
FACT SHEET

Causes of Women's Poverty

1. Introduction

1.1 A review of the literature on poverty has indicated that there are clear links between gender and poverty in that more women than men live in poverty.¹ Statistics from the United Nations show that the majority of the 1.5 billion people living on US\$1 (HK\$7.79)² a day or less are women.³ There is a consensus among nations that the gap between women and men caught in the cycle of poverty has widened in the past decade, which is now referred to as "the feminization of poverty". In fact, the Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, identified the eradication of the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women as one of the 12 critical areas of concern requiring special attention and action by international communities, governments and civil societies.

1.2 There has been an increase in the number of female-headed households due to divorce, widowhood and other reasons. Female-headed households do not have income from male earners and the single mothers have to fulfil both the roles of an earner and a carer. Therefore, these female-headed households bear a higher risk of living in poverty. More importantly, unless the economic status of these women improves, the accompanying problem of child poverty cannot be properly tackled.⁴

1.3 Poverty is a multi-dimensional problem. While some causes of poverty are common to both men and women, some apply specifically to women. These particular factors are discussed in the following section.

¹ Bellamy & Rake (2005a) and United Nations Development Fund (2005).

² The average exchange rate of US\$ to HK\$ for 2004 was US\$1 = HK\$7.788.

³ The United Nations Department of Public Information (2000).

⁴ Bellamy & Rake (2005b).

2. Causes

Traditional role as a carer

2.1 Tradition, culture and stereotypes have contributed to a gender division of labour that women should be mainly responsible for caring of children, the elderly and the disabled in the family. Women taking the unpaid caring responsibilities can only work fewer hours or stop work altogether.⁵ Over the lifetime, this caring role reduces women's opportunities to develop skills and build up assets, such as pension.

Unequal economic status

2.2 Since most women are unpaid for assuming the caring role, they normally suffer from a lower economic status. Although more women have been engaged in either full-time or part-time jobs since the 1970s under the growing trend of female participation in the labour market, there is still a wide disparity in pay between men and women and in conditions of employment as well.⁶ For instance, a survey in the United Kingdom has shown that the gender pay gap between full-time hourly earnings for women and men is 19%, and the gap between women's part-time hourly earnings and men's full-time hourly earnings is 59%.⁷

2.3 In spite of the growth in female employment, women's employment continues to concentrate in part-time works, which are usually poorly paid, such as the four "Cs": the caring, catering, cash registers and cleaning sector.⁸ In particular, motherhood is often a trigger to women working part-time. Women accept low-paid jobs which tend to be flexible in terms of working hours and available locally, and therefore fit with their traditional duty of caring in families.⁹ These part-time jobs are usually of low status, insecure and have few occupational protections and benefits, which means that the employment may not be sufficient to guarantee those women sufficient wage to live above the poverty line.

Poverty within household

2.4 Poverty research often treats all individuals as equal recipients of income earned by a household, regardless of who receives and controls the money. This approach may hide the true extent of poverty faced by women.¹⁰

⁵ Evandrou & Glaser (2003).

⁶ United Nations Development Fund (2005) and Women and Equality Unit (2005). For instance, in the United Kingdom, the pay gap between men and women stands at 18.3% for full-time workers and 43.2% for part-time workers. Only 11% of women work as senior managers or officials compared with 18% of men.

⁷ Bellamy & Rake (2005a).

⁸ United Nations Development Fund (2005).

⁹ Bellamy & Rake (2005b).

¹⁰ Bellamy & Rake (2005a).

2.5 In addition, many women in poor households tend to sacrifice their basic needs, such as food and clothing, in order to protect their children and/or partners. Therefore, women living in poor households may face even more severe poverty than other family members.¹¹

Social exclusion

2.6 Poverty and social exclusion always go hand in hand. Women in poverty usually cannot afford to participate in social, community and political activities. In addition, poverty often creates a negative impact on one's self-confidence, which further reinforces the tendency of social exclusion of women in poverty. Therefore, the consequences of social exclusion not only affect the well-being of women in poverty, but also diminish their prospect of getting their way out of poverty.

Government policy

Lack of a woman's perspective

2.7 Although many governments have formulated policies to reduce poverty, they often fail to address the particular circumstances of women. The lack of a gender perspective in anti-poverty policies may result in the special needs of women being overlooked. For instance, while men's risk of poverty is primarily related to their exclusion from the labour market, women's poverty is linked to their caring role as well.¹² Besides, even when women are engaged in paid jobs, they are paid less than men in general. Therefore, policies which simply emphasize increasing employment opportunities as a cure to poverty may not be sufficient to lift women-headed households out of poverty.

Women's participation in decision making

2.8 While women's share in seats in a legislature has increased in all regions, women hold only 16% of parliamentary seats worldwide.¹³ There is a lack of women's voice in the public sphere and in political decision-making. Even if there is such representation, women's voice may be too weak to make a significant impact.

¹¹ Bellamy & Rake (2005a).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ United Nations Development Fund (2005).

A vicious cycle

2.9 The gender pay gap and the traditional role of women generally reinforce the gendered division of labour, which means that it is always women rather than men who work part-time or stop work in order to care for the family in the hope of maximizing household income. Accordingly, women lack the opportunities to build up their skill and experience, and are thus less competitive in the labour market than their male counterparts. In return, women are trapped in low-paid jobs with little prospect to upward mobility. This vicious cycle exacerbates the division of labour and economic inequalities between women and men, and "feminizes" the phenomenon of poverty.¹⁴

2.10 The impact of women's caring responsibilities and low earning power results in their poor pension entitlements. This phenomenon is exacerbated by women's longevity and their increased risk of living alone later in life. In other words, they may experience persistent poverty without a way out.¹⁵

3. Differences among women

3.1 In general, more women than men suffer from poverty. Nevertheless, there is an increasing trend that considerable differences exist among women themselves. Highly educated women who are childless or have had fewer children or have had children later in life have benefited from the narrowing of the gender gap over the latter half of the twentieth century as they spend more time in better paid employment, compared to women with lower education. As a result, there is as much inequality among women as between women and men.¹⁶

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¹⁴ Bellamy & Rake (2005b).

¹⁵ Bellamy & Rake (2005a) and (2005b).

¹⁶ Bellamy & Rake (2005a).

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