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CHAPTER 10

GENDER AND POVERTY

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KEY CONCEPTS AND OVERVIEW
OF CHAPTER

ASSESSING the links between gender and poverty is an immensely complex task—both conceptually and empirically—for several reasons.

First, poverty is defined and measured in myriad ways. In the vast, interdisciplinary literature on poverty, "poverty" refers to diverse conditions—most often, insufficient economic resources (e.g., income, consumption, earnings), the deprivation of human capabilities, or social exclusion and marginalization. Other scholars focus on material hardship (e.g., hunger, homelessness, lack of health care), economic volatility, or intergenerational immobility. There is no single, universal definition of poverty.

Second, the conditions associated with poverty—however defined—vary dramatically both within and across countries. This renders cross-national poverty studies a thorny endeavor. Clearly, a poor woman in Norway faces substantially different circumstances, in absolute terms, than does a poor woman in Mali. More starkly, a poor woman in Norway may be better off, on multiple dimensions, than an affluent woman in Mali—a fact that must be accounted for in poverty studies that cross national borders.

Third, although gender is an individual (i.e., person-level) attribute, poverty is most often conceptualized as a household condition. That disjuncture presents further theoretical and empirical challenges, because precise information about intrahousehold resource distribution is limited, and because adjusting for within-household economies of scale is not always straightforward. Linked to this is the fact that market involvement (for both women and men) often takes place at the person level, while economic well-being may be more meaningfully determined at the household level. More specifically, there is often a mismatch between labor market earnings, on the one hand, and household income, on the other. Many individuals—especially women—command no or little labor market income, but live in households with sufficient or even ample resources.

Likewise, in many families—most acutely, in those headed by a single parent (the vast majority of whom are women)—the breadwinner's earnings may not fall in the lowest earnings strata, but they may be insufficient to keep the household out of income poverty. Thus, unpacking the relationship between gender, paid work, and household structure is crucial in any assessment of gender and poverty.

Overview of Chapter

In the second section, we highlight selected theoretical perspectives that have informed the study of poverty—focusing on economic insufficiency, capabilities deprivation, and social exclusion—and we assess the often-cited and much-critiqued concept of the feminization of poverty.

We review key contributions to the empirical literature on poverty and gender, in the third section, focusing on interdisciplinary studies that define poverty via economic resources. In the fourth section, we present selected empirical results from a group of 26 high- and middle-income countries, based on data from the LIS Database, a database containing harmonized microdata from over 40 countries¹. Our results—presented in three descriptive figures—correspond to a point in time, the early-middle 2000s. Specifically, we assess the likelihood that women, and men, live in poor households, and how that likelihood varies by two crucial risk factors: family structure and the strength of their attachment to the labor market. These figures illustrate, and highlight, some of the key factors regarding gendered poverty that we discuss in this chapter.

We return, in the fifth section, to the main findings from our review of the literature and our empirical results, and comment on how these contribute to the challenge of assessing the link between gender and poverty.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Conceptualizing Poverty: Economic Resources, Capabilities, and Social Exclusion Perspectives

Poverty research requires that analysts define poverty and select a measurement approach. This is always a challenge, and it is especially complex when studying gender and poverty. Interestingly, scholars of both feminism and development have been at the forefront of critiquing and influencing poverty measurement. Their contributions have enhanced the conceptualization and measurement of poverty in ways that take gender into account. Here, we review three major theoretical frameworks used to study poverty and address their usefulness in studying gendered poverty.

Poverty as Insufficient Economic Resources

The most widely used approach to defining and measuring poverty focuses on the economic well-being of households or persons. Within this economic framework, poverty is most often captured via income, or consumption, or earnings, or some combination of the three. Insufficient economic resources may be defined in absolute terms—that is, relative to a threshold that is independent of the population's distribution—or in relative terms, most often with respect to the population median.

The main critique to studying poverty solely through economic metrics is that it offers a narrow and static account of poverty, whereas poverty should be conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon that includes both material and social deprivations (Chant 2003). This critique has particular resonance for research on gender and poverty—especially in the developing world. In lower income countries, critics argue, monetized measures are less meaningful indicators of well-being and, by extension, less useful for assessing gender gaps in well-being (Razavi 2000).

Chant (2010) synthesizes this concern:

Although issues of gender gaps in earnings, expenditures, and the like remain vitally important elements . . . and there is strong evidence for persistent and ubiquitous gender differences in access to economic resources, major doubts have [arisen] in the feminist literature about whether income should be pre-eminent in gender-sensitive conceptions of wellbeing, and whether tackling income poverty is the most effective strategy for solving women's disadvantage. . . . [I]ncome is probably a less "robust" indicator of women's privation than factors such as access to land, agency in decision-making, legal rights within the family, vulnerability to violence, and (self)-respect and dignity. (P. 3)

Poverty as Capability Deprivation

A powerful alternative approach to poverty measurement is the capabilities approach, most often associated with the work of Amartya Sen (see, e.g., Sen 1999). The capabilities approach has greatly expanded the conceptualizing of deprivation to include constraints on persons' opportunities, and abilities, to generate valuable outcomes—in a sense, the freedom to achieve.

The capabilities approach has also helped poverty studies address the fact that economic poverty is generally measured at the household level while gender is an individual-level trait. Gita Sen (2010:101) observes that "looking within the household uncovers the extraordinary extent to which one's economic experiences can differ depending on whether one is a woman or a man." Jackson and Palmer-Jones (2000) note that gendered scholarship that unveils unequal intrahousehold allocations has led many organizations focused on poorer countries to favor conceptualizing poverty in terms of individuals' capabilities and functionings. This is especially the case when

assessing gender gaps in well-being in poorer countries, because assumptions about equal sharing within households are understood to apply less well in poorer countries. Assigning to women and men the well-being of their households, as is common in studies of affluent countries, is less useful when studying low-income countries—and the capabilities approach offers an alternative.

One advantage of the capabilities approach is its flexibility; there is no single, definitive list of capabilities. At the same time, that flexibility has a downside: capabilities—and constraints on capabilities—are difficult to operationalize and measure (Sugden 1993). Nevertheless, there have been innovative attempts to measure capabilities, including in conjunction with the Human Development Index produced by the United Nations Development Programme.

Poverty as Social Exclusion

The concept of social exclusion is another alternative to purely economic approaches to analyzing deprivation. Social exclusion—which emerged in France in the 1960s (see Castel 1991) and took hold across Europe in subsequent years—has most often been used to assess “a situation of multiple disadvantages in terms of labour market marginalization, poverty and social isolation” (Gallie and Paugam 2004:35). While social exclusion is framed in a multitude of ways, drawing on diverse intellectual traditions (see, e.g., Barnes et al. 2002), there are universal themes that crosscut nearly all usages (for a review, see Gornick 2002). First, social exclusion is characterized as a process; it is more than an outcome or a collection of outcomes. Second, exclusion is multidimensional and methodologically plural. Third, exclusion is always relational; that is, an individual or group must be excluded from some larger entity. Fourth, the primary causal factors underlying exclusion are found outside the excluded individual or group; at the same time, inclusion emphasizes reciprocity. Finally, social exclusion generally connotes some degree of permanence; it is a long-term affair.

Jackson (1999) has questioned the usefulness of social exclusion theory for feminist analyses of poverty. Its integration of various forms of disadvantage does offer an alternative method to study poverty beyond one based only on economic resources. However, she argues, social exclusion scholarship has poorly conceptualized gendered elements, most prominently in its failure to address the power relations in the subordination of women specifically. Women’s exclusion and marginalization are unlike that of other groups (e.g., racial minorities, the poor); they are driven by features of social relations within these groups. Jackson argues that gender “mediates particular forms of exclusion but does not produce categories of people included or excluded in uniform ways” (1999:130); in short, women are often simultaneously included and excluded. Furthermore, she notes, the concept of social exclusion is problematic—for women *and* men—where the poor are not a marginalized minority but a mass phenomenon, as in many developing countries.

The “Feminization of Poverty”

The conceptual murkiness that surrounds the interplay between gender and poverty has been exacerbated by the multiple meanings associated with the popular term “the feminization of poverty.” That widely used term was, by most accounts, introduced in the United States by scholar-activist Diana Pearce in the late 1970s. Chen et al. (2005) report that the concept took hold internationally during the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985): “researchers and advocates drew attention to the disadvantaged position of women economically and socially, especially those in female-headed households, and called for a gender perspective in the whole field of poverty research” (2005:37). Chant (2007) reports that the term “feminization of poverty” was further popularized following the famous Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. She highlights the call, in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPA), for eradicating the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women.

Chant (2007) argues that, while there are many interpretations of the “feminization of poverty” in circulation, it has most often referred to three tenets:

- Women are the majority of the world’s poor.
- Women’s disproportionate share of poverty is rising relative to men’s.
- The changing face of poverty is linked to the feminization of female household headship.

Chant further notes that other claims as well have been associated with the “feminization of poverty,” including that women’s poverty is deeper and more extreme than men’s; that women are more prone than are men to persistent poverty; that women face more severe barriers to overcoming poverty than do men; and that the gendered nature of poverty transmits poverty to children.

Given the diversity of interpretations of the “feminization of poverty,” it is not surprising that many scholars, especially feminist scholars, have critiqued the language and the underlying concepts. Chant (2007), focusing on low-income countries, cites several fundamental concerns with this “formulaic nomenclature”: the term links poverty to women rather than to gender relations; in practice, it overemphasizes income privation; it conflates gender with household structure; and, perhaps most problematically, it confuses changes in women’s poverty (a dynamic condition) with women’s disproportionate risk of poverty (an inherently static condition). Goldberg (2010), focusing on high-income countries, levels similar concerns—especially about the confusion between states and trends—and further adds that the emphasis in the “feminization of poverty” literature on single women (both mothers and the elderly) fails to capture the economic vulnerability of married women “and the likelihood that many of them would join the ranks of the poor if they were on their own” (2010:4).

The Dominance of the Economic Approach

Despite the powerful criticisms of the economic approach to poverty analyses—some of which are echoed in the critiques of the “feminization of poverty”—this approach clearly dominates the empirical literature on gender and poverty.

Even its critics acknowledge its strengths. Razavi and Staab, for example, observe: “As the capabilities framework has made clear, an insufficient level of income is a very narrow conceptualization of poverty which does not capture its multiple dimensions” (2010:427). Yet, in their empirical work, they adopt an income framework—after offering three reasons for its usefulness. They argue that the economic approach to assessing gender and poverty:

- highlights the crucial relationship between employment and poverty;
- is most amenable to analyses based on quantitative data; and
- is strengthened by the fact that income poverty is often *correlated* with other dimensions of poverty.

An overwhelming majority of empirical studies on gender and poverty focus on economic resources. Accordingly, in the next sections—our review of existing literature and our empirical portrait using the LIS data—we do as well.

THE GENDERED NATURE OF POVERTY

Overview

Many scholars, studying multiple countries, find that, overall, women are more likely to be poor than are their male counterparts (see, e.g., Casper, McLanahan, and Garfinkel 1994; Wright 1995; Pressman 1998, 2002). In this section, we synthesize the primary, and most consistent, findings that emerge from this body of research.

Using LIS data,² for example, Christopher, a sociologist, compares the poverty rates of mothers and fathers (2002b) and also of mothers and all men (2002c), in a sample of affluent countries. She finds a strong cross-national pattern of heightened poverty risk for mothers compared to all men—everywhere except in Finland and Sweden—and for mothers compared to fathers (when both are custodial parents) in all nine countries that she studied. As in earlier LIS-based research, Christopher finds the largest poverty gender gaps in the English-speaking countries; mothers in the United States are fully 58 percent more likely than fathers to be poor (with respect to post-tax-and-transfer household income).

The causes underlying women’s higher risk of economic insecurity are complex, overlapping, and cumulative. The most powerful factor is women’s weaker

attachment to the labor market. On average, women command lower market income, including wages and occupational pensions, than do men and, as a result, they receive lower employment-related social transfers. In addition, as a group, women still earn lower pay than do men for each hour worked, partly due to their concentration in lower paying occupations and partly due to pay discrimination based on gender. In turn, the main reason that women’s connection to paid work is weaker than men’s is their disproportionate engagement in caring for family members, especially young children. Largely due to their role as family caregivers, women are less likely to be employed than are similarly situated men and, if employed, they average fewer weekly work hours, including among those in full-time employment. Recent evidence indicates that being an active caregiver (independent of gender) further reduces hourly pay—a pay penalty that disproportionately affects women.

In many countries, substantial numbers of parents are raising their children without partners, and everywhere single parents are overwhelmingly women. Single mothers, as a group, typically report worrisome levels of poverty—not surprisingly, as their (mainly unshared) caregiving responsibilities depress their own labor supply, their gender is associated with lower hourly earnings, and their homes typically lack a second earner. Additionally, women are at much higher risk of elderly poverty than men because of the economic disadvantages that they experience earlier in life. Finally, diverse households—young and old, female-headed and male-headed, with and without children—receive tax benefits and public income transfers. Among lower income households, those transfers can make them less poor or lift them out of poverty altogether. In some countries—the United States is a prime example—social benefits targeted to children are meager compared to those granted to other demographic groups. As a result, families with children, which disproportionately include women, are more likely to be poor than are other family types. In many countries, these factors—both micro and macro—operate independently and interactively to raise women’s likelihood of poverty relative to men’s.

Social Constructs of Care: Gender and Unpaid Work

One of the strongest factors in women’s higher risk of poverty is their weaker attachment to the labor market. That, in turn, is linked to women’s disproportionate engagement in the work of caregiving, especially for children. Notably, this influential factor—the association of women with unpaid care work—is widespread throughout both developed and developing countries (Folbre 1994; Benería 2003).

Women’s constrained “choices” in the labor market, stemming from entrenched divisions of labor at home, result in women—in all countries—being less likely than their male counterparts to work for pay. Among those who do work for pay, women are more likely to be in part-time employment, in precarious jobs, and/or in the informal economy (Vosko, MacDonald, Campbell 2011; Carr and Chen 2002).

Heintz (2010) argues that women's greater likelihood of being employed in less desirable jobs is largely explained by care-related constraints. Women, for example, are more likely to choose home-based work as way to balance work and care responsibilities, even though home-based work is generally less remunerative and often precarious (Carr and Chen 2002). Caregiving duties are also understood to influence the occupations that women enter, due to factors operating on both the supply side and the demand side; the result is that women are overrepresented, for example, in lower paying service and caregiving jobs. In short, women's unique role in unpaid care work—widely understood to be overwhelmingly socially constructed—weakens their participation in the labor market and thus their access to one of the most decisive factors in reducing the risk of poverty: paid work.

Gender Divisions of Labor: Paid Work and Poverty

When assessing the gendered determinants of poverty, paid work matters everywhere—but it matters in different ways in affluent versus poorer countries. In their 2005 UNIFEM report on women, work, and poverty, Chen and her colleagues (2005) argue that, in both developed and developing countries, women are concentrated in more precarious, and more poorly remunerated, forms of employment. In affluent countries, that employment takes the form of part-time and temporary jobs; in developing countries, however, women's precariousness stems from their disproportionate engagement in informal work.

A number of researchers have examined how the changes to the global economy, most notably the rise in low-wage and informal work, have interacted with the quality and quantity of jobs available to women and how this links with gendered poverty (Vosko et al. 2011; Carr and Chen 2002). Collins and Mayer's (2011) study of welfare reform highlights the rise of women's employment in low-wage jobs in the United States, a country with a high prevalence of working poor. Pearson (2010) points to a number of features in the new global economy that have influenced crucial changes in labor markets, namely, the use of inexpensive labor by transnational corporations, the associated loss of "good jobs," the increase in nonunionized labor, and the economic crisis that has squeezed social assistance.

Undoubtedly, the quality of women's paid work shapes their poverty risk. Pressman (2003) assessed the role that occupational segregation plays in the "gender poverty gap." Using a 10-category occupational breakdown, he concluded that, across a group of 10 LIS countries, the gender poverty gap, based on disposable income, would be nearly three percentage points (or about 20 percent) lower if women household heads were employed in the same occupations as male household heads. Orsini, Büchel, and Mertens (2003) studied the impact of mothers' employment on family poverty risk in seven European countries. They concur with the established finding that there is a strong positive effect of mothers' paid work on family income across countries and family types.

In developing countries, in general, informal employment represents a greater share of women's employment than of men's, and, in many countries, over 60 percent of women workers are in informal employment outside agriculture—and substantially more if agriculture is included (Chen et al. 2005). Development scholars note that the link between women's economic hardship and their concentration in informal work has direct policy implications that are specific to low-income countries; these include strengthening efforts to organize women in informal sectors to increase their economic rewards, while, at the same time, implementing policies aimed at expanding formal employment opportunities.

It is important to acknowledge that informality can pose hazards in wealthier countries as well, especially when considering employment disparities by race or immigration status. Ng (2008), for example, assesses low hourly pay among home-based workers in Canada, underscoring the difficulties of regulating home-based work. Likewise, Collins and Mayer (2011:20) observe that welfare reform in the United States has created "a caste of low-wage workers with attenuated rights at the bottom of the labor market."

Poverty, Gender, and Parenting: Single Mothers

When addressing gendered poverty risks, single-mother households are usually at the forefront of discussions. This is understandable given that female-headed households have grown in prevalence in both wealthy (Klett-Davies 2007) and poorer countries (Chant 2007). Goldberg's (2010) volume on women and poverty in seven industrialized countries establishes that, in her study countries, there has been an overall increase in the share of poor households that are female headed. The shift in family structure, in conjunction with the rising poverty rates among single mothers, has led many researchers of gender and poverty to focus on single mothers.

Several studies from the early 1990s, mostly by sociologists, focused attention on the high risk of poverty (or of low income) among single mothers in high-income countries (Sorensen 1994; Gornick and Pavetti 1990; Wong, Garfinkel, and McLanahan 1993; McLanahan, Casper, and Sorensen 1995). Sorensen (1994) reported that a third of single-mother households in Germany—and over half in the United States—lived in poverty; single-mother households with three or more children had far higher poverty rates. In contrast, Sorensen found, Swedish single mothers' poverty rates were remarkably low (7 percent overall). McLanahan et al. (1995) assessed women's poverty cross-nationally, comparing the likelihood of poverty across various work-family combinations. Virtually everywhere, employed wives without children are the least likely to be poor, and single mothers—especially if not employed—the most likely. A substantial literature addresses child poverty; child poverty is, of course, distinct from women's poverty, but the two are inextricably linked because among the highest risk children are those who live with single mothers (see, e.g., Bradbury and Jäntti 1999; Gornick and Jäntti 2009).

A number of researchers have homed in on the role that employment and earnings play in explaining variation, both within and across countries, in single mothers' poverty risks (Nichols-Casebolt and Krysik 1997; Solera 1998; Morissens 1999; Christopher 2002a). Nichols-Casebolt and Krysik (1997) found that the percent of (never married) single mothers with earnings varied sharply across the four countries they studied, ranging from over 60 percent in France to 53–55 percent in the United States and Canada, to only 34 percent in Australia. They also found that being employed significantly reduced single mothers' poverty odds in all four countries, and that the independent poverty-reducing impact of being employed was greater everywhere than the impact of being a recipient of either child support or public transfers. Solera (1998) reports that variation in single mothers' employment rates explains nearly all the variation in single mothers' economic well-being across Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Italy. In Sweden, in particular, high levels of employment, shored up by strong policy supports, leave Swedish single mothers far less poor than, for example, their counterparts in the United Kingdom. In contrast, the majority of British single mothers have no (or very part-time) labor market attachment and rely instead on social assistance. Christopher (2002a) adds that low wages also matter. In the United States in particular, she reports, it is not low employment rates, but the preponderance of poverty-wage jobs that exacerbates U.S. single mothers' poverty. In fact, Christopher reports, compared to their counterparts elsewhere, U.S. single mothers who work full time are among the least likely to work in jobs that pay wages above the poverty line.

In the last decade, researchers—mainly political scientists and political sociologists—have considered the effects of policies outside the tax-and-transfer arena on single mothers' poverty. Huber et al. (2001) pooled LIS datasets across countries and over time to model the effects of labor market and political variables on a range of gendered outcomes; one of their dependent measures was single mothers' pre-tax-and-transfer poverty rate. They find that both union density and having a Left Cabinet have independent, significant, negative effects on single-mothers' market poverty. While having a Left Cabinet seems to operate at least in part by raising single mothers' employment rates, the causality underlying these institutional effects is not completely clear. Using a similar approach, Brady and Kall (2008) assess associations between women's (and men's) poverty and a range of policy and institutional factors. They conclude that economic growth, manufacturing employment (although, interestingly, not public employment), social security transfers, and public health spending all significantly influence both women's and men's poverty.

Given the propensity of lone mothers living in poverty, analysts often link gendered poverty with lone motherhood. Feminists have questioned, however, whether the two are, in fact, intrinsically linked (Chant 2007; Kabeer 2003). Some have critiqued the suggestion that a household is inevitably poorer without a man, noting that some of the assumptions underlying that claim are questionable. Lone females household heads might not have the material support of a male partner, in addition

to facing gender inequalities in the labor market; yet the focus on the "feminization of household heads" tends to overlook the possibility that lone mothers (compared to partnered mothers) may enhance their, and their children's, well-being (Chant 2007). For example, women with live-in male partners may suffer due to intrahousehold inequalities. Brickell's (2010) research on gender and poverty in Cambodia found that some women have to work more (than they might wish to) to compensate for their husband's *lack* of work, while others are pressured to earn less money than they would otherwise because their husbands have laid claim to being the main breadwinner. Furthermore, focusing on single mother's poverty obscures the poverty of partnered women and the dependency of women on their partner's income to stay out of poverty.

Gender and Poverty: Age

Elderly women constitute another demographic group that faces an elevated higher risk of poverty, relative to men, in both wealthy and poorer countries. Elderly women's poverty risk stems from a number of factors. First, women tend to live longer than men. Second, the inequalities women face in the labor market throughout their life course follow them into their older years. Third, many pension systems condition benefits on earlier earnings, placing older women at a disadvantage. In short, women enter their older years with fewer resources than men due to disadvantages that have accumulated over the life course—in factors such as education, property holding, income, and social benefits (Vera-Sanso 2010).

In affluent countries, state transfers play a large role in keeping the elderly out of poverty. Goldberg's (2010) edited volume on women in seven high-income countries established that, while countries that place greater emphasis on employment to reduce poverty, such as the United States, might have lower pre-transfer poverty rates, countries with higher levels of poverty reduction report lower rates of post-transfer poverty among elderly women. In fact, after accounting for transfers, the United States has exceptionally high poverty rates among elderly women (Sandström and Smeeding 2005). Yet, current pension systems are designed such that elderly women, especially those who are divorced, widowed, or never married, are at a much higher risk of poverty than are elderly men (*ibid.*).

Many researchers have addressed the link between the entitlement structure of pension systems and women's pension protection (Budowsky 2010; Falkingham, Evandrou, and Vlachantoni 2010; Vera-Sanso 2010). Many wealthy countries have earnings-related pension systems that are based on economic contributions over the life course. Women are clearly at a disadvantage in these pension systems, due to their greater likelihood of having breaks in employment or periods of part-time work (Falkingham et al. 2010). In these countries, elderly women often rely on means-tested benefits late in life. In contrast, the universal pension schemes, found in Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands, offer pension income to the elderly regardless of their

work history. Falkingham and her colleagues (2010) suggest that policies should either offer universal pension entitlements, or, if that is not viable, they should account for the caring work performed by women when calculating entitlements. Budowsky (2010) warns that, in the latter case, it is important not to institutionalize gendered divisions of labor in unpaid care work; interventions that ease women's care responsibilities earlier in life (such as childcare facilities, school meals, and housing), have the potential to reduce labor market inequality during prime-age years and, in turn, reduce women's risk of elderly poverty.

In the developing country context, Vera-Sanso (2010) examines gender and aging in India. While some elderly women receive old-age and/or widowhood benefits, the Indian government tends to disregard the older urban poor, expecting them to rely on filial support and/or on working late in life. These expectations are often based on class and gender biases that overlook the plight of the urban poor in India and especially that of women. For example, the age threshold for entitlement does not take into account the life expectancies of the urban poor, nor the more physically demanding jobs that they hold. Furthermore, because remarriage is stigmatized, widows are often forced into paid work, and they often take low-paying jobs.

Although research on elderly poverty most often focuses on developed countries, elderly poverty is a growing concern in developing countries because populations are aging at a more rapid rate than in wealthier countries. In order to address the gendered aspect of elderly poverty, researchers should be cognizant of the complex interactions between women's labor market outcomes and the characteristics of pension systems, keeping an eye on the gendered disadvantages associated with both.

“Engendering” Poverty Alleviation

Not surprisingly, a major theme cutting across gendered poverty studies concerns the impact on poverty of national conditions—including public policies (especially tax-benefit systems and work-family reconciliation policies), political configurations, and macroeconomics outcomes. Social and economic policies and institutions can contribute greatly to poverty alleviation, with policy variation explaining much cross-country variation in poverty rates.

Poverty-alleviation programs, unfortunately, are often insufficiently responsive to the gendered aspects of poverty risks. This is the case for both welfare state policies in wealthy countries and development agendas in poorer countries. Gita Sen (2000:273) identifies key gendered barriers to poverty alleviation:

- The unequal division of (and access to) resources; unequal divisions of labor within and outside the home; and associated ideologies and behavioral norms.
- Nonrecognition of the “care economy” which shapes the resources, labor, and ideologies that underlie the reproduction of human beings.

Sen discusses these challenges in relation to low- and middle-income countries, yet in general the same hold true for high-income countries.

Low- and Middle-income Countries

There have been two main approaches to poverty eradication in the global development agenda: market-driven and labor-intensive growth (Sen 2000). Neither of these adequately addresses gendered poverty. Market-driven and labor-intensive growth approaches rely on economic growth as a means for mitigating poverty. However, feminist scholars have noted that, when considering multidimensional aspects of poverty, a solely market-based approach typically has negative consequences for women. In some cases, these antipoverty approaches have caused further harm to women in developing countries because they disregard the complex interactions among gender, poverty, and social institutions; rather, they focus on the very institution that has produced so much gender inequality—the market.

While employment is key to overcoming poverty, approaches that focus solely on economic activity disregard other dimensions of poverty that have especially significant effects on women. Many of the jobs created through market-driven or labor-intensive growth are low-quality jobs, often in the informal sector—increasing the chance of women being “invisible” to social policy or to poverty-alleviation programs. Gender-blind economic growth can place additional burdens on women's well-being. Brickell's (2010) study, in Cambodia, revealed problematic consequences in the lives of her subjects, including the additional burden that paid work can place on women's familial responsibilities, worsening their time poverty, the continual wage disparities women face in the labor market, and men's lack of acceptance of women's waged work.

High-income Countries

Scholars and activists, similarly, have highlighted the need for poverty alleviation programs in high-income countries to take into account multidimensional aspects of poverty and to acknowledge that women's inequality is rooted both in the labor market and at home. In recent years, social policies have faced retrenchment pressures, with substantial cutbacks currently resulting from the continuing economic crisis. Post-austerity welfare states, in conjunction with the rise of low-wage labor markets, are creating an increasingly precarious position for women already at risk of poverty (Collins and Mayer 2011).

Perrons (2010) argues that concentrated efforts should ensure that policies aimed at poor women are actually reaching them. She points out that, even with economic growth, enduring gender inequalities place women at higher risk of poverty. Despite state supplementation of income to help counter poverty, Perron stresses that transfers usually occur at the household level, ignoring the individual dynamics of poverty and gender, as well as the instability of partnerships and households. Perrons highlights the need to address gender inequality and women's likelihood of earning low wages in particular.

A PORTRAIT OF GENDER AND POVERTY ACROSS 26 HIGH- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES

In designing the empirical results presented here, we draw on lessons from this prior literature, by incorporating the main risk factors that have been found to matter—especially women's family structure and their employment status.³

Social Policy Regimes

To place the variation across these 26 countries into institutional context, our study countries are grouped into six country clusters. In the text and figures, we refer to these groupings by their geographic/regional or linguistic characteristics. We classify Australia, Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States as *Anglophone* countries;⁴ Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands as *Continental European* countries; Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden as *Nordic European* countries; Hungary and Slovenia as *Eastern European* countries; Greece, Italy, and Spain as *Southern European* countries; and Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay as *Latin American* countries.⁵ Of course, ultimately it is not geography, region, or language that makes these groupings meaningful for our analyses of gender and poverty across countries. These clusters are meaningful because of their well-established institutional commonalities. Substantial within-cluster variability is undoubtedly evident in all of these groups, but overall they are clearly characterized by common features.

This cluster framework is rooted largely in the theoretical and empirical work of Danish sociologist Gosta Esping-Andersen, as presented in his 1990 book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Esping-Andersen classified the major welfare states of the industrialized West into three clusters, each characterized by shared principles of social welfare entitlement and relatively homogeneous outcomes. Subsequent cross-national research extended "the three worlds" to characterize other country groupings as well.

While comparative welfare-state research, especially with a European focus, generally excludes Latin America, social policy in these countries also displays some characteristic features. Although Latin America has a long history of social policy development, income benefits have typically been extended only to formal workers, mainly in urban labor markets, and informal and/or rural workers have generally been excluded. One result is that Latin America is characterized by extremely high levels of income inequality, and post-transfer inequality is often greater than pre-transfer inequality. In recent years, new antipoverty programs known as Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT) provide money targeted to poor families, conditional on their adherence to specified behavioral

rules (such as attending school or getting medical care). Three countries included in our empirical work, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, now have CCT programs—although only the former two were operating at the time that these microdata were collected.

We make use of country clusters in this chapter because they bring into relief the importance of policy configurations for poverty reduction, and because they help us identify empirical patterns across our comparison countries. Working with these well-known groupings will also allow comparative scholars to situate our findings into the larger literature on the nature and consequences of social policy variation across countries.

Data, Methods, and Analytic Strategy

The results reported here are based on data from the LIS Database, a public-access microdatabase, now containing data from over 40 countries. The LIS staff collects datasets (mostly based on household-income surveys), harmonizes them into a common template, and makes them available to registered researchers via remote access. The LIS Database includes repeated cross-sections from participating countries, with datasets available for up to eight points in time, depending on the country. The LIS datasets include income, labor market, and demographic indicators. The microdata are available at the household- and person-level, and records can be linked between levels.⁶ This analysis uses datasets from the early and mid-2000s.

Unit of Analysis

Measuring differentials in women's and men's likelihood, or intensity, of poverty is never a simple exercise. As we noted earlier, it is complicated because large numbers of women, especially prime-age women, share their homes with men. Designating "her" and "his" income, for the most part, is not feasible. First, many sources of income, both taxes and transfers, are received at the household level. Second, even if some or all income sources could be disaggregated, doing so has limited meaning, as individuals who live together (especially partners) generally pool their income, so "her" well-being is clearly shaped by "his" income as well as her own. (As a result of these complexities, most research on gender gaps in economic well-being focus on market earnings.⁷) In this study, the approach taken considers individuals poor if they live in poor *households*—an approach that, of course, produces relatively small gender gaps among adults who are partnered.

Poverty Measures

In Figure 10.1, we report poverty outcomes based on income (from earnings, capital, and private transfers), after taxes, but before public transfers are taken into account; this is labeled "pre-transfer income." We compare these to poverty outcomes based on income after both taxes and public transfers (including social insurance and social assistance) have been accounted for; this is labeled "post-transfer income." Figures 10.2 and 10.3 report poverty based on this latter measure, post-tax-post-transfer income.

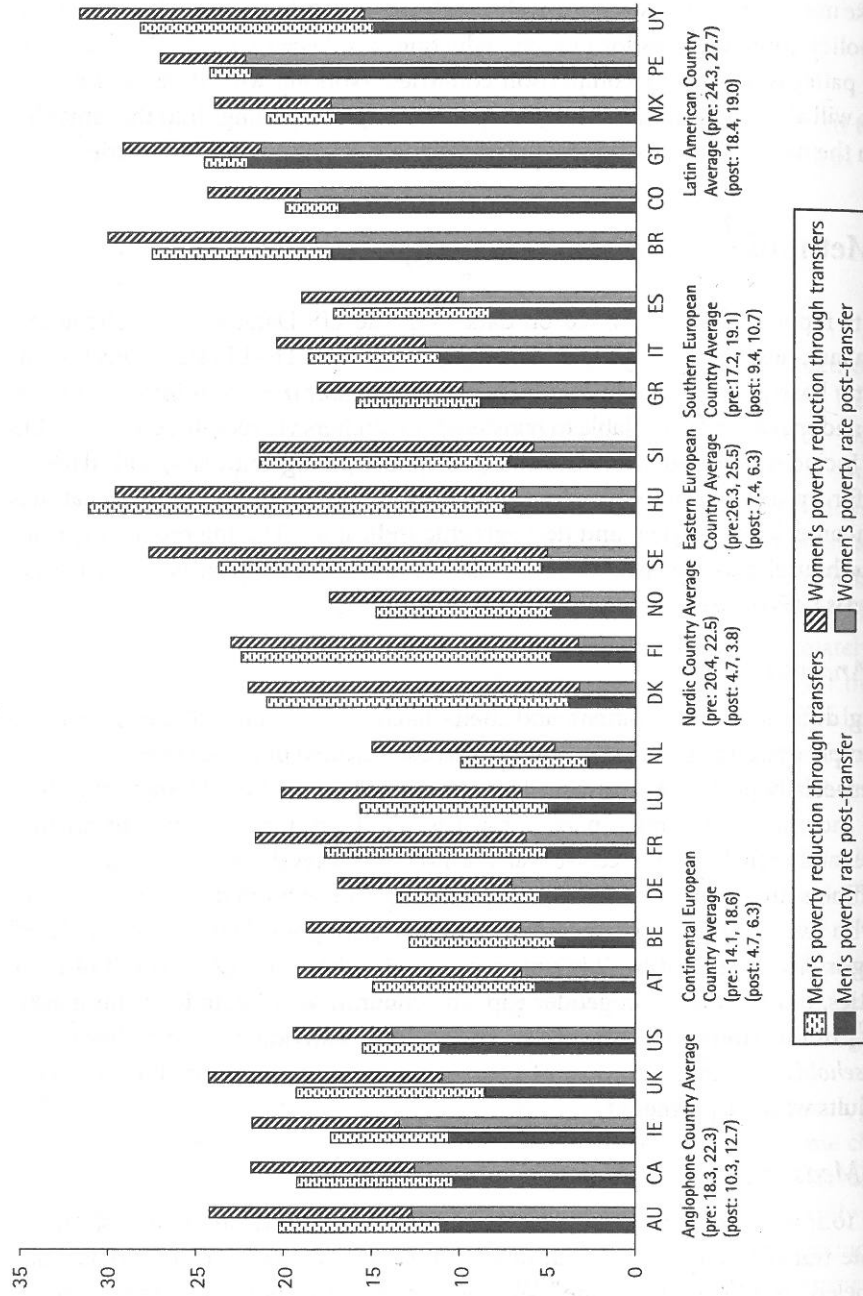


FIGURE 10.1 Poverty Rates by Gender: Pre-transfer Income (early-middle)

Note: All incomes in post-tax. Country group averages are unweighted. Poverty rates are based on relative poverty measures. The total height of the bars represent men's and women's poverty rates, pre-transfer.

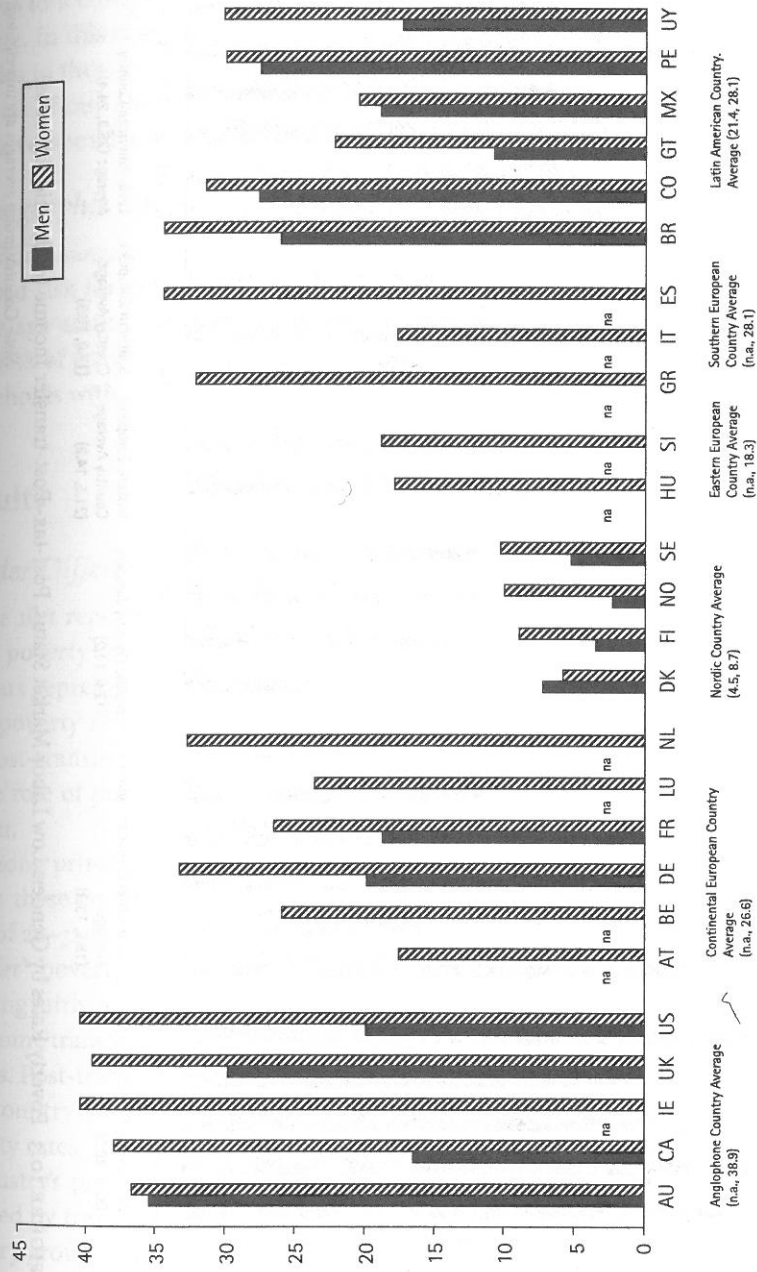


FIGURE 10.2 Poverty Rates by Gender: No Partner with Children, Post-tax-Post-transfer Income (early-middle 2000s)

Note: Country group averages are unweighted. Cell sizes that are too small for reporting are marked "n.a."

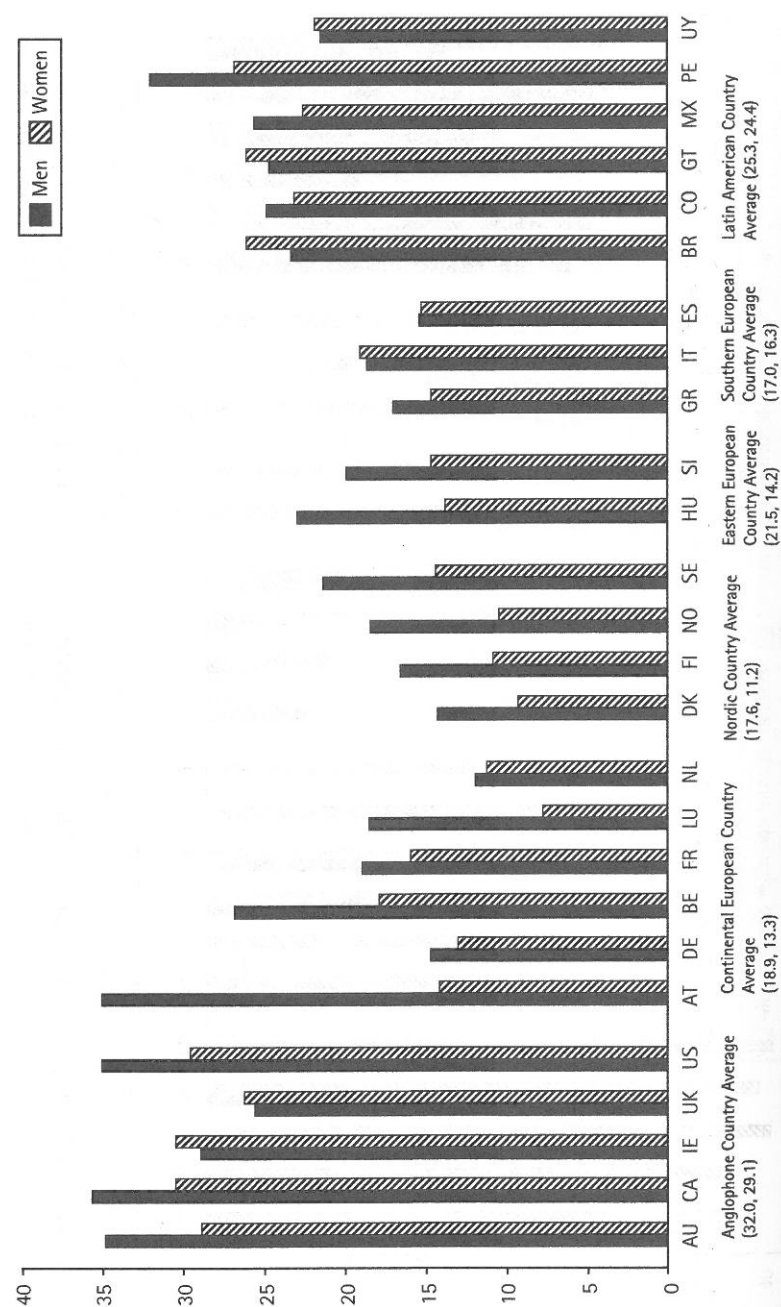


FIGURE 10.3 Poverty Rates by Gender: Low Labor Market Status, Post-tax-Post-transfer Income (early-middle 2000s)

Note: Country group averages are unweighted.

Some datasets in the LIS archive report only after-tax income. To maximize cross-national comparability, the study is limited to after-tax income throughout. Unfortunately, this approach clearly lessens the degree of redistribution reported relative to a comparison of pre-tax/pre-transfer income versus post-tax/post-transfer income. In this case, the results are likely to be similar either way, because most poor families in these countries have fairly limited tax liabilities.

In all of our analyses, we use a relative poverty line set at 50 percent of national median disposable income among all persons, adjusted for family size.

Demographic and Labor Market Variables

The study sample is limited to persons aged 25–54. Although elderly women are at elevated risk for poverty (as we noted earlier), we restrict these empirical analyses to prime-age adults, simply to contain the scope of our presentation. To highlight the high risk of poverty among single parents, we present poverty rates of single heads of households with children below the age of 18 in the household.

Results

Gender Differences in Household Poverty Rates

Figure 10.1 reports poverty rates by gender.⁸ For each country, the left bar indicates men's poverty rates; the right bar indicates women's poverty rates. The total height of the bars represents poverty rates pre-transfers. The patterned parts of the bars illustrate poverty reduction through transfers. Finally, the solid parts of the bars report the post-transfer poverty rates for men and women. This figure reveals a telling story of the role of public income transfers in addressing poverty and its interaction with gender.

Among prime-age adults, the prevalence of "pre-transfer" poverty varies markedly across these countries, ranging from a low of 10–15 percent in the Netherlands to a high of 28–32 percent in Hungary, Brazil, and Uruguay.⁹ Substantial variation in "pre-transfer" poverty across the country groupings is also evident, with country clusters showing fairly homogeneous poverty rates.

Income transfers reduce poverty substantially, as indicated by the poverty-reduction results. Post-transfer poverty rates are much lower than pre-transfer rates everywhere. The country clusters again show consistent patterns with respect to "post-transfer" poverty rates. It is evident, of course, that accounting for transfers causes these country cluster's poverty rates to reorder substantially. Indeed, the percentage of poverty reduced by transfers varies sharply across them. Clearly, these 26 countries, and these country groups, vary both by the level of poverty prior to transfers and by the extent to which income transfers pull otherwise poor households out of poverty.

Before income transfers are taken into account, the pattern with respect to gender is remarkably uniform: with the exception of the two Eastern European countries,

women are everywhere more likely to be poor than are men—although in general the differences are relatively small. Women’s “pre-transfer” poverty rates are higher than men’s by one percentage point or less in Denmark and Finland and, on the high end, by about four to five percentage points across the Anglophone and Continental countries, and in Colombia and Guatemala. In Slovenia, women and men are equally likely to be poor and, in Hungary, men are slightly more likely to be poor than are women.

After accounting for income transfers, the gender picture becomes more favorable for women. In all countries, when we shift from “pre” to “post” poverty, the gender gap narrows, reversing direction entirely in the four Nordic countries and Guatemala. Clearly, the overall finding is that, across these countries, income transfers are disproportionately reducing women’s prevalence of poverty.

Gender Differences in Poverty Rates—Among Single Parent Households

Much prior literature on poverty establishes that family type (and/or household structure), interacted with gender, dramatically affects the likelihood of poverty within countries. Our findings confirm that single-parent households—which are overwhelmingly female headed in all of these countries—face the greatest risk of poverty (see Figure 10.2).

Figure 10.2 reports poverty rates among single-parent households disaggregated by gender. The first crucial result is that women are far more prevalent in this family-type group than are men. In this age group (25–54), single parents constitute about 2 to 5 percent of women in Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Spain; and 6–10 percent or higher in the other countries (results calculated but not shown). In contrast, in most of these countries, less than 1–2 percent of men are single fathers. In fact, as evident in Figure 10.2, in fully 10 of the 26 countries, we have less than 30 cases of single fathers in these LIS datasets, hence we report “not available” (n.a.) rather than a poverty rate. Clearly, single parenthood, and its associated economic hazards, is demonstrably more prevalent among women throughout these countries.

Among single mothers across all of our study countries, the prevalence of post-transfer poverty is marked. In the 16 countries in which we can compare poverty rates among single mothers with those of single fathers, these mothers are more likely to be poor nearly everywhere, and sometimes dramatically so. Two Anglophone countries especially stand out—Canada and the United States—where single mothers are more than 20 percentage points more likely to be poor than are single fathers.

Gender Differences in Poverty Rates—Among Those with Low Labor Market Attachment

Finally, in the third figure, we report the difference between women’s and men’s poverty rates among adults with lower labor market attachment, as defined by their earnings (see Figure 10.3). Low labor market attachment (a person-level measure) is defined as

having earnings in the bottom fifth of each country’s earnings distribution, including those with zero earnings.

A counterintuitive gendered story emerges when looking at differences between women’s and men’s poverty rate among adults with weak labor market attachment. In most of these countries—Ireland, the United Kingdom, Italy, and three Latin American countries are exceptions—women with weak links to employment are *less* likely to be poor than are their male counterparts. This result is not, however, unexpected—because many more women than men in this age group (especially among parents) are out of the labor market; a large share of these women are partnered with men with substantial labor market attachment and sufficient income to keep their households out of poverty. In contrast, among men in this age range who are weakly attached to the labor market—a less common occurrence—a higher proportion have no partners (and no second income), while substantial numbers share their homes with partners who also have no or weak connections to the labor market.

This finding has disconcerting implications for women and their risk of poverty. Women might gain from receiving economic support from their partners (in the short term), but their economic dependency on their male partners’ income also carries an array of risks. This dependency, coupled with the disadvantages women face in the labor market, leaves many of these women at elevated risk of poverty in the event that they lose access to their partner’s income. Women’s reliance on income that “comes through” their partners can be especially problematic later in life, when women rely on pension entitlements (their or their partners) that penalize them for their weaker earnings histories during their earlier years.

CONCLUSION

Our review of the literature and our empirical analyses shed light on gendered poverty outcomes. Our findings reveal how gender intersects with various social institutions to shape women’s risk of poverty, both absolutely and relative to men’s. While the relationship between gender and poverty is complex, several elements of this relationship are evident.

First, overall, women face a higher risk of poverty than do men, due to several economic and social factors. In our empirical analysis, we found that, before income transfers are taken into account, poverty outcomes with respect to gender are remarkably uniform: in nearly all countries included in our study, women are more likely to be (relatively) poor than are men—although in general the differences are fairly small. However, public income transfers matter for reducing poverty disparities by gender. After accounting for income transfers, the picture becomes more favorable for women. In all 26 countries, when we shift from pre-transfer to post-transfer

poverty, the poverty gender gap narrows. In a few countries, it reverses direction entirely. Clearly, across these countries, income transfers—even with their shortcomings vis-à-vis women's disadvantage—play a key role in reducing women's market-generated poverty.

Second, family structure matters—most especially, single parenting. Among single mothers, the heightened poverty risk is driven by the lack of a partner's income coupled with the disadvantages women face in the labor market. Our comparison of poverty rates among single mothers, with those of single fathers, show that single mothers are more likely to be poor (than are single fathers) nearly everywhere and sometimes dramatically so. Two Anglophone countries especially stand out—Canada and the United States—where single mothers are more than 20 percentage points more likely to be poor than are single fathers.

Third, many women are economically dependent on their male partners. A key facet of the poverty risk faced by women is illustrated by our analysis of men and women with weak labor attachment. Nearly everywhere, these women are less likely than their male counterparts to be poor—and often by a substantial magnitude. As noted earlier, this finding has a double-edged-sword aspect to it. On the one hand, it highlights the extent to which men “provide” for their female partners, reducing women's likelihood of being poor. On the other hand, the “income transfers” that women receive within their families, and that keep them out of poverty, are inherently unstable; women's economic well-being depends on their partners' continued economic success and on their families remaining intact. Notably, much of this economic disadvantage stems from women's disproportionate performance of unpaid care work. Importantly—as much research has established—women's dependency on their male partners' income during their prime-age years places them at heightened poverty risk during their elderly years.

Fourth, national contexts matter—and they matter a lot. While the focus of this analysis concerns gender differentials, it is crucial to emphasize that women—as well as men—report widely varying levels of poverty across countries. Gender clearly matters for women's well-being but so does one's home country. Women's and men's poverty outcomes, across these countries, are undoubtedly shaped by an array of country-specific institutions, including social policy designs.

Although the concept of the “feminization of poverty” may not adequately characterize the interplay between poverty and gender, poverty—in countries at diverse levels of economic development—undoubtedly has a gendered cast to it. Nevertheless, extensive work lies ahead for scholars of gender and poverty. Further empirical analyses of gender and poverty are much needed, especially analyses that use high-quality data, incorporate noneconomic metrics—such as constrained capabilities and social exclusion—and capture both dynamics and levels. Finally, scholars would do well to carry out more fine-grained policy analyses aimed at identifying and evaluating the ways in which, and the extent to which, poverty-alleviation policies and strategies account for and respond to gender differences in the causes, natures, and consequences of poverty.

NOTES

1. The World Bank ranks countries into four income categories—high, upper-middle, lower-middle, and low—based on per capita GDP. As of the early-mid 2000s, 19 of these 26 countries were classified as high-income countries. Hungary, Mexico, and Uruguay were classified as upper-middle income countries. Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, and Peru were classified as lower-middle income countries. The LIS Database contains no low-income countries.
2. See section “Data, Methods, and Analytical Strategy,” for a description of the LIS data.
3. Section IV of this chapter is based on empirical work carried out collaboratively with Markus Jäntti and reported in Gornick and Jäntti 2010a, 2010b. We are grateful to Markus Jäntti for his invaluable input, especially his contributions to the design and construction of the results presented in Figures 10.1–10.3.
4. Following the convention in cross-national research, we refer to Canada as Anglophone, although it is officially bilingual, part Anglophone and part Francophone.
5. In 2009, LIS added five new Latin American datasets to its archive—from Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Peru, and Uruguay—and the analyses reported here were among the first to use these datasets.
6. Detailed information on the original surveys, including sample sizes, is available at <http://www.lisdatacenter.org/our-data/lis-database/by-country/>.
7. For a review of LIS-based research on gender gaps in labor market outcomes, see Gornick (2004).
8. In the three figures, the countries are abbreviated as follows: Australia (AU), Canada (CA), Ireland (IE), United Kingdom (UK), United States (US); Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Germany (DE), France (FR), Luxembourg (LU), Netherlands (NL); Denmark (DK), Finland (FI), Norway (NO), Sweden (SE); Hungary (HU), Slovenia (SI); Greece (GR), Italy (IT), Spain (ES); Brazil (BR), Colombia (CO), Guatemala (GT), Mexico (MX), Peru (PE), Uruguay (UY).
9. The ranges reported refer to the poverty rates of men and women, respectively.

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CHAPTER 11

LIFE, DEATH, AND
RESURRECTIONS*The Culture of Poverty Perspective*

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WHITNEY WELSH, AND LINDA M. BURTON

THIS chapter is a critical treatise on the culture of poverty thesis. The thesis has lived many lives in scholarship about the poor, mostly in the United States, as it is repeatedly put to rest only to be resurrected again when a new wave of poverty research emerges. For example, a decade into the millennium and over a half century since the thesis emerged in the scholarly literature, sociologists Mario Small, David Harding, and Michele Lamont (2010) edited a volume of the *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* on new ways of studying culture and poverty. After a fierce backlash against the culture of poverty argument in the 1960s and 1970s, the edited volume revived academic and policy interests in the culture of poverty, albeit from a "new perspective." Selective reactions to the *ANNALS* volume and its claim of offering a new perspective on culture and poverty were aptly reflected in a statement by an urban anthropologist with whom we consulted: "How many lives has this cat [referring to the culture of poverty] lived anyway? Surely it is more than nine!" This scholar's sentiments matched our own. The thesis has been resurrected in many forms, some of which merely reflect a play on words, or a reconceptualization of culture, but not the overall thesis (Vaisey 2010). Others attempt to sporadically revive the culture of poverty as a way of thinking about the poor by arguing that the thesis has been deeply misunderstood (Harvey and Reed 1996).

The culture of poverty argument also lives, dies, and is reborn time and again in the public imagination and discourse. For example, shortly after the publication of Small, Harding, and Lamont's (2010) special issue of the *ANNALS*, policy-makers, pundits, and average U.S. citizens debated the culture of poverty in the media. Each attached their own meaning to the thesis. A *New York Times* (Cohen 2010) article