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Feminist Political Economy

A Global Perspective



Pluralist Economics
Certificate Project

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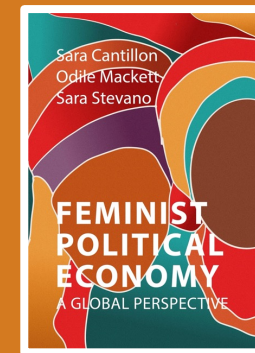
Chapter 9

Feminization of Poverty



Outline

- PART I. What is the femization of poverty?
- PART II. Issues with the measurement of poverty & other limitations of the feminization of poverty thesis
- PART III. The complex relations between gender and poverty

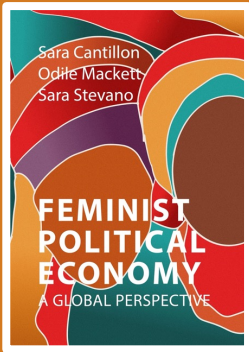




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PART I

What is the feminization of poverty?

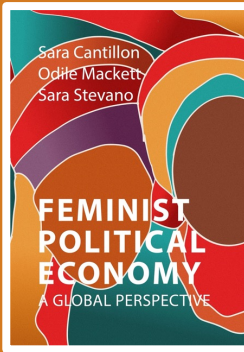


Definition and origins

- Feminization of poverty thesis states that women are disproportionately affected by poverty
- Origins of the term attributed to Diane Pearce (1978): used to capture how changes in family structures in the US saw an increasing number of women entering the labour market and breaking away from marriages, which led to their impoverishment

‘Though many women have achieved economic independence from their spouses by their participation in the labour force (and, in some cases, by divorce), for many the price of independence has been their pauperisation and dependence on welfare. In 1976, nearly two out of three of the 15 million poor persons over 18 were women.’
(Pearce, 1978: 28)





Developments of the concept

- Concept initially elaborated in relation to the US context
- It then became a core dimension of the integration of gender into development policy in the Global South
- Addressing women's poverty identified as a critical area of intervention at the Beijing Platform for Action (1995)
- Idea the poverty is feminized central to gender mainstreaming agendas and to programmes targeting women to alleviate poverty



Various characterisations

Feminization as a static concept or a dynamic process?

- As a static concept, it refers to women's over-representation among the poor
- As a process, it can refer to i) variations in the levels of poverty among a given group, or ii) changes in the size of a group among the poor

Common characterisations of the 'feminization of poverty'

Women experience a higher incidence of poverty than men

Women experience greater depth/severity of poverty (extreme poverty) than men

Women are prone to suffer more persistent/longer-term poverty than men

Women's disproportionate burden of poverty is rising relative to men

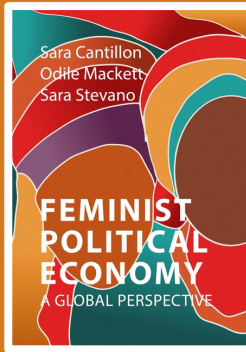
Women face more barriers to lifting themselves out of poverty

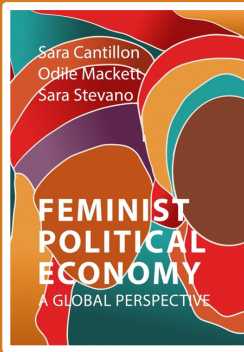
The 'feminization of poverty' is linked with the 'feminization of household headship'

Women-headed households are the poorest of the poor

Female household headship transmits poverty to children

Source: Chant (2008: 167)





Focus on women-headed households

- Starts with Pearce's work – interested in increase in women-headed households due to changing family structures in the UK
- On a global evidence, evidence of growing prevalence of women-headed households driven by various phenomena – gendered migration, erosion of the male breadwinner household model, questioning of the nuclear heteronormative household
- Women-headed households expected to be poorer due to i) higher ratios of dependants, ii) women have access to lower-paid jobs, iii) women are more affected by time constraints, iv) more restricted access to family/kinship support
- Most poverty data has the household as the unit of data collection/analysis

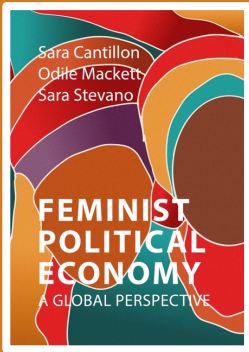




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PART II

Issues with the measurement of poverty & other limitations of the feminization of poverty thesis



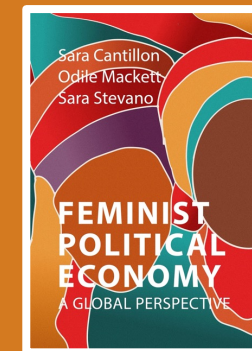
What poverty affects women?

- Most common measurements of poverty are informed by the money-metric approach, where poverty is assessed based on income or consumption
- The World Bank's poverty line is an objective and indirect indicator of poverty based on household income/expenditure assessed against a poverty line
- Poverty lines can be international, national and sub-national, reflecting cost of living
- International poverty line at \$1.90 per day (2015) – intense debates on whether this is an adequate measurement of poverty



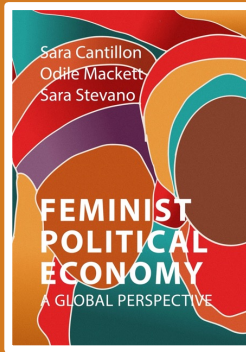
Feminist concerns

- **Income is not an adequate indicator of well-being**
 - Sen's argument that income does not ensure people can convert it into 'functionings' (i.e. adequate welfare)
 - Poverty is multidimensional (e.g. human poverty indicators that capture gendered barriers in choice and opportunity, Fukuda-Parr, 1999)
 - Many alternative indicators: Gender Development Index (accompanies Human Development Index); Multidimensional Poverty Index (direct measurement of poverty, based on health, education and living standards)
- **The household is not an adequate unit of measurement**
 - Household as a key site of reproduction of (gender) inequality
 - Key question is whether women command the use of resources within the household (e.g. Vijaya et al. 2014 study in Karnataka)
- **Subjective/participatory assessments of poverty may add some information but obscure gender inequality**



Are women-headed households the poorest of the poor?

- ❖ What do you think?
- ❖ Find out by reading Case Study 9.2, p. 189



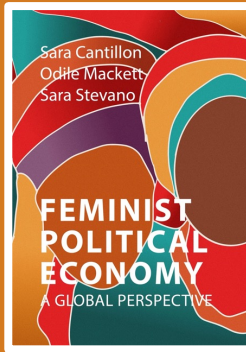
Heterogeneity of women-headed households

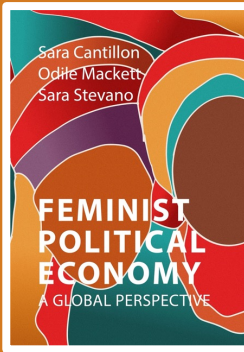
De-jure women-headed households

- The woman head is a widow, separated/divorced, single mother
- Not likely to receive financial support from a husband – although she may receive it from a (male) relative

De facto women-headed households

- A husband or male relative is absent from the household due to migration
- The migrant member may send remittances back home – remittances are now a key source of financing in many Global South countries





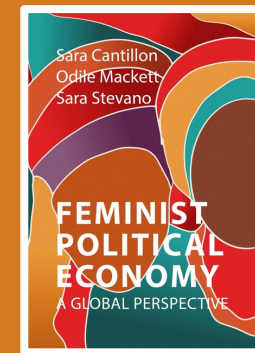
What is household headship?

- Often defined in terms of economic responsibility, either in terms of decision-making or economic contribution to the household
- Decision-making or primary economic responsibility may not be easily attributed to one person: i) multiple income sources, ii) decision-making entailing multiple moments/people



Feminization of responsibility

- Given mixed evidence on poverty of women-headed households, Sylvia Chants suggested that it may be more appropriate to analyse the ‘feminization of responsibility’
- Women continue to have primary responsibility for care and domestic work and their ability to negotiate better work distribution within the household is limited





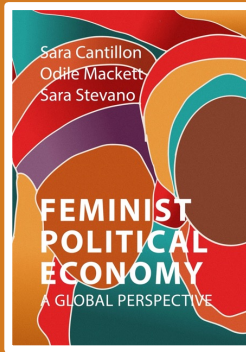
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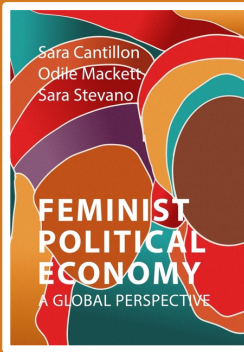
PART III

The complex relations between gender and poverty

Is the feminization of poverty thesis useful?

- It has been useful to draw the attention of researchers, practitioners and policy makers to the gendered nature of poverty
- However, it provides a simplistic understanding of such nature
- Its overwhelming focus on women-headed households, and the associated conflation of individual women with women-headed household, leads to misleading conclusions on poverty in women-headed households
- We need a better understanding of the relation between gender and poverty





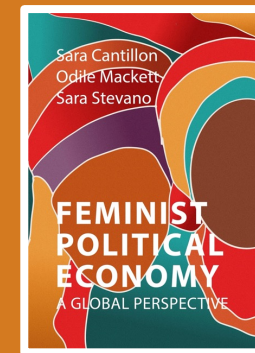
The risk of conflating gender and poverty

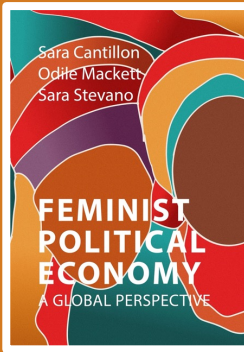
- Gender issues are ‘collapsed’ into poverty ones (Jackson, 1996)
- When gender issues are seen/addressed through poverty, the expectation is that they will be resolved through poverty alleviation programmes
- Jackson foregrounds forms of gendered oppression that are not linked with poverty, such as gender-based domestic violence, personal insecurity, health risks
- This critique is informed by a liberal understanding of women’s subordination that presumes a separation between capitalism and patriarchy



Patriarchal capitalism

- If we see how patriarchy and capitalism are systems that reinforce each other (Mies) or as integrated systems of oppression (contemporary SRAs), the oppression of women underpins processes of capital accumulation on a world scale
- Gender, race, class dimensions of poverty emerge from the global division of labour – structural change of the socio-economic system is required to change this





The importance of structures

- What is needed is a historico-materialist analysis of women-headed households
- ❖ In your own time, read this paper by Bridget O’Laughlin on women-headed households in southern Africa and how their emergence/growth was linked a regime of accumulation based on extractive industries in the region:

O’Laughlin, B. (1998). Missing men? The debate over rural poverty and women-headed households in Southern Africa. *The journal of peasant studies*, 25(2), 1-48.



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Thanks for watching! 😊



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