



## Resolution 1558 (2007)<sup>1</sup>

# The feminisation of poverty

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The term “feminisation of poverty” means that women have a higher incidence of poverty than men, that their poverty is more severe than that of men and that poverty among women is on the increase. Preventing and reducing women’s poverty, if not eradicating it, is an important part of the fundamental principle of social solidarity to which the world is committed.

2. Poverty can be described as the impossibility of meeting a person’s minimum biological, social, spiritual and cultural requirements. The Parliamentary Assembly notes that in this regard women are the most vulnerable group of the population. Women may face difficult situations in which they are particularly exposed to poverty, for instance when they are pregnant as teenagers, or are lacking a vocational qualification, after a divorce or upon retirement, when they do unpaid housework, which does not lead to the improvement of their skills, the strengthening of their economic situation or their financial independence, and does not count towards the calculation of their pension scheme. In general one can say that women’s contribution to the development of the family, society and the economy is regularly underestimated and underpaid. The risk of poverty for households led by women is one third higher than that for other households. In fact, single mothers are in the same situation as large families, if not worse in many cases.

3. This is the basis for the phenomenon called “the feminisation of poverty”, by which is meant the prevalence of the number of women and children in the total number of poor people. This assessment basically refers to material (income or property) poverty. However, from the perspective of human poverty, namely the development of opportunities or freedom of choice, the gender inequality is deeper.

4. While identifying poverty as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, the Assembly finds that gender inequality is one of the factors at the very roots of poverty. There are four groups of problems:

- 4.1. the gender division of labour, which results in highly paid jobs generally for men and lower paid jobs for women;
- 4.2. inequality in access to and disposal of resources;
- 4.3. women’s limited power to defend their interests, which is conditioned by economic, legal, social, cultural and other factors;
- 4.4. poverty hinders women’s participation in the democratic process, and restricts their access to civil rights.

5. Gender inequality hinders poverty reduction and endangers the prospects of economic and human development. The Assembly thus invites Council of Europe member states to regard gender equality not only as a condition for social justice but also as a condition for the promotion of development.

6. The results of the time-use pilot study conducted in 2004 in some countries show that women in developing countries spend more time on housework than men. Consequently, a significant gender difference appears with respect to the compatibility of profitable employment and personal life. Such a difference also exists in other countries, including the developed ones, but on a smaller scale.

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1. Assembly debate on 26 June 2007 (21st Sitting) (see [Doc. 11276](#), report of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, rapporteur: Mrs Naghdalyan). Text adopted by the Assembly on 26 June 2007 (21st Sitting).



7. Unemployment can be assessed similarly. In developing countries the level of unemployment among women significantly exceeds the level of unemployment among men. The gender character of the problem of unemployment is related to age and marital status. While the chances of finding a job for unmarried young men and women are almost the same, women in the 50-54 age group are more likely to become unemployed and, consequently, have a higher risk of poverty.

8. Children growing up in poverty are also at risk of being underfed, hence physically underdeveloped, and of being undereducated, which, again, reduces their chances of escaping poverty in later life. Children's poverty includes not only material difficulties but also the lost opportunities with respect to the development of their human capital; as a result the transmission of poverty from generation to generation becomes almost inevitable.

9. The Assembly draws attention to the consequences of extreme poverty, which can lead to even worse situations of violence, prostitution and human trafficking and to which vulnerable women are more subject.

10. The Assembly thus attaches great importance to the elimination of poverty and not only its reduction, that is, the package of passive state policy measures of social assistance, including family benefits and social protection. It calls on the governments of member states to move towards the goals of human development and the establishment of social justice, and thus to identify the essence and tasks of policies aimed at the elimination of poverty based on the conceptual approaches of poverty eradication and on earmarking priorities and guidelines. A principled provision should be set forth in conceptual approaches: the elimination of poverty should be considered an issue of development and not of survival. The aforementioned approach, though valid for all countries, is of primary importance for developing countries and countries in transition.

11. The Assembly believes that it is necessary to adopt a gender-specific perspective as a key component of all policies and national programmes to eradicate poverty and combat social exclusion, in order to remedy and prevent the risk of poverty among women.

12. The development of employment is, indeed, the socially more accepted and economically efficient way to overcome poverty. In this respect, the key problems for the economic situation of women include discrimination against women in the labour market, insufficient employment opportunities for women and insufficient social security for working women.

13. The Assembly thus calls on Council of Europe member states to:

13.1. assess gender inequality in the formal labour market and reveal its causes;

13.2. consider developing methods of influencing the labour market (if need be through positive discrimination, gender quotas or other methods) aimed at the practical application of the principle of equality of opportunities;

13.3. observe non-formal labour market parameters, including the gender dimension, the underestimation of which casts doubt on the level of substantiation of economic and social development projects;

13.4. promote the development of national craftsmanship, home industry and small businesses through a privileged loan and tax policy, in particular in rural areas;

13.5. immediately apply the principle of "equal pay for work of equal value";

13.6. take the necessary measures to promote the reconciliation of work and private life, in order to enable women who so wish to pursue their careers or work full-time;

13.7. make employers aware of the need to provide career development opportunities for all employees irrespective of their sex;

13.8. maintain the principle of "balanced representation" for all civil service appointments, if need be by applying positive discrimination measures;

13.9. help women to enter or re-enter the labour market;

13.10. offer vocational training courses at all stages in life to enable women who lack sufficient qualifications to find a job;

13.11. support and encourage employers and businesses which promote women's employment, provide flexible working schemes, give access to childcare facilities, and so on;

13.12. support the creation of a qualification and training system for women entrepreneurs, contribute to the shaping of a positive image of women's entrepreneurship among the public, provide state funding for the development of women's entrepreneurship, and introduce and enlarge credit programmes for women entrepreneurs;

13.13. prepare national statistics, focusing on women's situation in the economy.

14. The Assembly recommends that Council of Europe member states apply the following measures with a view to improving social support:

14.1. assess the impact of social transfers according to the sex of the beneficiaries and, if need be, redress the balance between benefits;

14.2. significantly increase the allowances for the birth and care of children and for the duration of partially-paid leave;

14.3. set up childcare centres (for example, kindergartens with flexible hours) and other social services;

14.4. establish paid leave for taking care of sick children;

14.5. involve carers in social service projects for the elderly and disabled at home;

14.6. introduce allowances and other privileges (for example, paid leave) for the care of the elderly and other able-bodied family members;

14.7. involve a child specific component in national poverty elimination programmes, which, in particular, will include a considerable increase of the amount allocated to minors in the family allowance system;

14.8. implement training schemes for overcoming stressful situations, and establish socio-psychological services (for example, telephone hot lines) both for women and men.

15. The Assembly considers that the old-age pension system is crucial for poverty reduction both in individual families and at the level of the public at large and thus recommends that member states:

15.1. ensure that the scope and conditions of entitlement to old-age pension schemes enable women to have sufficient retirement pensions, especially by compensating for career breaks and part-time work due to childcare and the care of elderly or dependent persons;

15.2. introduce a minimum retirement pension for persons over the age of 60 who have not paid contributions or have not paid enough contributions to provide them with a decent standard of living, to which should be added a pension supplement based on the income earned during their period of employment;

15.3. provide social security cover for women caring for children or dependent persons or who have a modest retirement pension;

15.4. eliminate sanctions and restrictions which are applied by many pension schemes towards employees with irregular working activity (frequent change of work, change of professional occupation, geographic mobility), as well as in the so-called "flexible jobs" (part-time, or temporary or agency, domestic or distance work);

15.5. introduce in pension schemes the right to a pension in the event of the loss of the breadwinner, for divorced women and their children, as well as for women who have not registered their marriage;

15.6. not to restrict the eligibility for insurance in the retirement pension system in the event of a temporary break in career due to childbirth and childcare to six years;

15.7. pass the pension cumulative component right to the spouse by inheritance; the transfer of this component right can also be done by converting the accumulated resources of the individual pension accounts of spouses into a "joint" annuity.

16. The Assembly considers that poor health can be both a consequence of and a reason for poverty. Poor people are in a vicious circle: because of poverty they lack means to make contributions (medical services, food, clean water, sufficient sanitary and hygienic conditions, which are the prerequisites of good health) to preserve their health. This results in a reduced capacity for work and the individual becomes poorer. Hence the preservation of human health is an important component of poverty reduction and of the increase in living standards, and in this field an efficient purposeful policy should be pursued.

17. The Assembly thus calls on member states to:

17.1. act separately, according to “poverty” groups and geographical areas, in identifying the health care goals of the population linking them with “poverty maps” and implement targeted health care projects;

17.2. include representatives of the most vulnerable groups in the formulation of the basic services package provided by the state, focusing on social diseases (tuberculosis, infectious and sexually transmitted diseases), provision of medical services aimed at the protection of maternal and child health, and services of demographic significance (reproductive health);

17.3. encourage a more rational distribution of medical personnel in order to increase access to medical aid; in particular member states should:

17.3.1. introduce general practitioners’ practices in rural areas as a priority;

17.3.2. establish attractive conditions for new graduates to work in rural areas;

17.3.3. take more active measures to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/Aids, especially educational projects aimed at young people.

18. Quality education is one of the most important factors in mitigating poverty and inequality. Education for women greatly increases their opportunities and living standards. The Assembly sees a direct link between the level of education of women and the socio-economic conditions of their lives, since a low level of education for future generations means lost opportunities. The Assembly thus calls on the member states to promote the development of women’s opportunities through education, given the boomerang effect of women’s education on health care and the upbringing of future generations.