

The Female Face of Poverty

In 1978, Diana Pearce coined the term ‘feminisation of poverty’, describing the trend towards more and more of the burden of poverty being borne by women. Five decades later, this reality persists around the world.

With Women’s History Month having concluded in March, I took the opportunity to talk about women and poverty. The purpose of this piece is not to diminish the experiences of men, but to bring into spotlight and reflect on the realities faced by women globally, alongside some sobering statistics closer to home.

Although not all of the world's poor are women, a significant portion are. It is widely recognised that women are more susceptible and exposed to poverty and social exclusion than men, due to factors such as gender-based violence during conflict, traditional gender roles, their roles as primary caregivers, their association with more private, internal spaces and a myriad of other socio-economic influences. Experts warn that if this continues, there is a real risk of a global regression in women’s rights. I believe that this decline may already be underway; however, current examples tend to be linked to specific regions—primarily conflict-ridden states that also face climate-related disasters like droughts and floods, depletion of natural resources and economic policies driven by IMF loans that, instead of stabilising these countries, often deepen austerity and push the most vulnerable further into hardship. For instance, despite the UN and wider international interventions, Borno State in Nigeria continues to have one of the lowest levels of women’s empowerment, with only 41% achieving educational attainment, 47.8% employed, 22.5% participating in decision-making, 12.5% owning a bank account and just 0.3% owning land or property. This is compounded by ongoing issues such as forced marriage, physical violence, rape, survival sex, sexual assault and denial of access to resources. Meanwhile, over 7,200 miles away across the Atlantic, in Ciudad Juárez in Mexico, local activists are fighting against femicide deeply rooted in poverty-stricken neighbourhoods, yet the rate of impunity for the crime exceeds 95%.

Eradicating poverty in all its forms and everywhere is the first objective among the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals. By 2030, the aim is to ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance.

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Despite these commitments, the statistics remain bleak. While advancements in technology and the proliferation of the internet have enabled increased conversations about gender equality, tangible worldwide progress appears to be limited. Wealth has continued to concentrate, with the rich growing richer and the poor becoming poorer. Then, there's the gender factor as a socio-economic determinant of one's quality of life. According to the United Nations, 340 million women and children will be living in extreme poverty by 2030 worldwide – just five years from now.

I recall Yaba Badoe ascending the stage at my university in Hull during the screening of her documentary film 'Witches of Gambaga' – a hauntingly powerful 55-minute exposé about a community of women in Northern Ghana who were accused of witchcraft and exiled to a camp in Gambaga, to live 'under the protection' of a chieftain, without access to basic sanitation, trapped in forced labour, regularly abused by the chieftain. Yaba asks the question which permeates the film, "What if witchcraft traditions are so deeply entrenched, that to be born a woman is to be born under a shadow of suspicion?" This is contrasted with men, who can also be witches but for them, the practice is depicted in a positive light such as to protect his house or family. Historically, accusations of witchcraft have been used as a tool to marginalise women, especially during times of social or economic crises when communities face hardships they cannot easily explain. To understand why women are targeted, it is important to consider the broader context of poverty and socio-economic neglect. In many cases, accusations serve as a means of social control, often justified by the inability of governments to address widespread poverty, unemployment and social instability. The persistent influence of patriarchal systems, combined with the low socio-economic status of women, exacerbates their vulnerability. Although accusations can affect individuals of all ages and backgrounds, it is often women—particularly those who are poor, uneducated, yet perceived as strong and independent—who are the target.

For everyone present in the room that day, the film offered a glimpse into a world far removed from our own—problems that felt distant, and for which we had no immediate solution. At the time, for me as a research fellow in modern slavery, it also added a new dimension to consider, one that went beyond the statistics and spreadsheets, highlighting the global vulnerability of women and how neatly their personal stories are woven into the very fabric of both the causes and consequences of poverty.

I grew up in post-Soviet Armenia - besieged by blockade and Artsakh war, food and fuel shortages were part of our everyday reality. Winters were particularly harsh; each morning, my grandmother and I would rise before dawn to queue outside the local bakery in temperatures dropping to -15°C. She clutched the bread stamps tightly as we waited for

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hours. By the time we finally got in, the shelves were often nearly empty. We would leave with a loaf of coarse rye bread, which we carefully rationed for our family of five.

Between 1988 and 1994, while men fought on the frontlines, women bore the heavy burden of maintaining daily life. They stayed behind to care for children and keep the household warm and pristine (always). They dragged wood from the forest, made do with candles for light and kept the family going through hardship. Even after the war, I remember numerous families where men sought work abroad, particularly in Russia, struggled to make ends meet and send money home. Despite everything, women stuck together and persevered.

Looking back, those times felt like a collective struggle rooted in resilience. Yet, it never once crossed my mind that we were part of a larger, global pattern which manifests itself in many shapes and forms. I think it is difficult to truly see the depth of the situation when you are living through it.

Here in the West, not long ago, when we discussed poverty and particularly women in poverty, our minds often drifted to distant images—Don McCullin-style photographs from the Global South - Tondo, Rohingya women. These powerful visuals shaped our perceptions, but they also created a distance, a sense that poverty was something happening elsewhere. This is changing now, and, even more so for us, people in the VCSE sector, frontline workers who witness and they themselves go through the quiet everyday struggles often overlooked, as they are hidden behind the closed doors of familiar, day-to-day life. That neighbour down the road, a single mother, may be living in one small room with her three children over the winter because she cannot afford to heat the rest of her home. She might skip a meal now and then so her children can eat.

I love Manchester. When I first arrived in the UK ten years ago and visited Manchester, it felt like home—and it still does. The warm and friendly people, the rich history and culture, iconic landmarks like Old Trafford and the Town Hall, and the captivating architecture of the John Rylands Library—all contribute to its vibrant, film-like atmosphere. Manchester produces more wealth than Liverpool, Sheffield and Leeds combined and is projected to surpass the UK's overall economic growth rate by 2027. According to the State of the City Report 2025, Manchester is the economic hub of the North and one of the UK's fastest-growing economies, generating over £28 billion in GVA annually. Yet, despite the soaring high rises and impressive economic progress, it remains one of the country's most deprived areas, with pockets of communities left behind and food deserts where residents have limited or no access to fresh fruit and vegetables.

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The average wage gap in the city is £4460, and there are just under 64000 people who are not in employment.

In the 2022-2023 period, there were 63,266 children living in poverty in Manchester, defined as households with less than 60% of the median income after housing costs. This represents an increase of 4,133 children, or 7%, compared to the previous year, and marks a more than 50% rise since 2014-2015. Consequently, nearly half (47.9%) of all children in Manchester are living in poverty, making it the third worst rate among local authority areas in England. The increase from 44.7% in 2021-2022 highlights a concerning trend of worsening economic hardship for families across the city.

It is important to understand that these figures do not tell the full story of the scale of economic difficulty. Children do not live in isolation and do not form part of the job market; their circumstances are directly linked to their parents' or guardians' economic situation. Many households are headed by women, who often face persistent poverty, particularly in deprived areas of the North where life expectancy is decreasing. As primary carers, women bear the brunt of these challenges, which are compounded by limited access to adequate employment, affordable housing and opportunities for social mobility. Although specific data on women in poverty in Manchester is not readily available, sector observations show a high prevalence of women relying on community foodbanks, pantries and other support services — especially single mothers and carers. The Woman of the North report, which was published last year, brought into spotlight the determinants of health and systemic inequality that shape the socio-economic circumstances of women in the region. The report highlighted the devastating effects that the cost-of-living crisis, economic uncertainty and other factors have had on women, with key findings revealing, that:

- Girls born in the North East and North West between 2018 and 2020 can only expect to live in good health until 59.7, 62.4 and 62.1 years, respectively. This is up to four years less than the national average and up to six years less than girls born in the South East.
- Women in the North are paid less for their work. They lose out on £132m every week, around £6.86bn a year, compared to what they'd get if they were paid the same wages as women in the rest of the country.
- The average weekly wage for a full-time working woman in the North West is £598 – much lower than the national average (£625) and considerably lower than for women in London (£757).
- Women in the North contribute £10bn of unpaid care to the UK economy each year. This is £2bn a year more than if they provided the national average of unpaid care.

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- One in five women aged 55-59 in the North of England provides care to a family member because of illness, disability, mental illness or substance use.
- Over 25% of pregnant women in the northern regions of England are living in the most deprived 10% of areas with 40% living in the top 20% most deprived areas. In contrast, fewer than 5% of pregnant women in the South East live in the most deprived 10% of areas.
- There is higher prevalence of severe mental conditions, such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia the North West and North East compared to the South and Yorkshire and Humber. The proportion of women with a diagnosis of a mental health condition who were receiving a treatment was lower in the North West and North East than in the South and Yorkshire and the Humber, indicating a treatment gap between regions.
- Women in the North of England suffer the highest rates of domestic violence abuse in the country. In Manchester alone, domestic abuse remains a significant problem, with female victims constituting the majority of cases, though male victims are also affected. Greater Manchester Police recorded 14,020 domestic incidents in the year to March 31, 2023, with 75% of victims being female.
- Women in the North had the highest rates of deaths of recorded deaths per 100,000 from alcohol-specific causes in 2021, in England.
- In Greater Manchester, approximately 21% of women and people who menstruate are struggling to afford period products, a significant increase from 12% in 2022. This means roughly one in five people who menstruate in the region are experiencing period poverty.

The ongoing rise in poverty rates, particularly the feminisation of poverty, calls for a deeper understanding and a collective response. While we could endlessly cite statistics, it is more important to see what is happening and draw parallels between different manifestations of poverty across the world. Despite the varying forms it takes, poverty shares commonalities that provide valuable opportunities to learn from good practices and build on existing work. Fundamentally, poverty is a consequence of economic distribution—it's not an inherent characteristic of any society or its people. Manchester is not resource-poor; it is rich in ideas, ingenuity and potential. The city has the capacity to go beyond statistics and crisis management and instead, focus on collective, community-led solutions that harness the strengths of local organisations, residents, private and the public sector.

Manchester is fortunate to have initiatives like Making Manchester Fairer, strategies that gives importance to inclusive growth and the Real Living Wage campaign, alongside a vibrant voluntary, community and social enterprise sector that is embedded in communities that make up the city. The local authorities possess significant power to mobilise and harness

these efforts to foster real change. However, current funding practices—especially cuts and duplication—hamper our capacity to support women effectively, particularly in critical areas like escaping domestic violence or accessing essential services to achieve independence. Emergency responses provide necessary relief but they are merely a temporary fix rather than a sustainable solution.

Empowerment and prevention are key. Supporting women to develop skills, independence and economic resilience can transform lives and communities. As we reflect on personal experiences of women around us—like something as basic, but empowering, as the ability to return to work after having a child—it highlights the importance of creating policies and social safety nets that enable women to thrive.

Manchester has a unique opportunity to lead a societal conversation about the kind of city we want to build—one where poverty is not an accepted norm. We must advocate for policies that foster a vibrant, inclusive city, where everyone has the pathways and necessary tools to contribute and succeed, and build ‘a room of their own’.

The government’s role extends beyond funding programs; it must actively galvanise society towards mutual investment and shared responsibility. This involves fostering civic engagement, encouraging philanthropy focused on women’s empowerment and investing in women as vital community agents, leaders and changemakers.

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