

## **Women's Budget Group Response to the Department for Work and Pensions consultation on Measuring Child Poverty, July 2002**

The Women's Budget Group (WBG) is an independent UK organisation bringing together academics and people from non-governmental organisations and trades unions to form a network of experts to promote gender equality through appropriate economic policy.

We welcome this opportunity to raise issues relating to measuring child poverty and are particularly concerned that gender is taken into account.

When women are poor children are poor. Hence child poverty cannot be divorced from the measurement of the resources of their mothers, fathers and other family members. Despite women's greater risk of poverty, there is no mention of gender in any of the options for measuring child poverty. Women's greater risk of poverty has to be addressed if the Government is to be successful in reducing child poverty. The key issues are discussed in more detail below.

- **Lone mothers:** Children living in lone parent households are more likely to be living with lone mothers than with lone fathers<sup>1</sup>. A living income is beyond the reach of many women and when women head households they run a very high risk of poverty. There is therefore a strong link between women's resources and children living in poverty. At a minimum there is a need to disaggregate lone parent households to monitor the different poverty rates of lone mothers and lone fathers. Research indicates that female headed household are significantly more likely to be in poverty than their male counterparts. Ideally the impact of gender in determining the poverty levels of lone parents should be taken into account. If poverty reduction policies are to be effective then they have to recognise the gendered nature of poverty.
- **Longitudinal measures of poverty:** The greater instability of women's incomes, combined with the fact that they are more likely to be the main carer, emphasises the importance of longitudinal studies for the accurate measurement of child poverty. Paid employment is not an automatic route out of poverty for women, since women are more likely to be in an insecure job and more likely to be low-paid and/or earn the minimum wage than men. A woman who gets a temporary job may not count as poor at the time, but when her employment ends she might fall into poverty. The consultation paper rightly recognises that the longer the time spent in

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<sup>1</sup> Approximately 90% of all lone parents are women. ONS (2000) Living in Britain: Result from the General Household Survey 1998

poverty the greater the adverse effect on the child. Lone mothers are at particular risk from persistent poverty; the cumulative effects of poverty impinge on the life chances of both mother and child.

- **Poverty Intensity/ poverty persistence:** The poverty line only measures if someone is in or out of poverty. For those under this line, this measurement does not indicate the intensity of poverty. Evidence suggests that poverty tends to be particularly persistent among lone mothers.
- **Childcare in the home:** The consultation document uses the concept of “worklessness”, without consideration of the gender implications and the needs of children. Women’s unpaid work in the home, particularly looking after children, needs to be recognised as a valuable contribution to child welfare. Mothers living in impoverished areas will want to put their children’s best interests first, often deciding not to take paid employment until their children’s safety and well-being is guaranteed. These are not “workless households”.
- **Time poverty:** The WBG urges the government to recognise the issue of time poverty and its effects on children. Women spend more time than men in unpaid work and more time in total in paid and unpaid work. Children may suffer if parents do not have time to spend with them. It is essential to measure the amount of time both women and men spend in paid and unpaid work to obtain a full picture of child poverty.
- **Financial Autonomy and family re-distribution:** Research shows that women are more likely than men to spend money on children<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, men have more direct control over money and what it should be spent on. It is therefore important to have an indicator that will measure how incomes are distributed and how much financial autonomy individuals have within the family. If the woman is not getting a fair share of household resources, it is less likely that children are having their needs met. The distribution of resources within the family therefore has very serious consequences for children’s welfare. For the poorest children it is especially important that the person responsible for their well-being and care have access to adequate resources.
- **Immigration status:** It is important to consider children’s and parents’ immigration status in the measurement of poverty, since people seeking asylum have no right to claim benefits or work and are therefore at high risk of living in poverty.
- **Indicators:** It is essential to have some individual level indicators as well as measuring poverty on a household level. Resources within the family are not necessarily distributed evenly. For example, utilities provision should be assessed at household level, but other measures, such as income, time and financial autonomy, should be broken down to an individual level that can be disaggregated by gender. We call for different versions of poverty

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<sup>2</sup> Goode J., Callender C. and Lister, R., ‘Purse or Wallet? Gender inequalities and income distribution within families on benefits’, Policy Studies institute, 1998

measurement to be produced using different assumptions about sharing of resources.

- **Consultation method:** It is vital to ask women and children about their experience of poverty and to let them be included in the consultation process to obtain relevant indicators for measuring poverty. It is essential that indicators to measure poverty are chosen so they are easy to interpret. It is also important that a measure is chosen which people in poverty and others can relate to easily.
- **Sustainability:** It is important that the method for assessing and reporting on levels of child poverty is sustainable over time in order to monitor the effectiveness of the government's anti-poverty strategy. Continuity is essential if we are to gain an accurate and reliable picture of the changes in child poverty and a valuable source of information about the dynamics of families living in poverty.

Thank you for the time you have taken to read and consider our response. If you would like any further information about the WBG or our work please contact:

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