

The Feminization of Poverty: Gender, Household Structure, and Economic Vulnerability

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ABSTRACT

The feminization of poverty—the disproportionate representation of women among the poor—was first identified by Diana Pearce (1978) and has been a central concept in feminist sociology and gender economics for four decades. Women's higher poverty rates reflect the intersection of multiple structural disadvantages: the gender wage gap, the care penalty from unpaid domestic and childcare labor, occupational segregation into lower-wage feminized sectors, and the particular vulnerability of female-headed households with dependent children. This paper examines the feminization of poverty through three analytical lenses: the macro-level analysis of poverty rates by household type and gender; the meso-level analysis of labor market structures that generate gender income differences; and the micro-level analysis of household economic decision-making and vulnerability trajectories. Using Current Population Survey and Panel Study of Income Dynamics data, we examine how female household headship, divorce, and caregiving responsibilities increase poverty risk, and evaluate the effectiveness of policy interventions including childcare subsidies, parental leave, and targeted income supports.

Keywords: Feminization of Poverty; Gender; Single Motherhood; Care Penalty; Wage Gap; Household Structure; Social Policy

1. INTRODUCTION

Diana Pearce (1978), in the journal *Urban and Social Change Review*, introduced the concept of the feminization of poverty to describe the growing proportion of women among the poor in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. She identified the primary drivers as the growth of female-headed households through divorce and non-marital childbearing, combined with women's lower earning capacity and limited access to male-breadwinner welfare state protections designed around the standard employment relationship. The concept has remained theoretically productive and policy-relevant: despite substantial increases in women's labor force participation and educational attainment, women continue to face higher poverty rates than men in most countries, and female-headed households with children consistently show the highest poverty rates of any household type.

The feminization of poverty intersects with several structural processes in labor markets and welfare states. The gender wage gap persists at approximately 82 cents on the dollar in the United States (BLS, 2023), with the gap particularly large for mothers compared to fathers—a phenomenon Budig and England (2001), in the *American Sociological Review* (66(2): 204–225), termed the 'motherhood penalty' versus the 'fatherhood premium.' Hochschild (1989), in 'The Second Shift,' documented the double burden of paid work and unpaid domestic labor that reduces women's capacity to compete in labor markets on equal terms with men. These structural constraints create distinctive poverty risks for women across the life course.

2. DIMENSIONS OF FEMALE ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY

2.1 Female-Headed Households

Female-headed households with dependent children have consistently higher poverty rates than any other household type. In 2022, 26.3% of female-headed families with children lived below the federal poverty line, compared to 5.4% of married-couple families with children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). This disparity reflects both the absence of a second earner and the concentration of caregiving responsibilities on a single adult. The transition from two-parent to single-parent household through divorce or separation is a leading poverty trigger for women, particularly those who exited employment during marriage to provide childcare.

2.2 The Motherhood Penalty

Budig and England (2001) estimate that each child is associated with a 7% wage penalty for women, while Lundberg and Rose (2000) find that fatherhood is associated with a wage premium. The motherhood penalty reflects multiple mechanisms: human capital depreciation during career interruptions, employer statistical discrimination against mothers anticipating productivity reduction, and reduced hours and job flexibility preferences that are penalized in rigid labor markets. Waldfogel (1997) estimates that controlling for educational attainment and work experience, mothers earn 10–15% less than childless women, with the penalty concentrated among mothers with young children. This wage penalty accumulates over the career, generating substantial lifetime earnings gaps.

3. CARE WORK AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Table 1. Structural barriers generating female economic vulnerability and corresponding policy interventions.

Structural Barrier	Mechanism	Policy Lever
Unpaid care work	Women provide 76% of unpaid care globally; reduces market hours and human capital	Paid family leave; paternity leave to redistribute
Childcare cost	Average U.S. childcare cost exceeds \$15,000/year; consumption of full-time minimum wage	Universal pre-K; childcare subsidy expansion
Occupational segregation	75% of workers in ‘care sector’ occupations are women; these sectors pay 12–21% less	Pay equity legislation; wage transparency
Divorce and household dissolution	Women’s post-divorce income falls 26%; men’s rises 10% (Smock, 1994)	Equitable divorce property law; child support enforcement

4. POLICY EVIDENCE

Comparative welfare state research shows that countries with comprehensive childcare systems, generous paid parental leave equally distributed between mothers and fathers, and active labor market policies achieve substantially lower gender poverty gaps than liberal welfare states with means-tested, minimal income supports. Scandinavian countries with universal childcare and generous parental leave show female poverty rates close to male rates; the United States and United Kingdom show female poverty rates 30–40% higher than male rates. The expansion of the Child Tax Credit during COVID-19 (2021) in the United States, evaluated by Parolin et al. (2022), reduced child poverty by 30% in one year, with the largest impacts on female-headed households, demonstrating that targeted income transfers can significantly reduce female poverty when adequately funded.

5. CONCLUSION

The feminization of poverty persists as a structural feature of labor markets and welfare states that penalize caregiving, undervalue feminized occupations, and provide insufficient income support for households lacking a male earner. The motherhood penalty, unpaid care work burden, and female-headed household poverty concentration are all amenable to policy intervention: paid parental leave, universal childcare, pay equity legislation, and adequate child support enforcement can significantly reduce gender-based poverty. Progress has been uneven across welfare state types, with Scandinavian universal provision models achieving the greatest gender poverty equality. Future sociological research should examine how intersections of gender with race, immigration status, and disability compound poverty risk for the most vulnerable women.

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