

A FEMINISATION OF POVERTY IN GREAT BRITAIN? A CLARIFICATION

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In a recent paper in this *Review*, I examined the relationship between gender and absolute poverty in Great Britain in the period 1968 to 1986 (Wright, 1992). Foster, Greer and Thorbecke (1984) poverty measures, based on three poverty lines, were calculated using data from the *Family Expenditure Survey*. The analysis supported two main conclusions. The first is that poverty rates are higher for women compared to men. The second is that there has not been an increase in the female share of poverty. The latter finding was interpreted as evidence *contrary* to the so-called feminisation of poverty hypothesis—the belief that the incidence and intensity of female poverty is increasing.

With respect to formally testing the feminisation of poverty hypothesis I write:

Clearly, if the poverty experience is shared equally between males and females, then $S(\alpha)_f = S(\alpha)_m = 0.5$. On the other hand, if $S(\alpha)_f > S(\alpha)_m$ then poverty is not equally shared, with females being over-represented in the ranks of the poor. It follows that an increase in $S(\alpha)_f$ over time is indicative of a feminisation of poverty. (Wright, 1992, p. 21)

This method is strictly not a valid test of this hypothesis. In terms of the FGT poverty measure, $S(\alpha)_f$ and $S(\alpha)_m$ are the female and male “shares” of total poverty, respectively. It is only correct to say that poverty is “shared equally” between men and woman if $S(\alpha)_f = S(\alpha)_m = 0.5$ when the relative population shares of women and men are also equal. That is, when: $(n_f/n) = (n_w/n) = 0.5$. In addition, if the population share of women is changing over time, then changes in the female share of poverty, $S(\alpha)_f$, does not necessarily mean that female poverty is increasing relative to male poverty. This interpretation is only correct when the population share of women is also not changing.

Due to well-known demographic processes (mainly mortality differences), the population shares of men and women are not equal in nationally-representative samples, such as the *Family Expenditure Survey*. More specifically, these data indicate that the female population shares are: 52.3 percent in 1968; 52.7 percent in 1977; and 52.3 percent in 1986 (see Table 1). Clearly, the female share of the British population is significantly larger than the male share. Furthermore, the female population share is not the same at these three points in time.

If poverty is shared equally between women and men, then their poverty shares would equal their population shares. That is: $S(\alpha)_f = (n_f/n)$ and $S(\alpha)_m = (n_m/n)$. Therefore, a more accurate description of how “over-represented” women

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TABLE 1
FEMALE POVERTY SHARE/POPULATION SHARE RATIOS: GREAT BRITAIN

$S(\alpha)_f =$			$S(0)_f$			$S(1)_f$			$S(2)_f$		
			Year	n_f/n	$\rho =$	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.4	0.5	0.6
1968	52.3		1.05	1.03	1.05	1.06	1.04	1.04	1.05	1.05	1.04
1977	52.7		1.02	1.02	1.01	1.02	1.01	1.00	1.03	1.03	1.01
1986	52.3		1.05	1.06	1.02	1.00	1.03	1.03	0.98	1.00	1.01

Notes:

- (1) The table entries are: $S(\alpha)_f/(n_f/n)$.
- (2) $S(\alpha)_f$ is the female share of poverty.
- (3) The poverty line is $y^* = p \cdot \bar{y}$ where \bar{y} is the mean level of equivalent income in 1986.
- (4) α is the specific version of the FGT index employed.
- (5) n_f/n is the female population share expressed as a percentage.
- (6) For further details see Wright (1992).

Source: Family Expenditure Survey.

are in poverty is simply how much their poverty share exceeds their population share. A convenient way of summarising the magnitude of this disadvantage is the ratio of the female poverty share to the female population share. That is: $Ratio = S(\alpha)_f/(n_f/n)$. If this ratio is greater than 1, then women are "over-represented" amongst the poor. It follows that increases in this ratio, not necessarily increases in the female share of poverty, are indicative of a feminisation of poverty.

More generally, these poverty shares describe what may be termed the "distribution of poverty." If the poverty burden is shared equally across all population groups (for example, between men and women), then each group's poverty share would equal its population share. If this is not the case, the poverty share/population share ratios provide valuable information concerning which groups are over-represented in the ranks of the poor.

Table 1 shows the female poverty share/population share ratios calculated for all the poverty estimates given in my earlier paper. Turning first to the ratios based on the index that measures the *incidence* of poverty (i.e., the FGT measure with $\alpha = 0$), there is no clear pattern of increase or decrease. Likewise, when the ratios based on the index that incorporates information about the *average deprivation* of the poor are considered (i.e., the FGT measure with $\alpha = 1$), no clear pattern of change is found. Finally, the ratios based on the poverty index that captures the *relative deprivation* of the poor (i.e., the FGT measure with $\alpha = 2$), appear to be *decreasing*. For reasons discussed above, such a trend is contrary to the feminisation of poverty hypothesis. In other words, when these more informative ratios are examined, my original conclusion of little support for the feminisation of poverty hypothesis in Great Britain is confirmed.

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