

**Feminization of poverty within rural households of  
Thulamela Municipality in South Africa**

**By**

**Matimba George Ngonyama**

**University of Venda**

**(PHDRDV)**

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**FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY WITHIN RURAL HOUSEHOLDS OF THULAMELA  
MUNICIPALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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**Matimba George Ngonyama**

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**School of Agriculture**

**Promoter : Prof Francis J.  
Co-Promoter : Dr Radzilani. Makatu M.**

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## ABSTRACT

"Feminization of poverty" is a concept that has been a subject of interest for social and economic development scientists since the 1970s when Diana Pearce coined it. Over the past decades, many studies have been carried out in order to gain deeper insights into it. Most of the studies have revealed that female-headed households are poorer than the male-headed ones. However, two major conceptual and methodological weaknesses are evident in the studies, viz.: presenting different types of female-headed households as a homogeneous mass with the uniform characteristics; and the use of monetary metrics and household consumption as baseline indices and principal causes of feminization of poverty. Based on the situation articulated above, it can be argued that the current approaches fail to capture the dynamics inherent in the various types of female-headed households. Moreover, there is a paucity of literature generated through interrogating the views of the people embedded in poor communities. Yet, these have deep knowledge on what poverty means to them, its characteristics and who they perceive to be most affected. Against this background, exploratory sequentially integrated mixed methods studies were undertaken in Ward 14 of Thulamela Municipality. The studies, which sought the perceptions of youth and adults of both sexes in three villages, were designed to: (i) derive the interest group-perceived meaning of household poverty, its determinants and characteristics; (ii) dichotomize types of households and analyse their dynamics; and (iii) analyse the coping strategies that various types of rural households used.

A qualitative research approach was employed for the first phase of the study. The study explored community members' perceptions on the meaning of household poverty, its determinants and characteristics. Perceptions of community members on the poorest households and coping strategies to enhance their livelihoods were also explored. The criterion purposive sampling method was used to select the 51 respondents from the three villages. The sample comprised men, women as well as in and out of school youth. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The collected data were analyzed using the Thematic Content Analysis method. The most common definitions of poverty were the inability to meet basic needs (76 %) and insufficient monthly income (47 %). The following were perceived as the major characteristics of poverty: inability to meet daily basic needs (54 %), lack of regular income (37 %), poor state of family dwellings (35 %), and tattered clothing items (24 %). Lack of employment opportunities (84 %) and low level of education and skills (51 %) were regarded as

the major causes of poverty. Almost half of the respondents (47 %) perceived male-headed households of unemployed men as the poorest, followed by the widow-headed households (31 %) and other types of female-headed households (27 %).

In phase 2 of the study, multiple stratification and purposive sampling methods were used to select 151 respondents from the same villages as in phase 1. They represented cohorts of men, women plus in and out of school youth. Recruited contact persons from each village coordinated the mobilization of community members. Data were collected using a questionnaire, which was developed through consolidating the results of phase 1. The questionnaire contained 13 items that described the characteristics of poverty. Data were collected through 151 self-administered individual questionnaires and 13 focus group discussions. Respondents ranked the various characteristics of poverty to compare the different types of households. Effects of gender and age on each characteristic of poverty were determined using the Mann Whitney test. The Kruskal Wallis and Mann Whitney tests were used to determine if there were differences in perceived poverty among the villages. There were no differences in the perceived effects of age group on all the 13 characteristics of poverty ( $P > 0.05$ ). However, female respondents agreed more than male respondents in most of the 13 characteristics ( $P < 0.05$ ). The residents of Mahonisi village consistently agreed more ( $P < 0.001$ ) with most of the perceived characteristics of poverty than their counterparts from Jimmy Jones and Mahonisi villages. Households in which the married male head resided in the village were perceived to be worse off followed by those in which widows and widowers were the heads.

The results of this study revealed that although poverty existed in all the household types, there was no evidence of feminization. In fact, the poorest households were those in which the male head resided in the villages. Thus the notion that female-headed households were the poorest was invalid when shared views of rural community members were taken into account. This implies that current social protection policies and strategies that are biased towards female-headed households should be reconsidered. For South Africa, the results of this study suggest that the Department of Social Development and also the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) should reconsider their support systems, taking into account that specifically targeting female-headed households as the most needy might actually be worsening poverty in the most vulnerable male-headed ones. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed: (i) conduct a broader and robust study to determine whether the views of community members of Ward 14 resonate with those in other rural areas of South

Africa, (ii) determine the relationship between alcohol consumption and household poverty; (iii) explore whether masculinization of poverty exists within rural households; and (iv) the typology of households used in this study is unique, has never been used in poverty studies and thus forms the basis of making more objective and appropriate targeting decisions on social protection.

**Key words:** Household, poverty, feminization, rural areas