



## Women Hurting More Than Men New UN Report Finds Globalization Leads to Feminization of Poverty

Globalization, and the many economic impacts that go along with it, adversely affect basic services, education and employment, and this has had a disproportionately negative impact on the lives of women; according to UN-HABITAT'S new publication *"The State of the World's Cities, 2004"*.

In a world that's rapidly urbanizing, living conditions are deteriorating for large numbers of people. Poverty has increased, and for women in slums, poverty and a lack of social safety nets mean a life of physical and psychological insecurity. Even for women in the developed world, life has become increasingly insecure, with homelessness looming at the dark edges of the gaps in social services.

Legal instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; recognize that women and men have equal rights to an adequate standard of living.

Yet, according to the UN-HABITAT report, inadequate and insecure housing and living conditions, such as overcrowding, pollution, precarious housing, lack of water, sanitation and electricity affect women more than men. Women living in extreme poverty, in cities the developing world, face a much greater risk of becoming homeless or finding themselves in inadequate housing and health conditions than their developed-country sisters; however, the report shows clearly that even they are at greater risk.

In the developing world, women bear the brunt of forced evictions, especially when the evictions are violent. Some women, like the widows of HIV/AIDS victims, are especially at risk of eviction. The lack of adequate housing, particularly for women, is a strong indicator of the extent to which governments across the world are literally failing to provide for the livelihood and dignity of all people, especially women and children.

### The feminization of poverty

In *"The State of the World's Cities, 2004"*, all of the standard indicators – poverty rates, healthcare, education, participation in the labour force and participation in the political process – reveal the extent to which women are more exposed than they were before 1991. Women are also increasingly marginalized, as the feminization of poverty manifests itself in many parts of the world.

The new economic situation has forced many women out of formal employment or into the informal job market, where social supports are negligible. A growing number of women-headed households are now deprived of the former state-provided services that were part of the safety net: childcare, healthcare and other social supports to enable women to carry the double load of running a household and being productive members of the full-time labour force.

### In transition economies: Women as commodities

Recent research on women in poverty in Russia suggests that the feminization of poverty manifests itself not only in the high probability of inclusion in the poor category by income, but that female poverty shows exceptional patterns in the form of stagnant and extreme poverty (the poorest among the poor). Single-mother families and single elderly women present the highest poverty risks.

Some estimates have women making up as much as 90 per cent of the unemployed in transition economies. According to a 1999 report, women and children from Russia, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Hungary and Poland are often preyed upon by traffickers. It is estimated that 500,000 Ukrainian women were trafficked to the West between 1991 and 1996. They ended up in Canada, Germany, Greece, Hungary, The Netherlands, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the US and the former Yugoslavia, as well as Korea, particularly for prostitution around military bases.

### **Poverty and AIDS: The plight of women in Africa**

Current statistics show that between 58 and 60 per cent of people infected with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa are women. Research conducted by the African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC) shows that slum women are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection than their non-slum counterparts. Women who live in slums become sexually active about three years earlier and are about 2.8 times more likely to have multiple sex partners than non-slum residents. The difference in the median age at first intercourse between slum and non-slum residents who grew up in a city is five years. Young women (15 to 24 years' old) and married women in slums are 6.4 and 3.7 times more likely to have multiple partners than their non-slum counterparts.

Data also show a marked difference between slum and non-slum residents in the perception of the best ways to avoid contracting the HIV virus. Slum women are less likely to practice abstinence, stick to one partner or use condoms. Slum dwellers' low average age for commencement of sexual activity and greater number of partners are largely the result of the extreme deprivation that prevails in slums. High levels of unemployment, unstable sources of income and the predominance of low-paying jobs push many women and children into prostitution to supplement household incomes. When household income fails, often the next step is homelessness.

### **Even in advanced economies: Nowhere to go**

The unprecedented level of homelessness in advanced economies is one of the most visible symptoms of social change in the new era of globalisation. Women who are forced from their homes are often the victims of frequent and widespread violence. The violation of their right to adequate housing contributes to their vulnerability to gender violence.

Homelessness and unemployment can be mutually perpetuating. If a woman loses her job, she will often lose her home. If she has a job, losing her home often means an end to work. Additional problems faced by homeless women include a lack of mobility and access to the public domain, sexual abuse and even morbidity. Ironically, when not evicted, many women often find themselves homeless in an effort to avoid violence at home.

Violence in the home can take the form of beatings, rape and harassment before, during and after forced evictions, or in situations of armed or ethnic conflict. Degrading housing and living conditions and the constant threat of rape makes women more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Domestic violence is the main cause of homelessness among women in England. A report by the charity Crisis found that 63 per cent of homeless women aged between 30 and 49 said domestic abuse was the key reason they had lost their homes. Over half of these women had slept rough, the majority on more than one occasion – despite the fact that this made them vulnerable to rape and abuse. Several resorted to drugs and alcohol to blot out the dangers. Other reasons why women said that they had become homeless were family breakdown, severe mental health problems and childhood abuse.

### **The worst choice: Homelessness or oppression**

In Asia, large numbers of women and young girls migrate to urban areas or foreign countries to earn a living for their families. Many take employment as domestic workers. Often, they have to sleep on the kitchen floor or a corner of the bathroom. In one example, an Indonesian woman in Malaysia was kept locked in a cage without a toilet, and let out only for a couple of hours a day to do the cleaning.

Women refugees from Afghanistan face violence and can be deprived of their rights and property when they are repatriated. Most women returnees have no land or homes, making them very vulnerable to violence. Women who own land are often denied access to it by traditional leaders and even the judicial system. Women have no legal recourse, and are forced to rely on male relatives. Women are culturally prohibited from living alone or living without men. In families headed by women, widows are forced to remarry or live with male relatives. Many women are unable to leave situations where they face violence from their husband or other family members. Women who escape are usually detained and prosecuted or risk being killed by their families.

### **Answers in civil society?**

In Peru, large numbers of people have been displaced in political violence, and informal settlements have mushroomed, largely fuelled by poverty. These settlements feature insecure tenure, a lack of utilities, particularly water and sanitation, homes built in dangerous places and a polluted environment. The impact of these conditions is most severe on women.

But in an example of civil society stepping in where the government has not, one Peruvian non-governmental organization (NGO) called Estrategia, trains community residents, both women and men, to build affordable homes. Conscious efforts are made to ensure participation of both men and women in the planning processes, training and execution of housing construction and local production of materials. Estrategia combines the technical assistance in housing construction with human rights awareness training, so that men and women become aware of their rights and can participate in meetings with local authorities.

Women are particularly vulnerable to violent crime that occurs at night in many of the world's cities. In Montreal, The Women's Urban Safety Action Committee (CAFSU) was set up in 1992, comprising the principal local authorities and groups addressing violence against women. The group's objective is to increase women's safety and sense of security, recognising that fear and its effect on mobility is a major obstacle in achieving greater gender equity in urban areas. Women identify public transit (bus stops and the metro) as being among the locations where they feel least safe. A formal partnership between the Women's Urban Safety Action Committee and city authorities now exists. Findings from 'women's safety audits' and ongoing consultations have resulted in the Service between Two Stops, which enables women to get off the bus between stops at night. The organization also helped improve lighting at subway exits.

The Montreal initiative brings home an important gap in city planning: the serious dearth of women planners. As the CAFSU group discovered, it often takes a woman to articulate problems and find answers to the constraints women face in everyday life. The contributions that women can make in urban planning have been sorely underestimated, often leaving them voiceless as cities continue to box them into slums and poverty.

The deteriorated state of housing, health and employment for women demonstrate the failure of governance on a wide scale. While some countries are taking positive concrete steps, stronger measures both at the national and international level must be taken, according to the Report. But on the global scale, governments have yet to recognize and respect the critical and constructive role that women can play by including them in the development of alternative solutions to securing their right to a decent life in the age of globalization.

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