Gender, Generation and Poverty
Exploring the ‘Feminisation of Poverty’ in Africa, Asia and Latin America

Sylvia Chant is Professor of Development Geography at the London School of Economics, UK. A specialist in Gender and Development, her previous books include Women-headed Households: Diversity and Dynamics in the Developing World, Women and Survival in Mexican Cities, Mainstreaming Men into Gender and Development (with Matthew Gutmann), Women of a Lesser Cost: Female Labour, Foreign Exchange and Philippine Development (with Cathy Mcllwaine) and Gender in Latin America (in association with Nikki Craske).

‘Sylvia Chant provides the most lucid treatment to date of the debate over the relationship between gender and poverty, and, based on new research from Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia critically engages, and moves the discussion beyond the taken for granted assumptions that tend to govern this issue. Essential reading for scholars and policymakers alike.’
– Maxine Molyneux, Professor of Sociology, University of London, UK

The ‘feminisation of poverty’ is widely viewed as a global trend, and of particular concern in developing regions. Yet although popularisation of the term may have raised women’s visibility in development discourses and gone some way to ‘en-gender’ policies for poverty reduction, the construct is only weakly substantiated. Its over-emphasis on income and on female household headship also conveys little of the contemporary complexities of gendered disadvantage.

In Gender, Generation and Poverty Sylvia Chant challenges the ‘feminisation of poverty’ on the basis of recent fieldwork in the Gambia, Philippines and Costa Rica. Interviews with over 220 women and men of different ages at the grassroots, as well as with 40 professionals in international agencies, government departments and NGOs, highlight the difficulties of establishing any general tendency towards a widening of gender disparities in income poverty, or for female household heads to be the ‘poorest of the poor’. While not denying a ‘female bias’ in material privation, a more important and consistent pattern is that women are bearing an ever-greater burden of responsibility for household survival, and under especially exploitative conditions in male-headed units. These findings lead Chant to propose a more elaborate and nuanced construction of the ‘feminisation of poverty’ which incorporates inputs as well as incomes and takes greater account of gender relations within the home. This not only stands to enrich gendered poverty analysis, but to provide a more appropriate basis for policy interventions.

Sylvia Chant’s book will be critical reading for students, researchers and lecturers in development and gender studies, as well as comparative international and area studies focusing on Africa, Asia and Latin America. Planners and policymakers in gender and development will also find much to engage them in this exciting and original new study.

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