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Poverty as the Ultimate Material Consequence of the Sexual Division of Labour for Brazilian Women

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Abstract

This article aims to summarise reflections on the sexual division of labour and the feminisation of poverty, providing data on Brazilian reality. The sexist and exclusionary cultural bias against women that drives the sexual division of labour has strong repercussions on the economy and the labour market, as well as on women's income-generating opportunities, ultimately converging to the feminisation of poverty. The methodology employed is based on the analysis of secondary data available in Federal Government agency publications, especially IPEA and IBGE, as well as reading and indexing works to define concepts such as the sexual division of labour and feminisation of poverty, including intrinsic conceptual discussions like intersectionality, gender, and patriarchy/capitalism. This approach is particularly relevant to the issue of wages and employability, combined with the poor distribution of domestic and family care tasks and the impact this has on women's professional lives. For Brazilian Government agencies, domestic work does not count as an economic activity, neglecting the status and recognition of unpaid domestic and care labour as activities that contribute to production, the economy, and the country's development. As a consequence of the sexual division of labour, women face worse conditions and opportunities in the labour market, have lower pay, and still face the double shift, as they remain almost exclusively responsible for domestic care work. Data confirm that female-headed households, especially non-white, are more prone to poverty and food insecurity, which need to be addressed by targeted public policies.

Keywords

Sexual Division of Labour, Feminisation of Poverty, Domestic and Care Work

1. Introduction

This paper presents a descriptive secondary-data analysis to summarise reflections on the sexual division of labour and the feminisation of poverty, providing data from the Brazilian reality to illustrate the micro-theses discussed. I argue that the sexist and exclusionary cultural bias against women that drives the sexual division of labour has strong repercussions on the economy and the labour market, as well as on women's income-generating opportunities, ultimately presenting itself as the feminisation of poverty, especially in low- and middle-income countries or—in the Brazilian[1] case—extremely unequal countries.

I begin by establishing the concepts on which the main argument is based, notably the sexual division of labour and feminisation of poverty. Next, the situation of women in the sexual division of labour is assessed through the new history of labour (Van Der Linden, 2007), which allows for addressing issues such as gender, ethnicity, race, and age relations, alongside domestic structures, sexuality, and informal politics. This approach will be taken particularly with regard to the issue of wages and employability, combined with the poor distribution of domestic and family care tasks and their impact on women's professional lives, through the lens of Brazilian data on female poverty, paid and unpaid work, income, and food security.

The data used is provided by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (hereinafter referred to as "IBGE"), through its Continuous National Household Sample Survey from 2024, especially the report section on labour force and participation rate by sex; by the Institute of Applied Economic Research (hereinafter referred to as "IPEA"), through its report on gender and race inequalities from 2024 and its analysis on women and work reported in a technical note from the period 2004-2014 published in 2016 (which unfortunately has not received an update yet); and by the Annual Socioeconomic Report on Women (hereinafter referred to as "RASEAM"), published in 2025 by the Observatory of Gender Equality of the Brazilian Ministry of Women. It is important to note that while IBGE is the primary data collector, IPEA acts as the analytical arm that often refines this data.

The concept of income adopted, unless otherwise stated, comprises the effective income received in the reference month within the scope of labour and other sources (such as pensions, rent, or social aid programs). Since Brazil does not have an official poverty line (the eligibility threshold for social benefits and cash transfer programs, as for other aspects of legal and bureaucratic deployments, is not unified), IBGE sums all income sources for all residents in a household (salaries, pensions, Bolsa Família, rent, etc.), divides it by the total number of residents, and categorizes poverty based on the World Bank thresholds, which are adjusted for Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). As of 2024/2025, the standard lines used for ex-

[1]According to the World Bank, Brazil is an upper-middle-income nation, with around 3.5% of the population living in extreme poverty and 23% in poverty (in 2024), and extreme levels of income and wealth inequality. Without government social programs, it is estimated that the levels of extreme poverty could be as high as 10% of the population.

treme poverty and poverty, respectively, are US$2.18 and US$6.85. Food security is measured through the Brazilian Food Insecurity Scale (hereinafter referred to as "EBIA") and comprises four levels that are assessed through the answers to a 14 (households with children) or 8 (households with no children) question survey: 1) food security (full access to food), 2) mild insecurity, 3) moderate insecurity, and 4) severe insecurity (hunger).

What cannot be overlooked is that work and labour transform nature and allow the human world to exist and develop, but it does not (nor could it) occur in isolation from the work and labour that create and transform human beings themselves. Social production and reproduction are inseparable and intertwined, although they are not to be confused. The conflict that arises between these spheres acts to the almost exclusive detriment of women: "only in a society where men and women constitute unequal genders is there any reason why gender should be an important organising principle of the social division of labour, with the exception of the physical process of childbearing" (Mackintosh, 1984, p. 5).

2. Sexual[2] Division of Labour

The division of labour in society has always been a fact, and it grows in proportion to the growth of society and its complexity, as well as the sophistication of what is produced. Even the "isolated" worker, outside a production line, is already part of a long chain that ranges from the extraction of the necessary raw materials from nature to the final product being commercialized (Taussig, 1921, p. 15). Likewise, the sexual division of labour can be observed in all societies (Mackintosh, 1984), and the sexual division of human activities predates the market and even the legal[3] concept of labour. The specialisation of gender roles in traditional societies can be considered the starting point of the division of labour, which is replaced by agriculture, crafts, trade, and industry as humanity becomes more complex. What occurred is that capitalism, the market, and the Industrial Revolution changed the

[2]The expression established itself with the word "sexual," while meaning, these days, to address the division of labour along lines of gender, since the division observed does not derive from differences between the sexes biologically, with the obvious exception of bearing a child and giving birth (Mackintosh, 1984; Elson & Pearson, 1984).

[3]From a strictly legal-dogmatic perspective, there cannot be labour prior to the existence of the notion of subordinate and free labour, since the legal phenomenon arises with the emergence of the basic category of the legal branch analysed. The existence of free labour is a historical-material prerequisite for the emergence of subordinate labour: historical because it requires the existence of a large supply of free labour in the economic and social universe, and material because subordination only arises when the service provider does not personally submit to the service taker (Marx, 2023). Personal submission has not completely disappeared from labour relations in general, given the explicit social and economic vulnerability of most workers in contemporary times, especially in the Global South, but it is reasonable to admit that it is no longer an essential characteristic of labour activity, in contrast to what occurred in previous historical moments. In slavery and in servitude modes of production, personal subjection is a necessary feature and represents a legal situation in which the worker lacks personal freedom or agency over their own life. In modern labour relations, there exists the notion of subordination, but from a strictly objective perspective: it is a legal situation derived from an employment contract, in which the employee freely undertakes to accept the employer's direction on *how to perform* the services.

concept of labour, or rather created it, and also changed the social dynamics that surround it, affecting the previous balance of the sexual division of labour (Federici, 2004, 2021; Dalla Costa & James, 1973).

The designation of men for production and women for reproduction reflected, before the emergence of capitalism, a relation between the sexes structured on both a political and economic basis but not necessarily implying inequality. The family played a fundamental role in the organisation of production and reproduction, and men and women participated in both spheres (Gama, 2014). The works of Veblen (1899), Greenwood (1984), and, in some ways, Lerner (1986) claim, more extremely, that the system of values and status of a society was reflected in the role women would play in the economy, represented by the capture of women as the origin of property and ownership (and accordingly the institutions of marriage, the patriarchal family, and private property), by the division of labour into exploit/female and industry/male activities, and by the importance of the vicarious role women would play in wealthy societies. Still, it was with the organisation of paid work along capitalist lines that the increasing feminisation of the sphere of reproduction took on a new dimension.

The emergence of the economy, the market, capitalism (or rudimentary mercantilism) brought about a shift in the conception of roles within the family and social group, such that the sexual division of labour emerged as "the form of social division of labour resulting from social relations between the sexes; more than that, it is a priority factor for the survival of social relations between the sexes." Under the sexual division of labour, men are primarily assigned to the productive sphere, while women are assigned to the reproductive sphere, expunged from functions and fields (such as the political, economic, or military) with the highest added value (Hirata & Kergoat, 2007).

Men and women are two social groups engaged in a specific social relation—gender relations—which is materially based on the sexual division of labour. The ideological justifications for the sexual division of labour serve to naturalise inequality, based on biology and the activities that, in nature, were divided between women and men in the group. They serve to articulate ideology and symbolic reproduction with the existing material basis. The sexual division of labour is based on the division of the productive and reproductive spheres, with the former being the responsibility of men and the latter being the responsibility of women, who are the carers, in charge of financially supporting the family of which men (fathers and husbands) are the providers. The failure to recognise domestic and care work obscures its economic dimension and its contiguity with capitalist exploitation (Kergoat, 2000).

The sexual division of labour has two organising principles: the principle of separation, which separates men's and women's work, and the principle of hierarchy, according to which men's work is worth more than women's (Kergoat, 2000). Culturally and historically, these are the characteristics that mark the existence of the sexual division of labour and that result in women generally occupying

less important positions, receiving lower salaries for equivalent positions, having fewer employment opportunities even though they often have higher levels of education (Moghadam, 1997), tending to choose careers that are less profitable precisely because they are associated with femininity—which creates a sectorisation of fields in which women are allowed to function—the unequal distribution of domestic tasks, experiencing the double shift, among others.

The sexual division of labour highlights the deficiencies of Marxist theories in disregarding the heterogeneity in the composition of a (working) class that is made up of men and women. When the composition of men and women is addressed, the approach tends to be biologizing and stereotypical, lacking rational, political, or sociological embedding. The concept of exploitation, which is the key concept of Marxism, is not enough to show the oppression suffered by women in social relations. Class relations are gendered, and social relations of sex are transversal in society. To say that relations of oppression and exploitation are not only interconnected but also form a web is not enough—there is also the economic, social, and political context, and the overall level of development of society (Hirata & Kergoat, 1993). On the other hand, the workforce as a whole is weakened by the emergence of material divisions, "allowing capital to divide and rule and thus to increase profits at the expense of wages" (Mackintosh, 1984).

The social operations that take place in the home, school, and community are the pillars that make profit-making activities possible through unpaid, invisible, undervalued work and labour effected by women, who find themselves facing the consequences of the domestication process performed by capitalism/patriarchy (Vogel, 1983; Federici, 2004; Bhattacharya, 2017; Pateman, 1988). Although the convenience and profits of unpaid labour benefit the whole society, all its disadvantages and mishaps are endured by each woman individually, daily, according to where she finds herself in the social structure, intersectionally speaking.

Intersectionality plays a defining role in the outcome of the sexual division of labour: "race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena" (Collins, 2015, p. 2). Despite almost all women being somehow affected by one or more of the various types of oppression present in society, the degree to which they will experience the overlapping of oppression systems simultaneously may be higher or lower, making each experience unique (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

Gendered oppression is directly linked to the history of slavery and racialization (Lerner, 1986). Before private property (land) was even a concept, men enclosed and traded the reproductive capacity of women, construing women as the first form of private property. In this way, class was formed through the different ways men and women were integrated into society. The model for the enslavement of others was first developed through the subordination of women in conquering tribes.

The struggle takes place depending also on political opportunities, places, and

moments in life. For example, in the Global South, the trajectory of men in their professional careers resembles that of (mostly white) women in Northern countries; that is, the intertwining of class and gender relations is greater than the class theories[4] alone would be able to construe (Hirata & Kergoat, 1993).

Sexual division of labour spreads, these days, both in the production and the reproduction spheres, reaching women with the burden of domestic tasks at the same time as in wage work, where they are relegated to second-rate job positions precisely because domestic work restricts their ability to participate better in cash-earning activities. It embodies female subordination in general, which goes beyond the division of labour itself but, rather, attains the realm of economic exploitation to finally translate as poverty for women (Mackintosh, 1984).

3. Feminisation of Poverty

The feminisation of poverty is a controversial topic, since there is no consensus about its existence. The findings of Pearce (1978, 1989), Peterson (1987), and Pressman (1988) about the fact that poverty had become increasingly feminized in the United States started a debate that seems to have no right or wrong answers, but rather diverse methodological and ideological approaches that lead to different conclusions.

The work of Costa et al. (2005) outlined six possible definitions for "feminisation of poverty" to subsidize an investigation into whether this process occurred in Brazil from 1983 to 2003, namely: 1) an increase in the proportion of women among the impoverished population; 2) an increase in the proportion of individuals within female-headed households among the poor; 3) an absolute increase in the incidence or intensity of poverty among women; 4) a rise in the poverty incidence or intensity differentials between women and men; 5) an increase in the incidence or intensity of poverty among individuals residing in female-headed households; 6) an increase in the poverty incidence or intensity differentials between individuals in female-headed households and those in male-headed households. The research showed no evidence of a process of feminisation of poverty, according to the authors. They also performed a similar investigation concerning Latin American countries (Medeiros & Costa, 2006) and concluded that even though poverty was higher among women, there was no evidence of a feminisa-

[4]Taking a different approach, Joan Scott (1989) argues that gender and race do not attain as much theoretical precision as class (as defined by Marxist theories), and the use of the triad of gender, class, and race may not be the safest bet. According to the author, the answers to questions such as "Should the history of women be treated separately or together with that of men? Are women not part of political and economic history? Is it just about sex and family? How does gender function in human social relations? How does gender give meaning to the organisation and perception of historical knowledge?" depend on gender being raised to a category of analysis. She argues that the descriptive use of the term "gender" affirms that relations between the sexes are social but says nothing about the reasons why these relations are constructed as they are, how they function, or how they change. According to her, "gender is a constitutive element of social relations based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary form of signifying power relations," so that women's place in social life is not directly the product of what they do, but of the meaning their activities acquire through concrete social interaction.

tion of poverty in those countries.

Pressman (2002), although explicitly stating that "it is well known that women are much more likely to be poor than men" (p. 353), also affirms that no empirical support was found for the feminisation of poverty when examining demographic and human capital explanations. The author denounces that the main explanation for women being more likely to be poor in the United States, when compared to women in other countries, was due to the impact of fiscal policy on the distribution of income. Nonetheless, the conclusions drawn assert that female-headed households do face a gender poverty gap for not having the same rates of labour force participation and for relying on their main income from jobs that are less profitable than those occupied by male household heads (Pressman, 2003).

In disregard of the lack of consensus around the phenomena of feminisation of poverty, men and women do experience poverty differently for several reasons (Lind, 1997; Razavi, 1999), and the empirical research is deeply challenged by the fact that "gender inequality extends beyond the poor and, by its turn, poverty is not exclusive to females" (Medeiros & Costa, 2010). Both the debate on gender inequality and the establishment of adequate anti-poverty policies are in jeopardy by overemphasizing either poverty or gender issues.

The force of methodological differences in measurements determines the feminisation of the results regarding policy interventions targeting to reduce gendered poverty, in the face of an overlapping of feminisation of household headship, feminisation of poverty, and feminisation of anti-poverty programs (Bradshaw, Chant & Linneker, 2018). Chant (2006) also states the importance of working towards aggregate indices that are more sensitive to gender gaps in poverty as identified and experienced by poor women, not only by emphasizing the methodological weaknesses of the term "feminisation of poverty" but also by proposing indicators that might be incorporated into the construction of indexes such as Gender-related Development or the Gender Empowerment Measure.

In the face of the controversy regarding the term "feminisation of poverty" and the possibility of abandoning the expression altogether due to its methodological and analytical vulnerabilities, along with Chant (2005, 2010), I prefer to keep it and define it as a process rather than a state, highlighting that "the poverty part of the construct refers not just to income but other, albeit related, privations" (Chant, 2005, p. 211), as lack of income is just one facet of the feminisation of poverty (Fukuda-Parr, 1999). Thus, what is important is that the subject be discussed, focusing on the fact that responsibilities and obligations fall disproportionately upon women regarding household survival and that there is a trend in gendered disadvantage among the poor.

It could be said that a "feminisation of poverty" is occurring if we embrace a broader take on poverty which comprises the notion that poverty is not just about incomes, but inputs, and which highlights not women's level or share of poverty, but their burden of dealing with it. Dealing with poverty is arguably as onerous and exploitative as suffering poverty (as well as exacerbating the latter), especially

given the mounting disparities in gendered investments in household livelihoods and the rewards derived. (Chant, 2005, p. 212)

The International Labour Organization[5] (ILO) strongly states the existence of a gender pay gap (ILO, 2018), in addition to general wage inequality ILO (2024), which is explained by several reasons, all of which are closely connected to the sexual division of labour and sum up to 1) household structure and 2) occupational sex segregation. The main examples of female poverty are essentially the expression of the sexual division of labour, manifesting themselves as varied forms of privation that go far beyond the lack of income. Then, with the dynamic framing of the feminisation of poverty as a process of "feminisation of responsibility and obligation" (Chant, 2005), we can move on to examining data that help support this broader definition with which this paper operates.

4. Discussion

Market labour conditions for Brazilian women have improved in recent decades, as they have in the rest of the world. However, gender segregation persists in terms of occupations and wage equality, despite women generally having a higher level of education than men. The choice of occupation probably has a strong impact on this wage gap, which cannot always be measured statistically. In addition, the opportunity cost of maintaining a double shift still keeps women out of the labour market (Madalozzo, 2010).

Married women tend to receive lower wages than women in stable relationships, who receive lower wages than single women (Madalozzo & Gomes, 2012). Motherhood is also a factor in women's discontinuity in the Brazilian labour market (Madalozzo & Gomes, 2012; Machado & Pinho Neto, 2016), especially for younger mothers (Feijó et al., 2022). Although these concepts seem evident in common readings of reality, it is extremely important that they are proven by government agencies' statistics, so that statements about sexual segregation in the labour market can be unequivocally demonstrated.

The division of domestic labour is also unequal: on average, women contribute two to three times more than men to domestic tasks. Tasks are distributed according to criteria of femininity or masculinity, and "typically feminine" tasks, such as preparing meals or doing laundry, are more time-consuming and need to be performed more regularly than "typically masculine" tasks, such as repairing objects or maintaining the car. When it comes to caring for children, women consider themselves, and are considered by others, to be primarily responsible, so that activities that require more care and take more time, such as hygiene and feeding, are left to mothers, while fathers take on interactive activities associated with fun

[5]Prior to those reports, the ILO was warned to pay more attention to developing and applying a critical gender perspective and to the operation and effects of gendered relations of power in particular contexts, on top of articulating axes of social differentiation, including class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, nation, religion, and ability, and that ILO studies should seek the root causes of specific inequalities, focusing on collecting primary quantitative and qualitative data to complement existing national statistics on employment, the informal economy, and gender (Chant & Pedwell, 2008, p. 29).

and leisure. This belief in traditional family roles is deeply rooted in the mindsets of both spouses (Poeschl, 2010).

The change in the concept of work brought about by capitalism and the Industrial Revolution requires women from lower socioeconomic classes to work in the market to contribute to—when they are not solely responsible for—the family's livelihood. This has led to the assertion that these women are subjected to a double shift, i.e., working in the labour market and still taking care of all the domestic tasks that traditionally "are their responsibility." The idea of a double shift masks the economic value of domestic or care work, which ends up being invisible, even though it is essential. The irony lies in the conversion of everything into a commodity operated by capitalism, especially the labour force, without any appreciation of domestic care work, precisely because it has no immediate economic value. This is a fallacy, because if a third person is hired to do the same work, there will be a (considerable) fee charged. Not even through the capitalist conversion of all activities into commodities is the invisibility of women's care work eliminated.

Measuring work exclusively according to economic criteria is not feasible, since unpaid domestic work is not easily replaceable by anything that can be found on the market, meets emotional needs, and has no defined duration, because even when it is delegated, its management must be constant. Hence the need to value work from a global perspective, encompassing market work and domestic work, that is, the public and private spheres of life. The labour expended in the unpaid domestic sphere generates use-value that is subsequently internalized as the exchange-value of labour-power. This reproductive process demands a sophisticated repertoire of skills, specialized knowledge, and specific means of production. In the context of childcare, this encompasses a continuum of labour—from biological gestation and nourishment to the cultivation of intellectual, social, and emotional faculties. Consequently, these activities are not peripheral to the economy; they constitute a vital form of value production that is structurally integrated into the broader logic of capital accumulation. The estimation of the economic value of unpaid care work reveals a substantial contribution of 10.0% to the Brazilian economy, despite not being accounted for in the Gross Domestic Product (Igansi et al., 2025).

In Brazil, the concept of work adopted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in accounting for the active and employed population considers as work only market economic activities, excluding much of what is done by women in their daily lives, and the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA) itself criticizes it:

The concept of work that underpins the production of statistics in the country is therefore characterised by the ideas of production and commodification. The production of unpaid goods and services in the private sphere is rendered invisible and understood as a non-productive activity that renders those who perform it inactive if they do not also engage in activities in the labour market (IPEA, 2016).

The aspects discussed in the literature are confirmed by the statistics: the con-

cept of "activity" for IBGE is exclusionary and disregards unpaid domestic work—caring for one's own home, children, the elderly, and the sick—as an activity that contributes to the production and reproduction of life and generates value. When it comes to the distribution of domestic work in Brazil, there are not even differences between racial groups, which are so significant in all other aspects: "the issue of unpaid domestic work has a gender marker that, strictly from the point of view of involvement and working hours, seems to be equally felt by Black and white women" (IPEA, 2016). In 2022, men (Black and white) dedicated on average 10 hours weekly to domestic and care work, while white women dedicated 19 hours and Black women, 21 hours (IPEA, 2024).

According to IPEA, between 2004 and 2014, there was a consolidation of what could be described as the feminisation of work, based on the proportion of economically active people. In 1970, 18.5% of women were economically active, a figure that rose to over 52% in 2024 (IBGE, 2024). However, "women remain in precarious and vulnerable jobs in sectors traditionally occupied by them. They receive the worst wages and have long and unpredictable working hours, as a result of the accumulation of paid work with care services" (IPEA, 2016).

Despite the economic growth and more formalised labour relations of the last two decades, there has been no reversal of the sexual and racial division of labour, as the growth in female participation in the labour market has occurred through atypical contracts, outsourced contracts, or precarious self-employment. In 2016, the worst occupations were those of Black women, who face the triple oppression of gender, race, and class: 39.1% of employed Black women were in precarious[6] working relationships, followed by Black men (31.6%), white women (27.0%), and white men (20.6%) (IPEA, 2016).

Women's income in Brazil rose between 2004 and 2014 from 63% to 70% of men's income, meaning that women earned, on average, 30% less than men (IPEA, 2016). In 2022, the income of white men was, on average, R$2381.41; of white women, R$2238.86; of Black men, R$1283.85; of Black women, R$1191.66. That means that Black women's income was, on average, only 50% of white men's (IPEA, 2024). Households headed by Black or Brown women exhibit a lower per capita household income. The average income of a Black or Brown female-headed household with children and no partner or spouse is around 35% of a non-Black or Brown couple-headed household with children (Brazil, 2025), indicating how deep the vulnerability gap is between these two socioeconomic groups.

IBGE surveys pose the question of "who the reference person of that household is," meaning the one responsible for financial support and decision-making, and records self-identification as to the reference person, which is a functional defini-

[6]In the Brazilian context, precarious work should be read as a multidimensional phenomenon of labour instability, characterized by depressed wages and the erosion of social protections and statutory labour rights. Driven largely by outsourcing, atypical contracting, and the rise of the platform economy, this condition encompasses informal and disguised self-employment (e.g., courier services). These arrangements frequently subject workers to hazardous environments, chronic income insufficiency, and heightened psychosocial stress (Fernandes, 2023).

tion, or a de facto headship. In this context, a woman can be the reference person, whether or not she has a spouse or partner present in the home. Additionally, this woman could have children or other dependents, or not. It paints a scenario in which a female-headed household could be that of 1) single-person: a woman living alone; 2) extended: a woman living with children and/or other relatives who have low or no income; 3) lone-parent: a woman living with children; 4) nuclear female head: a woman living with children and a spouse or partner (often a dual-income household). According to IBGE (2024), approximately 51% of the households in Brazil are female-headed, of which 57% are described as without spouse/partner and 43% with spouse/partner. That is to say that around 29% of Brazilian households are led by women without a spouse and 22% are led by women with a spouse. Since the configuration of female-headed households is very wide, the type of headship definition itself is enough to affect the poverty comparisons: women with children and without a partner who are household heads are statistically more likely to engage in informal work because they require extreme time flexibility to balance childcare and income, often at the cost of labour rights and stability. The dependency ratio of children per working adult is high and there is no second income to help cover financial shortfalls, leading to a significantly lower per capita income.

The most vulnerable subgroup in the IBGE data (2024) is, therefore, the Lone-Parent Female-headed Household with children under 14: this subgroup exhibits the highest poverty rate (41%, which is almost twice as high as the national average of 23%) and the worst labour market possibilities, making these women the most likely to be in precarious work (they often cannot work full-time or fixed-hour jobs due to time poverty—the double burden of unpaid domestic care). The accumulation of paid and unpaid labour corresponds with an increased risk of food insecurity for these households, an association between the gendered double burden (time poverty) and nutritional vulnerability (Braga & Costa, 2022).

Female headship is not necessarily a proxy for poverty; instead, it is the interaction between headship, the absence of a partner, and the presence of children (the lone-parent household arrangement) that creates the highest propensity for low income and the correlation with precarious work.

As the ultimate outcome of poverty, there is a greater propensity for food insecurity in households led by women in Brazil: data show that in 2025, 68.3% of female-headed households were in a state of food security, while male-headed households represented 76.8% (Brazil, 2025). Households led by women without a partner are nearly twice as likely to face severe food insecurity compared to those where a partner is present: while 20% of Brazilian female-headed households with a spouse face some degree of food insecurity (EBIA mild to severe), almost 35% of Brazilian female-headed households without a spouse are in the same situation, of reliance on cheap, ultra-processed, or insufficient food. Limitations on access to sufficient income are linked to greater vulnerability to severe food insecurity for Brazilian households with a female reference person (Rodrigues, Costa, &

Salles-Costa, 2025), while the reduction of unpaid labour hours could contribute to a lower likelihood of food insecurity due to increased access to the labour market (Rodrigues, Ribeiro, & Salles-Costa, 2025).

Historical trends reveal a disparity in nutritional stability, with female-headed households exhibiting a higher prevalence of both mild and moderate/severe food insecurity when compared to those headed by men. While food security initially improved across all household types between 2004 and 2013, this trajectory reversed between 2013 and 2018, signaling a period of heightened vulnerability. By 2018, the data identifies a critical intersection of risk: households headed by Black or Brown single mothers with children under five faced a probability of moderate/severe food insecurity over four times higher than those headed by married white men. The presence of children—particularly in households headed by Black or Brown individuals—also amplifies the risk of severe nutritional deprivation, suggesting that the convergence of gender inequities and systemic racial disparities significantly potentiates household food insecurity (Santos et al., 2023). A projection indicates that if current disparities persist, by the year 2040, Black female-headed households will consume on average 22% less kcal/capita/day than white male-dominated households (Gerber Machado et al., 2020).

The empirical claims discussed in this section—women being pushed out of the labour market, the gender pay gap, women being penalized in the labour market by maternity, the double shift, the unequal distribution of domestic tasks and economic invisibility of domestic work, lower household income, and food insecurity—are all illustrative of the intertwining of the sexual division of labour and the process of feminisation of poverty (or feminisation of responsibilities and obligations), as stated in the previous section.

The data presented suggest a significant association between the sexual division of labour and the feminisation of poverty, a relationship underpinned by the disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic work and reduced paid hours for women within a gender-segmented labour market. This structural imbalance often corresponds with a higher prevalence of female-headed households—specifically those with children and no spouse—experiencing heightened food insecurity as a direct consequence of systemic poverty.

The sexual division of labour acts as the structural engine of economic inequality, assigning women primary responsibility for unpaid care work, which severely constrains their time use and dictates their entry into the labour market. This constraint often forces women into "flexible" or "pink-collar" roles, driving occupational segregation where female-dominated sectors are systematically undervalued. Consequently, the resulting wage gaps—compounded by fewer hours of paid work and lower hourly rates—fuel the feminisation of poverty, as women-led households possess fewer liquid assets and social protections. Within the home, this translates directly into household poverty, where a lack of purchasing power manifests in critical food insecurity indicators, such as reduced caloric intake, poor nutritional diversity, and the prioritisation of children's meals over the

mother's own health.

5. Final Remarks

Drawing upon data from different institutions and years, this study employs a range of indicators—from labour-force and income metrics to food insecurity data and a 2040 projection—as complementary evidence rather than direct points of comparison. This approach uses these various data points to triangulate a broader scenario, pointing to the ways in which reproductive labour costs impact the income of women and the per capita resources of female-headed households. Collectively, these indicators illustrate a socio-economic environment where gendered labour divisions converge with systemic poverty and food insecurity. A primary limitation of this study lies in the reliance on secondary, aggregate household-level statistics, which effectively treat the household as a single economic unit. This approach obscures intra-household resource allocation, making it impossible to observe individual poverty or the potentially unequal distribution of income and food among family members. In many contexts, a household may sit above the official poverty line while female members or children experience "hidden" deprivation due to gendered power dynamics that prioritize the consumption of the primary breadwinner. Consequently, interpreting poverty through household headship as a proxy may underestimate the true extent of female economic vulnerability, as it fails to capture the lack of financial autonomy and individual "time poverty" experienced by women living in male-headed or multi-generational arrangements.

Marx overlooked how the "wage" is not just a payment for work, but also a tool for creating social hierarchies (Federici, 2012). In the context of Social Reproduction Theory, this data illustrates that women often bear the burden of economic instability. When a female-headed household experiences food insecurity, it directly impacts the health and development of children (reproduction of labour), which has long-term implications for the workforce and the economy at large.

As Bhattacharya (2017) posits, by recentering oppression and remapping class, we can see that the food insecurity and lower per capita income of female-headed households are not mere statistical outliers, but core features of how class is structured under social reproduction. The higher incidence of food insecurity in female-headed households is not an isolated social failure. Rather, it represents the "crisis of care" that occurs when the system fails to support the very domestic labour it depends on for the reproduction of labour power (Vogel, 1983).

The liberal contract suggests that people own their labour and can sell it, but for women, this contract often results in the alienation of our bodies and autonomy to men, since the social contract is founded on a sexual contract, which is key to understanding the legal logic of how gendered poverty and domestic labour are structured (Pateman, 1988). Adding the historical violence of the primitive accumulation (Federici, 2004) and the modern economic structure described in the Social Reproduction Theory (Bhattacharya, 2017), the data provided show the

current material consequences, meaning the feminisation of poverty.

The precarious socioeconomic status of Black and Brown female-headed households, as evidenced by the RASEAM report, is the contemporary manifestation of what Federici identifies in Caliban and the Witch as the foundational devaluation of reproductive labour.

Poverty has been classified as a multi-dimensional phenomenon by several institutions in the past decade (The United Nations Development Programme, The World Bank, The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, The Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, and UNICEF). The European Council in Resolution 1558 (Council of Europe, 2007) identifies poverty as a multi-dimensional phenomenon rooted in gender inequality—which highlights even more strongly the connections to the aspects we have been trying to argue—and divides it into four groups of problems: 1) the gender division of labour, which results in highly paid jobs generally for men and lower paid jobs for women; 2) inequality in access to and disposal of resources; 3) women's limited power to defend their interests, which is conditioned by economic, legal, social, cultural, and other factors; 4) poverty hinders women's participation in the democratic process and restricts their access to civil rights.

Economic thinking still needs to be reoriented towards a broader definition that includes the provisioning and reproductive activities of women: the home production of the necessities of life, notably the reproduction of the next generation. Considering these guidelines and data on women's participation in the labour market, we see that, despite the little progress[7] achieved, gender inequality persists and only deepens when combined with racial and class issues. There are many obstacles to overcome:

The structuring of social protection systems and public policies capable of effectively contributing to overcoming gender inequalities and addressing tensions between family and work presupposes not only overcoming the traditional dichotomy between "woman as caregiver" and "man as provider," which has been the basis for the establishment of the vast majority of welfare state institutions, but also overcoming the notion of women as a secondary labour force, which, despite all empirical evidence to the contrary, continues to be deeply ingrained in the social imagination, in economic and sociological theory, and among public policymakers. (Gama, 2014, p. 55)

Public policies articulated in this sense must be capable of promoting equality in the world of work and the economic autonomy of urban, rural, and forest women, in order to reduce or eliminate the feminisation of poverty. When devel-

[7]Especially as a result of income redistribution programmes promoted by the federal government, particularly Bolsa Família and the Continuous Cash Benefit Programme; it is important to highlight that the way in which gender has been incorporated pragmatically—predominantly through the "feminization" of anti-poverty programmes—has rarely relieved women of the onus of coping with poverty in their households, and has sometimes exacerbated their burdens (Chant, 2008), since the cash transfers are conditioned on keeping up responsibilities that befall almost exclusively upon women, such as children's school attendance and performance or attendance at health appointments.

oping public policies, it is necessary to consider class, race, and ethnic inequalities together so that specific actions can be designed to contribute to the elimination of inequalities in the sexual division of labour, with an emphasis on policies to eradicate poverty and value women's participation in the country's development, to stop perpetuating the cycle of social exclusion (Jesus, Wajnman & Turra, 2026). Also, society needs to raise boys and men to be aware of domestic tasks as their responsibilities, since that represents a significant part in the increasing "feminisation of responsibility and obligation".

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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