



CSW 68 Gender and Poverty Brief

Poverty and Female-headed Households

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Many female-headed households struggle with poverty, in both developing and developed countries, especially those with young children.

- One in six poor people live in female-headed households, with the vast majority in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia.¹
- In the poorest US states, such as Mississippi and Kentucky, more than half of single mothers are poor.² US households headed by a single mother are much more likely to be food insecure (24.3%) than households headed by a single father (16.2%).³

Several factors contribute to the poverty of many female-headed households, especially the dual disadvantages of the gender wage gap and occupational segregation into low-income jobs.

- Single mothers with young children face triple disadvantages due to childcare expenses.
- Female heads of household in rural regions have few employment opportunities.
- Women heads with disabilities have difficulty finding suitable employment.

These intersecting disadvantages for female-headed households result in fewer resources:

- less property and lower savings accumulated over a lifetime
- less resilience in medical and economic crises, climate disasters, or conflict disruption.

The disadvantages of single mothers carry over into the next generation when they cannot afford to nourish their children adequately, provide health care, or send them to school.

- Daughters are especially likely to stay home from school to help their mothers.
- Their future ability to support their own families is significantly curtailed.

Fast Facts

- US single heads of household with children under 18 from minority ethnic groups face the greatest poverty:
 - 42% of Indigenous mothers
 - 37% of Black mothers
 - 36% of Latina mothers
 - 25% of white mothers.⁴
- 55% of American Indian and Alaskan Native mothers are the sole or primary breadwinners in households with children under 18, compared with 37% of white mothers.⁵
- The high poverty rate among working single mothers (29.3%) would fall to 15.8%, nearly by half, if they were paid the same as comparable men.⁶
- In the European Union, 2/3 of single mothers report serious economic difficulties.⁷

- Five out of six multi-dimensionally poor in India are in the lower tribes and castes.⁸ Female-headed households in the Scheduled Tribes, the most disadvantaged group in India, are severely poor.⁹

Recommendations

Governments can alleviate the poverty of female-headed households and their children with targeted policies:

- 1) Provide **cash transfers** without work requirements to poor female-headed households including rental and food vouchers. During the COVID period in the United States, the Child Tax Credit injected monthly payments into family households that succeeded in improving nutrition and reducing child poverty nearly by half (9.8% to 5.3%).¹⁰ Other US programs such as SNAP, WIC, and the Earned Income Tax Credit have proven very successful in reducing poverty and should be fully funded. Universal school meals are also a proven way to improve child nutrition.
- 2) Fully fund **childcare, preschool, and afterschool programs** for low-income female-headed households to allow single mothers to pursue their education or employment.
- 3) Mandate **paid parental and sick leave** for poor single mothers to give them flexibility in managing their dual responsibilities as mothers and workers.
- 4) Provide **grants for tuition and living expenses** so that single mothers may complete their education and increase their future earning power without incurring the burden of debt.
- 5) Enforce laws against **gender wage discrimination**, raise the minimum wage, and end subminimum wages for tipped and disabled workers to address the gender wage gap.

Resources

UNDP and OPHI. *Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2021: Unmasking Disparities by Ethnicity, Caste, and Gender*.

Bleiweiss, Robin, Diana Boesch, and Alexandra Cawthorne Gaines. 2020. *The Basic Facts About Women in Poverty*. Center for American Progress Fact Sheet.

Javaid, Sarah and Jasmine Tucker. *National Snapshot: Poverty Among Women and Families 2021*. National Women's Law Center Fact Sheet.

¹ UNDP and OPHI. *Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2021: Unmasking Disparities by Ethnicity, Caste, and Gender*. Pg. 18.

² Institute for Women's Policy Research (n.d.) *Status of Women in the States*.

³ Hudson, Valerie et al. 2023. *Shadow CEDAW Report for the United States*. Texas A&M University, The Bush School of Government & Public Service.

⁴ National Women's Law Center. *National Snapshot: Poverty Among Women and Families 2021*.

⁵ Center for American Progress 2021. *How the Government Can End Poverty for Native American Women*.

⁶ Institute for Women's Policy Research 2016. *Breadwinner Mothers by Race/Ethnicity and State*.

⁷ Oxfam 2018. *Raising their Voices against Precariousness: Women's Experiences of Work Poverty in Europe*.

⁸ UNDP and OPHI. *Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2021: Unmasking Disparities by Ethnicity, Caste, and Gender*. Pg. 12.

⁹ Banu, Nasrin and Avijit Mistri. *Female-Headed Households in India: An Eagle's View from 2011 Census*.

¹⁰ Burns, Kalee and Liana E. Fox 2022. *The Impact of the 2021 Expanded Child Tax Credit on Child Poverty*. US Census Bureau.