

The Feminisation of Poverty in the European Union and in Hungary

Ibolya Czibere PhD

University of Debrecen

Institute of Political Science and Sociology

Department of Sociology and Social Policy

Debrecen, Hungary

Abstract

The global phenomenon of feminisation of poverty get into the focus in the 90's in the developing countries', in the Western European and in the transforming Eastern European democracies as well. According the European Economic and Social Committee's recommendation, formulated in 2006, the definition of poverty should be reviewed since it only drew the attention only on obvious reasons for poverty and underestimates the extent of women's poverty and its consequences as well. It assumes that the resources in the households are allocated equally within the family; however, there are arguments for the poverty in an individual experience and it should be examined – if we want to understand the differences between the genders from this point of view – at individual level. Our study summarises the tendencies and reason for impoverishment of women that are typical in the countries of the European Union and we represent the characteristics of in it in Hungary.

Keywords: feminisation of poverty, the reasons for women's poverty, elderly women, single mothers, women with low educational attainment, employed poor women

Introduction

Worldwide, the feminised poverty and violence against women are the two major issues that make the women's situation difficult (Hell 20029. At global level, the following areas are crucial: (1) one-third of the all households in the world have female head and vast majority (80-90%) of poor households have women head. (2) women who raise their children alone live in extremely bad financial circumstances that are resulted partly from they get insufficient support from the father and partly from (3) the typical labour market discrimination namely "women with children" and it causes worse chances for getting a job, income and for career as well. (4) The elderly women living alone are also in very disadvantageous situation, they represent the three-quarter of elderly people living alone. It is a fact that they live in the most difficult situation in every country. (5) The tendency can be observed that at international level, where the households are getting poor and poor the women start to wear a special attitude, they start serious and in many cases, self-damaging savings limiting their own consumption needs dangerously. (6) In significantly less chance to get loan from the bank than the men, moreover, (7) in many country, they cannot possess property and (8) cannot make financial transactions either that further increase their vulnerability and risk of impoverishment (Hell, 2002)

In several countries, the women's illiteracy is also a major problem, which is a direct cause of their misery all along their lives. In the developing areas, the number of young girls who quit education is continuously increasing which keeps them in poverty and low social status.

1. Women's poverty in the European Union

The interpretation and inclusion into social discussion of this in the European Union became necessary as well. This is promoted by the European Economic and Social Committee's view formulated in 2006 in the topic¹ of "poverty among women in Europe", it gets serious political emphasise and it drew the attention to this issue. Based on analysis of the opinion of European Union's demographic and social situation, it presented those generally expected tendencies that going to have great effects on the processes of women's impoverishment.

¹ European Economic and Social Committee's view, Subject: "Poverty among women in Europe" (2006/C 24/18) – official Journal of the European Union, 31.1.2006

Special emphasis was put on the interpretation of the Union's demographic situation goes through so significant change that finally results in the break in a tendency that has been standing for centuries – the increase in the number of working age population – and expected to be discontinued and turn around so it would be a decreasing tendency. The proportion of people older than 65 years is 16% among the whole population and 17% is the rate of people under 15, in addition, the life expectancy at birth is continuously increasing and it result in that the rate of people over 80 will be 50% in the following years, according to the report.

At the same time, the structure of the households is changing too. One particular phenomenon is the decreasing number of marriages and postponement of marriages, the increasing number of divorces and the decreasing numbers of couples who have child.

Referring to Gary Becker, a Nobel Prize winning economist, the report states that these processes are explained by economic phenomena: work outside the households for women means the financial independence from their families and as a result, the particular marriages (the man is the earner and keeper, the women is the dependent) are continuously replaced by the “marriage between partners”. In such a system, the woman is the couple pay increasingly higher cost for childbearing, since the bigger amount of income, professional status can the women get, the more she has to give up terms of career and possible increase in income if she leaves the labour market temporarily or permanently because of childbearing. The other main direction of the change is the issue of single parenting that emerges because the rate of children who are raised by only one parent is dramatically increasing in the EU; their rate is 10%² among children between the age of 0 and 14. The main reason for this is the continuously increasing number of break up regarding both marriages and cohabitation and also the increasing number of unexpected pregnancies. According to the Committee's report on the occurrence of poverty risk, the women are generally more possible to live in poor households.

The risk of poverty is the highest among single parent households because 85% of the single parent households have woman as the head of the household. Additional problem is the three-quarter of people over the age of 60 is female so among the single retired women especially among who are over 80 and not eligible for pension for work, the rate of poverty is extremely high. The poverty risk of single parents is mostly typical in the case of women and one of the main reasons of it is that the participation rate in the labour market is very low: according to the view, only 50% of the women work in a member state of the European Union. Many factors prevent these mother from employment: there is no affordable day care for them; they often do not have marketable professions so the lower their educational level, the less chance they have for labour market participation; the single mothers often live in such areas where the demand for labour is very low so they cannot get a job; their health condition is generally worse and often have a sick child or relative whose disease or disability inhibit or prevent them from employment; the work ethic of single mothers living in difficult situation is more likely to be worse and it is also a serious obstacle regarding employment. In addition, the single mothers are forced to carry out the care for children (including the day care) by themselves so they need to find a job with flexible working hours. Therefore, many of them are forced to have poorly paid and insecure jobs making their situation worse. The women who become single mother because of teenage pregnancy are in particularly difficult situation, they especially exposed to the risk of poverty. Generally, in the EU, 6% of young women become pregnant before the age of 18, but Committee's report highlights some countries where this rate is way smaller approx. 3%, for example, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden and also some countries where this rate is way bigger like in Hungary (12%), Slovakia (13%) and the United Kingdom.

Approaching from the labour market's point of view, those female workers are at the risk of poverty who are hired hands. The reasons for it are the high rate of unemployment amount women, the separated employment regarding gender and dividing it into sectors, “the spread of precarious forms of employment that provide limited social security” and their job is underpaid compared to men and it is typical in every member state of the Union. The women – according to the EU average – get only the 85% for an hour of work than men get even if the performance is the same; moreover, there are some countries where this difference is 33% Educational disadvantages generate significant lag in the labour market, since the data show that only 20-40% of women with low educational attainment work while this rate is 84% in the case of women with better educational attainment in the EU. There is a huge difference between men and women, since 83% of the men work who have low educational attainment and 93% of those who have better educational level.

² Data that was collected in 2000

Continuously approaching from the education's point of view, the main factors that influence women's poverty are the quitting or leaving labour market permanently due to childbearing are mainly typical of women with low educational attainment. In the case of women with higher qualification, the time spent on childbearing is shorter; many of them stay at home during the maternity leave then them for somebody to take care of the baby. In comparison, nothing changed in the behaviour of the uneducated mothers, that is, they rather stay home until they child goes to school. This also means the women with lower educational level who also had low income potentially, they likely to quit for longer time and have financial damage resulted from it. Among the permanently unemployed people, the proportion of women is bigger than that of men, even the programs aiming returning to workplace is favourable rather for men; for women the training opportunities are fewer and they offer poorly paid jobs.

The Committee's view dealt with disadvantages of retired women. It emphasises, the women's disadvantages experienced on the labour market and the income differences between the genders have significant effects on the retirement years. One of the reasons for it (...) the retirement system is created in a way in several member countries preferring the men's points of view. These system adversely affect women and many of them interrupt their professional career and have not standard employment or they do pursue activities in certain periods of their lives what for they do not receive income. As a result, the women are in disadvantageous situation in terms of acquiring rights for pension that necessary for security at old age and accumulating savings (European Economic and Social Committee's views 2006:99).

Two-thirds of people who get pension are women in the European Union, their average pension is 55% of the men's pension and it has effects on every aspect of their lives. It has effect on their housing, quality of live, health condition. Most of the pensioners who get aid because of their small income are women, approx. 75%. Consequently, the poorest pensioners are older women, especially widows and divorcee.

In addition, an ILO study published in 2007 about the "phenomenon of feminised poverty experienced among women employees", traces back this phenomenon to the salary, status, employment sector and qualification gap between men and women. The study cites the director general ILO: "the women very often cannot lift themselves and their families out of poverty. Those equitable employment opportunities can change this undeserved situation so the women can access to productive and profitable work in an environment that provides freedom, security and human dignity. Otherwise, the feminisation of poverty will continue and the following generation will inherit it." (ILO 2007:1)

2. The Reasons for Women's Poverty in Hungary

Based on the characteristics of Hungarian economic activity, the biggest group of poor women (in the end of the 90's) consists of pensioners (because of being single), although the risk of poverty is the biggest for widow pensioners (Spéder 1997). The second largest group is made up of women who get subsidy for child care of fee for child care, in the third group includes the housewives. As for the examined social groups, the poverty rate is the highest among housewives, 40%. As for their age groups, they belong to the middle age (between the ages of 30-50) and live in small settlements (Spéder 2007). The characteristics are different among poor men. More than one fifth of poor men belong to the inactive group, many of them (under the age of 20) have never worked before or could not find a job and many of them dropped out of the system that supports unemployed people (they are rather the middle age, between the ages of 30 and 50). Relatively small rate of the poor men who have job are usually husbands or partners of those women who receive subsidy for childcare, fee for childcare. Examining form the direction of unemployment, Spéder and his colleagues' research (1997) shows that we find more unemployed people among poor men than among women and the unemployed men more likely become poor. Consequently, the risk poverty of unemployment is different by gender.

The women's relations with profitable work and labour market inclusion are formed by the combination of three different work strategies.

- a) Continuous (uninterrupted) employment is mainly typical of educated women who have higher education level and/or managerial position. They are either childless/single or do not interrupt their profitable work in case of childbearing.
- b) The biggest group of women who require and have profitable job "receive possibilities for interrupting work for short or long time, mainly if the society supports it financially. Many people of this group (can) become temporarily or permanently poor for the period of interruption.

Whether they are able to leave poverty is dependent on the chances for labour market inclusion. Returning to work is a problem primarily for those who are in unfavourable labour-market position and who are over 40.

- c) Finally, lesser or greater number of women take the housewife position for a lifetime in every country. Some of them finish their employment and others do not even have a job or work experience. These women's risk of poverty is great because of social exclusion

In a country the different ration of this three aspects influence the female population's poverty risk significantly. In Hungary, the women employment structure is less favourable for them than for men in terms of poverty risk. The labour market maintains jobs that are not defended and have flexible working hours for women. The mechanism of feminisation forces women in the bottom of the employment hierarchy where available income, the job security is worse than the general and the risk of poverty is higher. The lack of income presents all over their lives and as the time pass the scissor keeps opening. The differences between the incomes limit the financial balance within the family their whole lives and it influences their access to goods, the extent of need satisfaction and conserves the patriarchal family relations as well.

The indirect rise of poverty is also significant. The indirect risk of poverty for the women is significant. The effect of the great extent of income differentiation after the political transformation because In many cases of the families fallen behind the money earning for ensuring basic livelihood is left for the women to solve. The decreasing family incomes make the situation of women worse because mainly they economize the decreasing money income since the conservative labor market models within the family is mostly in poor families. Presumably, the children's poverty has greater impact on women than men because the child poverty is mostly concentrated in families with many children and single mother families and in this kind of families the housework and caring children are rather left for the women than the men. Even the deterioration of the men's situation has impact on women too. The loss of the breadwinner's stability shifts great burden to women as well. Because of losing stability due to unemployment or illness, the women keeps the family together, economizes the income that often is not even enough to maintain physical existence instead of men – who often escapes into alcoholism.

References

- Európai Gazdasági és Szociális Bizottság vélemény. Tárgy: „A nőket érintő szegénység Európában” (2006/C 24/18) – Az Európai Unió Hivatalos Lapja, 2006.1.31.
- HELL, J. (2002): *A nemek viszonya a globalizálódó világban*. In: Magyar Tudomány 2002/3.
- SPÉDER, ZS. (1997): *Szegény nők és férfiak*. In: Lévai Katalin – Tóth István György (szerk.): Szerepváltozások. Jelentés a nők és férfiak helyzetéről 1997. TÁRKI – Munkaügyi Minisztérium, Budapest