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Gender, Poverty, and Social Policy Regimes

A Comparative Analysis of Twenty-Four Upper-Income Countries

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prepared for the UNRISD project on

**UNRISD Flagship Report:
Combating Poverty and Inequality**

July 2008 • Geneva



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**Gender, Poverty, and Social Policy Regimes:
A Comparative Analysis of Twenty-Four Upper-Income Countries**

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July 14, 2008

Background Paper
prepared for the
United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)

Acknowledgment:
We thank Helen Connolly, of the Luxembourg Income Study staff,
for helping us to construct the categorical variables used in this study.

OUTLINE OF THE PAPER.

- I. Introduction and Overview.
- II. Previous Gender and Poverty Studies Based on the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS).
- III. Social Policy Regimes – Welfare State Variation Across Upper-Income Countries.
- IV. Microdata Analysis – Data, Methods, and Analysis Plan.
- V. Descriptive Results.

Gender Differences in Household Poverty Rates and Gaps.
[See Tables 1 and 2.](#)

Gender Differences in Poverty Rates – Variation across Family Types.
[See Table 3 \(also see Appendix Table 1\).](#)

Gender Differences in Poverty Rates – Variation across Education Groups.
[See Table 4 \(also see Appendix Table 2\).](#)

Gender Differences in Poverty Rates – Variation by Labour Market Status.
[See Table 5 \(also see Appendix Table 3\).](#)

Gender Differences in Poverty Rates – Variation by Immigrant Status.
[See Table 6 \(also see Appendix Table 4\).](#)

Gender Differences Household- versus Person- Level Income.
[See Table 7 \(also see Appendix Tables 5 and 6\).](#)

- VI. Multivariate Results.

The Effects of Gender, Age, Education, Employment, and Family Structure on the Odds of Being Poor.
[See Table 8 \(also see Appendix Table 7\).](#)

Gender Differences in Predicted Odds of being Poor.
[See Table 9.](#)
- VII. Summary of Findings.
- VIII. References Cited.

I. Introduction and Overview.

Although all industrialized countries have enacted public policies that place a floor under household resources and/or redistribute income from higher to lower income families, none have entirely eradicated income poverty. A substantial research literature on poverty in rich countries has reached two over-arching conclusions. One is that the prevalence and intensity of poverty varies markedly across relatively similar countries, due at least in part to variation in social policy designs. The second is that, within all countries, poverty outcomes vary extensively across subgroups. In this paper, we draw on data from the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS), a cross-national microdata archive, to examine one widely-recognized factor associated with poverty – that is, gender. Specifically, we focus on the question: How does gender as a poverty risk factor vary across a group of 24 upper-income countries?

A large body of research, much of it drawing on the LIS data, has established that, in many upper-income countries, women are more likely to be poor than are their male counterparts. That is true both before, and after, taxes and transfers are taken into account. The causes underlying women's higher risk of economic insecurity are complex, overlapping, and cumulative. The most powerful factor is women's weaker attachment to the labour market. On average, women command lower market income, including wages and occupational pensions, than do men and, as a result, they also receive lower employment-related social transfers. In addition, as a group, women still command lower pay than do men for each hour worked, partly due to their concentration in lower-paying occupations and partly due to pay discrimination based on gender. In turn, the main reason that women's connection to paid work is weaker than men's is their disproportionate engagement in caring for family members, especially young children. Largely because of their greater caregiving duties, women are less likely to be employed than are similarly-situated men and, if employed, they average fewer weekly work hours, including among those in full-time employment. Recent evidence indicates that being an active caregiver (independent of gender) further reduces many women's hourly pay.

Furthermore, in all upper-income countries, a substantial number of parents are raising their children without partners, and everywhere single parents are overwhelmingly women. Single mothers, as

a group, typically report worrisome levels of poverty – not surprisingly, as their solo caregiving responsibilities depress their own labour supply; their gender is associated with lower hourly earnings; and their homes typically lack a second earner. Finally, diverse households – young and old, female-headed and male-headed, with and without children – receive tax benefits and public income transfers. Among lower-income households, those transfers can make them less poor or lift them out of poverty altogether. In some countries – the U.S. is a prime example – social benefits targeted on children are meager compared to those granted to other demographic groups. As a result, families with children, which disproportionately include women, are more likely to be poor than are other family types. In many countries, these factors – both micro and macro – operate independently and interactively to raise women’s likelihood of poverty relative to men’s.

Against this broad portrait of commonality, we focus in this paper on cross-national *variation*, in particular on variation that captures diversity in social policy designs. Although nearly all of these 24 countries are high-income countries – three are classified as upper-middle income countries¹ – they are spread across diverse geographic regions, which largely correspond to equally diverse welfare state models. In this study, we include five Anglophone countries, seven Continental European countries, three Eastern European countries, four Nordic European countries, three Southern European countries, and two countries not easily classified, Israel and Mexico. The selection of countries – especially our limited inclusion of middle-income countries – was driven by data availability. Although the LIS archive will add a large number of middle-income countries over the next three to five years, unfortunately only a few are included at this time.

This background paper is organized as follows. In Section II, we present highlights from past LIS research on cross-national variation in women’s poverty status and/or poverty gender gaps, and comment on the ways in which this paper extends on past research. In Section III, we draw on other research

¹ The World Bank ranks countries into four income categories – high, upper-middle, lower-middle, and low – based on per capita GDP. As of the early 2000s, 21 of these countries were classified as high-income. Three – Hungary, Poland and Mexico – were classified as upper-middle income. In this paper, we use the term “upper income” to refer to the top two groups: high and upper-middle.

literatures to sketch a portrait of social policy variation across the major country grouping captured in this study. In particular – albeit it in a stylized way – we describe the underlying principles and characteristics of the “residual welfare-state” model associated with the Anglophone countries, the “conservative-corporatist” model typified by the Continental countries, the “post Socialist” model in place in the Eastern European countries in the wake of their transitions to capitalism, the much-studied “Social Democratic” model long associated with the Nordic countries, and the so-called “Latin” model operating in the Southern countries.

In the Section IV of the paper, we describe the LIS data and our methods. Assessing gender gaps in poverty raises thorny methodological problems, because gender is fundamentally an individual characteristic whereas poverty is largely a household concept. In this section, we explain our approach, which relies mainly on assessing women’s odds, compared to men’s, of living in a poor *household*; to a lesser extent, we assess pre-and post-transfer income recorded at the person-level. We also present other crucial details, including the income definitions used, our method for adjusting for household size, and the logic behind of our descriptive and multivariate analyses.

In Section V we present our descriptive results, in Section VI our multivariate results, and in Section VII a summary of our major findings. Our results, which focus on both commonality and variation across these 24 upper-income countries, are organized around of set of five research questions:

- ◆ What is the probability that prime-age women, compared to their male counterparts, live in a poor household?
- ◆ How does the overall pattern differ: (a) when we consider pre-transfer as well as post-transfer income? (b) when we consider absolute as well as relative poverty? and (c) when we consider poverty gaps as well as poverty rates?
- ◆ How do women’s poverty rates, compared to men’s, vary by family type, by educational attainment, by labour market status, and by immigrant status?
- ◆ How does our cross-national portrait of gender and poverty shift when we consider person-level income as well as household-level income?
- ◆ In a multivariate context: (a) what is the nature of the association between poverty and gender, both alone and in interaction with our other covariates? and (b) how does the risk of women’s poverty, compared to men’s, vary across a set of six example “cases” which vary by level of expected disadvantage?

II. Previous Gender and Poverty Studies Based on the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS).

The issue of women and poverty has attracted considerable attention among scholars using the LIS data. Over the last twenty-five years, nearly fifty LIS Working Papers have made poverty and gender their central focus.² Several studies have assessed gender differentials in poverty outcomes, while others have concentrated on poverty among particularly vulnerable groups of women, especially single mothers.³ At the micro-level, these studies have focused variously on the effects of household composition and/or employment, hours and/or earnings on women's poverty risk. Another substantial LIS-based literature addresses child poverty; child poverty is, of course, distinct from women's poverty but the two are inextricably linked because among the highest risk children are those who live with single mothers (see, e.g., Bradbury and Jantti 1999). Not surprisingly, a major theme cutting across these studies concerns the impact on poverty of national conditions, including public policies – mainly income transfers and work-family reconciliation policies – political configurations, and/or macroeconomics outcomes. These studies are diverse with respect to conceptual approaches, measurement decisions, countries included and years covered. In this section, we synthesize the primary, and most consistent, findings that emerge from this body of research.

The LIS research on gender and poverty has produced three general findings. First, in several LIS countries, post-tax-and-transfer poverty is more prevalent among women compared to men, mothers compared to fathers, and female-headed households compared to male-headed households. Second, solo

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