

SPOTLIGHT ON FACULTY RESEARCH

A Q&A with Professor Meredith Turshen on her research work regarding child poverty and the food crisis as they relate to Africa. Her recent article, “*Child Poverty in Africa*,” was published in the Review of African Political Economy [35(3):494-500; 2008.]

Q. Your current work focuses on child poverty in Africa. How did you become interested in this topic?

Working for UNICEF and in the Maternal and Child Health Unit at the World Health Organization, I learned a lot about children in low- and middle-income countries. I have focused on Africa since writing my dissertation on health care in Tanzania. A few years ago, I developed a new undergraduate course on Third World Poverty that focused on children. In 2008, an invitation to an international conference on child poverty, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, led me to explore anew the topic of child poverty in Africa.

Q. How does African childhood poverty differ from childhood poverty in other regions of the world?

Most geographical regions prospered in the 1980s and 1990s; Africa was the sole exception. On most measures of health, nutrition, longevity, and income, Africans lost ground. Childhood poverty is deeper, more pervasive, and more destructive in Africa than elsewhere. Infrastructure remains undeveloped, and unemployment and underemployment mean there are few opportunities for youth, although more children under 15 years of age work in Africa than in any other region of the world (26.4%.) More than 30 percent of African children still do not attend primary school, and post-primary education is denied to the majority.

Q. You spend some time discussing how poverty differentially impacts boys and girls. Tell me about these differences.

Statistics do not disaggregate the poverty of girls and their brothers; there are no sex-segregated data for child poverty because the measurement is of the poverty of the families and households in which children live. So the issue is to discover the discriminatory systems operating in childhood that lead women to become the majority of the world's poor. We know that girls receive less education than boys. Data on child labor show that girls are more likely to be sexually exploited in their workplaces than are boys.

Q. What lines of inquiry do you recommend researchers pursue in the future regarding the gendered nature of childhood poverty?

If we are to address the gender dimension of child poverty, it seems that we need to design a new sort of research project that would gather data on girls' and boys' pathways from poverty in childhood and adolescence to an impoverished or better-off life in adulthood. Examination of these trajectories in cohort studies might reveal the points of divergence in girls' and boys' lives that lead to more poverty in adulthood for women. Such research should be both qualitative and quantitative, tracing children's life chances and setbacks in gendered settings.

Q. What is next for you on your personal research agenda?

One issue that arose in the African Child Policy conference was the current food crisis. I decided that I wanted to explore the dimensions of the crisis in Africa and understand its implications for women and children. In the past four months, I gave two talks on this theme—at the University of Michigan and at Cornell University. I am currently writing up my research and will be contributing the work as a chapter to a volume on African Development, Gender and Human Security edited by Howard Stein and Amal Fadlalla.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meredeth Turshen is a Professor in the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University. Her research interests include international health and she specializes in public health policy. She has written four books, *The Political Ecology of Disease in Tanzania* (1984), *The Politics of Public Health* (1989), and *Privatizing Health Services in Africa* (1999), all published by Rutgers University Press, and *Women's Health Movements: A Global Force for Change* (2007) published by Palgrave Macmillan; she has edited five other books. She serves on the Board of the Association of Concerned Africa Scholars, as Treasurer of the Committee for Health in Southern Africa, as contributing editor of the *Review of African Political Economy*, and is on the editorial board of the *Journal of Public Health Policy*.

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