

REFLECTIONS ON “THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY: MYTH OR REALITY”

MARTHA GIMENEZ

University of Colorado, Boulder

The concept, feminization of poverty, not only denotes the greater proportion of the poverty population who is female, but it also connotes the idea of continuous growth and novelty, as if the feminization of poverty were an unprecedented process bound to intensify in the future. I was dissatisfied with the implications and connotations of the concept and I wrote this article, intended as a critical evaluation of the theoretical and empirical appropriateness of the concept.

Empirically, the data show that the sex composition of the poverty population has not changed a great deal since the earliest available data was gathered by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The female of all ages proportion of the population below the poverty level has remained relatively constant since 1966, when it was 57.1 percent, fluctuating between 57 and 58 percent in the 1970s and early 1980s but remaining mainly a little over 57 percent since 1982. In 1987, the year this article was first published, it had declined to 56.1 percent. Its highest peak (59.1 percent) was reached in 1978; 20 yrs later, it was 57.3 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Historical Poverty Tables—Table 7, www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/hispov/hspov7.html) and there is no reason to believe that the 1999 data will show a drastic departure from those figures.

Given this relative stability in the female proportion of the poverty population, why was it possible to speak of the feminization of poverty as a novel and intensifying process? Why is this concept uncritically accepted and used today? The perception of increasing female poverty was the product of several factors. Ideologically, the aftermath of the women’s movement sensitized researchers to women’s needs and problems among which women’s socio-economic status was paramount. Women’s earnings, job segregation by sex, women’s place in the occupational structure, women’s educational and occupational opportunities, the effects of divorce, and women’s poverty became and continue to be important areas of research and policy concerns. Research demonstrating that a large proportion of women experienced downward mobility

and even poverty after divorce led to the observation that women were “a man away from poverty.” But there were also important economic causes of this perception that women were becoming poorer; changes in the economy, including de-industrialization, altered the opportunity structures for male and female workers, so that poverty and near poverty increased for male and female adult workers (aged 18–44), while it decreased for older workers (aged 45–64) and those 65 and older. And, together with the better economic opportunities enjoyed by older Americans after WW II, that Social Security was tied to the consumer price index helped to lower the proportion of the poor aged 65 and over. This change in the age structure of the poverty population, namely, the visibility of the poverty of adult women and their children, together with the aftermath of divorce, produced this impression, that women were becoming increasingly poorer, or that poverty was being feminized.

Given that close to 60 percent of the poverty population is female in the U.S., and that the pervasiveness of gender inequality everywhere suggests that this proportion is likely to characterize the situation of women in the rest of the world, it would seem that to speak of the feminization of poverty captures the empirical realities of women’s lives while demonstrating also the theoretical importance of gender to explain women’s plight.

While it is undoubtedly true that there are more poor females than males, I have presented in my paper an argument against the theoretical adequacy of the feminization of poverty that continues to be relevant today: It is misleading to refer to this phenomenon as the “feminization of poverty” because gender is a relevant correlate of poverty only among propertyless women. Gender is an individual characteristic of people but it is not the major determinant of their economic fate; gender matters among those whose social class location reduces them to the need to work for their economic survival. Women who do not depend on marriage or a job for economic survival: i.e., women who are economically independent, either because they own capital or hold a tenured well paid job, are unlikely to fall into poverty if they become single mothers or divorce, unless an economic depression devalues their assets. Propertyless women, on the other hand, are all at the risk of becoming poor, especially if they are born in poor families.

But there are more complex reasons why this is a misleading concept: a focus on the poverty of women makes poverty at most a gender effect and overlooks that gender is only one of the important

relationships that shape persons' fate; people, as Marx once wrote, are "ensembles of social relations," and their social conditions cannot be understood in isolation from the social relations within which they live their lives. Among those relations, class relations are as paramount as the relations between men and women. As economic conditions change, men's opportunities also change; as the feminization of poverty was becoming visible, the number of poor men almost doubled between 1978–1983. There is an important link between the poverty of women and the poverty of men that must be taken into account. Race, and age, are also important social relationships that shape individuals' economic fate. But, as I argued in 1987 and continue to argue today, to focus on the poverty of the disproportionately poor (e.g., the poverty of children, the elderly, or adult young workers, women and non whites) as the media, policy makers and social scientists tend to do, overlooks their class location and, consequently, the main causes of their poverty. Structurally, poverty is a class issue and to overlook this fact results in the conceptualization of poverty as an identity issue to be ameliorated through policies targeted to the needs of specific sectors of the poverty population—sectors defined on the basis of identities, rather than class location—thus detracting from the examination of the complex ways in which changes in the mode of production affect family formation and basic survival among the most vulnerable sectors of the working class. It is not my intention to deny that women are disproportionately poor, nor to fall into "class reductionism" by denying the effects of gender; my argument is that gender, as an objective structure of inequality and as an individual characteristic and identity, matters to understand the poverty and the downward mobility of propertyless women or working class women, so that the appropriate way to refer to the phenomenon in question might be the feminization of working class poverty, thus avoiding the overgeneralization that somehow all women are at the risk of becoming poor.

The dominant way of thinking about poverty separates it from its connection to the class structure, so that we think of the poor as having no social class at all, or as the marginal sectors or "underclass." We need to think of the poor as the most vulnerable, the most oppressed layers of the propertyless class and then examine the ways other oppressions and exclusions based on age, gender, race, ethnicity, and other divisions, cause disproportionate poverty. This is why I ended my article suggesting that the feminization of poverty is a concept that partially captures and obscures the effects of the immiseration of the lower layers of the working class.