

2 Unpaid care work and poverty

In this section we look at the relationship of women's unremunerated (unpaid) work in Southern Africa to the incidence of, and their vulnerability to, poverty. We look at whether and how women might be poorer than men. We look at how the types of work that women do might cause them to be poor. We also start to differentiate between unpaid care work and other forms of unpaid and underpaid work.

2.1 Poverty has a women's face

In 1995, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) wrote that: 'Poverty has a woman's face – of 1,3 billion people living in poverty, 70 percent are women.' It is not clear on what data this estimate was based, but it is often quoted. The wording is also loose, in that presumably many of the 'women' are actually 'girls'.

The Human Development Report of the UNDP is another source of crude estimates on the relative poverty of women and men. The table below gives information from the 2002 edition (UNDP, 2002: 150-1; 222-225) for the fourteen countries which fall under UNIFEM's Regional Office. The first column of figures gives the human development index (HDI) ranking). The second column shows gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. The third and fourth columns show average female and male income. The final column shows the female average income as a percentage of male average income.

The table suggests that for every country for which data is available, female income is only a fraction of male income. The fraction is as low as 39% in Swaziland. Further, there is no clear relationship between the level of wealth of a country and the relative position of female and male.

Country indicators of wealth and income, 2002

Country	HDI rank	GDP per capita	Female income	Male income	Female as % male
Angola	161	2187	-	-	
Botswana	126	7184	5418	9025	60%
Comoros	137	1588	1136	2038	56%
Lesotho	132	2031	1223	2853	43%
Madagascar	-	-	-	-	-
Malawi	163	943	506	726	70%
Mauritius	67	10017	5332	14736	36%
Mozambique	170	854	705	1007	70%
Namibia	122	6431	2019	5068	40%
South Africa	107	9401	5888	13024	45%
Swaziland	125	4492	2557	6479	39%
Seychelles	47	12508	-	-	
Zambia	153	780	562	995	56%
Zimbabwe	128	2635	1946	3324	59%

Source: UNDP Human Development Report, 2002: 150-1; 222-225

Although we know that this pattern is correct in general, the UNDP notes that the disaggregated income figures are 'crudely estimated' on the basis of the ratio of female non-agricultural wage to the male wage, the female and male shares of the economically active population, the total female and male population, and GDP per capita.

Strong statements and crude estimates like this are useful in shocking people. They are not useful for policy-making. For policy-making we need more reliable figures, because otherwise we cannot measure whether the situation is improving or deteriorating over time. And, if we introduce policy changes, we cannot see if the new policies are working well. For policy-making we also need to understand why women are poor, because this will enable us to tackle the causes of their poverty, rather than only the consequences.

2.2 The link between low-paid work and unpaid care work

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) describes how women's poverty is linked to their disadvantage in the labour market (1995). Overall, women tend to be concentrated in economic activities with low earnings, where

earnings are irregular and insecure, and where there is little protection through labour law and social protection. For example, in Africa women often work in unpaid subsistence agriculture, in low-paid domestic work, as street traders, and as low-paid clerks.

The ILO argues that the following factors work together to create these patterns:

- Society sees women's primary function as fulfilling reproductive and domestic functions. This view restricts their access to education, training, land and productive assets. It limits the time available for (paid) productive work. It limits women's choice of income-earning activities.
- Men are seen as the main breadwinners, while women's earnings are seen as an 'extra'.
- Women's work is often undervalued. The occupations and sectors which are dominated by women are generally seen as being less important, requiring lower skills, and thus deserving of lower earnings than the occupations and sectors dominated by men.

Both the first and last points are related to unpaid care work. The first point has a direct link, because it is precisely the reproductive and domestic functions which make up unpaid care work. The last point is related because many of the occupations and sectors dominated by women involve work which is similar to the unpaid care work. For example, in many countries women are concentrated in the clothing and textile industries. In many countries the jobs which involve work with children are female-dominated. In many countries paid domestic work is performed primarily by women. The fact that these types of work – sewing, child care, and housework – are done 'free' by so many women within their own households, suggests (a) that there are few skills involved – it is something that women, at least, can do 'naturally'; and (b) that the work has low value, because it can be obtained free in other circumstances. The result is low wages and low status.

2.3 Feminisation of poverty

Just as we often read that 70% of poor people are women, we often read the term 'feminisation of poverty'. This term can mean several different things, but the authors and we, as readers, do not always think about which meaning is intended. To make good policy, we need to be clear what we are talking about.

BRIDGE (2001) suggests that the term 'feminisation of poverty' has at least three (different) meanings:

- Women have a higher incidence of poverty than men i.e. a higher percentage of women than men are poor;
- Women's poverty is more severe than that of men i.e. poor women are even poorer, on average, than poor men; and
- The rates or levels of poverty among women are increasing. In particular, the rates and levels might be increasing because of an increase in the number of female-headed households.

The first two meanings describe a 'state' in which women suffer more in some way from poverty than men. The last meaning describes a process through which women are becoming poorer over time, and doing so faster than men. The first two points are probably true in most countries. The third point may be true, but is not always true.

2.4 Female-headed households and poverty

BRIDGE notes that female poverty may be assumed to be increasing because of an increase in the number of female-headed households. But we need to avoid simplistic assumptions, such that all female-headed households are poor. In fact, very close to home, the results of the 2000/1 Household Budget Survey in Tanzania found that female-headed households seemed, on average, to be slightly better off than male-headed in that 45% of female-headed households were below the poverty line, compared to 49% of male-headed households.

Instead of talking about female-headed households as one homogeneous group, we need to think about the different types of household within this category. A widow living alone is different from a widow living with her children. A widow living alone is also different from a widow who is looking after her grandchildren because their parents died of HIV/AIDS. All these types are different from the young professional woman who decides to bring up her children alone because she feels that a man will be a drain on her resources.

We also need to think more carefully about both advantages and disadvantages for women of being household heads. On the one hand, women who head households may be less restricted in taking on paid work, may have greater control over finances, and be less subject to physical and emotional abuse. On the other hand, they may have less access to resources of all types, and suffer from social and other forms of discrimination. Importantly for our purposes, where a woman lives alone with her children, she alone will be responsible for all the paid work and all the unpaid care work. Or she will have to ensure that her children take on some of these responsibilities.