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Amsterdam: Gender and Poverty

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Social exclusion in the European Union

Many words are used to point to poverty. Marginality and social exclusion are relatively new ones. Social exclusion is a contested concept. Generally unemployment is seen to be the most important element. However, social exclusion also relates to generalized disadvantage in terms of education, training, housing and financial resources. Social exclusion also relates to the extent and quality of social networks people are included in.

The multidimensionality of the concept was clearly expressed in the Commission of the European Communities 1992 paper The Community’s Battle Against Social Exclusion:

Poverty is a complex, heterogeneous phenomenon and cannot be defined solely in terms of low income levels. As many studies have shown, the deprivation suffered by the poorest classes extends to many fields – employment, housing, health, education, social life, etc. The European Community and several of its Member States now consequently tend to define poverty in terms of ‘social exclusion’, a definition that encompasses both the processes of exclusion and the resultant situations. It also serves to emphasize the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon and the multiplicity and diversity of the factors that combine to exclude individuals, groups or even regions from those exchanges, activities and social rights, which are an inherent part of social integration.

Many of these problems appear to be most manifest in large metropolitan areas. Problems of social exclusion are not new, but some argue that in the past two decades they have become more severe in many cities. Many researchers and politicians have pointed to the increase of social polarization between well-educated people included in the labour market and society and under-educated people often excluded from that market and society; or between people with and people without a well-paid job; between men with jobs and women without jobs; or between people with voting rights and political power and those without. Several studies appeared in which dual or
divided cities, polarized societies and the urban ‘underclass’ were the central themes (Fainstein et al., 1992; Sassen, 1991; Wilson, 1987).

The cumulative process of social exclusion may be at its worst where the place of residence or quality of the neighbourhood adds to other factors involved. This kind of perspective is widely accepted. However the impact of the different factors has not been explored sufficiently.

This chapter deals with the interconnection between gender and urban poverty in The Netherlands and more in particular in Amsterdam and focuses on the position of single mothers in the labour market and in the social security system. First, we elaborate on the relation between gender and poverty and on the changing character of the Dutch welfare state. Next, we present an overview of the changes in the labour market participation of men and women in The Netherlands in general and of single mothers in particular. Next, we introduce the two low-income neighbourhoods in Amsterdam, Landlust and Osdorp-Midden, where the fieldwork was conducted. Then, we compare the coping strategies of unemployed single mothers with those of unemployed men in these two neighbourhoods. In the conclusion we challenge the idea of vulnerability of single mothers by demonstrating the relatively successful social integration of this category and we judge the role of the opportunities the two neighbourhoods offer.

The gendered nature of social exclusion

Although problems of poverty and social exclusion concern both men and women, they are not gender neutral. Literature on urban poverty and literature on gender issues both refer to the gendered character of social exclusion. Unskilled persons, immigrants, single mothers and single older women are considered to be vulnerable categories (SCP/CBS, 2001). Women are over represented in low-income groups and in groups with long-term low incomes (Portegeijs et al., 2004). Single mothers in particular are indicated as high-risk categories in terms of poverty and social exclusion (Jehoel-Gijsbers, 2004; Kodras and Jones, 1991; Rose and le Bourdais, 1986). This is caused by the combination of several poverty-increasing characteristics of single mothers: their household income is generally lower than that of other households, in particular two earner households without children; by definition single mothers do not have a partner adding to the income of the households; and finally, in many cases single mothers are unemployed and dependent on social benefits. Traditionally, the gender positions of men and women in European societies were clearly defined. Society used to be constituted with families with a male breadwinner and a female housekeeper. Men were dependent on their wives for the unpaid household tasks and the care for their children; women were dependent on their husbands for their incomes. In this respect single mothers have a