

Urbanization, gender and poverty

INTRODUCTION

Cities concentrate poverty but, for many, they are the best hope of escaping it. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to plan against, rather than for, low-income urban residents. This does not exclude them from income-generating activities but makes it difficult for them to secure decent living conditions. In so doing, inadequate urban policies place a disproportionate burden on reproduction rather than on production activities, and on women rather than men. A gendered understanding of urbanization and urban poverty is not just about women. It highlights how urban disadvantage is not only income-related, but includes limited access to shelter and basic services.

THE INCOME AND NON-INCOME DIMENSIONS OF URBAN POVERTY: WHY GENDER MATTERS

Most of the world's population now lives in urban centres, a proportion that is expected to increase in the next four decades, especially in low- and middle-income nations in Africa and Asia. Urbanization reflects transformations in national economies, with growing numbers of people moving out of agriculture and in to industry and services sectors. It goes hand in hand with economic growth, and with the potential for more efficient use of natural resources and greater environmental sustainability through technological innovation. At the same time, this shift in the distribution of the world's population means that poverty is increasingly concentrated in towns and cities. Urban poverty is, however, avoidable; it is largely the result of the lack of proactive approaches by policymakers towards urban growth which, in contrast, is almost inevitable.

Income-based measurements show that there has been a marked urbanization of poverty in the world: the estimated urban share of people living on less than US\$1 a day has increased from 19 per cent in 1993 to

25 per cent in 2002.¹ But these figures underestimate the real extent of urban poverty and the fact that in many urban centres a dollar a day does not cover the most basic needs.

The urban poor spend a disproportionate amount of their income on accommodation, even in inadequate and overcrowded housing. They often live in peripheral areas of cities, and face high transport costs to access workplaces and health and education services. Urban residents have limited opportunities to grow their own food and are vulnerable to abrupt price increases. But the poor are likely to pay more for food because they can seldom afford to buy in bulk and must often rely on credit from shopkeepers. The urban poor also tend to pay more for water, because they lack access to piped water and have to buy from private vendors, or because they have shared water connections and cannot benefit from lower rates linked to lower quantities used. Many of them also have to pay to access latrines.

Urban poverty is not only about low incomes and high living costs. Poor planning for urban population growth means that most of the urban poor live in appalling conditions. Inadequate shelter and insecure tenure — often in unsafe neighbourhoods and areas exposed to hazards such as floods and landslides — combined with

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limited access to water and sanitation makes residents of low-income settlements extremely vulnerable to disease and accidents. Limited access to transport and distance from workplaces and services increase social isolation. This is exacerbated by inadequate protection of their rights and entitlements, and limited representation and power within political systems and bureaucratic structures.²

Perhaps most importantly, urban poverty, with its associated lack of infrastructure and services, means that daily domestic and care activities take up disproportionate amounts of time and energy. These duties tend to fall to women, and put an often huge burden on women of all ages. Most poor urban women also engage in activities to boost household incomes, often at a very young age. As a result, women's workload, including paid and non-paid activities, is generally much higher than men's.

GENDER AND RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION

Urban centres increasingly attract women because they offer more economic opportunities than rural areas. This is reflected in changing urban sex ratios (the rate of males to females in a population): the proportion of women living in urban areas has risen steadily in most parts of the world. In Latin America and Southeast Asia, employment in export-oriented manufacturing has attracted female workers for decades, and in specific sectors such as garments, women make up 70 to 90 per cent of the workforce.

Urban centres also generally host a greater diversity of household structures compared with rural areas. Households can include tenants, new migrants from the same rural home area, friends and relatives and compositions frequently change. Moreover, in most low- and middle-income countries, women heading their households — either as a result of widowhood or separation, or because they never had a cohabiting male

partner — are more likely to live in urban centres and in many cases have moved from rural areas (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 compares the proportion of women-headed households in rural and urban areas in selected countries for which this information is available. Reasons for this urban concentration of women-headed households vary, but generally include the greater availability of income-generating activities, even if low-paid, and the opportunity to somehow escape social stigma. It is also associated with women's limited access to farmland in rural areas, often compounded by limited family labour and higher dependency rates in female-headed households.³

When considering migration, age is often as important as gender. The age of young people moving on their own (without following their family) has, in many countries, decreased dramatically in recent years. Adolescents as young as fourteen are moving alone from rural areas to urban centres, often as part of a family strategy to diversify income sources. Young people often move to seek education or jobs: boys typically find work in construction, while girls tend to work in domestic service.

In many cases, young people also move to escape oppressive family relationships. Being alone in the city obviously increases vulnerability, especially for young women. This is exacerbated by low incomes and high living costs, which can be a major constraint on access to health services, and safe and adequate housing. Despite this, young migrants still tend to contribute financially to their parental home, as this is often the only way to ensure that they are still considered part of the family and the safety net it can provide.³

FERTILITY AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

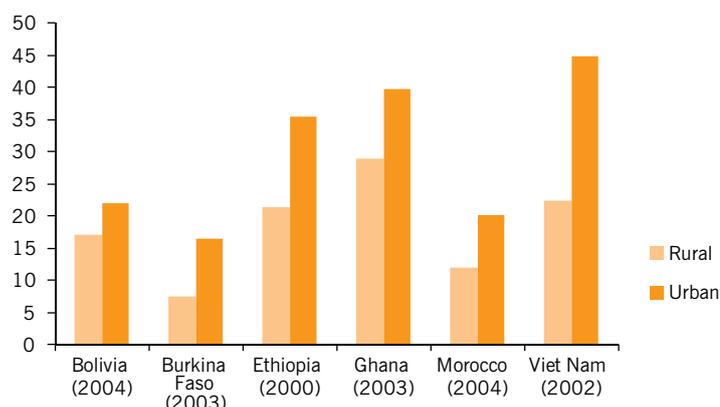
It is a common assumption that services related to family planning, conception and birth are more widely available and of better quality in urban centres than in rural areas. On average — that is, when urban centres are considered as a whole — this is often the case but access to services within cities can vary considerably.

One way of measuring this variation is to compare fertility levels between different urban neighbourhoods. Fertility rates are generally lower in urban areas compared with rural areas, although the difference is less pronounced among the urban poor and in smaller urban centres. In some African countries, the fertility rate of residents of poor, often informal settlements with limited access to health services is significantly higher than that of urban residents living in wealthier neighbourhoods.²

How does this affect rural-urban migrants? The evidence suggests that migrants' fertility declines rapidly after arriving in urban areas, as they adapt to their new environment. But poor migrants living in low-income settlements have the same constraints in accessing services as non-migrant urban poor women, and their unmet needs are just as high.⁴

Of course, reproductive health is not only about family

Figure 1: Women-headed households in urban and rural areas in selected countries



Source: Devinfo database

planning, conception and birth. The term also encompasses ‘imbalances in decision-making power in the context of sexual relations between women and men, including potential coercion and violence, and related health risks.’⁴ This is especially important for women and for young women in particular.

While the age of first marriage for urban women is generally higher than that of rural women, urban contexts potentially bring more sexual pressure on young women, affecting their reproductive health. In Tanzania, young girls in early adolescence (12 to 13 years old) increasingly move alone to cities. Weak or absent community and family support systems make these young girls particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. For them, but also for their non-migrant counterparts, high levels of poverty make any monetary and non-monetary sexual offer attractive, and put them at exceptional risk. Research in Tanzania shows that for one fifth of them, the first sexual encounter is forced, and that sexual abuse is prevalent. The consequence is that the incidence of HIV/AIDS is both location- and gender-skewed: HIV infection rates in Tanzania are 12 and 9.6 per cent respectively for women and men in urban areas, compared with 5.8 and 6.7 per cent in rural areas.⁵

Lack of water and sanitation makes the urban poor more prone to a range of illnesses that compromise their immune system and make them more susceptible to HIV infection and accelerated progression to AIDS. Women affected by bilharzias often end up with lesions in their uro-genital tract that makes them three times more vulnerable to HIV infection. The risk of passing HIV on to babies is seven times greater for pregnant women infected by worms; and HIV-infected people with malaria can be seven times more contagious than other HIV-positive people.⁶

Restricted access to sanitation can also have severe implications for urban women’s reproductive health. Women that lack access to toilets, either because there aren’t any or because public toilets are too expensive to use, often resort to open defecation. To somehow protect their privacy, women often prefer to do this at night, but this exposes them to sexual assault and early sexual debut. Efforts to restrict defecating and urinating during the day can also affect women’s food intake; and a lack of toilets in schools can dissuade young women from attending them once they start menstruating.

GENDER AND URBAN LABOUR MARKETS

A key difference between urban and rural areas is that urban residents depend more on waged employment and have more limited access to land for subsistence activities. Many of the urban poor rely on inadequate and unstable incomes from informal sector work which includes various occupations, from home-based micro-enterprises to street vending and waste picking.

Since the 1970s, the proportion of women in the labour force has increased in most regions of the world. This is due

to a range of factors including rising education levels, lower fertility rates, changing aspirations and the growing need for cash to cover mounting living costs associated with the privatisation of public welfare services.⁷

But despite greater participation in the labour force, women tend to concentrate in lower quality, more precarious forms of paid work. In part, this is because they need to reconcile paid employment with their primary responsibility for unpaid domestic and care work within households. But it is also the consequence of segmentation of labour markets along gender lines which prevents women from entering better paid and more protected jobs.

To a large extent, the ‘feminisation’ of the labour force is closely linked to the informalisation of labour markets.

Women’s jobs are often in the informal sector, but even in the formal sector, women concentrate in export manufacturing and non-core jobs, which are the most vulnerable during a recession. At the same time, a growing proportion of female workers in export-oriented industries are home-based and their earnings depend on how many pieces they can produce, blurring the distinction with work in the informal sector.

In the current economic crisis, informal sector workers suffer from shrinking consumption and declining demand. They also face more competition as workers laid off from formal sector employment enter the informal sector and as jobs are informalised. Because women have vulnerable jobs in the formal sector, they also make up the majority of new entrants in the informal sector.⁸

A ‘FEMINISATION’ OF URBAN POVERTY?

Since the mid-1990s there has been a growing debate on whether there is a ‘feminisation’ of poverty. Proponents argue that most of the world’s poor are women; that the incidence of poverty among women compared with men is growing over time; and that this is linked to the growing number of women-headed households, which are thought to be disproportionately poor compared to men-headed ones. Since women-headed households concentrate in urban areas, this implicitly means that the feminisation of poverty is also linked to urbanization.

But there is little evidence that there really is a ‘feminisation’ of poverty. While women and women-headed households are often — although not always — over-represented among the income-poor, there is no conclusive proof that their relative numbers are growing.

A key problem is that income is calculated at the household rather than individual level. But the assumption that resources, including income, are equally distributed among household members has been widely proven to be misleading. Ignoring the inequalities in how resources are allocated within households means underestimating income or consumption poverty among women, particularly in male-headed households. This is compounded by inheritance

practices, the habit of registering assets such as land and housing to male heads — despite the often crucial contribution of women to self-built and self-financed housing — and women's limited access to credit.⁹

The idea of a 'feminisation of poverty' is primarily, if not exclusively, based on income and so neglects important dimensions of disadvantage. Women are worse off than men in many ways. Because they are usually responsible for domestic and care work, the limited access to basic services and unsafe environmental conditions facing the urban poor disproportionately affect women. Moreover, women's increasing engagement in paid work has not led to greater equality within households; men still retain much decision-making power over resource allocation and have not increased their share of domestic tasks.

It is perhaps more appropriate to view women's growing disadvantage as the 'feminisation of responsibility and/or obligation.'¹⁰ In this context, it is not surprising that many women living in women-headed households have chosen to do so voluntarily — as a route to ensuring that resources, however meagre, are allocated in a more equal way. Indeed, there is evidence that women and often children's life circumstances in women-headed households are frequently better than in male-headed ones.

HOW A GENDER PERSPECTIVE CONTRIBUTES TO UNDERSTANDING URBAN POVERTY

Interventions to reduce poverty tend to focus on people's material circumstances. While these are certainly important, a gender perspective supports a broader understanding of disadvantage that stretches beyond

incomes to include domestic and care responsibilities, dependency and powerlessness. Among the urban poor, women's engagement in paid work is all too often not a route out of poverty but a necessity, and one that is subject to increasing insecurity and low earnings. In many ways, women are the cheapest labour entering the urban economy. The link between the feminisation of the labour force and the informalisation of labour markets is a direct result of women's subordinate position as flexible workers confined to low-paid jobs.

Attempts to curb urban population growth commonly make it difficult for the urban poor to secure access to shelter and basic services, including environmental services. Avoiding investment in public goods and services that are essential for the wellbeing of urban populations implicitly assumes that social reproduction and care activities are 'private'; that is, that they can be undertaken within the individual household.

Such an assumption, along with the worsening basic services and local environments that go with it, has an acutely gendered impact. It disproportionately burdens women, who tend to be responsible for private provision of care while at the same time contributing to household incomes and facing an unequal distribution of resources and tasks at home.

Urbanization is typically linked to positive transformations, such as economic growth and a better educated and more productive labour force. It can and should also contribute to greater environmental sustainability through more efficient use of resources, and to improved social welfare through better access to services. But this can only be achieved by policies and planning that account for both income and non-income aspects of urban poverty, and that address the gendered nature of disadvantage.

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UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is an international development agency that promotes the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity.

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