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Gender and Extreme Poverty

Too often, women living in extreme poverty are relegated to the category of “victim,” because their capacity to revolt and resist is not recognized. It is apparent that these women are victims of both gender inequality and of extreme poverty, but when we fail to recognize the active role they play, we continue to perpetuate the myth that submission and inferiority are somehow innate in the lowest-income communities. Certain social welfare institutions in Europe and North America, as well as certain development programmes in Africa or Latin America tend to see women in extreme poverty as passive, indifferent and even unaware of their oppression, tolerating a situation that no better-off woman would tolerate. This attitude is based on the idea that women living in extreme poverty are only victims, incapable of acting on their own behalf.

On behalf of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, I will present some of the implications of the **junction between gender and extreme poverty**, which is the result of a history of this movement's action and knowledge gained in fighting against the exclusion and violence of extreme poverty. This work has contributed towards defining **extreme poverty as** a condition which “simultaneously affects several aspects of people’s lives, when it is prolonged and when it severely compromises people’s chances of regaining their rights and of reassuming their responsibilities in the foreseeable future,” differentiating it from insecurity and poverty.¹ Even in the current situation of crises, where ever more people and families are falling into poverty, few things have changed for those who are born into persistent and inter-generational extreme poverty.

This presentation will develop two themes, work and family, through the lens of intersection between gender and extreme poverty, and building on the experiences of oppression and resistance of women living in extreme poverty, alongside whom ATD Fourth World's Volunteer Corps works. Their experiences are recorded in family histories and interviews, carried out between 2004 and 2009, which take as their starting point the experience and **knowledge** of women living in extreme poverty. There is no homogeneous group of “very poor women.” On the contrary, the approach of ATD Fourth World in terms of action and knowledge, is built on the conviction that the starting point must be the complexity and richness of individual experiences which constitute the daily lives of the poorest. Based on this work, we affirm that, far from being victims, women living in extreme poverty possess a capacity to revolt and resist.

Beneficiaries or Activists?

For the 1st World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, ATD Fourth World published the *Fourth World Women's Charter*; based on what activists living in extreme poverty had expressed in People's Universities (participatory discussion fora) on the theme of “Women and Extreme Poverty.” The knowledge which emerged at this time questioned how these the violence of gender and extreme poverty reinforces one another. This charter affirmed that women are not only characterized by their gender but by being women from a certain social condition, and that an ignorance of the intersection between gender and extreme poverty risks excluding the poorest women from the centre of feminist and feminine movements and organizations. “*Throughout the world of women the most diverse conditions and aspirations exist. Do the people who speak of*

¹ Despouy, Leandro. “Final Report on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty,” United Nations, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13 .

women's conditions take them all into consideration? Are all women equally represented? [...] It is only about certain categories of women and, especially, women from a certain background and a certain strata of the population. The poorest women belonging to the most excluded strata are never included.”²

In the context of the 1970s, this understanding of the intersection between gender and extreme poverty, and the awareness of the exclusion of the poorest women, brought ATD Fourth World closer to movements such as that of the Black feminists in the United States. The title of the *Fourth World Women's Charter* in 1975 echoed the phrase of Sojourner Truth, a woman who had been enslaved, a militant abolitionist and feminist, who addressing in 1851 a feminist assembly made up of mainly white, upper-class women, asked, “*Am I not a woman?*”

Although the international approach to gender issues has evolved enormously since 1975, programmes designed to support women living in poverty have had an unintended negative consequence. If today very poor women are the beneficiaries of a number of feminist organisations, women's shelters or development projects, they are rarely seen as activists. For example in the Paris “Women’s Houses”—which welcome women living in difficult situations or in extreme poverty—the logic behind these institutions is based on the distinction between activists and “victims,” or beneficiaries. When the latter participate in public events, their involvement is limited to cooking or decorating. In this way, their participation, whilst vital to the successful running of such events, remains invisible to the public. ATD Fourth World starts from the principle that women living in poverty are actors and agents of resistance against extreme poverty. They use their knowledge to make plans for themselves and their families to overcome their situations. The failure to harness the resistance and knowledge of the most disadvantaged women can become an additional obstacle to lasting change.

Work

For the lowest-income women, work often means **multiple and continuous migrations** between urban and rural districts, between different neighbourhoods and between different cities, according to the seasons and opportunities. They carry out **undervalued** and sometimes **shameful** work, in employment fields where they are considered interchangeable, or in self-employment where they are unprotected. They work in informal or unregulated sectors, such as childcare or domestic work, without health insurance, a fixed salary or paid leave. They do badly paid work in the food service sector, in industrial cleaning; or caring for the elderly. They earn a living as launderers, street vendors, bottle recyclers or as prostitutes in bars or on the street.

They are more often than not **considered as bad mothers or bad workers**, yet they constantly make sacrifices to fulfil both roles. They are often obliged to choose between working to earn a livelihood or staying with their children to protect them from the violence of extreme poverty.

“Mrs. Kimberly Paul often works until 9:30 at night. Because she cannot leave her 6-year-old son alone, she must leave him with her mother five days a week, about two hours from her home. Earning her living is contingent on the fragile web that holds up the working-class—subsidies coming through, nobody getting sick—and carries with it a price that no middle-class mother would consider paying: her child doesn't live with her.”³

2 De Vos van Steenwijk, Alwine, and Wrésinski, Joseph, “La femme du Quart Monde, une inconnue,” Pierrelaye: Editions Sciences et Services, 1976.

3 Skelton, Diana (ed.), *How Poverty Separates Parents and Children: A Challenge to Human Rights*, ATD Fourth World and the United Nations, 2004, page 92. <http://www.un-ngls.org/orf/atd-study-poverty.pdf>.

"I carry on washing other people's clothes so that my children can eat and go to school," says Mrs. Mercedita Villa Diaz Mendez from the Philippines.⁴

"I'm not going to hire a childminder who does not stay with their own children." What Mrs. Vicky Mercier from Luxembourg is told at a job interview expresses the extent to which the work of very poor women is discredited. She was not hired as a childminder because she does not live with her children; her own children were taken into foster care because she and her partner did not have secure housing or income. Now that she has found housing and hopes to be reunited with her children, she is criticised for not having an adequate income to look after them.⁵

As well as their work outside and inside the home, women living in extreme poverty have to travel long distances or wait for hours in offices to access **support** from institutions or charitable organisations.

Family

Family unity which is organised around work takes on a particular meaning in very poor households that have to survive from day to day. The difference in work and income between men and women are less important than in other social backgrounds, and most women work outside the home, often alongside their partners. Others are often the sole income earners in the household and it is often the young girls who become household heads. In Burkina Faso, *"In families living in extreme poverty, it seems like everyone helps out. The family is a unit. It is difficult for boy and girls to get school work done for sure, but there are less gaps between boys and girls than in working class families."*⁶

Work outside the home means both experiencing **exploitation** and **security** for oneself and one's family, as well as conveying a status of income provider, often as head of the household for certain young mothers or girls who are the sole earners. *"In Burkina Faso, one girl stopped school at 13 and she started work cleaning houses for food. Her work represents a huge security for the family because they were never sure of getting anything to eat."*⁷

Access to **contraception and abortion** are rights which are demanded by women in the Fourth World People's Universities. Sterilisation is practised in a freely consensual manner by many women living in poverty around the world. Yet economic factors lead to unequal access to these services which may take place within a legal or illegal framework, and in a medically safe or unsafe context. However, such practices have also been imposed on low-income women at different times throughout history, by force or economic constraints, within the framework of family planning policies, looking not to give them access to their rights but to control a population judged as undesirable by controlling poor women's bodies.

Until 17 April 2003, a law remained in force in the state of North Carolina (USA) authorising the eugenics commission to sterilise people judged "unfit to reproduce."⁸ This kind of legislation, applied in large measure to people too poor to defend themselves, was once widespread in many countries. In Peru, between 1995 and 2000, birth control was introduced coercively, often when a woman asked for medical help. Her request was considered only if she first agreed to have her Fallopian tubes tied. Between 1930 and 1970, Sweden sterilised 62,000 people, as a pre-condition

4 Godinot, Xavier (dir.), *Eradiquer la misère: Démocratie, mondialisation et droits de l'homme*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008.

5 Heyberger Patricia and Vicky W., "On a eu des hauts ensemble. Famille : des liens contre la misère," in *Revue Quart Monde*, N° 150, 1994.

6 Stornelli, Karen, in an interview about the seven years she spent in ATD Fourth World's team in Burkina Faso, 2009.

7 Godinot

8 Skelton, page 94.

to accessing social welfare, keeping custody of their children or leaving prison. Forced sterilisations have been part of the history, sometimes recent, of very poor women. The distrust that is the result of this history must be taken into account by current family planning policies in their ambition to reach the poorest women.

Taking children into foster care, putting them up for adoption and putting children and young people into group homes, although intended as a means to relieve the burdens weighing on women living in extreme poverty, are too often instead tools used to control and punish a whole social class. This is seen in institutional policies and professional practice.

Mrs. Alicia recounts, “to leave I had to pay for my hospital stay. The nurse told me, ‘If you don't pay; we'll keep the baby, why would you take her if you're not able to look after her? If you don't have enough money to leave hospital, you won't have enough to feed her.’”

In France, social services call Mrs. Céline Lenand to explain to her that her baby will be taken into care. She flees the hospital to look for her partner, but when she returns her baby is no longer there. He will be placed in a foster home. The reasons given to her are her previous stays in a psychiatric hospital and her partner's recent homelessness. The intervention of a committed doctor was necessary in order for Mrs. Céline Lenand to return home with her child.⁹

In England, the fact that a parent has been in local authority foster care as a child can be considered as justifying the concern of social services regarding their capacity to look after their child. In some circumstances, they may not be represented when social workers ask a judge for an emergency care order.

“In Africa, there is a whole context: the responsibility of many sectors create conditions where the children of very poor people can be considered orphans and adopted internationally. Their parents are considered invisible, because of their lack of means to provide for their children.”¹⁰

While there are cases where alternative care of children is necessary to protect the children from abuse, there are also many situations where appropriate support could allow children to remain safely with their families. Removal of the children is a policy often applied in the interests of the child, despite the frequent pejorative effects on a young population who grow up cut off from their roots.

Such policies are often based on a logic **excluding fathers** regardless of the situation: to obtain certain forms of welfare support, women are required to leave their partners or the father of their children.

In New Orleans for example, there is no city-run shelter that will accept fathers, or even male children over the age of 11. For this reason, some homeless families there avoid the shelter system.¹¹

In Burkina, some fathers don't exist legally on their child's birth certificate because otherwise the family wouldn't be supported by the state institutions.¹²

In the end, these policies end up in **increased control over low-income women**, over their bodies and their relationships with their children and their partners. Because these policies, often intended to protect women, were not thought out in partnership with those living in extreme poverty, their results can be paternalistic, or can turn into sanctions against women. Yet, *“given their situation of poverty, they are the ones considered at fault, blamed, even by their husbands and children whose most elementary demands they cannot satisfy.”¹³*

9 Godinot

10 Stornelli

11 Skelton, page 91.

12 Stornelli

13 De Vos van Steenwijk

*Mrs Mercedita Villar-Diaz Mendez from the Philippines and other people from her neighbourhood, came together to free a woman imprisoned with her child for begging with a minor.*¹⁴

*In Burkina, Awa, a young single mother “was offered a training program, if she agreed to give up her daughter for the four years of training. Her older sister Mariam, also living in the streets, told us later that she convinced Awa not to go, telling her ‘you will never see your daughter again’.”*¹⁵

In France, there are many examples of social services that say to a woman, “If you leave your partner, we can help you, but if you stay with him we can't do anything for you.”

The solutions and advice offered to the most excluded women by welfare institutions can end up shutting them into their situation of extreme poverty. *For doña Matilda from Guatemala, it was too expensive to get married and when she decided to separate from the father of her children she had to renounce State support.*¹⁶

In Switzerland, a young woman who was applying for work in an employment agency, was told by a social worker that if she wanted State support she needed to have a child because she had no chance of finding work.¹⁷

Family bonds in the poorest and most excluded environments take very diverse forms, but all go beyond biological links and the confines of the nuclear family. In order to struggle against extreme poverty, **very low-income women create ties with children who are not their own** (the case with doña Matilda in Guatemala and doña Alicia in Peru, for example), with men who are not the fathers of their children (as in Mrs Mercedita from the Philippines who says, "I didn't really love him but I pitied him"), and with women who are not their sisters.¹⁸ Women living in extreme poverty are often part of families that split apart and then reform with different partners.

For very low-income single mothers, **children represent a huge support** for the work and organisation of the home, caring for the youngest children and maintaining family ties.

*Mrs Mercedita from the Philippines tells how her daughter, "Roseline, wants to look after her little brother. She says that she doesn't mind begging all day along in the street to be able, at the end of the day, to buy him some milk. What matters to her is that her brother stays with us."*¹⁹

But maintaining these ties with their children is all the more fragile when women are alone. *In some legislative frameworks, as in Burkina Faso, single mothers often have fewer rights than others and find themselves faced with complicated decisions. If she gives her surname to their children, the latter will be looked down upon and stigmatised. If she gives them the father's surname, she risks losing custody of the child at any moment.*²⁰

Family ties can protect against extreme poverty. Some women who have left their partners maintain contact with them in solidarity, because they are from the same social background or community and because they share the same difficulties, injustices and struggle for their children.

*Madame Vicky Mercier from Luxembourg says, "We are divorced. Yet you shouldn't believe we've abandoned one another. That's not how it works with us. Let's say we help each other better this way. He lives nearby, we support each other a lot."*²¹

14 Godinot

15 Stornelli

16 ATD Fourth World, *This Is How We Live*, Fourth World Publications, 1994.

17 Kuehni, Morgane, « Des chômeuses face aux violences administratives en Suisse », in *Nouvelles questions féministes*, vol. 25, n. 3, 2006.

18 Godinot

19 *Ibid.*

20 Stornelli

21 Heyberger

For women living in extreme poverty, as opposed to women from other social backgrounds, family ties and children are a resource against extreme poverty. **Many of them struggle to make the home a place of resistance to the violence of extreme poverty that they and their partners have undergone at work and in the street, violence that goes as far as killing their sons, daughters, brothers and sisters.** Their status as mothers turns them into activists.

Their status as mothers and as workers, even if invisible and undervalued, turns them into actors of change for themselves, their family and their community.

The lowest-income women, as activists in their own right, have to be at the heart of places where decisions are taken on questions of gender because, *“whilst the conditions of the poorest women persist, no woman will truly be protected. Any right that is refused to the woman at the bottom of the social ladder is not an inalienable right for all women.”*

Ways forward?

The many challenges carried by low-income women around the world to hold their families together and to find shelter and work are also obstacles to education and job training. We know that these women play active and courageous roles in their communities and that their victimization is most often at the hands of economic forces and social policies designed without ever consulting them. But how is it possible to catalyse these women’s strength and resistance in ways that lead to lasting change?

One way forward is through programs that link economic empowerment with a transformation in working relationships. In ATD Fourth World’s “Working, Learning and Living Together” project, for example (carried out in Guatemala, France and Madagascar), women who may have previously done work that endangered their very health (such as prostitution, or baking tortillas with scavenged construction site wood that poisons their lungs with chemicals as it burns) learn to train one another to do creative craft work. This project is not only about creating decent work but making it possible for both women and men living in extreme poverty to decide together on the ground rules for their workshops and to support one another in making it possible for each person to participate to the best of their ability, despite the many crises in their personal lives that create obstacles to regular work.

Finally, the most crucial way to move forward is by taking seriously the voices of women mired in the most difficult situations of poverty, like that of a woman in rural Bolivia who was finally able to participate in a people’s university and said, “I thought I would go to my grave without ever being able to speak out” about oppression and stigmatization within her small community. The United Nations’ draft Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights are the fruit of many such consultations with both women and men living in extreme poverty and helping to shape concrete policy recommendations that would respect the human rights of all people and peoples.

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