted to coincide with legalized abortion. Strahan, observing that poverty worsened at a time when there was an upsurge in abortions, suggested that, at the very least, abortions

were an inadequate solution to the trend of poverty. While acknowledging that the causes of feminization of poverty are complex, Strahan suggested that abortion may instead be a contributing factor to poverty. Increased broken relationships, psychological difficulties and substance abuse all of which are consequences of abortion tend to place women at a greater economic disadvantage, thereby contributing to poverty. An argument that is repeatedly raised by pro-life activists is the extent to which the ready accessibility of services contribute to the problems of exploitative sexual attitudes and denial of responsibility by men. The argument, therefore, that accessibility to abortion is a way of eradicating poverty cannot be maintained.

In addition, the system of patriarchy has over the years subjected women to social, cultural and religious subordination. This subordination has been observed in women's lack of autonomy over their reproductive rights. More recent discussions and debates on HIV/AIDS has drawn attention to "a new visibility" of woman (Roth & Hogan, 1998:xv). Much of the earlier discussion was characteristic of gender distortions, while research has made scant mention of poverty and gender as a factor in HIV/AIDS. The 13th AIDS International Conference in South Africa in July 2000 has attempted to draw some attention to the plight of women albeit from a medical perspective. The experience of poverty and the lack of adequate medical care were issues of contention for the millions of sufferers on the African continent.

Women and economic development

The phenomenon of feminization of poverty is confined not only to women in developing countries. In fact, in both industrialized and developing countries the relationship between gender and economic stratification is evident (Piven, 2000). Women and economic development are at the core of the discourse on feminization of poverty. The difference between male and female poverty is that for men, poverty is often a consequence of unemployment, but for women it is much more complex as other factors such as family commitments are critical issues (Stallard, Ehrenreich & Sklar, 1983). Even though globally women comprise two-thirds of the work force, according to the US Bureau of Labour Statistics they also comprise two thirds of the minimum wage earners (Catalyst, 1997). Generally most female dominated jobs or careers have a lower earning capacity. Studies have shown that where participants believed that masculine traits are required for a job higher salary and prestige are assigned to it and vice versa (Glick, 1995). This perception, in part, stems from the way gender has been

constructed. Jobs that are predominantly female are presumed to have lesser degrees of competency and to be easier. In essence the value that society places on men and women also permeate occupations which are perceived to be "feminine" or "masculine". The construction of gender in this way makes it difficult, if not impossible, to perceive occupations to be independent of gender-labeling (Lips, 1999). Society tends to perceive successful women as an exception, yet this is not so for men. However, prejudices against women are not only reared by men but by women as well. The limited opportunities for women create heightened degrees of competitiveness among themselves. Success among women is, therefore, viewed as a scarce commodity which only a few can attain.

In addition to the unequal status and lack of equity in remuneration for work, women face the hurdle of the "glass ceiling". The "glass ceiling" concept which is an invisible barrier that prevents women from rising past a certain point, is linked to gender bias in jobs. The limitations only become evident when a person reaches the exhaustive limit. Research studies have shown that few women are given the opportunity to hold managerial positions. The highest figures recorded were for the USA and Canada where 67 and 68 women held managerial positions for every 100 men respectively (Neft & Levine, 1997). Generally women who have achieved leadership positions continue to be subjected to discrimination. Their positions are tempered by reduced responsibility, having fewer people to manage, given less options for travel and reduced amount of status and clout as their male counterparts. Hence, gender inequity is prevalent as much in lower positions of the job strata as it is in higher. These biases can be attributed to "persistent gender stereotypes that color the evaluations of and expectations for women" (Lips, 1999:).

ERADICATING FEMINIZED POVERTY

The eradication of poverty itself is dependent on socio-economic changes in all strata of society ranging from the micro to the macro. However, policy changes in and of itself are inadequate to deal with institutionalized gender inequity which has a profound impact on the quality of life for many women. The eradication of feminization of poverty calls for specific focus on the status of women in society. This has partly been achieved through feminists movements and activities which the role that women play in eradicating conditions that perpetuate feminization of poverty. The proposed approaches flow from the three major perspectives under which feminization of poverty

has been conceptualized. These approaches emphasize the need for ideological changes which promote equality and create opportunities for economic empowerment of women through macro socio-economic reform.

PROPOSING CHANGES USING THE IDEOLOGY OF FEMINISM

In South Africa the democratization process has put women's and children's issues firmly on the political agenda. The South African Constitution, 108 (1996) and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women unequivocally. It epitomizes the ideal for every citizen which, in reality, is a far cry for thousands of impoverished women. The powerful discourse on democratic rights has been influenced by and has, in turn, influenced feminist ideology. Feminist ideology has increased phenomenally over the past few decades and its value in drawing attention to the plight of women is also acknowledged. The use of feminist ideology is significant as it demands an investigation of the impoverishment and oppression of women with the aim of promoting women's rights in all spheres (Vincent, 1994). Many of the problems affecting women are experienced by women alone, yet they are often communicated by men, for example, the system of patriarchy needs to be understood from a women's perspective. Hence, feminist ideology is an active practical critique directed not only at the academic level and political level but at deeply held beliefs about the character of our society, thought patterns and intimate relationships. Deeply rooted values and beliefs which have influenced gender roles are propagated through the process of socialization and reinforced through institutions of religion and education. Feminist ideology acknowledges the biological and psychological differences but at the same time advocates that equality of the sexes is still possible. The fundamental goal of feminist ideology is to ensure that women are also the accorded full democratic rights. This means the acceptance of women to attain equal worth with men in respect to their common nature as a free person. Liberal feminists seek a future of "sexual justice" where men will play an equal role in child care and domestic responsibilities and women's careers will not be compromised by bearing and raising children (Vincent, 1994:204). Feminist ideology implies major paradigm shifts in social and cultural values. With the sharing of responsibility for child care and domestic chores substantial increase in the education and training of women is anticipated followed by the capacity of women to participate in the global economy. A critical aspect in the use of feminist ideology is the use of language as a medium of transmitting values and underlying assumptions. According to postmodernism and postculturalism language is potent in the

transfer of ideology. The contention is that just as language can be decoded to expose assumptions so can it be recoded to effectively transform perceptual and cognitive worlds (Vincent, 1994). Femininity and masculinity are social constructs which can, therefore, be deconstructed to reflect gender equity. Feminist ideology has contributed significantly to the understanding of the intricate processes that have perpetuated gender distortions.

STRENGTHENING THE ECONOMIC CAPACITY OF WOMEN

According to Goldberg and Kremen (1990) it is possible to predict the feminization of poverty when three factors are present: (1) inadequate efforts to reduce remuneration inequities for women; (2) the absence of social welfare programmes to redress the needs of women created by the duality of their roles (work and family); (3) the changing family structure which represent a large percentage of single mothers through increasing rates of divorce. Studies conducted by the United Nations revealed some common trends to be relevant to the feminization of poverty. Strong family ties, a sound system of welfare and equal employment opportunities were evident in varying combinations in countries (Italy, Sweden & the Netherlands) where there were equal rates of poverty among men and women (United Nations, 1995). There is substantial support for the need for social and cultural support for women to redress their inequalities thereby eliminating the threat of poverty. Studies according to UNIFEM (2000) have revealed that the benefits of women's participation in the economy is generally extended to the entire family. Greater discretion is exercised in household spending and food and children's education assume priority. Traditional approaches to women's participation and ultimately contribution to the global economy are, therefore, challenged. Education, vocational skills and technology are underlying pre-requisites for the economic emancipation of women. Access to resources such as land, credit facilities and technology which are imperatives for sustainable development need to be ensured by changing the contexts. Policy makers are challenged to explore ways in which the women's potential contribution to economic development can be maximized, their energies and talents effectively mobilized and their resources adequately utilized. Obstructive policies which remain a barrier to women's participation should be removed (UNIFEM, 2000). Inequality, sexism and racism which are deeply rooted in many economies and cultures of the world underlie job status and pay inequities. This implies a re-conceptualization of jobs that appear to be predominantly the domain of women. Opportunities for economic

empowerment should coincide with the re-alignment of supportive policies. Unless child care responsibilities are shared or appropriate alternative exist, women will continue to be isolated from the global economy.

MACRO-ECONOMIC REFORMS

Just as daily lives provide the basis for framing analysis of the wider social order, so does male-female relationships impact on all aspects of life from child development to policy making (Bandarage, 1998; Patton, 1998). Strategies which are proposed to address the plight of impoverished women are often formulated without their participation. These strategies are also seldom linked to the actual circumstances of impoverished women. For macro socio-economic reforms to be effective it must transcend ineffectual tokenism. Despite the numerous national and international strategies and policies developed to address the culture of poverty perpetuated amongst women, they continue to be marginalized. Women's participation in issues that affect them must underscore macro economic reform process. Until desperate and urgent measures are taken to inculcate a culture of inclusivity, they will continue to be relegated to positions of subordination. Campaigns for gender equality and emancipation of women must encompass a wider group, not only women. Men are an integral part of this campaign. Although there has been several national and international programmes and campaigns advocating gender equality progress has been limited. Tradition and custom, despite maintaining and promoting identity and culture, can undermine the progress of women. Women who are voiceless economically are also voiceless politically. The imbalance in economic power isolates women from being involved in advocating for solutions and resources to address the problems they encounter. Why the impasse? In most instances the poor are not the beneficiaries of macro-economic reforms because the underlying institutional contexts often remain unchanged (May, 1998). In South Africa, there is a fairly good representation of women in key government positions. These strategic positions offer opportunities for the inclusion and participation of women at various levels. Women themselves can be catalysts for change through inclusivity and representation of women by women. Legislation in itself is inadequate to address gender imbalances. Reform in child care, tax policies, marriage and divorce laws which recognize the role of women in the labour market but at the same time recognizing their special needs as mothers are imperative. In South Africa various socio-economic reforms have been instituted to enhance participation of women as active members of society. These include the increased participation of

women in key government positions. Initiatives to address the capacity of women to generate income and reduce poverty levels. Labour legislation has been reviewed to give women economic security by recognizing their reproductive rights. The risk of losing their jobs while on maternity leave is no longer a threat. The employment Equity Bill which has recently been promulgated compels employers to review discriminatory practices by identifying measures to rectify gender and race inequities. South African society has been characterized by institutionalized discriminatory practices in terms of race and gender, hence, social policy reform, which is only one aspect of social change, must be enacted in combination with attitudinal, customary and traditional changes. At this juncture I would like to remind delegates of the keynote address at the UN Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995, of the commitment the world has toward eradicating feminized poverty. The following quote emphasizes the need for changing the paradigm from one of domination to one of partnership:

In societies where men are truly confident of their own worth, women are not merely "tolerated". They are valued. Their opinions are listened to with respect, and they are given their rightful place in shaping society in which they live....

There are no gender barriers that cannot be overcome. The relationship between men and women should, and can, be characterized not by patronizing behaviour and exploitation, but by *melta* (loving kindness), partnership and trust.

Aung San Suu

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