

**Alive and kicking:
women's and men's responses to poverty
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Globalisation is a process that affects people in the North as well as the South. Its negative effects are felt by people living in poverty in wealthier countries, as well as by those living in poorer ones. Drawing on experience from the work of Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme, this article explores some aspects of how changing labour markets affect men and women living in poverty in the UK. People's sex is a key determinant of who is poor. Women and men have different experiences of poverty, different livelihood options, and different potential routes out of poverty. Government attempts to eliminate poverty, whilst laudable and to some extent successful, have been hampered by the gendered complexities of poverty.

Globalisation has been defined as 'the process through which an increasingly free flow of ideas, people, goods, services and capital leads to the integration of economies and societies' (Köhler 2002). It is not news to say that globalisation is a major influence on the breadth and depth of poverty around the world. Nor is it news to say that it has affected the North as well as the South. That globalisation affects the *nature* of poverty in the North is something which perhaps fewer people are aware of.

Similarly, it is now well-known that people's daily experience of poverty is defined and shaped by their sex, as well as by other variables. This is as true in the UK as elsewhere.² The intersection of gender-based discrimination, poverty, and the forces of globalisation in the UK, however, is less familiar. Increasingly, the reasons for some women and some men being, becoming or remaining poor, and why this happens, are to do with their relationships with the labour market of a global economy.

This article will explore what it means to be poor in a country generally perceived as wealthy, and how poverty itself is shaped by people's gender identity and their relationships to a changing labour market. Some of the issues raised will also have resonance in other contexts where paid employment has in the past been perceived as a predominantly male preserve.

Experience in two poor communities in the UK

Oxfam has been working in partnership with the South Bank Women's Centre, in a very deprived area in Teesside in north-east England (Links 2001). This region has 27 per cent of people living on a low income,³ the highest proportion in England outside London.⁴ At a workshop, women involved with the centre were asked to describe the changes they had seen over the past decade. Jobs for men in steel and ship-building had gone. A very small number of men had taken over the housework to enable women to undertake paid work, but men were not willing to take part-time work. The government had put resources into economic development in the area, and this attracted small businesses, mostly foreign-owned. More women had entered the workforce on a part time basis, often on short-term contracts. There was a constant challenge to juggle low and intermittent income with state welfare benefits. Women had increasingly taken on responsibility for household budgets, and described the way in which this left their menfolk feeling inadequate. Older men became depressed, and frustrations were often taken out on the women; there were many arguments. There was also an increase in the number of lone parents, with women being less willing to put up with the increased levels of abuse that had followed when the men lost their jobs. Sue Andersen, the Centre's Director, expressed it in this way: 'There aren't the jobs that the men want. No big companies are coming in bringing traditional work. We're getting part-time and short contract work, and more women are interested in doing those jobs. Yet the men aren't involved in the regeneration of our area, it's the women taking leadership in the community. The men don't seem to want to do the work.'

Another Oxfam partner in the UK is a community organisation in the ex-mining communities of south Wales,⁵ which have been greatly affected by the switch from a national policy of sourcing of coal within the UK to importing cheaper coal supplies, largely from eastern

Europe. The following account from the co-ordinator of the project illustrates the poverty that the organisation is fighting, and mentions some of the work it is undertaking:

'One of the first things we did was send around a questionnaire to everyone on the estate. We asked people what they thought about living on the estate. People said the best thing about the estate was the road out. We had no community services working with people here. No-one was dealing with the problems on the estate. There was nowhere for people to meet. We had environmental problems. There was no street lighting, and people were doing drugs in the derelict buildings. There are massive drug problems here and massive problems with anti-social behaviour. So nobody left their houses.

'Then we targeted the youth annoyance problem. The kids said they wanted somewhere to play football. We didn't have any youth schemes on the estate – every other estate had them, but there was nothing for kids to do here. So we kept asking and asking the authorities to start a youth scheme here. Now nearly every child on the estate is involved in the Foundation's youth activities. We've got teams for under 18s, under 16s, under 10s... Even a game of football can make a big difference to people on this estate. ...

'Before, there was no lighting in the middle of the estate, behind the shops. People didn't want to walk past the derelict buildings at night – they were frightened. People used to hang out there doing drugs. Now the Council has put a street light in. Before people here didn't have anyone to represent them, so the estate was forgotten.

'The main employer here was a light bulb factory at the end of the road. It closed ten years ago and then there was massive unemployment on the estate. Things died completely when the social club closed seven or eight years ago. Nobody had anywhere to meet and there was no focus for the community. It made me so sad to see people just shutting their doors. Years ago, if someone was ill, the community would have all chipped in to help.

'It's been very difficult to get the men involved. When we wanted to interview people about their views on the estate, we couldn't get any men to participate. We get a few men interested through the football but we have to work out other ways to get them more involved.'
(Project co-ordinator)

A detailed participatory needs assessment was undertaken, with Oxfam support, in January and February 2001. It was carried out by two local people, one man, one woman, who work for the local community organisation. Men and women were interviewed separately. The results reveal a wealth of detail about men's and women's experience of poverty, and the livelihood options available to them. Some of the findings are outlined below.

On the estate, family is the centre of women's world. Although they are willing to take up training, the needs assessment suggested that women's horizons are determined by the boundaries of the estate, and by what will be useful to them in getting jobs which mean they can support their children, or give them help of other kinds: for example, with homework. Women tended to recognise that the lack of training is a barrier which holds them back from reaching their full potential. They see everything through the lens of childcare responsibilities, and work is an additional rather than a central concern for many of them. The raising of children was seen by many as a life choice; when their children were grown up, then they could think about a job. Their concern was less with the state of the local employment market, and more with the practical difficulties that prevent them earning enough to support themselves and their children. They said that the jobs on offer are few, low-paid, and offer limited opportunities. Formal childcare is inflexible and scarce, and takes up a big percentage of the wage. They did not see the jobs which are available as an attractive option: they do not bring in enough money to replace the state benefits that would be lost as a result of entering paid employment. If they did work at all, they said they preferred it to be on a casual basis, and therefore able to be picked up and dropped around childcare needs.

Women saw life on welfare benefits as a struggle, in which they could expect to deprive themselves for the needs of their families, and expressed the view that it is hard to manage if there is no other income or support. Women spoke of the increased likelihood of going into debt in these circumstances, which was not something highlighted by men.

Men on the estate expressed the belief that academic qualifications are needed as the workforce is now very competitive – and this is a particular problem perceived by older men, with men over 40 tending to see themselves as unemployable. These men expressed willingness to undertake training if they could see a direct connection with better jobs, because their world-view means they live day to day for the necessity of bringing in money. They see the training that is currently on offer as slave labour, in that it is inadequate in the present, because the work it would prepare them for is badly paid, and inadequate for the future because it doesn't improve the quality of jobs actually on offer.

The fact that women see caring as their job, and men do not, is a critical factor holding women back from better training and employment, and men from greater involvement with their families. Women focused on the practical difficulties of undertaking training (for example, in information technology) which might open up new employment possibilities. The cost of materials and transport, course fees, combined with training not being flexible around school hours, childcare and part-time work, prevents them from taking it up. Women automatically accept responsibility for childcare. Many women said they would prefer to leave their children with a member of their family, who they feel they can trust. Finding childcare is a particular problem for lone parents if they cannot call on family members – for them, the costs and emotional ties of having to have a childminder mean that it is difficult for them to go out to work or to undertake training at all. The vicious circle of getting into high interest debt, and then not taking up employment because of increased repayments once off benefits,⁶ impacts on women's self esteem.

Women on the estate mentioned other personal barriers that men do not. They highlight the problem of ill-health and disability. They mention the personal isolation which comes from the lack of support and facilities for ill and disabled people and their carers. The fact that men do not mention them may be because of men's reluctance to admit to problems and stresses, rather than because they don't suffer from them. Men do highlight one problem, though, that may be particular to a male response to crisis – they say that alcohol and drugs offer a way out for many men when faced with the social and economic climate.

Gender and poverty in the UK: the wider picture

How do the two situations discussed above measure up against men's and women's gendered experiences of poverty in the UK? Some basic statistics show that the experience of poverty outlined above is not unique. The measure of people living in poverty most commonly used by government in the UK is that of people falling below the 'low income threshold' of 60 per cent of median household income, after deducting housing costs. This relative measure of poverty⁷ is based on the actual disposable income⁸ of households, gained from any legal source. Some 23 per cent of the population of the UK is poor by this measure (New Policy Institute 2002). It is not straightforward to break this statistic down by gender (see note 6), but two groups where women are predominant stand out in the figures experiencing persistent poverty:⁹ lone parents (27 per cent of this group – a figure that is falling but still significant, since lone parents are only 8 per cent of the general population), and single pensioners (21 per cent of this group, and increasing). The largest group of persistently poor people which can be discerned from statistics is the group living within workless households. As well as formally unemployed people, this figure includes people who do not do paid work because of caring responsibilities, illness and disability. So although the figures available are not transparent on gender, it is clear that poverty is a condition that affects women in greater numbers than men. Poverty in the UK also has an ethnic dimension, with 62 per cent of households headed by people of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin being in the bottom 20 per cent income bracket.

The recent context within which poverty exists in the UK is that of an economy which has been growing faster than other European economies, and which is becoming more and more 'individualised', with the individual increasingly taking the place of the household or the community as the 'building block of the economy'. However, in practice, one income is no longer generally seen as sufficient for household survival. Another change has been in the structure of the benefits system, whereby the Conservative government of the 1980s moved from linking increases in long-term benefits to earnings levels, to linking them to prices –

thereby ensuring that, as the economy grows and some get wealthier, the poorest get left behind, and the gap between them gets wider. The current Labour government, elected in 1997, has selectively increased some benefits at a higher rate than prices, which has particularly benefited young children and pensioners, but the general principle has not been reversed.

There is a strong regional dimension to poverty in the UK, with great inequality between regions within the UK in terms of contribution to GDP.¹⁰ There is a strong overlap between the poorest regions and the areas of decline of heavy industry.

As stated earlier, change in the structure of the UK economy over the past two decades has brought a significant shift away from heavy industries, which generally employed full-time, mostly male labour, both skilled and unskilled. Heavy industrial processes have moved to parts of the world where labour and raw materials are cheaper, and the environmental effects associated with them are less effectively controlled. The move has been towards light industry and the service sector, where employees are more likely to be skilled, but employed part-time, paid low rates and generally female. A significant proportion of this new economic activity has been developed with direct foreign investment.

The present government in the UK has placed significant emphasis on employment as the best route out of poverty. There has been some accompanying concern on the part of the government to see to it that the income from employment is sufficient to ensure that poverty is left behind, through a system of tax credits for low paid workers. Tax credits and schemes to support people into employment have had a high profile, and have mainly been targeted at the main earner. This has had the effect, in many cases, of channelling resources to men – a difficulty that has been recognised and addressed in the new Child Tax Credit, which from April 2003 will go instead to the main carer who is still usually a woman, and who is more likely to use the resources for family maintenance. These approaches, however, still fail to address the problem of significant numbers of jobs not being paid a living wage.¹¹ Nor are they adequate to address the power relations within the household which can subvert the best intentioned policy instrument, and can lead to hidden poverty.

A trend toward the individual being called upon to support him or herself economically is very hard on anyone who is not able to generate income – for example, because of severe disability or long-term sickness. It is also hard on the people who care for the people who cannot generate their own income, most of whom are women, as it has the effect of placing stresses on their time and energy, and constraints on their own capacity to earn.

The gendered context of poverty

There continues to be a disparity between the earnings of men and women in the UK, with female full-time employees earning an average of 82 per cent of the salary of their male equivalents. Women's gross individual income (including not just employment, but also benefits, pensions, investments, and so on) is on average only 52 per cent of that of men (EOC 2002). This 'gender pay gap' is largely the result of the fact that women continue to enter employment in the ghettos of the service and caring sectors, where their work continues to be undervalued because of its gendered nature. Women get this work because it resembles forms of work they carry out unpaid within their homes, and it commands a low wage because our society undervalues work associated with women.

The gap between women's and men's earnings also rests on the time commitment the majority of women make to their gendered role as primary carer for family and household, which continues to be generally unquestioned. Recent research into women's and men's incomes over a lifetime shows that for highly-educated women without children, the gender pay gap has significantly reduced (Rake 2000). But for all other groupings of women, the picture remains one where women lose out. The combined factors of women having to spend time out of the labour market raising children, and receiving lower earnings when they are in the labour market have a dramatic effect. The link between lifetime earnings and women's caring responsibilities, particularly for children but increasingly for others, is unmistakable – but it is not just a question of earnings and income: mothers have higher outgoings because of the need to pay for childcare and other child-related expenditure. For lone mothers, finding this money is frequently impossible.

This inequality between women and men in terms of the earnings they command is by no means a new phenomenon in itself, and certainly cannot be blamed on globalisation. It is, however, a force which contributes in a critical way to the availability of a workforce willing to accept part-time employment on whatever terms are offered. It is, therefore essential to the introduction of the kind of industry attracted to the UK by the forces of globalisation.

Women have been entering the workforce in increasing numbers over the past two decades. More than two fifths go into part-time employment (EOC 2002). For some women, this has meant an improvement in their household income; but it has not brought with it any significant reduction in the hours of work they put in as unpaid labour in the home: caring and household tasks still fall predominantly to women. For many women, particularly if they have children, there is little if any financial benefit in taking low paid part-time work without freely available childcare provision, and many women are still better off if the household remains in receipt of welfare benefits. Anyone on low income during their working life will be unable to make sufficient provision for their own pension, and will therefore continue to be poor in retirement in a context in which the pattern of extended families living in close proximity, and its attendant pattern of inter-generational mutual support and caring, is far less common than it used to be. Despite specific tax measures designed to support families with children, which have been introduced with some flexibility about who claims them, state welfare provision continues to be broadly formed around a gendered division of labour, with women as carers and men as breadwinners.

Much of the gender-disaggregated data most commonly seen refers to the position of women as disadvantaged, which continues to be the dominant gender concern for many analysts. But what of the gender context as it relates to men who are poor? Why are some men poor? This relates in large part to their changing position in the labour market and its consequences, which are not just about loss of income, but also about loss of power. We have already seen in relation to women that poverty is not just about low income levels, but also about access to other kinds of resources including social capital, and ultimately is an issue of powerlessness.

The decline of heavy industry has left men in some parts of the UK with the challenge of re-training in order to have a skill that is needed in the current labour market. Some men have successfully made the transition, but for many, particularly men in the second half of their working life, this has been a major challenge. A man who has worked for many years in mining, steel or ship-building, for example, not only earned his living that way, but did so within a culture of a particular masculinity, being seen by society as 'the breadwinner', and with his idea of himself as a man very closely linked to his occupation. With the demise of that occupation, his whole identity as a man comes into question. If his wife becomes the breadwinner, as has been seen in many of the areas most affected by industrial decline, his identity as a man is further put in question. It is small wonder that many men in this situation become depressed. As Colette Carol from CREST, a New Deal for Communities project in Salford currently supported by Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme, put it: 'older men don't make a fuss, and their needs therefore get ignored' (Ruxton 2002, forthcoming). Sandy Ruxton observes 'it appears that older working-class men in particular are unwilling to enter training schemes. One central factor is that the self-image of older men (50+) is closely connected to paid employment rather than training. Another is that they are also apprehensive of involvement in education, and fear that more training could result in renewed failure.' (ibid). Large numbers of men in traditional industrial areas do not feature in the figures for employed or unemployed people: long-term sickness and disability, sometimes as a result of their previous employment, affect up to 30 per cent of 25–64 year old men in some areas (Fothergill et al., 1999).

Younger men in the poorer and more disadvantaged communities are also facing challenges which arise from the interface between masculine identity and the kinds of employment opportunities now available to them. In particular, in addition to the generic high levels of unemployment among men of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin, young men of African-Caribbean heritage face high levels of unemployment. For example, a study by Berthoud found that young Caribbean men are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as young white men, and they also had lower earnings (Berthoud 1999). Whereas the number of suicides among women has decreased, the number among young men has more than

doubled in the last 25 years. There is also a growing concern over the level of boys failing at school compared with girls.

Being poor and male in a society where leisure activity for men has often revolved around work-mates and spending money (often on alcohol or sport) brings a different dimension to poverty for men. For women who become poor, traditional female leisure activities, and the social relationships that go with them, less frequently have to be abandoned – a cup of tea and a chat with friends is usually still within reach. Many men find themselves having to deal with unanticipated isolation that women do not, on the whole, experience.

The discussion above has shown that the experiences of women in poverty and men in poverty are very different. Women in poverty are generally exploited because their caring responsibilities limit their access to the labour market and they end up in low paid jobs or workless; they also very often have high levels of dependence, and therefore a lack of autonomy. Men in poverty are generally exploited because they are unable to adapt to the new types of labour market, and they therefore remain unemployed, or take significant cuts in income in order to get work. This can affect their self-identity and standard of living, but is less likely to undermine autonomy and relative independence. Some (mostly white) men's refusal to take poorly paid and part-time work could be viewed positively as a refusal to be exploited, where male immigrant men are more likely to opt for the poorly paid job.¹²

Addressing the needs of men and women in poverty

What can be done to address the poverty that exists within the apparent plenty of a Northern industrialised country? There is a big challenge here to think more clearly about the complexity of gender and poverty. As stated earlier, government initiatives have tended to focus on promoting participation in paid employment, which clearly presents a problem in the light of the strongly gendered nature of people's actual experience. For example, the 'New Deal for the Long-Term Unemployed' (1998) and the 'New Deal for Lone Parents' (1998), and other similar programmes developed since, are packages of support and benefits available to anyone who qualifies, regardless of sex. The former is by far the bigger pot of resources, yet only 27 per cent of people accessing it have been women. This is because generally, a male partner will apply on behalf of the household, and will therefore be eligible for the support scheme, which makes work compulsory. The female partner can access the 'New Deal for Partners of the Unemployed' scheme, which was set up in 1999 to offset the disadvantage experienced by partners of unemployed people who, since they do not claim benefit in their own right, cannot directly participate in the other scheme. This brings advisory support, but not the bigger range of training resources. Gender issues are also raised by the 'New Deal for Lone Parents'. Most lone parents are women, and the scheme is perceived widely as a scheme for women. Few lone fathers apply for it, but when they do, they can be faced with incomprehension and may even be turned down.¹³ It would make a big difference if the various initiatives being taken to address poverty could be more 'joined-up' – that is, based on a more complete and real picture of the issues and needs, and designed to fit together more effectively.

We need frameworks to guide policy and action that enable all the work that is required to sustain human life and endeavour to be visible and valued.¹⁴ They need to enable action to be taken that is relevant to different stages of life for both men and women. We also need frameworks that enable gender analysis to reach within the household unit to examine relationships between individual men and women, and to see the many ways in which individuals, households, families and other social groupings interact with the wider society and economy. Poverty is an issue of power as well as resources, and this is as true in the UK as it is in other parts of the world.

In Oxfam, we are beginning to use a sustainable livelihoods framework that encompasses both income-generating/economically valued work and unpaid/caring/reproductive/economically uncounted and undervalued work and recognises the relationship between them. It is a model that recognises the value of social relationships and social assets to the survival and well-being of individuals and households. This can be coupled with a gender analysis that looks at how men and women have differing access to and control of resources, only some of which have recognised financial value.

Figure 1: *Combining livelihoods and gender analysis*
INSERT DIAGRAM HERE

(Kidder (2002), diagram from Oxfam internal presentation¹⁵)

We think that strategies are more likely to succeed if they recognise the ways people living in poverty constantly juggle and negotiate different elements of the whole, in order to get by or improve their position. Strategies that continue to focus rigidly on one or two aspects, or focus on one side of the equation, are not likely to work.

In the UK, gender is not yet a concept embedded in the thinking of policy-makers of those charged with implementing policy. This can be seen in the continuing focus on 'equality of opportunity', where policy focuses on access to equal pay, equal opportunities for employment and equal rights under law. This puts an emphasis on legislation and policy instruments that will, in theory, mean that women and men have the same chances, making it illegal to discriminate, for example in the process of recruitment for jobs, in favour of one sex or the other. Equal opportunities is an approach that fails to address the fact that in many cases women have had less access to certain kinds of experience, perhaps because of spending time raising a family, and therefore will tend to be less well-qualified for the job.

As discussed above, despite decades of initiatives to close the gender pay gap, there is still a long way to go. We would argue that the inequalities will continue, and the effects of undervalued caring and reproductive work will continue to negatively affect the lives of both men and women, until a shift of focus is made onto achieving equality of outcomes, based on a re-valuing of caring and reproductive work, so that women's double burden is reduced. It is not enough to unlock a door and invite women and other disadvantaged people to cross the threshold. Obviously, we need to make it possible for them to go through the door if they so choose – but also for society to value what is on their side of the door more highly. Then more men will choose also to transverse the boundary and engage in caring activities as well, with all the positive benefits that brings.

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Notes

- 1 With thanks to Gina Hocking, Sue Smith and Fran Bennett.
- 2 See, for example, LINKS May 2001.
- 3 The measure of poverty used is explored later in the article.
- 4 Department of Work & Pensions 2000/1: 'Households on Below Average Income 2000/1'.
- 5 The partner organisation prefers to remain anonymous.
- 6 There are two aspects to this: direct deductions are made for some debts when the debtor is on benefits, making them easier to manage; then when people get into work, direct deductions stop and creditors often demand repayment of the whole debt.
- 7 The unit of measurement for poverty is the household, which is a problem if we wish to understand the gendered nature of poverty, as it does not allow for the possibility that unequal power relations within households may mean that even in some households with incomes above the poverty line there may well be hidden female poverty.

- 8 Adjusted to allow for size and composition of the household in order to allow comparisons to be made.
- 9 Below 60 per cent median income for three out of four years, 1996–9. Statistics from DWP: 'Households Below Average Income 2000/1'.
- 10 The UK ranks second only to Mexico in the industrialised world for regional inequality. OECD Territorial Outlook 2001.
- 11 The introduction of a minimum wage has caused some incomes to rise, but is set too low.
- 12 Thanks to Caroline Sweetman (pers. comm.) for this point.
- 13 I am not aware of any systematic research on this, but the phenomenon is described to Oxfam by a UK partner, One Parent Families Support and Information Network in York: 'The isolation, loneliness, displacement from society and anxiety that is experienced by many if not all the participants is shocking. The joy and pleasure that these fathers take from their fathering is obvious and the success that they achieve in creating warm loving safe environments for their children is clear. What is also clear are the barriers they face in their fathering, from social services who expect them to be substitute mothers to family and friends who expect them to fail and are surprised when they don't.'
- 14 The UK now has a 'Household Satellite Account which estimates the value of unpaid work including childcare, but it remains separate from the main accounting systems.
- 15 My thanks to Thalia Kidder for permission to use this very helpful diagram here. Thalia works for Oxfam as Policy Adviser Livelihoods (Economics and Gender).

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