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HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL DECISION 2006/102**

Social Forum

**The fight against poverty and the right to participation:
the role of women**

Working paper submitted by Ms. Chin-sung Chung

**The challenges of women's participation in policies and
strategies to combat poverty and extreme poverty**

* Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 60/251 of 15 March 2006 entitled "Human Rights Council", all mandates, mechanisms, functions and responsibilities of the Commission on Human Rights, including the Sub-Commission, were assumed, as of 19 June 2006, by the Human Rights Council. Consequently, the symbol series E/CN.4/Sub.2/_ , under which the Sub-Commission reported to the former Commission on Human Rights, has been replaced by the series A/HRC/Sub.1/_ as of 19 June 2006.

Summary

This working paper is submitted for consideration at the fourth session of the Social Forum of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, pursuant to Sub-Commission resolution 2005/8 of 8 August 2005.

Increasing feminization of poverty and the fact that women are the main actors in organizations combating poverty and social exclusion draw attention to the importance of the role of women in development policies and programmes. The feminization of poverty must be understood as more than a phenomenon of a growing proportion of women among the poor, and the deep-rooted institutional causes and barriers which keep women caught in the cycle of poverty must be tackled conceptually.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other globally and regionally accepted documents have already provided a basic framework for a holistic approach to the issue of women and poverty. The Millennium Development Goals should be interpreted on the basis of interlinkage among the Goals, and must be interconnected with far-reaching obligations and commitments elaborating comprehensive ways to gender equality and the empowerment of women, using all relevant human rights mechanisms.

There have been a series of programmes deployed in order to engender development programmes and enhance women's participation, which is a vital and indispensable factor in the efforts to eradicate poverty. Many experiences, however, show that the effective participation of women cannot be achieved without creating an enabling environment by ensuring the enjoyment of women's rights as a whole. Participation processes should reflect the specific needs and arrangements of the women living in poverty, and poverty reduction programmes must be paralleled by the removal of the structural barriers and other human rights violations against women, which impede the empowerment of women in the context of transformational change.

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Introduction

1. In its resolution 2001/24 of 16 August 2001, the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights requested the Commission on Human Rights to authorize the holding of a pre-sessional forum on economic, social and cultural rights, to be known as the Social Forum. By its decision 2002/106 of 22 April 2002, the Commission on Human Rights approved the resolution, and the Social Forum was first convened in August 2002.
2. The first session of the Social Forum examined the impact of globalization on human rights and the state of hunger and poverty reduction strategies in the context of the right to food (see E/CN.4/Sub.2/2002/18). The second Social Forum focused on the relationship between rural poverty and the rights of peasants and other rural communities (see E/CN.4/Sub.2/2004/26). The third Social Forum held in 2005 discussed economic growth with accountability in a human rights framework (see E/CN.4/Sub.2/2005/21).
3. The third Social Forum paid special attention to participation and empowerment as an indispensable factor in combating poverty, and acknowledged that the meaningful participation of people in decisions affecting them is a central component of a rights-based approach to poverty reduction. In his working paper submitted to the third session of the Social Forum, Mr. José Bengoa emphasized that active participation of the poor during the entire decision-making process, from project design to implementation and monitoring stages, is a precondition for the success of poverty reduction programmes and thus for compliance with the principle of democratic governance (see E/CN.4/Sub.2/SF/2005/3).
4. The present working paper is submitted pursuant to Sub-Commission resolution 2005/8 of 8 August 2005, which requested Ms. Chin-sung Chung to prepare a working paper on “The challenges of women’s participation in policies and strategies to combat poverty and extreme poverty”. In the resolution, the Sub-Commission decided that the theme for the fourth Social Forum will be “The fight against poverty and the right to participation: the role of women”, with the recognition of the increasing feminization of poverty and the fact that women are the main actors in organizations combating poverty and social exclusion.

I. UNDERSTANDING THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

5. The term “feminization of poverty” originated in the 1970s and 1980s in the debates in the United States of America about the high rate of poverty among female-headed households.¹ Since then, the term has been generally understood as referring to the situation of the growing proportion of women below the poverty line.
6. In both academic and development policy circles, there has been much discussion about what the feminization of poverty means and about whether the trend of the feminization of poverty can be empirically verified.² The feminization of poverty may be hard to statistically document because of limited data on intra-household resources; however, if poverty is to be seen as more than income poverty, that is, as low levels of capability resulting from denial of human rights or as the failure of basic capabilities to reach certain minimally acceptable levels,³ evidence of the feminization of poverty can be easily brought into relief.

7. Of the world's 6 billion people, over 1.2 billion - or 20 per cent of the world's population - live on US\$ 1 a day or less, and a majority of them are female.⁴ The concept of the feminization of poverty not only addresses this quantitative indicator of income poverty, but also the qualitative nature of poverty, that is, the deep-rooted institutional barriers which keep women caught in the cycle of poverty.

8. The capability failures which force more women than men into poverty are evinced by many social indicators, such as access to health care, maternal mortality rates, fertility rates, literacy, primary and secondary school enrolment, access to land or employment, wage differentials, etc. With regard to literacy, for example, almost two thirds of the world's 770 million illiterates are women. And, in almost all countries where literacy is below 90 per cent, women are more likely than men to be without reading and writing skills.⁵ Literacy is a fundamental skill, one that can empower women to take control of their lives, to engage directly with authority and to gain access to the wider world of learning. Thus, the failure of women's empowerment due to illiteracy is one of the main causes leading to the state of poverty.

9. All these gender-differentiated institutional outcomes are in turn shaped by a variety of more systemic institutional factors of kinship structures and inheritance patterns, distributions of power and access to decision-making, gender biases in legislation, and gender differences in space to organize and claim rights.⁶ Women from ethnic minorities, Dalit women, indigenous women, disabled women, girl children, elderly women, refugee women and migrant women⁷ are more likely to be found in poverty than others, as they are more often excluded from societal institutions than others. When understanding the feminization of poverty, therefore, what matters is to address the deep-rooted gender-specific causes of poverty rather than the symptoms.

10. As another aggravating factor responsible for the feminization of poverty, the dominant macroeconomic paradigm that prioritizes growth over equality, rights and sustainable development must be addressed as well. While economic growth is critical, economic policies that seek to meet the needs of poor people must start with a human rights-based framework with specific attention to the rights of women. Growth-based policies, within a market-based rather than social context, have made women worse off: paid work for women is increasingly insecure and without social protection; formal sector jobs are decreasing, pushing women further and further into informal and often precarious work; and increasing burdens on women's unpaid work are evident as social safety nets are weakened or eliminated.⁸

11. The process of globalization has also deteriorated women's economic situation in developing countries, accelerating the feminization of poverty. The negative impact of the globalization of the world economy is borne disproportionately by women. Women are more vulnerable to the uneven distribution of globalization. The trend of local economies becoming increasingly linked to global markets is often accompanied by a reduction in public spending and social programmes, pushing the costs on to the family, where it is most often the women who shoulder the added burden.⁹

II. EXISTING GLOBAL INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF WOMEN AND POVERTY

12. The Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September 1995 (A/CONF.177/20 and Add.1/Rev.1), addressed the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women as one of the critical areas of concern, and identified that the eradication of poverty cannot be accomplished through anti-poverty programmes alone, because democratic participation and changes in economic structure are necessary in order to ensure access for all women to resources, opportunities and public service.

13. The Beijing Platform for Action further elaborated that “Poverty has various manifestations, including lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure a sustainable livelihood; hunger and malnutrition; ill health; limited or lack of access to education and other basic services; increasing morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments; and social discrimination and exclusion. It is also characterized by lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and cultural life”. This complex nature of poverty acknowledged by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has provided a basic framework for a holistic approach to the issue of women and poverty.

14. The General Assembly launched the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006) in December 1995 under the theme of “Eradicating poverty is an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind”. Since then, the high incidence of poverty among women has been a focus of all poverty eradication policies and programmes taken by the international community, government and civil society.

15. In February 2006, the Commission for Social Development reviewed the implementation of the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, and noted that the access of women and youth to financial resources through microfinance is one of the success stories in poverty eradication; however, a significant portion of financial resources is being used mostly for current consumption, rather than for investment in education, for example (see E/CN.5/2006/6).

16. In his report reviewing the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (E/CN.5/2006/3), the Secretary-General also recognized that gender inequality is a major barrier to progress in reducing poverty. Women have less access to paid employment than men in most of the developing world. Women in Southern Asia, Western Asia and Northern Africa still hold only about 20 per cent of the paying jobs in sectors outside of agriculture.

17. The Secretary-General stressed in the report that empowered women can be the most effective drivers of development, and that direct interventions to advance gender equality should include measures such as increasing primary school completion and secondary school access for girls; ensuring secure tenure of property for women; ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health services; promoting equal access to labour markets; providing the opportunity for greater representation in government decision-making bodies; and protecting women from violence.

18. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, to which 183 countries around the world are party, provides an essential text for overcoming poverty and ensuring the rights of women by means of dealing with specific ways and factors intensifying the women's poverty.

19. With regard to women's right to participation, the Convention puts special importance on the participation of women in the public life, including development/poverty eradication programmes. In the preamble, it states that "Discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity, is an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries, hampers the growth of the prosperity of society and the family and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the services of their countries and of humanity". The Convention further obligates States parties to "take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country" (art. 7).

III. MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND GENDER MAINSTREAMING

20. There have been a number of criticisms of the fact that the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women were reduced to one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (the Goals) which were adopted during the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000 as a set of objectives to be achieved by 2015 in response to the world's main development challenges. The criticisms point out that gender equality is more than a mere single goal in itself and that it must be recognized as essential to the achievement of all the remaining seven goals.¹⁰

21. In particular, Goal 1, to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, neither explicitly mentions the gender dimensions of poverty nor designs specific actions and indicators to reduce the feminization of poverty.

22. The consequences of these limitations are already apparent. The country reports on the implementation status of the Goals tend to confine gender equality only to the Goals that relate to health (Goals 4, 5 and 6) and girl's education (Goal 3), and appear to exclude it from Goal 1, to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; Goal 7, to ensure environmental sustainability; and Goal 8, to develop a global partnership for development.¹¹

23. In this regard, if the Millennium Development Goals are to be an effective tool to pave ways for the eradication of poverty, it is very important to bear in mind that the Goals are not exhaustive and that there is a need for mutually reinforcing strategies that create interlinkage among the Goals - specifically, interlinkage between Goal 1 and Goal 3 in pursuit of addressing the feminization of poverty - which in turn must be interconnected with the more far-reaching obligations and commitments embodied in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other globally and regionally accepted documents, which have already adopted comprehensive and in-depth ways to address gender equality and the empowerment of women using all relevant human rights mechanisms.

IV. CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY PROGRAMMES

24. At the national level, efforts to implement the Goals have manifested themselves in various policies, plans and programmes, including poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs). In particular, PRSPs have become the main instrument for national development strategies in low-income countries. According to the World Bank, PRSPs are prepared by Governments through a participatory process involving domestic stakeholders and development partners, and describe a country's macroeconomic, structural and social policies and programmes to promote growth and reduce poverty.

25. From experience, the World Bank has affirmed that stakeholder participation is an essential element in each stage of a poverty reduction strategy (PRS), to ensure that the views of all groups are reflected in poverty diagnosis, selection of public actions, and evaluation of outcomes and impacts. Recognizing the gender dimensions of poverty, the World Bank has developed strategies and methodologies for removing barriers to women's participation in PRS consultations.

26. The barriers to women's participation in PRS consultations identified by the World Bank were as follows: women's representation is generally lacking in national consultations; women's participation is not considered by organizers; women do not attend meetings or do not speak; women are not informed; culture may limit meetings of women with male facilitators or outsiders; facilitators may be told information that the participants expect they want to hear; and women's views are not heard nationally.¹²

27. The problems addressed by the World Bank in its poverty reduction programmes actually have a similar appearance to the general challenges impeding women's participation in public affairs. Engendering the concerned policies and programmes is often misconstrued to simply mean including women as well as men, rather than bringing "transformational change in gender power relations".¹³ The policy of "add women and stir", without questioning basic assumptions or ways of working, does not substantially contribute to women's enjoyment of the right to full and equal participation in shaping decisions of importance to them, their families and their communities, including decisions relating to poverty eradication and development.

28. In the participatory approach to development, what should be remembered is that the enjoyment of the right to participate is deeply dependent on the realization of other human rights. For example, if the poor are to speak out, expressing their own voices and needs, and are to participate meaningfully in poverty reduction strategies, they must be free to organize without restriction (right of association), to meet without impediment (right of assembly), and to say what they want without intimidation (freedom of expression); they must know the relevant facts (right of information) and they must enjoy an elementary level of economic security and well-being (right to a reasonable standard of living and associated rights). Thus, without parallel arrangements to realize these other rights, the poor cannot participate, in an active and informed manner, in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of poverty reduction strategies.¹⁴

29. The enhancement of women's participation in poverty reduction strategies cannot be achieved without creating an enabling environment by ensuring the enjoyment of women's rights as a whole. The following two examples¹⁵ show how existing human rights violations, specifically violence against women, seriously hinder the activities and participation of women in their efforts to emerge from poverty:

In a Mexican project funded by the United Nations Development Fund for Women, the participants experienced increased incidents of battering. It appeared that the men's perceptions of the women's growing empowerment escalated [the men's] fears of loss of control over their partners. It is speculated that the increased abuse reflected the men's attempts to reverse the women's increased independence by disrupting their project involvement.

[In Sri Lanka, a woman] participated in a local credit scheme, [which] allowed women to process cashew nuts in their homes. As a result of her economic success, the woman initiated a legal separation from her abusive husband. Her husband and friends reacted hostilely towards her. They subsequently branded her a "hard" woman and allegations of prostitution were made against her.

30. As these examples suggest, development programmes also have the potential to adversely affect the prevailing social relations between women, men and their communities. Therefore, the issue of women's participation must be understood in the context of all other human rights violations against women, which result from differential power relations between women and men.

V. CONCLUSIONS

31. **Based on the recognition that poverty bears a woman's face, a series of programmes need to be deployed in order to engender poverty reduction strategies and enhance women's participation therein. Much experience, however, shows that development policies and programmes should be paralleled by substantial measures addressing the specific needs and conditions of women living in poverty.**

32. **The effective participation of women, which is a vital factor in the efforts to combat poverty in society as a whole, can only be accomplished by removing the deep-rooted structural barriers and other human rights violations against women which impede their empowerment in the context of transformational change.**

Notes

¹ The term "feminization of poverty" was first used by Diane Pearce, who observed that women's economic status had declined from 1950 to the mid-1970s, and that in the United States two thirds of the poor over age 16 were women. Pearce's study was followed by further research that showed that female-headed households, elderly single female households in particular, formed a larger and larger percentage of the poor. Diane Pearce, "The feminization of poverty:

women, work and welfare”, *Urban and Social Change Review* 11, 1978, pp. 28-36; Janice Peterson, “The feminization of poverty”, *Journal of Economic Issues*, vol. 21, 1987, pp. 329-337; Thomas J. Kniesner, B. Marjorie and Steven P. Wilcox, “Family structure, race and the feminization of poverty”, *IRP Discussion Papers*, DP #810 86, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1986, etc.

² BRIDGE (development-gender), Institute of Development Studies of the University of Sussex, “Briefing paper on ‘The feminisation of poverty’”, April 2001. Available at: <http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/reports/femofpov.pdf>.

³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Human Rights and Poverty Reduction: A Conceptual Framework* (New York and Geneva, 2004), pp. 19-20. Available at: http://www.ohchr.org/english/about/publications/docs/Broch_Ang.pdf.

⁴ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), “Working to Empower Women: UNFPA’s Experience in Implementing the Beijing Platform for Action - Women and Poverty”. Available at: <http://www.unfpa.org/intercenter/beijing>.

⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, “Education for All - Global Monitoring Report 2006”. Available at: <http://www.efareport.unesco.org>.

⁶ Ranjani K. Murthy and Lakshimi Sankaran, *Denial and Distress: Gender, Poverty and Human Rights in Asia* (London, Zed Books, 2004).

⁷ The feminization of migration has lately been raised as a critical challenge faced by the women in developing countries. Some female migrants take the traditional role of women, including domestic labour and sex work, in developed countries. Susan Marks and Andrew Clapham, “Women”, in *International Human Rights Lexicon* (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 411-428.

⁸ Women’s Environment and Development Organization, “Comments and Preliminary Recommendations on the United Nations Secretary-General’s Report - ‘In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All’”, April 2005. Available at: <http://www.wedo.org/commentsSGsreport.doc>.

⁹ United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, “The Feminization of Poverty”, Fact Sheet No. 1, May 2000. Available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/session/presskit/fs1.htm>.

¹⁰ For a list of main critiques by the international women’s movement of the limitations of the Millennium Development Goals, see Ana Elena Obando, “Women and the Millennium Development Goals”, November 2003. Available at: <http://www.whrnet.org/docs/issue-mdg.html>.

¹¹ Women’s Environment and Development Organization, “Women’s Empowerment, Gender Equality and the Millennium Development Goals”, 2004. Available at: http://www.wedo.org/files/MDGtoolkit_eng.htm.

¹² The World Bank, “Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper Source Book - Chapter 7: Participation”, October 2002. Available at: http://povlibrary.worldbank.org/files/13839_chap7.pdf.

¹³ Center for Women’s Global Leadership, “Gender Equality Architecture and United Nations Reforms”, July 2006. Available at: <http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/globalcenter/policy/unadvocacy/index.html>.

¹⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁵ Qiyamah A. Rahman, “Reconceptualizing Violence Against Women as a Development Issue”. Available at: <http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/globalcenter/rahman.html>.
