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The 'Feminisation of Poverty' and the 'Feminisation' of Anti-Poverty Programmes: Room for Revision?

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ABSTRACT *The construct of the 'feminisation of poverty' has helped to give gender an increasingly prominent place within international discourses on poverty and poverty reduction. Yet the way in which gender has been incorporated pragmatically – predominantly through the 'feminisation' of anti-poverty programmes – has rarely relieved women of the onus of coping with poverty in their households, and has sometimes exacerbated their burdens. In order to explore how and why this is the case, as well as to sharpen the methodological and conceptual parameters of the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis, this paper examines four main questions. First, what are the common understandings of the 'feminisation of poverty'? Second, what purposes have been served by the popularisation and adoption of this term? Third, what problems are there with the 'feminisation of poverty' analytically, and in respect of how the construct has been taken up and responded to in policy circles? Fourth, how do we make the 'feminisation of poverty' more relevant to women's lives – and empowerment – at the grassroots? Foremost among my conclusions is that since the main indications of feminisation relate to women's mounting responsibilities and obligations in household survival we need to re-orient the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis so that it better reflects inputs as well as incomes, and emphasises not only women's level or share of poverty but the burden of dealing with it. Another, related, conclusion is that just as much as women are often recruited into rank-and-file labour in anti-poverty programmes, 'co-responsibility' should not be a one-way process. This requires, inter alia, the more active support of men, employers and public institutions in domestic labour and unpaid care work.*

I. Introduction

This paper reflects on the relevance of the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis to analysis and policy in developing countries. Informed in part by recent field research in The Gambia, the Philippines and Costa Rica,[1] I argue for re-orienting the 'feminisation of poverty' in a manner which more appropriately reflects trends in gendered

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disadvantage among the poor and which highlights the growing responsibilities and obligations women bear in household survival.

The 'feminisation of poverty' was first coined in the 1970s (see Pearce, 1978) but did not make its major breakthrough into the development lexicon until the mid-1990s. A critical catalyst was the Fourth UN Conference on Women in 1995 at which it was asserted that 70 per cent of the world's poor were female and when eradicating the 'persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women' was adopted as one of the 12 critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). Disregarding the fact that the 70 per cent level was supposed to be rising and that, a decade on, no revision seems to have been made to the original estimate, this bold and largely untenable claim,[2] with its alarming (or alarmist) predictions of 'worse to come' seems to have brought women, if not gender, more squarely into the frame of international fora on poverty reduction, including in relation to Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Chant, 2007: Chap. 1). According to Wennerholm (2002: 10), the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis has been responsible not only for drawing attention to the 'great number of women living in poverty' but in highlighting the impact of macro-economic policies on women, calling for women to be recognised in the development process and promoting consciousness of the existence and vulnerability of female-headed households. Added to this, as Williams and Lee-Smith (2000: 1) contend: 'The feminisation of poverty is more than a slogan: it is a marching call that impels us to question our assumptions about poverty itself by examining how it is caused, manifested and reduced, and to do this from a gender perspective'. If the mounting range of policy interventions aimed at women's 'economic empowerment' is anything to go by, the astoundingly rapid translation of the 'feminisation of poverty' from opportunistic shorthand to 'established fact', has ostensibly been fortuitous.

Yet there are various problems with the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis, methodologically, analytically and in terms of its translation into policy. With this in mind, my paper is divided into five sections. The first explores common understandings of the 'feminisation of poverty'. The second examines the purposes served by the popularisation and adoption of this concept. The third summarises some of the key problems with the 'feminisation of poverty' analytically and in respect of how the construct has been taken up and responded to in policy circles. The fourth suggests some revisions to the 'feminisation of poverty' concept, while the fifth points to possible directions for policy.

II. What is Understood by the 'Feminisation of Poverty'?

The term 'feminisation of poverty' is often used without any elucidation of its meaning. Notwithstanding some attempts to make explicit its major attributes (see Panel 1), unpicking of the 'poverty' dimension of the construct remains disappointingly rare.

In general terms, monetary privation is implied yet it is somewhat strange that this should be uppermost in 'feminisation of poverty' discussions for two reasons. First, various authors, including Fukuda-Parr (1999), have stressed that the feminisation of poverty is not 'just about lack of income'. Second, feminist research over the last

Panel 1. Common characterisations of the 'Feminisation of Poverty'

- Women experience a higher incidence of poverty than men.
- Women experience greater depth/severity of poverty than men (that is, more women likely to suffer 'extreme' poverty than men).
- Women are prone to suffer more persistent/longer-term poverty than men.
- Women's disproportionate burden of poverty is rising relative to men.
- Women face more barriers to lifting themselves out of poverty.
- The 'feminisation of poverty' is linked with the 'feminisation of household headship'.
- Women-headed households are the 'poorest of the poor'.
- Female household headship transmits poverty to children ('inter-generational transmission of disadvantage').

Sources: Chant (1997b, 2007), Box 1; Moghadam (1997); Cagatay (1998); Baden (1999); Davids and van Driel (2001, 2005); Wennerholm (2002); Medeiros and Costa (2006).

25 years has consistently stressed the importance of more holistic conceptual frameworks to encapsulate gendered privation. These include: (a) 'capability' and 'human development' frameworks, which identify factors which pertain to human capabilities or 'functionings' such as education, health and infrastructure (see Fukuda-Parr, 1999; Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 2003; Klasen, 2004; UNDP, 2005); (b) 'livelihoods' frameworks, which emphasise social as well as material assets (see Rakodi, 1999; Rakodi and Lloyd-Jones, 2002); (c) 'social exclusion' perspectives which highlight the marginalisation of the poor from mainstream society through lack of political participation, social dialogue and 'voice' (see Chen et al., 2004: 5–6; UNRISD, 2005: 49); and (d) frameworks which stress the importance of subjective dimensions of poverty such as self-esteem, dignity, choice and power (see World Bank, 2000; Kabeer, 2003; Rojas, 2003; Johnsson-Latham, 2004a; Painter, 2004).

Over and above the schism which seems to have evolved between the narrow parameters of the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis and the more inclusive and holistic conceptualisations of gendered poverty, another conundrum is that in the light of shrinking disparities between a number of women's and men's capabilities and opportunities – particularly in education, employment and politics – it is almost counterintuitive that gender gaps in income poverty should be widening (Chant, 2007: Chap. 1). As observed by Moghadam:

> The feminisation of poverty would . . . appear to refute the idea that economic development and growth are generally accompanied by a trend towards the diminution of patriarchal gender relations and an advancement in the status of women through improvements in women's capabilities. (Moghadam, 1997: 3)

Beyond the apparent paradox posed by the disjuncture between women's rising capabilities and opportunities, and worsening incomes, another problem attached to monetary emphasis in the 'feminisation of poverty' is that relevant data are extremely scarce. As noted by Rodenberg: '. . . a large proportion of the 1.3 billion

people living in absolute poverty are women, though there is too little gender-specific data to substantiate the oft-quoted figure of 70 per cent' (Rodenberg, 2004: 1) (see also Marcoux, 1998a, b; Baden, 1999: 10; Chen et al., 2004: 37; Elder and Schmidt, 2004: 3n).[3]

Despite the calls of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and more recently the BFPA for more sex-disaggregated statistics, there is still no international database which provides a comprehensive breakdown of the incidence and extent of women's income poverty in comparison with men's (UNIFEM, 2002: 60). In terms of the South – only for Latin America, thanks to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), is there a regional breakdown of the numbers of females and males within households which fall below national poverty lines (Table 1). While on the surface these data suggest that women are poorer than men and, indeed, in all rural areas for which data are available, a higher percentage of the female population seems to live

Table 1. Gender and poverty in Latin America

Country	Area	Proportion below poverty line (%)		Females per 100 males below poverty line
		Male	Female	
Argentina	Urban	23.8	23.6	99.3
Bolivia	Urban	48.6	48.2	101.4
	Rural	79.4	81.6	102.8
Brazil	Urban	33.0	32.6	99.5
	Rural	54.8	55.6	101.6
Chile	Urban	20.6	20.6	101.0
	Rural	26.4	28.8	109.1
Costa Rica	Urban	16.8	19.2	114.4
	Rural	20.8	23.8	114.5
Dominican Republic	Urban	33.9	36.9	110.2
	Rural	37.7	43.3	115.0
Ecuador	Urban	63.1	63.3	102.8
El Salvador	Urban	38.1	39.0	101.3
	Rural	64.9	65.4	100.8
Guatemala	Urban	45.7	45.4	101.0
	Rural	69.8	70.0	100.4
Honduras	Urban	66.6	65.4	99.3
	Rural	81.0	81.5	100.8
Mexico	Urban	38.7	38.7	101.0
	Rural	58.3	58.6	101.6
Nicaragua	Urban	63.4	64.5	101.7
	Rural	77.4	76.6	99.0
Panama	Urban	25.8	26.6	103.1
	Rural	40.4	43.6	107.9
Paraguay	Urban	49.7	47.4	97.1
	Rural	73.2	74.4	101.9
Uruguay	Urban	9.7	9.4	97.3
Venezuela	Total	48.6	50.0	104.4

Sources: CEPAL (2002), Cuadros 6a and 6b; UNIFEM (2002), Table 15.

in poverty, differences are for the most part, fairly marginal. Moreover, in urban areas in 10 out of 17 countries, the proportion of men in poverty is actually on a par with or slightly higher than women. On the basis of this, UNIFEM (2002: 61) concludes that the 'feminisation of poverty' is present only in some countries in Latin America and that women are nowhere near the level of 70 per cent of people in income poverty as popularly expounded.

Even if income poverty headcounts are rather limited in depicting gendered privation (see later), CEPAL's efforts represent a laudable start. This is mainly because elsewhere in the South poverty assessments are based not on per capita but *aggregate* household incomes, which, on account of the generally smaller size of female-headed households, can over-estimate their poverty (Kabeer, 2003: 79–81; see also Chant, 1997b; Bongaarts, 2001). As it is, even aggregated household data do not present us with a picture of unilateral disadvantage. Although a progressively greater share of households in extreme poverty in some parts of Latin America have become headed by women in the last decade, and notwithstanding that the greatest increase in female headship has occurred among the poor as a whole (see Arriagada, 2002; ECLAC, 2004b: 58) (Table 2), more recent in-depth analyses suggest otherwise. For example, a detailed quantitative study of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Venezuela between the early 1990s and early 2000s by Medeiros and Costa (2006) found 'no solid evidence of a process of feminisation of poverty in the Latin American region' (Medeiros and Costa, 2006: 13). This conclusion was drawn on the basis of an extremely comprehensive analysis which not only considered per capita income figures but, examined women and men in general and according to household headship, as well as exploring the incidence, severity and intensity of poverty (see also Lavinas and Nicoll, 2006: on Brazil).

Moreover, within a wider geographical remit there is relatively little evidence to support the notion that women-headed households are poorer than their male counterparts in any systematic manner (Quisumbing et al., 1995; Chant, 1997b, 2003a; Moghadam, 1997: 8, 1998; Fukuda-Parr, 1999: 99; IFAD, 1999; CEPAL, 2001: 20; Chen et al., 2004: 37). Yet from the early 1990s onwards, categorical pronouncements about female-headed households being the 'poorest of the poor' have flowed thick and fast (see Panel 2), added to which female heads have often become a crude proxy for women despite the caution that 'Headship analysis cannot and should not be considered an acceptable substitute for gender and poverty analysis' (Lampietti and Stalker, 2000: 2).

Irrespective of whether we consider households *or* individuals, another major problem in sustaining the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis as a trend, is the dearth, if not total absence, of sex-disaggregated longitudinal panel data (Johnsson-Latham, 2004b: 18; Nauckhoff, 2004: 65). And as Medeiros and Costa remind us:

> In spite of its multiple meanings, the feminisation of poverty should not be confused with the existence of higher levels of poverty among women or female-headed households... The term 'feminisation' relates to the way poverty changes over time, whereas 'higher levels' of poverty (which include the so-called 'over-representation'), focuses on a view of poverty at a given moment. Feminisation is a process, 'higher poverty' is a state. (Medeiros and Costa, 2006: 3)

Table 2. Female-headed households by poverty status over time in urban Latin America

Country and year	Total % of households headed by women	Extremely poor (%)	Poor (%)	Non-poor (%)
Argentina (Gran Buenos Aires)				
1990	21.1	26.2	11.6	22.3
1994	24.0	22.0	20.0	24.0
1997	26.1	31.7	24.1	26.5
1999	26.9	36.9	28.0	26.5
Bolivia				
1989	16.7	22.0	24.1	26.1
1994	18.0	20.0	17.0	18.0
1997	20.7	24.0	22.4	18.6
1999	20.9	24.4	18.9	20.7
Brazil				
1990	20.1	24.2	22.6	18.4
1993	21.7	22.9	21.0	21.7
1996	23.7	24.1	22.1	24.0
1999	25.4	24.2	24.2	25.9
Chile				
1990	21.4	24.5	19.8	21.5
1994	22.0	27.0	21.0	22.0
1996	23.0	29.0	22.0	23.0
1998	24.0	28.0	23.0	24.0
Costa Rica				
1991	24.1	27.7	22.3	24.0
1994	24.0	24.0	24.0	24.0
1997	26.8	51.0	35.5	24.0
1999	27.9	55.8	38.5	24.9
Ecuador				
1990	16.9	21.6	15.9	15.3
1994	18.7	22.7	17.5	15.3
1997	18.6	23.8	18.6	16.7
1999	20.1	22.9	20.5	18.0
El Salvador				
1995	30.8	38.2	31.3	29.0
1997	30.2	35.8	33.2	27.8
1999	31.4	35.5	35.5	29.2
Guatemala				
1989	21.9	23.1	21.0	21.7
1998	24.3	24.2	21.9	25.3
Honduras				
1990	26.6	35.4	21.2	21.4
1994	25.0	28.0	25.0	21.0
1997	29.2	31.9	27.7	27.5
1999	30.3	32.2	30.4	28.1
Mexico				
1989	15.7	13.9	14.0	16.7
1994	17.0	11.0	16.0	18.0
1996	17.5	17.1	14.7	18.9
1998	19.0	18.0	16.0	20.0

(*continued*)

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Country and year	Total % of households headed by women	Extremely poor (%)	Poor (%)	Non-poor (%)
Nicaragua				
1993	34.9	39.9	33.8	31.7
1998	34.5	39.2	36.4	29.6
Panama				
1991	26.0	33.7	29.0	23.5
1994	25.0	35.0	25.0	24.0
1997	27.5	36.5	28.8	26.2
1999	27.4	44.6	28.0	25.8

Source: CEPAL (2002), Cuadro 6E.

While I will return to some of these concerns later, it is nonetheless important to highlight the positive impacts of the 'feminisation of poverty' in 'engendering' the poverty agenda.

III. The Importance of the Feminisation of Poverty Thesis in Engendering Poverty Analysis and Poverty Reduction Strategies

As mentioned earlier, growing circulation of the notion of a 'feminisation of poverty' in academic and policy arenas has had a number of benefits.

The term 'feminisation of poverty' may be poorly elaborated or substantiated but it is nonetheless a succinct and hard-hitting slogan – what Molyneux (2006a) so eloquently describes as 'a pithy and polyvalent phrase', effective as a way of underlining the point that poverty is a '*gendered experience*' (emphasis in original). With a helping hand from unbridled repetition, the 'feminisation of poverty' has clearly proved persuasive enough to grab the attention of planners and policymakers beyond as well as within gender and development (GAD) circles. In the process this has helped to raise the status of women's (if not gender) concerns in national and international discourses on poverty and social development (see Jassey, 2002; Chant, 2007: Chap. 1). In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, ECLAC's Secretariat has established as one of its foremost priorities, to 'identify the characteristics of female poverty and its associated causes' (ECLAC, 2004b: 82). More generally, Johnsson-Latham notes that:

> ... the value of integrating poverty and gender and development has been increasingly acknowledged both within UN agencies such as the UNFPA and UNIFEM, among bilateral development agencies, and in the research communities in the North and South. Thus today more coherent efforts are made to better understand poverty by applying a gender perspective. (Johnsson-Latham, 2004b: 20)

The need to incorporate gender differences has not only increasingly been taken on board in poverty analysis but in policy and practice too. This is conceivably because

Panel 2. Assertions about female-headed households as the 'poorest of the poor'

> . . . the global economic downturn has pressed most heavily on women-headed households, which are everywhere in the world, the poorest of the poor.
> Tinker, 1990, p. 5

> Women-headed households are overrepresented among the poor in rural and urban, developing and industrial societies.
> Bullock, 1994, pp. 17–18.

> One continuing concern of both the developing and advanced capitalist economies is the increasing amount of women's poverty worldwide, associated with the rise of female-headed households.
> Acosta-Belén and Bose, 1995, p. 25

> What is clear is that in many countries women tend to be over-represented in the ranks of the 'old' or structural poor, and female-headed households tend to be among the most vulnerable of social groups.
> Graham, 1996, p. 3.

> . . .the number of female-headed households among the poor and the poorer sections of society is increasing and . . . they, as a group – whether heterogeneous or not – are more vulnerable and face more discrimination because they are poor and also because they are man-less women on their own.
> Bibars, 2001, p. 67.

> Households headed by females with dependent children experience the worst afflictions of poverty . . . Female-headed households are the poorest.
> Finne, 2001, p. 8

> Households headed by women are particularly vulnerable. Disproportionate numbers of women among the poor pose serious constraints to human development because children raised in poor households are more likely to repeat cycles of poverty and disadvantage.
> Asian Development Bank, 2003, p. 11.

> An increasing number of poor households are headed or maintained by women.
> UNMP/TFEGE, 2005, p. 4

Sources: Chant, 2003a, 2007, Chap. 1.

the wedding of gender and poverty offers the tantalising prospect that 'two birds may be killed with one stone' that is, in the process of reducing poverty, gender equality goals can also be realised. Certainly, what Rodenberg (2004: iv) describes as a 'win-win' formula which links greater gender equity, economic growth and effective poverty alleviation is in ample evidence in policy rhetoric. As articulated by the Asian Development Bank (2002: 135) in the context of their mission to improve the quality of life in developing member countries, the '. . . ;overarching goal of poverty reduction is closely linked to improving the status of women, since equity – especially gender equity – is now recognised as an essential factor in transforming growth to development and reducing poverty'. In the 'South' more generally, women's 'economic empowerment' – through welfare and productivity investments – has

progressively been deemed crucial not only in achieving gender equality but eliminating poverty, and leading to development which is 'truly sustainable' (UNIFEM, 2002: 1–2; see also Razavi, 1999: 418; DFID, 2000; UNDAW, 2000; Rodenberg, 2004). To this end, resources have been garnered for a range of interventions aimed at increasing women's literacy and education, facilitating their access to micro-credit, enhancing their vocational skills, and/or providing economic or infrastructural support to female-headed households (see Kabeer, 1997; Yates, 1997; Chant, 1999, 2003a; UNDAW, 2000; Mayoux, 2002, 2006; Pankhurst, 2002).

In light of the above, widespread take-up of the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis could be celebrated as something of a 'coup' for GAD stakeholders. Its bold (and surprisingly little contested) claims have provided an important tactical peg upon which justification for directing resources to women may be hung (see Baden and Goetz, 1998: 23; Jackson, 1998; Chant, 2003a). Even if there is increasing recognition in GAD arenas that it is difficult to pin down the extent of women's poverty with any precision (even in income terms), and/or that female-headed households may not be the 'poorest of the poor', the construction has managed to put 'gender on the agenda' in an unprecedented manner. Marrying gender to poverty reduction has secured resources for women, so why abandon a term which has proved so fruitful in this regard?

Yet although the 'feminisation of poverty' has undeniably had some advantages, its current constitution, and rather uncritical adoption, pose a number of problems for analysis and policy alike.

IV. Problems with the 'Feminisation of Poverty' Thesis for Analysis and Policy

Analytical Problems

1. Lack of Attention to Differences Among Women. Aside from the general problem of scant sex-disaggregated data on poverty, data which are disaggregated along other lines are also lacking. For example, beyond disaggregation between male and female household heads, attention has seldom been paid to other differences among women, such as age, which is arguably critical in determining whether and how poverty might be feminising. As mentioned previously, diminishing gaps between women's and men's capabilities make it difficult to comprehend how women are at greater risk of becoming poorer than men over time, or at least that gendered poverty gaps are increasing among the young. By contrast, it *is* plausible that poverty among women is increasing due to demographic ageing.

Given women's generally greater life expectancy, there is an increasing tendency for more women to feature in populations as a whole and among senior age groups in particular. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, 60 per cent of the population aged 60 and above are female (PAHO/MIAH, 2004: 1) and the corresponding levels for Asia and sub-Saharan Africa as of 1997 were not far below – at 53 per cent (Gist and Velkoff, 1997: Table 1).

In turn, female senior citizens may be particularly prone to disadvantage for three main reasons. The first is a legacy of greater gender gaps – for example in education, literacy, savings, pension coverage and so on. The second is a greater probability

that older women will be widowed than men and/or live alone, and the third, the possibility that older women suffer greater social and economic discrimination than their younger counterparts or male peers (see CELADE, 2002: 17; ECLAC, 2004b: 45–46; Ofstedal et al., 2004: 166–167; UNMP/TFEGE, 2005: 13). While these hypotheses could be contested on grounds that the elderly are still a relatively small proportion of the population in most developing countries (see WHO, 2005: Annex Table 1), that they may benefit from inter-generational family transfers (see Ofstedal et al., 2004: 197) and that women's age-related risk of poverty is cross-cut by other factors such as household circumstances, education and employment. Unless progress can be made towards further disaggregation of what little sex-disaggregated data exists, then we are unlikely to know how far demographic – or other – factors have a part to play in poverty's purportedly inexorable process of feminisation.

2. Over-Emphasis on Income. A second major analytical problem with the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis, as mentioned earlier, is its implicit privileging of income and neglect of other more complex and/or abstract dimensions of poverty.

Although obtaining and quantifying information on social and subjective aspects of privation is difficult, collecting data on incomes or consumption is arguably no less problematic. Over and above the fact that information on incomes, consumption (and assets) are usually only available for households in aggregate and are difficult to convert into individual levels according to gender, age and so forth (see Klasen, 2004), the value of income data in supporting the 'feminisation of poverty' is dubious for two main reasons. First, income, along with longevity, is argued to be one of the few indicators which is less robust in confirming women's relative privation than other criteria commonly found in the GAD literature such as access to land and credit, decision-making power, legal rights within the family, vulnerability to violence, and (self) respect and dignity (see Johnsson-Latham, 2004b: 26–27). In short, the privileging of income may underestimate the extent to which poverty is feminised or feminising, and deflect attention from other factors pertinent to women's disadvantage. As argued by Rodenberg:

> The important determinants that go into the making of women's social positions in today's world society are marked by legal, political, cultural and religious discrimination. These circumstances clearly indicate that the fact women are disproportionately affected by poverty is neither due primarily to lower incomes nor finds its sole expression in them. Instead, inequality has its most important roots in inadequate access to resources, lack of political rights, and limited social options as well as in a greater vulnerability to risks and crises. (Rodenberg, 2004: 5) (See also Moghadam, 1997; Fukuda-Parr, 1999; Parpart, 2002; Franco, 2003; Morrisson and Jütting, 2004; UNDP, 2005)

Second, and related to this, unless we are able to get a handle on poverty's subjective dimensions or its multidimensionality, we cannot go very far in understanding gendered poverty and its dynamics, or make policy-oriented assessments of poverty more relevant to women at the grassroots. For example, while the level of household income is clearly important in any poverty diagnosis, it is also important to appreciate that this may bear no relation to *women's* poverty because women themselves may not

necessarily be able to *access* it (see Bradshaw, 2002: 12; also Chant, 1997a, b). For many women, the capacity to *command* and *allocate* resources may be considerably more important than the actual resource base in their households (Chant, 2003b, 2007: Chap. 2). The bearing on women's privation of intra-household dynamics and 'secondary poverty' has been widely stressed in feminist research, with Sweetman (2005: 3) summarising that poverty is, 'as much about agency compromised by abuse, stress, fatigue and voicelessness, as it is about lack of resources'.

The significance of subjectivities and the multidimensionality of poverty has perhaps been best illustrated in work on female household headship and the notion of 'trade-offs' whereby women make tactical choices between different dimensions of poverty in the interests of personal and/or household well-being (Kabeer, 1996, 1997;Chant, 1997b, 2003a). For example, being without a male partner (and their earnings) may at one level exacerbate poverty for female heads – especially in respect of incomes – but this can be compensated by other gains. These may include female heads being able to use whatever income they themselves or other household members earn at their own discretion, to avoid the vulnerability attached to erratic support from spouses, or simply to enjoy a greater sense of well-being because their lives are freer from conflict, coercion or violence (van Driel, 1994; Jackson, 1996; Chant, 1997b).[4]

While the choice of trade-offs may be limited (Kabeer, 1997,1999; also van Driel, 1994), and the 'price' of women's independence may be high (Jackson, 1996; Molyneux, 2001: Chap. 4), as Graham (1987: 59) has argued: '... single parenthood can represent not only a different but a preferable kind of poverty for lone mothers' (see also UNDAW, 1991: 41; González de la Rocha, 1994). Indeed, although women do not usually choose to stay single or to engineer the dissolution of their marriages or unions, in the interests of their own or others' well-being, they may well opt to remain alone rather than return to ex-partners or form new relationships (Chant, 1997a: Chap. 7; see also Fonseca, 1991: 156–157; Bradshaw, 1996; Ypeij and Steenbeek, 2001; van Vuuren, 2003: 231). This underlines the idea that poverty analysis cannot afford to lose sight of women's personal experiences and perceptions, the diverse range of privations they face, and the fact that within an albeit limited remit, they may also exert agency. As articulated by Rodenberg:

> Women are ... more often affected, and jeopardised by poverty. Lacking powers of self-control and decision-making powers, women – once having fallen into poverty – have far fewer chances to remedy their situation. This fact, however, should not be understood to imply globally that e.g. a rising number of women-headed households is invariably linked with a rising poverty rate. It is instead advisable to bear in mind that a woman's decision to maintain a household of her own may very well be a voluntary decision – one that may, for instance, serve as an avenue out of a relationship marred by violence. If poverty is understood not only as income poverty but as a massive restriction of choices and options, a step of this kind, not taken in isolation, may also mean an improvement of women's life circumstances. (Rodenberg, 2004: 13)

3. Over-Emphasis on Female-Headed Households. Leading on from this, a third major problem with the feminisation of poverty thesis is its over-concentration on

female headed households, encapsulated by such statements as: '... the feminisation of poverty is the process whereby poverty becomes more concentrated among individuals living in female-headed households' (Asgary and Pagán, 2004: 97; see also Box 2). This emphasis in the thesis is somewhat paradoxical given that while feminist research has often identified that men are a major *cause* of women's poverty in developing countries – especially at the domestic level – the feminisation of poverty suggests that when women are *without* men, their situation becomes worse. Moreover, as intimated in Rodenberg's statement above, it is increasingly evident that some women are actively *choosing* household headship as a means by which they are able to enhance the well-being of their households and/or exert more control over their own lives (see also Safa, 1995; Baden, 1999; van Vuuren, 2003).

Another case against undue emphasis on female-headed households in the 'feminisation of poverty' is that they are a highly heterogeneous group. Differentiation derives from a wide range of factors including routes into the status, stage in the life course and household composition. These, and other axes of difference, can exert mediating effects on poverty and thereby defy their categorical labelling as the 'poorest of the poor' (see Chant, 2003a for a fuller discussion).

4. Neglect of Men and Gender Relations. A fourth analytical problem with the 'feminisation of poverty' is that its focus on women tends to deflect attention from men and gender relations, when it is perhaps precisely the latter which should come under greater scrutiny. Indeed, if poverty is feminising, then does this imply a counterpart 'masculinisation' of power, privilege and asset accumulation? If so, how is this explained when there is so much talk of a 'crisis of masculinity' and mounting evidence that men in some countries are beginning to fall behind women in respect of educational attainment and access to employment (see Kaztman, 1992; Gutmann, 1996; Escobar Latapí, 1998; Silberschmidt, 1999; Arias, 2000; Chant, 2000, 2002; Fuller, 2000; Varley and Blasco, 2000)? While UNRISD (2005: 12) endorses the idea that some men are disadvantaged, and this can exert costs such as higher suicide rates and stress- and alcohol-related health risks, they maintain that in general: 'Male underachievement has not led to parallel underachievements in wealth and politics'. In order to interrogate the validity of this claim, men and gender relations undoubtedly deserve closer attention in analysis of the feminisation of poverty.

On top of these four already quite well-established criticisms, a fifth set of points, inspired mainly by the author's recent fieldwork in The Gambia, the Philippines and Costa Rica (see Note 1), relates to the need to place as much, if not more, emphasis on the inputs related to dealing with poverty, as on income.

5. Missing the Major Points about Gendered Poverty: A 'Feminisation of Responsibility and Obligation'? Although women are often income-poor, what is perhaps more important is that they are increasingly at the frontline of *dealing* with poverty. While the burden of household survival has long been widely documented as falling disproportionately on women, the unevenness between women's and men's inputs and their perceived responsibilities for coping with poverty seem to be growing. In some cases, the skew is such that it has reached the point of virtual one-sidedness. On top of this, women's mounting responsibilities do not seem to be matched by any discernible increase in rewards or entitlements – whether of a

material or non-material nature. The social worth of women's efforts tends to go unacknowledged, robbing them of personal gains, prestige or satisfaction.

Feelings about the injustice of these gendered disparities were remarkably consistent across the case study countries and across all age groups, as illustrated by an indicative sample of comments of female respondents in The Gambia, the Philippines and Costa Rica presented in Panel 3. On the basis of respondents' views, the author had a strong sense not so much of a 'feminisation of poverty' in the

Panel 3. Women's views on the unevenness of gendered responsibilities for dealing with poverty in The Gambia, Philippines and Costa Rica

Men are not doing anything – if they pay for breakfast, it's women who pay for lunch and dinner. Women pay for school lunches. You see the festivals, and it's the women who are selling . . . some men are not working, and some men refuse to work, or if they work they don't do it for that (the family).
(Teeda, 35 years, fruitseller and batik-maker, married mother of 4, Cape Point, The Gambia).

If you are a woman you always have to think about having to spend it (money) on everyone else, whereas men will just use any surplus income to secure a second wife.
(Satou, 38 years, fruitseller and batik-maker, divorced female head of 9-member extended household, Cape Point, The Gambia).

While women should be sitting and watching after the children, they have to work because some fathers just used (that is, are accustomed) to sit and chat, drinking *ataya* (green tea).
(Sophie, 15 years, schoolgirl and part-time fish-seller, Bakau, The Gambia).

We women are all working so hard that we don't see our husbands until the night – and then they're asleep!
(Binta, 30 years, fish-smoker, married mother of 8, Old Jeswang, The Gambia)

Men don't take problems as seriously as women. Men don't worry much even when there is nothing to eat or no food to be cooked. They only depend on women.
(Nelia, 46 years, helper in husband's coconut-selling business, mother of 4, Babag, Mactan Island, Philippines).

Women have brighter future than men because nowadays more men are indulge in vices like drugs, *shabu* ('poor man's cocaine'), mistresses, drunkenness and so on. Though there are women who are in vices this is not much as men. Maybe because men is the source of income he has his money anytime and what he wants to do he can do . . . Nowadays men spend little time with the family. They are fond of getting out with their '*barkadas*' (gang/group of male peers), drinking beer just around the neighbourhood. Women and children are just left behind at home.
(Conrada, 24 years, shellcraft jewellery pieceworker, married mother of 2, Cebu City, Philippines).

A poor man will say 'I do not have a job, I do not have some things', and usually most will resort to gambling or drinking . . . vices . . . to try and compensate them

(*continued*)

Panel 3. (*Continued*)

for what they don't have. Whereas a poor woman will carry her responsibilities. She will create something in order to have earnings. I have to have a *sari-sari* store (small grocery shop) to have earnings. I have to cook to eat, to sustain ourselves, different to a man'

(Linda, 44 years, small shopkeeper and part-time hospice worker, married mother of 4, Mandaue City, Philippines).

A poor women doesn't only think of herself; she thinks about her family, her children, in getting ahead. In contrast, men are more selfish, only concerned with their own needs, unlike women who are thinking not only about their own necessities but those of her family. When men see a situation getting difficult, they tend to go off and leave the women to assume responsibility.

(Ixi, 40 years, housewife, separated female head of 5-member extended household, Liberia, Costa Rica).

Men are more reckless/wasteful, because when have money they go to the bar, whereas when women have money they think about buying food for their children . . . Men don't worry about anything. They're only concerned with themselves, and it doesn't matter to them whether people are waiting for them at home.

(Eida, 52 years, part-time domestic servant and foodseller, separated female head of 8-member extended household, Santa Cruz, Costa Rica).

The trouble is that that women struggle more than men; men can't fight alone against poverty, and because they can't they have to find a woman who will accompany them.

(Elieth, 51 years, pensioner, married mother of 1, Santa Cruz, Costa Rica).

Source: Chant (2007), Chap. 4–6.

conventional sense of deterioration of women's incomes relative to men's but of a 'feminisation of responsibility and obligation'.[5,6]

Three key elements in this 'feminisation of responsibility and obligation' are as follows:

i. Diversification and Intensification of Women's Inputs to Household Survival Versus Stasis or Diminution of Men's. Growing numbers of women of all ages in the three case study countries, not to mention further afield, are working outside the home, as well as performing the bulk of unpaid reproductive tasks for husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. Men on the other hand, are not only finding it harder to be the sole or primary economic support for their households but are not increasing their participation in reproductive work either. Notwithstanding isolated evidence for some Latin American countries such as Chile and Mexico that more men are playing a greater role in caring for children (Gutmann, 1996; Alméras, 2000; Olavarría, 2003), in the region more generally, domestic labour continues to be designated almost exclusively to women (Arriagada, 2002: 159). In my own fieldwork in Costa Rica, for example, many women commented that men look for wives who

will be their 'empleadas' (domestic servants) and that it was difficult to force change among the younger generation when fathers prevented their sons from helping women out in the home in case this made them effeminate. As summarised by ECLAC (2004b: 5): '. . . most men still do not share in household work or in the array of unpaid care-giving activities entailed by membership in a community or society'. In turn, men in '. . . male-headed households are more likely to enjoy the advantages of free domestic work by the spouse, thus avoiding expenditures otherwise associated with maintaining a household' (ECLAC, 2004b: 23).

Beyond Latin America, a study by the UNDP of nine developing and 13 developed economies found that unpaid reproductive labour accounted for two-thirds (66%) of women's work, compared with only one-quarter to one-third of men's (24–34%) and that women work more hours than men overall (Rodenberg, 2004: 17, Box 5; see also Table 3). Generally speaking, the disparity between hours of men's and women's work is most marked among low-income groups, and, as noted by Pineda-Ofreneo and Acosta (2001: 3) the '. . .poorer the household, the longer women work.' Certainly major disparities were found in my own fieldwork. In the Philippines, for example, female respondents usually worked 15 hours or more a day, spending their 'time-off' with their children. Men, on the other hand, felt entitled to 'down tools' after 8–9 hours of paid work, and did not seem to prioritise dedicated parenting, household labour, or even spending time at home thereafter. Juanito, a 57 year old trisikad driver, who headed a six member extended household in Cebu City, is typical here. Juanito generally allows himself about five hours rest in an average day, including a long lunchbreak, a nap when he comes home from work, and at least two hours 'roaming around' in the evening chatting with neighbours and friends.

At the same time as women are diversifying their activities in household survival, their reproductive labour also undergoes intensification as they come under the hammer of price liberalisation and reduced subsidies on basic staples, as well as limited or declining investment by the public sector in essential infrastructure and basic services. This may imply more onerous or time-consuming domestic labour, greater efforts in self-provisioning, and/or more care or forethought in budgeting and expenditure (see Chant, 1996; UNMP/TFEGE, 2005: 7).

ii. Persistent and/or Growing Disparities in Women's and Men's Capacities to Negotiate Obligations and Entitlements in Households. Women's mounting responsibilities for coping with poverty do not seem to be giving them much leverage in respect of negotiating greater inputs to household survival on the part of men. Frequent mention is made by women at the grassroots in The Gambia, Philippines and Costa Rica that they have little choice but to deal with poverty on a daily basis, working harder in and outside the home, and allowing themselves minimal licence for rest and recreation, or personal over collective expenditure. As articulated by Nyima (51), from Old Jeswang, The Gambia – a fish-smoker married to an imam (Musim cleric) who had fathered her seven children: 'If there's a problem and the children go hungry, men just put on their kaftan and go out, but women have to stay behind to answer their children's needs'.

In all case study countries it was clear that men not only feel entitled but act, on this perceived entitlement, to escape from the daily hardship of family life. This ranges from withholding earnings (and/or appropriating those of their wives or other

Table 3. Gender, work burden and time allocation: selected developing countries

	Burden of work				Time allocation (%)					
	Total work time (minutes per day)			Female work time (% of male)	Total work time		Time spent by women		Time spent by men	
	Year	Women	Men		Mkt activities	Non-mkt[1] activities	Mkt	Non-mkt	Mkt	Non-mkt
Country										
Urban areas										
Colombia	1983	399	356	112	49	51	24	76	77	23
Venezuela	1983	440	416	106	59	41	30	70	87	13
Kenya	1986	590	572	103	46	54	41	59	79	21
Nepal	1978	579	554	105	58	42	25	75	67	33
Indonesia	1992	398	366	109	60	40	35	65	86	14
Average[2]		481	453	107	54	46	31	69	79	21
Rural areas										
Guatemala	1977	678	545	117	59	41	37	63	84	16
Kenya	1988	676	500	135	56	44	42	58	76	24
Bangladesh	1992	545	496	110	52	48	35	65	70	30
Nepal	1978	641	547	117	56	44	46	54	67	33
Philippines	1975–77	546	452	121	73	27	29	71	84	16
Average		617	515	120	59	41	38	62	76	24

Source: UNDP (2004), Table 28.
Notes: [1]Mkt = market activities; non-mkt = non-market activities. Market activities refer to market-oriented production activities as defined by the 1993 revised UN System of National Accounts (SNA).
[2]Averages for urban and rural areas refer to unweighted averages for countries listed in relevant sections.

household members), to absenting themselves from the home to spend time with male friends, and/or consoling themselves with the transitory therapeutic fixes offered by drugs, drink, casual sex and gambling. While this by no means applies to all men, and some of these pursuits (especially passing time with other men) can be an important source of networking and securing resources, others add up to an evasion of core responsibilities, which, in the process, can compound problems for the rest of their households. For example, where men become ill or unable to work as a result of prolonged drinking or infections picked up through liaisons with other sexual partners, commercial sex workers and so on, the burden for upkeep falls on other household members, who may be called upon to provide healthcare in the home and/or to pay for pharmaceuticals and formal medical attention (see Chant, 1997a). Although the incidence of HIV/AIDS is not particularly high in The Gambia, the Philippines or Costa Rica, in other contexts it has been observed that even if women do not have the disease themselves, they often suffer a major loss of income as well as having to bear the brunt of caring for sufferers (Delamonica et al., 2004: 23; UNDP, 2005).[7]

As documented earlier, some women faced with negligible support from male partners are able to break away and set up their own households. However, others may not be in a position to do so, and are rendered more vulnerable than ever to extremes of servitude and inequality. This may be endorsed by culturally-condoned expectations of female altruism – a woman who opts for another, more egoistic , course – is not deemed 'feminine' and the consequences can be severe, including non-marriageability, divorce or separation. As Kabeer has argued: 'Gender often operates through the unquestioned acceptance of power. Thus women who, for example, internalise their lesser claim on household resources, or accept violence at the hands of their husbands, do so because to behave otherwise is considered outside the realm of possibility' (Kabeer, 2005: 14). As further articulated by Sweetman (2005: 2): 'Solving material poverty is not possible for women who lack the power to challenge the discriminatory policies of social institutions, ranging from the family to the state' (see also Mayoux, 2006). The chances of women negotiating increased financial help or contributions of labour from their husbands, in or outside the home, seemed negligible in all my case study localities. As emphasised by a group of predominantly female vegetable sellers interviewed in Bakau, The Gambia, women are 'slaves' to men and 'very backward', 'this is our culture, we have to accept' (see Chant, 2007: 150).

Most women in the survey expressed dissatisfaction about having to absorb heavier loads of labour, or bankrolling household subsistence with little or no male assistance (Box 3). Women also complain to one another about the injustice of performing the bulk of all domestic tasks when they are the economic mainstay of households. However, in accordance with the norms of feminine deference, they are much less open and vocal in expressing their grievances to men. Indeed, in some cases there was the sense that women were effectively 're-doubling' their efforts to live up to idealised norms of 'good wives' and 'dutiful daughters', maybe to defuse the conflict which so often erupts when men feel threatened by women's 'encroachment' onto 'male terrain' such as paid work (see also below).[8] One major downside of women's attempts to live-up to 'traditional' feminine ideals and avoid head-on confrontations with men is that this tends to preserve male prerogatives to put less effort into households daily war against poverty. While upholding these

prerogatives may also be driven by men's need to assert elements of 'traditional masculine behaviour' over which they still have some control – and which women may tolerate through their own perceptions of how men should be (see Chant, 2000; Chant with Craske, 2003: Chap. 1), the patterns described endorse Whitehead's observation that: '...men and women are often poor for different reasons, experience poverty differently, and have different capacities to withstand and/or escape poverty' (Whitehead, 2003: 8).

Summing up this second element of a 'feminisation of responsibility and obligation', it is not only gender inequalities in incomes and consumption which are important but gender differences in *time and labour inputs*, and of particular significance to a 'feminisation of poverty', however defined, the fact that the *onus* on women to cope is increasing. This is not only because they cannot necessarily rely on men and/or do not *expect* to rely on men but because a growing number seem to be supporting men as well. Also disturbing is that women are forced into accepting rather than challenging these mounting responsibilities in a spirit of quiet and self-sacrificing acquiescence. While recourse to 'traditional' norms of female altruism in a time of transition may be a tactical gesture to ensure household survival, the danger is that women will have to carry on assuming more responsibilities with severe costs to their personal health and well-being.

iii. Increasing Disarticulation between Investments/Responsibilities and Rewards/Rights. Leading on from this, a third element in my proposed 'feminisation of responsibility and obligation' is that while responsibilities for dealing with poverty are becoming progressively feminised, there seems to be no corresponding increase in women's rights and rewards. Men, on the other hand, despite their lesser inputs, are somehow managing to retain their traditional privileges and prerogatives such as control over income, licence for social freedom and power over household decision-making. This presents us with a rather puzzling, not to mention disturbing, scenario in which investments are becoming progressively detached from rights and rewards, and conceivably evolving into a new and deeper form of female exploitation. If analysis has not come to grips with this as yet, this is perhaps truer still in respect of policy, where although there is often more than lip-service to the 'feminisation of poverty', this is often an ineffective basis for policy-making and implementation (see UNRISD, 2005). Due to a narrow and unproblematised focus on women and on incomes, the 'feminisation of poverty' seems to have obscured rather than illuminated understanding of gendered poverty, and to have done little to engender effective policy approaches. Indeed, one of the main policy responses to date – which is to 'feminise' anti-poverty programmes (ECLAC, 2004b: 56) – seems to have contributed to the problem it is supposedly attempting to solve, that is to push more of the burden of dealing with poverty onto the shoulders of women. Some of the more specific issues associated with this dilemma are identified below.

Policy Problems

1. Poverty Reduction and Reduction in Gender Inequality Not One and the Same. Despite the fact that the 'feminisation of poverty' seems to have commandeered some resources for women (see earlier), the emphasis on alleviating

gender inequality and poverty simultaneously is misguided when these are distinct, albeit overlapping, forms of disadvantage (see Jackson, 1996). Two birds cannot necessarily be killed with one stone, and one major danger, if experience to date is anything to go by, is that poverty reduction imperatives end up overshadowing commitments to change gender relations.

2. Competing/Contradictory Interests of GAD Stakeholders and Poverty Stakeholders. A related concern with the mounting alliance between gender equality and poverty reduction are the differences in theoretical and political goals motivating gender and poverty stakeholders. As pointed up by de Vylder (2004: 85), while the pursuit of gender equality has usually been regarded within the GAD community as an end in itself and from a human rights perspective, pursuing gender equality as a means to achieve poverty reduction – especially among economists – is of a more instrumentalist nature and grounded in efficiency considerations. One aspect of efficiency is the desire to cut costs, which often takes the form of scaling down universal programmes in favour of targeted initiatives. Another is to target resources to groups who are likely to produce the greatest benefit for the greatest number. Focusing on poor female heads of household or even poor women in general, clearly presents a cost-effective option given the belief that resources directed to women offer the best chance of maximising the well-being of families as a whole (ECLAC, 2004b: 55; Molyneux, 2006a, b). Indeed, repeated emphasis on the links between women and poverty in analysis and advocacy, and the idea that investing in women is one of the most efficient routes to ensuring all-round development benefits, seem to have translated into a generalised bid to alleviate poverty primarily, or even exclusively, *through* women (see Razavi, 1999: 419; Molyneux, 2001: 184; Pankhurst, 2002; Mayoux, 2006). Here, we get the unfortunate but all too common scenario where instead of development working *for* women, women end up working *for* development (see Elson, 1989, 1991; Moser, 1993: 69–73; Kabeer, 1994: 8; Blumberg, 1995: 10).

The tendency to orient anti-poverty programmes to, and most commonly through, women has been particularly marked under neoliberal restructuring, giving rise to the conclusion that while the 'feminisation of poverty' has undoubtedly had a major and positive impact in terms of GAD, it has also served neoliberal interests. Using women to achieve more effective poverty reduction reflects an instrumentalism whereby the returns and 'pay-offs' from investing in women tend to prevail over women's rights (Jackson, 1996: 490; Kabeer, 1997: 2; Razavi, 1999: 419; Molyneux, 2001: 184, 2006b; see also World Bank, 1994, 2002). As summarised by Molyneux:

> Women have much to contribute to anti-poverty programmes. Their gendered assets, dispositions and skills, their inclination towards involvement in household survival and at community level, and their precarious relationship to the wage economy, all help to make them appear a peculiarly suitable ally of anti-poverty programmes. This is not least because they also represent an army of voluntary labour, and can serve as potential guardians of social capital ... These gendered assets and dispositions are being increasingly recognised by the international development agencies, but so far this has not brought significant material benefits to the women involved. The costs many women bear through juggling these multiple responsibilities in terms of weak

> labour market links, lack of support for carework and long term security are rarely taken into account. Prevailing policy assumptions still tend to naturalise women's 'roles' and seek to make use of them and influence how they are developed and managed subjectively and situationally. (Molyneux, 2006a: 49)

In light of this it is not hard to see how '... some programmes to combat poverty reproduce patterns of discrimination, since women are used as unpaid or underpaid providers of family or social welfare services, and are only marginally treated as autonomous individuals entitled to rights and benefits related to activities designed to improve their quality of life' (ECLAC, 2004b: 54; see also Bradshaw and Linneker, 2001; Molyneux, 2002, 2006b; González de la Rocha, 2003: 25).

3. Women as 'Victims'. Leading on from this, another unfortunate by-product of 'feminisation of poverty' orthodoxy is that it tends to present women as 'victims', with Johnsson-Latham (2004b: 38) arguing that perceptions of the vulnerability of women often means they get 'special support', rather than 'equal rights' (see also Bibars, 2001; ECLAC, 2004b: 58).

4. Neglect of Domestic Gender Inequalities. A further policy-related problem with the feminisation of poverty is that its routine wedding to female household headship tends to either favour the targeting of women-headed households at the expense of women in general, or to address 'women's issues' as if domestic gender relations had no part to play in female privation (see Kabeer, 1996; Jackson, 1996, 1997; Feijoó, 1999: 165; May, 2001: 50; Chant, 2003a). As noted:

> What is implied is that female-headed households are poorer than male-headed households. The question that is not asked, however, is whether women are better-off in male-headed households. By making male-headed households the norm, important contradictions vanish within these households, and so too does the possibly unbalanced economical (sic) and social position of women compared to men. (Davids and van Driel, 2001: 162)

While poor female heads of household clearly have problems to contend with, including a limited asset base in terms of labour, incomes, property and so on (see Bradshaw, 2002: 12), their counterparts in male-headed households may actually end up in the same position due to restricted access to and control over household assets (Bradshaw, 2002; see also Budlender, 2004: 8; Linneker, 2003: 4). Yet despite this, and considerable evidence of 'secondary poverty' in male-headed households (Bradshaw, 1996; Chant, 1997a; Fukuda-Parr, 1999; González de la Rocha and Grinspun, 2001), intra-household power relations have rarely been broached in anti-poverty programmes.

5. Missing Men ... (Again). Beyond neglect of the heterogeneity of women is the fact that men and gender relations remain largely absent from policy responses to women's poverty, despite the significant role played by men in women's lives, and growing recognition that gender projects and policies are often limited in their benefits when men are left out (see Chant and Gutmann, 2000; Cornwall, 2000;

Cornwall and White, 2000). Indeed, potential benefits all too easily become burdens when direct and indirect strategies to enhance women's access to material resources simply increase the loads they bear and/or the demands made upon them. With reference to the adverse consequences of the 'feminisation' of anti-poverty programmes, UN/UNIFEM point out that:

> One might even argue that the economic and social reproductive realms which women are expected to tread, overextend the range of roles and responsibilities of women compared to men, which does not necessarily enlarge their life choices, but may even limit them. (UN/UNIFEM, 2003: 19)

The practice of using women as a 'conduit of policy' (Molyneux, 2006, 2007) whereby resources channelled through them are expected to translate into improvements in the well-being of their children and other family members, is in abundant evidence. Over 90 per cent of micro-finance loans made by government and international agencies in The Gambia and the Philippines, for example, have been directed to women in recent years (see Chant, 2007: Chap. 4 and 5). Another example is the Progresa/Oportunidades programme in Mexico. This makes cash transfers and food handouts conditional on 'co-responsibility' on the part of communities to ensure children's school attendance and health (through taking them for medical check-ups, participating in health workshops and so on). In relying heavily on mothers, and making little effort to involve fathers in any of the unpaid volunteer work,[9] the programme has 'built upon, endorsed and entrenched a highly non-egalitarian model of the family' (see Molyneux, 2006a, b; also Bradshaw, 2008).

Similar patterns of directing responsibilities for poverty alleviation to women can be discerned in Costa Rica where the targeting of resources to lone and partnered mothers on low incomes has occurred under at least two flagship 'gender and poverty' programmes since the mid-1990s, notably the 'Comprehensive Training Programme for Female Household Heads in Conditions of Poverty' (Programa de Formación Integral para Mujeres Jefas de Hogar en Condiciones de Pobreza), and 'Growing Together' (Creciendo Juntas) (see Chant, 2002, 2007: Chap. 6). Despite the fact that both these schemes have nominally been 'empowerment' orientated and have comprised modules in 'formación humana' aimed at sensitising women to constructions of gender and human rights, the exclusion of men may not just have perpetuated but exacerbated, prevailing tendencies among men to limit women's rights and to avoid assuming responsibilities for their children's upkeep.[10]

Additional dangers of excluding men are that this can fuel gender rivalry or hostility, with evidence indicating that growing pockets of male social, educational and economic vulnerability can manifest itself in violence in the home and in the community, in drug or alcohol abuse and other forms of disaffected behaviour (see UNESCO, 1997: 6; Chant and Gutmann, 2000; Khundker, 2004; Moser and McIlwaine, 2004; Molyneux, 2006a).

In short, the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis tends to have translated into single-issue and/or single group interventions which have little power to destabilise deeply-embedded structures of gender inequality in the home, the labour market and other institutions. As articulated by Baden (1999: 7), 'The ''feminisation of poverty'' argument is not helpful if it is used to justify poverty reduction efforts which

uncritically target women-headed households or even ''women'' in general, but which do not challenge the underlying ''rules of the game''.'

This leads me onto my sixth and final point regarding the problems of policy interventions which marry poverty reduction with women's empowerment, namely that women's power to negotiate their burdens is not being addressed.

6. Missing 'Real' Empowerment. Although empowerment is a problematic and highly contested term (see Kabeer, 1999, 2005; Parpart, 2002), the main thrust of empowerment interventions has been to increase women's access to material resources as a route to widening their choices (see UNDP, 1995; UNIFEM, 2000). Yet as Johnson (2005: 77) points-up on the basis of earlier work by ECLAC, most mainstream poverty programmes are rather more preoccupied with addressing the *condition* of poor women, than their *position*, the former referring to people's material state and the latter to their position in society. In turn, steps to improve women's poorer condition have rarely challenged men's condition *or* position (Johnson, 2005: 77) (emphasis in original). Thus, even where programmes nominally make women, rather than their children, a priority, and aim to bolster women's economic standing, such orientations are unlikely to achieve little in themselves, since: the '''feminisation of poverty'' is . . . an issue of inequality that extends to the very basis of women's position in economic relations, in access to power and decision-making, and in the domestic sphere. It is emphatically not addressed in a sustainable manner solely by measures to improve the material conditions of women' (Johnson, 2005: 77; see also Sweetman, 2005: 6).

Despite the best-intentioned efforts of even the most rounded programmes designed to alleviate poverty and empower women, there is clearly a long way to go in respect of enhancing women's ability to negotiate greater gender equality at the domestic level. If anything, it appears that women are still, if not more, encouraged to be altruistic and family-oriented as their education, skills and access to economic opportunities expand. As such, rather than finding themselves 'empowered' to strike new deals within their households, many women simply end up burdened with more obligations (Chant, 2006, 2007). In The Gambia, for instance, where, as a result of dedicated policy initiatives to address gender inequality and poverty, young women are beginning to enjoy increased access to education and employment, familial claims on their newly-acquired human capital act to depress the possibilities of personal mobility. Many daughters not only continue helping out in the home but, are also expected to study hard and when they do find work to use the bulk of their earnings to subsidise their parents' or brothers' expenses. Later on in life, they often find themselves in a similar situation with husbands. As Satou (38 years old) from Cape Point observed: 'Women have no choice . . . they have to provide for their families, they cannot turn anyone away. But men, they keep their money and they feel nothing bad about it' (Chant, 2007: 169; see also ECLAC, 2004b: 29). Leading on from this, men's individualism, not to mention their entitlements to the fruits of female labour, continue to be tolerated. As mentioned earlier, women's duty towards others is rarely questioned, which is partly to do with an aforementioned resilience of culturally-condoned expectations of female altruism and servility.[11] Yet if we are to accept that poverty and human rights are integrally linked, women's rights to stand up for themselves

and to negotiate social expectations of their roles in the family are fundamental. As affirmed by the Asian Development Bank:

> poverty is increasingly seen as [a] deprivation, not only of essential assets and opportunities, but of rights, and therefore any effective strategy to reduce poverty must empower disadvantaged groups, especially women, to exercise their rights and participate more actively in decisions that affect them. (Asian Development Bank, 2002: xvi–xvii)

In short, while some of the rhetoric around women's empowerment and poverty alleviation is, on the surface, encouraging, in practice another scenario presents itself. The unilateral focus on women in 'gendered' poverty programmes which '"exploits" the social image of women as dedicated to serving others' (ECLAC, 2004b: 55; also Molyneux, 2006a, b), the exclusion of men, a bias towards women's condition (incomes) as opposed to position (power) and a palpable reluctance on the part of policymakers to engage in what Jackson (1997: 152) terms 'intrahousehold "interference"' have contributed to a situation in which most women are unable to challenge the disproportionate responsibilities they are now carrying.

V. Room for Revising the 'Feminisation of Poverty' Thesis

In terms of what the above implies for the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis, it should be clear not only that there are insufficient data but few theoretical or practical inducements to continue using the term as it is currently construed and deployed, that is, with an implicit (and sometimes exclusive) focus on women's monetary poverty and an overemphasis on female household headship.

Lack of appropriate sex-disaggregated panel data make it impossible to establish how many women are poorer than men and, how much poorer they are, not to mention how gendered gaps in income are evolving over time. While better sex-disaggregated income data would be a welcome step forward, income is only part of the poverty equation and on its own is of limited use either for analysis or policy (see Fukuda-Parr, 1999).

The effective redundancy of the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis methodologically and analytically presents two possible choices. Either the existing terminology is abandoned and perhaps substituted by the 'feminisation of responsibility and/or obligation' or the 'feminisation of survival' (see Notes 5 and 6), or the term is retained but with the proviso that the poverty part of the construct refers not just to income but other, albeit related, privations.

Obviously there is a major question about how broad the definition of poverty can go before it gets too diffuse and unwieldy to deal with methodologically, conceptually and policy-wise. Indeed, if the definition strays too wide, a case for revised nomenclature may well be pertinent. However, if possible, I feel we should stick with the 'feminisation of poverty' for three main reasons. First, the term is already known and there is nothing to stop it evolving into a more substantiated and elaborate concept. Second, it has had proven impacts on going some way to 'engender' poverty reduction strategies. Third, it could be said that a 'feminisation of poverty' is occurring if we embrace a broader take on poverty which comprises the

notion that poverty is not just about *incomes* but *inputs* and which highlights not women's *level* or *share* of poverty, but their *burden* of dealing with it.[12] Dealing with poverty is arguably as onerous and exploitative as suffering poverty (as well as exacerbating the latter), especially given the mounting disparities in gendered investments in household livelihoods and the rewards derived.

The other aspect of the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis in need of revision is its persistent bias towards female household headship. Accepting that female household heads could be seen as an extreme case of 'choicelessness' and 'responsibility' – in having little option other than to fend for themselves and their dependents and on potentially weaker grounds given gender discrimination in society at large – this needs to be qualified. Among many persuasive reasons are, first, that female-headed households do not necessarily lack male members; second, free of a senior male 'patriarch' their households can become 'enabling spaces' in which there is scope to distribute household tasks and resources more equitably, and third, women in *male*-headed households may be in the position of supporting not only children but spouses as well, with some men moving from the position of 'chief breadwinner' to 'chief spender'.

While household headship should almost certainly definitely be retained as a criterion of differentiation in a broader but more nuanced thesis, we also need to know which sub-groups of female-headed households are especially vulnerable to poverty (for example in terms of marital status, composition and so on – see Lampietti and Stalker, 2000: 25; Chant, 2006), as well as what other axes of difference among women more generally, including age and ethnicity, place them at particular risk of vulnerability and privation. As discussed earlier, age-disaggregated data are vital in respect of gaining a better purchase on generational trends in gendered poverty.

VI. Conclusion and Possible Policy Directions

The widespread adoption of the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis in academic and policy circles has probably been a 'good thing' insofar as it has made women visible in poverty discourses and raised their profile in anti-poverty initiatives. Yet in order to make the 'feminisation of poverty' a more effective tool for analysis and policy it is necessary to re-cast the construct in such a way that the multidimensional nature of poverty and its gendered dimensions are taken on board. Improving the basis and scope of policy interventions is essential given that the present tendency to 'feminise' anti-poverty programmes seems merely to be exacerbating gender disparities. Reproductive labour is thought to come 'free', and is 'naturalised' as 'women's work' (see Molyneux, 2006a, b), yet while '... policymakers often assume that there is a limitless supply – that they can have as much as they want' (Budlender, 2004: 3), supplies are clearly not limitless, and levels and quality of care can suffer when women become overburdened (Budlender, 2004: 3). As pointed out by Elson (1999: 13): 'Women's time burdens are an important constraint on growth and development – women are an *over*-utilised not an *under*-utilised resource. The benefits of reducing this gender-based constraint can be considerable' (author's emphasis).

While some interventions to reduce gender-differentiated poverty have clearly begun to respond to more holistic approaches to poverty analysis, and have arguably

moved into a new gear through experimentation with 'gender budgets' at national and local levels (see Elson, 1999b; UNRISD, 2005: 60), much remains to be done in respect of determining different types and experiences of gendered poverty. As articulated by Gangopadhyay and Wadhwa:

> If poverty incidence reflects a gender bias it is important to investigate where it originates. If it is in the workplace, such biases have to be fought differently from the case where it originates within the household. If the bias is in workplace, policy measures such as affirmative action may be a way out. On the other hand, if the bias against the girl child originates in the household, policies must aim at improving awareness within the family. To combat the first one requires a strict enforcement of laws. The second is a deeper social problem and laws alone may not help. (Gangopadhyay and Wadhwa, 2003: 2–3)

While acknowledging that '... changing gender cultures is a long-term process and not immediately tractable to government policies and projects' (Jackson, 2003: 476), it is also the case that enactment of legislative provisions in the domestic domain has traditionally been extremely hesitant. 'The family' persists in being regarded as a 'private sphere' beyond the bounds of state interference in which calls for equality are secondary, if not antithetical, to respect for culture, tradition and custom. For these reasons, and with the possible exception of domestic violence, initiatives relating to internal dynamics of home and family have often been left out of the frame in poverty reduction programmes (see Chant with Craske, 2003: Chap. 7). None the less, it is equally important to recognise that an implicit recognition of family drives the agenda for reducing women's poverty, given the prospective spin-offs for all-round improvement of welfare. Building on Abeyesekera's (2004: 7) argument with respect to the MDGs, that without acknowledging the family it is unlikely that any major changes in women's position will be effected, it is arguably critical to take family into account in future attempts to reduce poverty and gender inequality.

Subscribing to Jackson's (2003: 477) point that '... rather than wishing the family or household away, more detailed understanding of them is necessary', two 'family-oriented' strategies which might be useful in complementing existing approaches to alleviating poverty among women at the same time as enhancing their empowerment are first, greater public support for parenting and unpaid care-work; and second, dedicated moves to equalise responsibilities and power at the domestic level (see Chant, 2003a, b). Unfortunately, neither is likely to be easy, mainly because they threaten to disrupt gender constructions which have long served patriarchal interests. One of the major sticking points in addressing family matters, for example, is that it will require the greater involvement of men. Although there is growing recognition of the need to bring men on board in GAD initiatives on the part of some development agencies and national governments (such as Costa Rica), the persistent equation of 'women' with 'gender', together with the concerns about how to translate men's incorporation in practice, means that only limited progress has been made to date (for discussions see Chant and Gutmann, 2000; Cornwall, 2000; Cornwall and White, 2000; Ruxton, 2004 for discussions). Yet in continuing to talk about a 'feminisation of poverty' (or even a

'feminisation of responsibility and obligation'), we must not miss what is conceivably the main point, namely that even as women enjoy increased capabilities and opportunities, their potential gains are all too often cancelled out by men's seemingly infinite reservoir of props for asserting power, and (re)masculinising advantage. If there *is* a masculinisation of privilege going on, then attention needs to be paid not only to the 'female victims' but to the structures which uphold men's advantage. As argued by Murphy: 'The task of poverty eradication is to eradicate the structures that create and depend upon poverty itself, rather than fix the people who are vulnerable to poverty. The people are transitory, the place is permanent . . . if we are to confront the effects of poverty we must confront wealth and its privilege' (Murphy, 2001: 32; see also Chambers, 2001; Wichterich, 2004: 64). This not only involves taking into account men and gender relations but addressing the models which are guiding the direction of economic development nationally and internationally.

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Notes

1. The fieldwork has comprised individual interviews and focus group discussions with 223 low-income women and men in different age groups in The Gambia, the Philippines and Costa Rica between 2003 and 2005, and an additional 40 interviews with professionals in NGOs, government organisations and international agencies (see Chant, 2007 for full methodological details).
2. Aside from lack of robust empirical evidence, as detailed later in the paper, Marcoux (1998a, b) points out that the 70 per cent share of poverty assigned to women in 1995 is untenable in light of the age distribution of the global population and its household characteristics. Even assuming a priori that being female places persons at a greater risk of being poor, given that the sex of children under 15 is unlikely to have more than a negligible impact on gender differentials in household poverty, only single person and lone parent units could be responsible for the excess of female poverty. Yet there are simply not enough households of this type to give rise to the purported 70/30 ratio of poor women and girls to poor men and boys (see also Klasen, 2004).
3. As of 2005, the estimated total of world poor (based on the population living on less than US$1 a day) was 1.5 billion (Lopez-Claros and Zahidi, 2005: 4).
4. Violence tends to be statistically invisible despite the fact that it exacts a heavy economic toll in terms of costs and instability not only on individual households but on society at large (World Bank, 2003: 7; also WEDO, 2005). As highlighted by ECLAC (2004b: 26) for the Latin American region: 'A thorough understanding of poverty must include an analysis of violence as a factor that erodes personal autonomy, the exercise of citizenship and social capital (social autonomy), the latter as a result of the isolation to which women are subjected. This is consistent with the definition of poverty as the lack of minimum survival conditions . . . On the one hand, poverty is a risk factor that makes the appearance of physical violence in the home more probable. In addition, violence produces more poverty, since it holds back economic development for a number of reasons: (i) dealing with the effects of both social and domestic violence requires spending on

the part of the police, judicial and social services systems, and (ii) in the case of women, those who suffer domestic violence are less productive at work, which leads to a direct loss to national production'.

5. This has some resonance with Sassen's (2002) notion of a 'feminisation of survival' observed in the context of international migration. Sassen points out that not only households but whole communities, and states, are increasingly reliant on the labour efforts of women, within as well as across national borders.
6. The term 'feminisation of responsibility and obligation' is not as succinct or 'catchy' as the 'feminisation of poverty' or the 'feminisation of survival' but I feel it is useful in respect of working through the ways in which women are most affected by poverty. The 'feminisation of responsibility' is intended to convey the idea that women are assuming greater liability for dealing with poverty and the 'feminisation of obligation', that women have progressively less choice other than to do so. 'Duty' is implicated in 'obligation', with the salient aspects being that women have less scope to resist the roles and activities imposed on them structurally (for example through legal contracts or moral norms), or situationally (through the absence of spouses or male assistance) and that duty often become 'internalised', perceived as non-negotiable and binding.
7. It is also important to note a tendency towards a 'feminisation of HIV/AIDS' in an increasing number of countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In many respects this process reflects women's lack of power to negotiate the terms of their sexual relationships, particularly in situations of poverty. I am grateful to Maxine Molyneux for drawing my attention to this point.
8. That an ostensible reaffirmation of femininity may be a short-term strategy for women to improve their longer-term 'fall-back' position has been noted by Gates (2002) in the context of Mexico, where some women offer to do more unpaid work in the home as a means of getting their husband's permission to take employment.
9. Unpaid volunteer work undertaken by PROGRESA beneficiaries includes community activities such as cleaning schools and health centres, which can take up to 29 hours a month (Molyneux, 2006b).
10. Some discussion has taken place in Costa Rica, mainly driven by women at the grassroots, about including men in ancillary programmes in order to help ensure the exercise of women's and children's rights and, to stimulate more cooperative family patterns. Thus far, however, this has not materialised into any concrete policy initiative.
11. It could be argued that even 'women-oriented' policy interventions have played a part in the resilience of traditional gendered norms given Molyneux's (2006a, b) point that rather than being 'gender-blind', social policy has historically been based on 'deeply gendered conceptions of social needs'. As claimed by Molyneux (2006b: 425–426): 'In Latin America, as elsewhere in the world, gender bias and masculine prerogative have prevailed in social policy as in social life more broadly, with entitlements resting on culturally sanctioned and deeply rooted notions of gender difference and patriarchal authority. These have generally accorded with idealised assumptions about the asymmetric social positions occupied by the sexes, with male breadwinners and female mother-dependents receiving benefits according to these normative social roles. Such assumptions have proved remarkably universal and enduring even where, as in Latin America, gender divisions have been challenged by married women's mass entry into the labour force and by equal rights legislation'.
12. The notion that the 'feminisation of poverty' should entail considering what people do, as well as the income they have, is at least being verbalised by some organisations. In their Framework Plan for Women, for example, the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (2002: 11) state that current trend towards the feminisation of poverty is because women '. . . are the ones mainly responsible for the welfare and survival of households under conditions of increasing poverty'.

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