

Poverty, your Name is Woman

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Cristianisme i Justícia - Roger de Llúria, 13 - 08010 Barcelona

+34 93 317 23 38 - info@fespinal.com - www.cristianismeijusticia.net

It has been said that poverty's name is woman, but why? What has gender to do with exposure to poverty? Do we really have a proper grasp of it? What do we mean when we speak of the feminization of poverty? How does it affect women's lives in fact?

I am going to attempt some answers to these questions.

At the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women held in Peking in 1995, it was agreed to endorse a document that has since framed twenty years of policy towards gender equality, although systematically ignored in practice: the Peking Declaration and Platform for Action. It points out the importance of approaching the connection between women and poverty from a number of related angles –education, the environment, economics, communications, and so forth. It also calls on member states to commit them-

selves to 'combatting the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women', favouring equal access to education at every level, promoting access to decent jobs and participation in decision-making concerned with all economic issues that affect them, eradicating inequality between women and men in the handling of natural resources and environmental protection –these among other critical areas that directly involve the differential impoverishment of women.

Some data

At things stand, women's economic rights continue to be infringed. According to UNDP, the UN's Development Programme, extreme poverty affects some 1,500 million people, of whom 70% are women.

Together with difficulties over access to education, land, and credit, and with greater insecurity and vulnerability in labour markets, another of the factors contributing to women's impoverishment is the salary gap, as may be seen from a report published in February 2016 by the Spanish Trades Union, the Unión General de Trabajadores, entitled *Equal Pay, An Outstanding Question*:

‘Economic policies based on salary cuts have a direct effect on inequality between men and women, since one of their direct consequences is an increase in wage discrimination. These policies affect all sectors, but those with the greatest number of low-paid female employees visibly adversely affect the already precarious rates of pay of many millions of women workers. A total of 2,432,300 female workers received an average gross yearly income of less than 16,700 euros. But all women across all sectors are adversely affected by wage discrimination.’

Many other data reflect the alarming state of affairs:

- Of jobs lost in Spain during the recent financial crisis, 85% had been held by women. (Source, CC.OO)
- 94% of single parent families are headed up by women, making maintaining family cohesion far harder. (Source, Insocat, comparing Catalonia with the rest of Spain and Europe)
- The average client of Spanish Social Services is an unemployed woman with children, aged between 36 and 50, with only primary education, and an average monthly income of be-

tween 300 and 500 euros. (Source, Informes de los Servicios Sociales en España del Consejo General del Trabajo Social I y II ISSE 2013-2015)

- Fewer than 20% of those owning land are women. (Source, FAO)
- 40% of homeless women have been physically attacked, 61% have been robbed, and 24% have suffered sexual violence. (Source, INE)
- 70% of part-time workers are women. (Source, EUROSTAT)
- In Europe as a whole, women earn on average 16% less than men, whilst doing the same work. (Source, European Commission)
- 95% of those working as carers outside the formal labour market are women. (Source INE & UGT)
- Two thirds of the world's illiterate adult population are female. (Source, UNESCO)
- In rural areas, many women keep going by small scale agricultural labour, almost always informal and often unpaid. (Source, UN Women)

Feminizing Poverty: Women Invisible and Forgotten

Although both men and women suffer poverty, in the light of the above it is safe to claim that poverty is also a matter of gender, and that any idea that women's lives are improving world wide is a mirage. In her article «Feminismos, concepto sexo-género y derecho» [‘Feminism as concept, sex-gender, and the law’] Gemma Nicolás Lazo writes that ‘poverty among women is always greater, regardless of the specific geographical circumstances. Although the total amount of work they do is more than

half of that estimated for humanity as a whole, worldwide they receive only a third of the total remuneration.’

Gender inequality is therefore a considerable impediment to freeing women from poverty and their achieving the necessary material and other means of survival.

Feminizing poverty has long been an invisible phenomenon, since studies of poverty and social exclusion have not included it among their variables, thereby concealing an essential aspect of the extreme vulnerability our Western socio-economic system imposes on millions of women everywhere.

The feminization of poverty is as undeniable in poor countries as in those supposedly developed, although it operates on a different scale. UNPD relates it to four interconnected, mutually reinforcing, observations¹:

1. There is a preponderance of women among the poor.
2. Gender bias² is not accidental when it comes to the causes of poverty.
3. There is an exponential growth in the number of women who are poor. (In this sense, the feminization of poverty is a process, not simply the state of affairs at a given moment in time.)
4. Female poverty is not always visible to the same degree.

One might add in relation to this fourth point that invisibility is reinforced for as long as women remain unrepresented politically and are unable to participate equally in community decision making. Women who are poor face additional exclusion since they are ignored when it comes to running the economies that marginalise them or to sharing in the profits.

Economic Violence: A Perfect Alliance between Capitalism and Patriarchy

Patriarchy and capitalism are both systems that violate women’s rights by an asymmetrical redistribution of resources favouring men. As Rocío Domínguez Cejudo puts it, this inequality in the distribution of goods and resources generates economic violence, ‘a form of oppression and control of the female population exercised across the board by the capitalist economic system’. It can be defined in terms of ‘any exercise of power or force against women, to the detriment of their economic rights, both public and private’.

People, businesses, institutions, states, and systems deploy forms of economic violence and control resources (money, jobs, land...) in such a way as to limit the full development of women’s potential and the exercise of their rights as citizens. This invisible kind of violence has become naturalised in our society and become more marked owing to neoliberal policies of globalisation. In a lecture delivered in Madrid in April 2001, Victoria Sendón de León describes matters as follows:

‘The entrance into the global work market of sizeable numbers of women under exploitative conditions difficult to imagine in the developed world is one of the factors making the imposition of neoliberal policies possible. The numerical significance of women in the rag trade or free-market areas associated with the production of electrical goods means that certain workforces are majoritarily female. [...] It should be observed

in addition that far from working to women's advantage, neoliberal policies of globalisation produce more unpaid and poorly paid forms of employment.'

Globalisation and the relocation of industries to relatively poorer countries, in pursuit of ever cheaper workforces –far cheaper in the case of women, if we bear in mind the salary gap between the genders– turns women into objects. They are obliged to accept poorly paid tasks with no job security, tasks they often have to combine with forms of unremunerated domestic work created by reductions in social services and by other cost-cutting policies, thus suffering extremes of economic violence.

It can be seen from this that we are not just talking about the 'feminization of poverty' and the exploitation of workers on a global scale, but also of what the Dutch sociologist Saskia Sassen calls the 'feminization of survival', given a system that in the words of Judith Butler 'excludes the feminine and feminizes the excluded'.

Feminist Economics: A New Dawn

In her book *Globalización y desigualdad de género* ['Globalisation and Gender Inequality']³, Paloma de Villota describes how 'economic models reflect almost exclusively the economics of the market, given that labour markets are characterised by male participants unaffected by reproductive constraints.'

If we are to put a stop to this, we must listen to proposals made from a feminist perspective and critical of a predatory economic system and its deadly consequences, proposals calling for a re-examination of concepts such as well-being, markets, economic growth, production, consumption and progress.

In turn, feminist economics enables us to see the often vilified work that women do for what it is, proposing alternatives that value the 'care economy' and respect for the environment, building a sustainable system that guarantees a decent life for women as well as men.

Sonia Herrera, Specialist in Gender Equality and Member of CJ Social Unit

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1. Quoted by Paula Lucía AGUILAR in «La feminización de la pobreza: conceptualizaciones actuales y potencialidades analíticas» ['The feminization of poverty: current conceptualizations and analytical potentialities'], *Revista Katálisis*, 14. 1 (2011).
 2. In her lecture «The other side of the coin: Making women economically invisible: another form of violence», Rocío Domínguez Cejudo maintained that 'the greater exposure of women to poverty is due to greater degrees of insecurity, precariousness, and vulnerability issuing from their subordination to men where gender relations are concerned'.
 3. Paloma de VILLOTA (co-ordinator), Madrid: Síntesis (2014).