

Gender and Poverty Risk in Europe

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Research suggests that, throughout the world, more women than men live in poverty due to systematic discrimination against women. A case in point is the European Union (EU). Between 2005 and 2011, the average rate of poverty risk in the EU hovered at around 16.5 percent, while the poverty risk faced by women averaged 17 percent. Yet economic policies and institutions still mostly fail to take gender disparities into account. Consequently, the prevalence of women among persons living below official poverty lines is not mere circumstance or coincidence, nor is it just a women's issue.

Bárcena-Martín and Moro-Egido (2013) examine the factors that affect the percentage of women with low incomes in the EU for the 2007-2008 period; they also identify key elements for designing policies to combat the feminization of poverty. Their analysis combines the current micro-level and macro approaches, which separately are not adequate to examine gendered poverty risk. The micro-level approach scrutinizes the precise mechanisms of individual poverty but omits information on country characteristics, while the macro-level one focuses on country characteristics but controls for aspects such as family structure only at the aggregate level.

Bárcena-Martín and Moro-Egido show that having higher education and a job prevents individuals from being poor and from falling into poverty, while a) having children and b) having never been married increase the likelihood of being poor and of falling into poverty. The authors also find evidence supporting the thesis that public expenditures to reduce social exclusion reduce the risk of being poor. More interestingly, they find that location matters: while the gender gap in poverty risk results in part from the personal characteristics of the population, the characteristics of the country in which an individual lives – for example, the strength of gender biases in both society and government – are even more relevant.

To reduce the persistent gender gap in poverty in the EU, Bárcena-Martín and Moro-Egido first recommend comprehensive educational and training programs that aim to enhance women's opportunities for high-paying jobs, along with access to inexpensive childcare, child support (essential to overcome differences in earnings), high-quality flexible

work, and paid family leave.

The authors also recognize that government transfers make a difference in reducing poverty, particularly among elderly women, and since paid work may not always be the most appropriate route for poor women; they thus call for strengthening government transfers by targeting them more specifically at women's needs. These recommendations run counter to the austerity-policy regimes of the post-2008 economic crisis still in place in much of Europe.

In sum, policy solutions to address women's poverty must combine a range of decent employment opportunities with a network of social services that support healthy families. These approaches must promote the equal social and economic status of women and men by expanding women's opportunities to balance work and family life.

Read the article in full at

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