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# **The Relationship between Poverty and Inequality**

*Draft Paper prepared for the Combat Poverty Agency and the Equality Authority*

By

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## *Introduction*

This paper opens with some introductory remarks regarding the types of oppression experienced by those living in poverty<sup>1</sup>. It goes on to argue the case for a more structuralist approach to poverty analysis, one which takes cognisance not only of the global capitalist order, but also of the gender order, the disability, racial, sexual and other orders which frame social life and precipitate poverty in diverse ways.

A core assumption of the paper is that radical change in structural and institutional procedures which would help eliminate poverty, demands a change in political ideology to support it. Part II of the paper therefore outlines some of the ideological barriers to change which need to be overcome if a more radical holistic approach to equality and poverty is to be achieved. It is suggested that the dominant political ideologies of conservative neo-liberalism, housed in a framework of consensualism, needs to be challenged. The limitations of this perspective for the promotion of equality in any substantive sense, need to be documented.

Changes in the conceptual frameworks and paradigmatic assumptions of intellectuals are also necessary if poverty is to be eliminated. In particular, the traditional positivist approach, which draws a clear dichotomy between fact and value, between ethics and analysis, needs to be broken down if new paradigms are to develop. While this problem is acute in the economic analysis of poverty, it applies across a range of disciplines.

The main part of the paper focuses on the relationship between inequality and poverty in Part III. It is suggested that inequality arises in three key contexts, namely, the economic, the cultural and the political. While poverty is clearly a form of economic inequality, it is not synonymous with it. Both cultural and political contexts may be the principal generators of inequality in particular cases. The ways in which inequalities differ across the three contexts is also explored, and the significance of each context for generating inequality for the various groups identified in the Poverty Proofing Guidelines and the Equality legislation is discussed.

*Being poor: diverse oppressions*

It is widely accepted that poverty is a state of relative deprivation within a given society (Townsend, 1979; Nolan and Callan, 1994).<sup>1</sup> While it originates in the unequal distribution of economic resources it is not synonymous with economic inequality. Those who experience poverty experience economic inequality, but not all of those who experience economic inequality experience poverty. For example, although both the vertical and horizontal segregation of the labour market, and inadequate care support, means that women, *ceteris paribus*, earn less than men on average, and are hence economically unequal to them, it is clear that not all women are in poverty.

The defining characteristics of the poor in advanced capitalist societies are not only their relative material deprivation but also their social marginalisation. Poverty marginalises people within a host of social institutions which are not economic in nature, including education, health, politics and leisure. People are unable to participate on equal terms with others due to both the direct or indirect costs involved in participation, be these fees, transport or child care. The inability to participate may also arise because of the political incapacity (powerlessness) of the poor to direct the service towards their particular needs, or because of the lack of accurate and reliable information available to them on how to use or manage the service most effectively (Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998).

In Western capitalist states, poverty is generally managed and ameliorated by welfare provision. Because the welfare poor depend on the bureaucratic state for a livelihood, they can and are subjected to the arbitrary and invasive authority of the welfare service providers (legitimate though this may be). Often basic rights to privacy, respect and individual choice are suspended creating a sense of oppression which compounds the poverty which generated their welfare needs in the first instance. (Young, 1990: 53-55).

The oppression generated by poverty is not confined either to exclusion from participation or to the lack of respect, privacy or choice in relation to services, it is also manifested in a lack of self respect and the feelings of isolation, alienation and uselessness among the poor. (O’Neill, 1992) The marginalisation which ensues from material poverty creates states of internalised oppression whereby people blame themselves for their own state, and feel powerless to change it. Their problems become personalised rather than politicised thereby disabling them from action (McMinn, 2000).

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<sup>1</sup>The National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) defines poverty as follows:

“People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources, people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society”

## *Part I*

### *A Depoliticised Debate: Structural Issues*

To date, much of the focus of analysis in debates about poverty is on the experiences of those in poverty (their deprivation and relative economic marginalisation) or the attributes associated with it, that is age, geographical location, employment status, gender etc. The focus has been on the *relational life chances* emanating from poverty, as opposed to the *relational life causes* which generate it. This means that both the intellectual analysis and policy initiatives focus on how to remediate the 'problem' as opposed to dealing with the generative economic practices and social relations which precipitated that state in the first instance.

Abstracting the analysis of poverty from the relational and structural contexts in which it is created de-politicises the debate about poverty as it abstracts it from political and institutional reality. Poverty is presented as a state of being, a phenomenon, with no name for the pattern of relationships and the power struggles which allow people to live in contexts of high deprivation and oppression in the midst of plenty.

It is arguable that the depoliticising of the debate about social class (Reay, 1998) is what has contributed most to the depoliticisation of the debate about poverty. In Ireland and in other countries such as the UK, euphemisms about class have replaced the language of class itself (Lynch, 1999). Politically neutral terms such as 'the disadvantaged', or 'low socioeconomic groups' have come to dominate policy discourses about the poor, a language which has not been chosen by working class people themselves.

There is a sense also in which working class identity has become a 'spoilt' identity in an age of social mobility and possessive individualism. (Reay, 1998). Working class areas and jobs are places from one is expected to move on, out or up. As people who are poor are drawn disproportionately from the working class, their statuses are negatively defined therefore in a twofold sense: once in terms of their poverty which is by definition a negative status, and once in terms of their social class, which because of economic and political changes of recent history, is also often negatively defined. The ability to mobilise and act politically for change is undoubtedly constrained by the double burden of negativity (which is of course not just symbolic but also material in its outcomes)

Such depoliticisation forecloses an analysis of the powerful interest groups who benefit either indirectly or directly from the poverty of others, many of which work through a range of different channels to forestall any radical action to eliminate poverty. The focus remains firmly on the problems of the oppressed rather than on the structural relations which facilitate the lifestyles which the better off and wealthy can afford at the expense of the poor. Yet, it is the presence of the latter which determines the condition of the former.

The failure to examine the effects of structural systems generating economic marginalisation, including patriarchy, racism, disablism and ethnocentrism, creates a

partial and inadequate discourse about poverty. The debate around poverty becomes focused on relatively minor modifications in the tax and welfare systems, which, while important in their own right, do nothing to alter the relations of production, consumption, care and exchange which generate poverty over time and in each generation.

### *Structural forces generating poverty*

The economies of capitalist societies like Ireland are strongly focused on maximising the conditions which generate profit (Breen, 1990). As the maximisation of profit is frequently made possible at the cost of minimising wage costs, and/or reducing the costs of State funded health, education and other welfare services, which are funded in part from the tax paid on capital accumulated (Offe, 1984), it is inevitable that capitalist societies will generate economic inequality. A strong and unregulated focus on capital accumulation also fosters poverty as workers are treated as units of production in the realisation of profit objectives; they are used or dispensed with as the share price and market share demands, frequently being left without adequate income or welfare at times of slowdown in production or in recession.

In most Western countries, the State plays a pivotal role in managing economic relations. Poverty arises therefore not only from unequal systems of market relations but also from the way in which such relations are managed by the state. National governments, particularly those that operate an interventionist policy in relation to the management of public services and of the economy itself, play a central role in determining the distribution of wealth within a given society (Dreze and Sen, 1996). In so doing, they have a central role to play in either the perpetuation or the elimination of poverty.

While capitalism remains therefore, there will always be a problem of inequality and, depending on how capitalism is managed by the State, a problem of poverty, first, because capitalism depends on profits and cannot accommodate significant redistribution, and secondly, because capital needs to retain command over labour, which necessarily means unequal power; this lack of power increases the vulnerability of labour both economically and politically, making it more susceptible to poverty.

It is not only capitalism however, which generates poverty among particular groups, patriarchal systems also generate poverty. This arises due to the unequal distribution of work between women and men in the social relations of care, the more general subordination of women in the gendered division of (paid) labour and welfare, and the unequal status between gender groups in a patrilineal society resulting in a gendered distribution of property both within and between generations.

Institutionalised racism and xenophobia operate other segmentations in labour, welfare and property relations which promote poverty among those who are defined negatively in racial terms (most conspicuously black people in white societies, or Travellers in Irish society). The poverty induced by race or ethnicity is group specific and may arise from a range of race or ethnic induced exclusions, be it in legislation which prohibits certain categories of person from working (asylum seekers, who are ethnic minorities, for example), in ethnically-determined welfare codes, or in

legislation undermining forms of trade which are endemic to the lifestyle of an ethnic minority, such as Travellers, such as nomadism in the case of Travellers.

The high levels of poverty among the disabled is not confined to any one type of political or socio-economic system. While the operation of global capitalism, patriarchy of racism may all interact to reinforce poverty for any given disabled person, none of these alone can explain the disability-specific poverty which she or he experiences. The poverty of the learning disabled for example, is arguably as much a function of lowly status resulting in their incarceration and isolation in institutions, and their lack of education, training and advocacy support, as it is of the ordering of the labour market along capitalist lines.

While the end goal of poverty elimination is undoubtedly a significant redistribution of resources from the better off to the poor, the complete elimination of poverty demands restructuring multiple forms of social relations. It demands ultimately a restructuring of work, a revaluing of particular forms of labour including care work, a revaluation of states of dependence however they arise, and significant changes in the way in which wealth is managed and owned in society. The problems to be addressed are not simply economic, they are also social, cultural and political. They demand changes at the ideological and institutional levels which extend far outside the formal relations of material production, distribution and exchange. Eliminating poverty demands a restructuring of gender relations, ability relations, race and ethnic relations, age, sexuality and such other relations as are cognate to the problem of poverty in a given society.

Without such a multifaceted structural analysis, one which focuses on both the deliberate and indeliberate practices and decisions which create poverty, poverty is individualised; it is construed as 'pathos'. The net effect of this is that the focus of analysis is on those who are affected by inequality and injustice rather than on those systems and institutions which help to determine their position.

Academic analysis (and correlatively, policy attention and media analysis) needs to move therefore from its concern with the marginalised to a concern with how economic, political and sociocultural structures generate poverty, and how the relative significance of any one of these may vary in any particular case, depending on the age, gender, ethnic identity etc of the persons in question. It is the institutionalisation of unequal systems of valuation (status recognition), power and economic control which make poverty so difficult to eliminate.

“Economic domination in our society occurs not simply or primarily because some persons have more wealth and income than others, important as this is. Economic domination derives at least as much from the corporate and legal structures and procedures that give some persons the power to make decisions about investment, production, marketing, employment, interest rates, and wages that affect millions of other people. Not all who make these decisions are wealthy or even privileged, but the decision-making structure operates to reproduce distributive inequality and ....unjust constraints on people's lives...” (Young, 1990:23)

The importance of recognising the separate role of political, sociocultural and economic relations in promoting poverty will be discussed further below. However, prior to this, it is important to examine some of the more political and intellectual barriers which must be overcome if the elimination of poverty is to become a priority objective. Achieving a more egalitarian society, is not simply a matter of having a sound analytical framework, important though this may be. It is also a function of having an intellectual and political environment which favours having a socially just society. Without a supportive political and intellectual culture, the equally project can only be minimally implemented. The next section of the paper therefore examines some of the challenges which have to be faced politically and intellectually if poverty and inequality are to be substantively reduced or eliminated.

## *Part II*

### *The Importance of Ideology and Academic Paradigms*

#### ***Political Contexts of the Debate: Confronting a Political Malaise***

Concepts of poverty and inequality do not exist in some detached and objectified state; they are grounded in the intellectual, historical and political realities from which they have developed. It is important when undertaking an analysis of the links between economic inequality and poverty that we situate the discussion in the wider intellectual and political contexts in which it is located.

One of the most serious difficulties facing those who want to address issues of poverty (and related economic inequalities) in society is that the political context within which the debate can take place has radically changed internationally. The demise of communism in Eastern Europe and Russia in particular, has seriously challenged the legitimacy of economic equality as a political project. By implication it has also marginalised political concerns about poverty. Those on the New Right even claim that the problems of poverty have effectively been resolved through the market system (Saunders, 1993). Although such a claim is clearly untenable in the light of the continuing and growing economic inequalities in several countries including Ireland (Atkinson et al., 1995; Coates, 1998; Greider, 1997; Nolan and Maitre, 2000), nevertheless it has enormous political credence evidenced by the serious challenges to the welfare state occurring in several countries in Western Europe. A concept of the 'market citizen' has developed at the expense of the 'citizen with social rights' (Hanson, 2000). The market view of the citizen is highly individualised and privatised; it is premised on assumptions of possessive individualism (consumerism) as the defining element in social identity. The idea that citizenship is untenable without a strong redistributive component and social rights has been seriously undermined.

Others claim that the major new political project of our time is the recognition of difference, not the equalisation of wealth and income. The focus has shifted from economic inequalities to political and cultural inequalities; from reordering of the social relations of production and the redistribution of wealth to the recognition of cultural, social and political differences. Class (economically-based) politics has been increasingly replaced by a politics of cultural and social difference (Fraser, 1995; Phillips, 1999). 'Old' socialists continue to speak and to act as if the only major social divider was social class, while the new-style egalitarians assume that one can create a politically and culturally inclusive society without regard for the serious differences in capacity that are the by-products of economic inequality. The deep interface between the realisation of socio-economic and political/cultural egalitarian ideals is only beginning to be addressed in these new debates.



Underpinning the demise of a politics of economic inequality is a clear belief internationally that capitalism has 'won' the Cold War. A deep-seated resignation as to the power and influence of capitalism exists; many now believe there is no alternative to it (Phillips, 1999:16). This wider international development is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to realise change in a more radical economically egalitarian direction within Ireland. We are subject to a host of international influences which are pulling in the opposite direction, including such institutions as the OECD, and powerful industrial interests within the EU. Although the EU is often portrayed as a positive egalitarian influence on Irish social policy, research on EU Commission reports indicate that this is far from being the case. (Hanson, 2000). The European Commission is equivocal on social rights in many of its policy recommendations in the 1990s.

The net outcome of the aforementioned social trends is that the ideology of the New Right which has glorified 'free enterprise, individual 'choice' and the primacy of the 'market' informs much of public understanding about what are the appropriate policies to address economic inequality and poverty in Irish society. The terms of public discourse have changed; a new managerialism reigns with a focus on the market and 'consumers' Those who avail of public services now are increasingly referred to as in market terms as 'customers' and 'clients'; it is increasingly assumed that people are autonomous entities making individual 'choices', devoid of the constraints of economic and political circumstance and of the obligations of care and related commitments. etc. A new possessive individualism pervades public thinking about social policy and social justice. While individualisation may be a welcome development in the context of conservative communitarian ideologies which had led to the subordination of women and children in the family in particular, it is also a problematic principle in so far as it conceals the structural and relational character of inequality and social injustice.

The power and influence of global capitalism is undoubtedly immense. Inequalities between labour and capital, in terms of control over the means of production, have grown in intensity and scale, particularly with globalisation (Sklair 1994). While ascendant monetarist values and the associated culture of possessive individualism underpinning it are powerful forces in the early 21st century, there is no reason why they cannot be challenged, there is always scope for resistance (Gramsci, 1971). One of the first tasks to be undertaken is to deconstruct the ideologies legitimating the monetarism and possessive individualism underpinning contemporary economic practices. Without undermining the principles and values underwriting global capitalism, there is little chance of having the kind of public political support which significant policy changes require. The terms of the debates must change and the principles which support inequality must be challenged systematically if policy is to change in a significant manner. The realisation of social change is not simply about changing institutions and practices, it is also about changing the way we define the problem, both in the general public arena and within institutions; getting public commitment to an egalitarian society is essential for realising significant social changes for those who are poor.

### *Intellectual Contexts of the Debates*

Higher education and research play a central role in defining the terms in which the debate about economic and social policy take place in society. Consequently, it is important to analyse the way in which key disciplines analyse the question of inequality and poverty and explore the impact that their thinking has on public policy generally.

### *Economics*

The challenge posed by economic inequality is difficult to address because it is approached very differently across various disciplines. The discipline of economics, which is a powerful discourse in public policy-making, is dominated by neo-classicalism. Although there is not homogeneity within the discipline in Ireland or within economics as a whole, there is no powerful alternative to neo-classical thought (such as feminist economics or Marxist economics) operating within Ireland. Consequently, it is almost impossible intellectually for a new paradigm to develop. Put simply, intellectual closure within the discipline of economics means that the debate about equality rarely moves beyond concerns with welfarism. There is no serious intellectual challenge to the operation of the capitalist market or to the unequal outcomes of the gendered division of labour, the focus is never on assessing economic structures in terms of such moral considerations as economic justice, enhancing human relations or preserving the environment for future generations. While individual economists are undoubtedly deeply committed to social justice, the constraints of the dominant paradigm within the discipline are overwhelming, leading to an overriding concern with economic efficiency and growth *per se*.

The lack of attention given to the ethical dimensions of the economic order is far from being an exclusively Irish problem however. It is an endemic problem within the discipline. Internationally, the core principles of the discipline focus on relations between individuals as autonomous rational actors (normally male) rather than people as group members living in states of deep interdependency. The ethical dimensions of economic relations are thus dispelled from consideration without being subject to empirical analysis.

“Like economic behaviour itself, the study of economics has become de-valued in the sense that moral values have been expelled from consideration. Conversely, values and norms have become de-rationalised so that they become mere subjective, emotional dispositions, lying beyond the scope of reason. Thus, the (attempted) normative-positive split reflected a real subjectivization and de-rationalisation of values on the one hand, and the devaluation and expulsion of moral questions from matters of the running of economics on the other”. (Sayer, 2000: 87).

To say that the ethical is jettisoned from economic analysis is not to deny the deep personal commitment that many economists have to social justice. Moreover, many economists (especially those in the ESRI) have undertaken valuable research on poverty and economic inequality, analysing the ways in which groups and individuals differ in their command over goods and services. Others, including Sen (1992, 1997) and Roemer (1994) have introduced ethical and critical concepts into economic debates. However, the problem remains that the dominant discourse in economics assumes a positivist split between fact and value, a practice which characterises much sociological analysis of inequality as well (Lynch, 2000).

Economic inequality and poverty are not morally neutral subjects, and their study requires a level of moral engagement which may well not be salient for other issues. To discount the ethical implications of poverty and economic inequality in intellectual analysis however, is to discount a substantive defining element of the research subject itself. Poverty causes intense and prolonged human misery especially where it persists over time. To analyse it without regard for its degrading, exclusionary and often life-threatening implications is to ignore a substantive part of what poverty is. It is to confine oneself to a partial analysis of the research subject.

### *Sociological and Political theory*

Within sociological theory, Marxism<sup>ii</sup> has played a key role in defining the parameters of the debate about economic inequality and poverty. While Marxists have been correct in foreseeing the global expansion of capitalism, they have been less successful in explaining how social change can be realised. While deep economic inequalities pervade most Western capitalist societies, the economic and political conditions which generated the polarised class structures on which Marx's theory were based have been altered (Roemer, 1994:15-16). Consequently, the prospect of radical egalitarian social change being achieved in Western capitalist states by the mobilisation of a marginalised proletariat is increasingly remote. There are many reasons for this, not least of which is the accommodation reached between capital and organised (mostly male) labour in the stratification of the labour market. The unforeseen rise in the skilled working class and a range of middle classes, all with a stake in the political stability of the existing order of economic relations, also operates as an antidote to radical change. The old manual working class [and the welfare-dependent class] comprise a minority within most industrialised economies in Western Europe. Gender, race and ethnicity colour the collars of the extant working class in a way that Marx did not foresee. The majority of low wage, temporary and part-time workers in Ireland and many other European countries are women (Conroy, 1997). Migrant workers form a core form of the proletariat in a number of developed capitalist states in Europe. Exploitation takes gendered, racial, ethnic and other forms that greatly complicates the nature of class identities. Class has not been eliminated but its gender, racial, ethnic and even regional identity has changed. (Crompton, 1993).

The limitations of analysing economic inequality and poverty in a traditional Marxist framework are clear therefore: it underestimates the diversity within those who are marginalised, and the related difficulties of mobilising for change around diversity. Moreover, while contemporary analytical Marxism (cf. Elster, 1985) has taken cognisance of moral issues in economic life, it is also deeply embedded in rational choice assumptions (like neo-classical economics) of self interest and self-ownership as guiding principles of economic and political life. Such a framework is both empirically questionable (Sayer, 2000) and politically problematic as a guiding principle for solidaristic social change (Cohen, 1995, 2000).

It is within political theory that some of the most insightful analyses of inequality has taken place in recent years. There is a growing recognition that cultural affirmation is frequently a prerequisite for economic redistribution on the one hand, and that status

recognition is substantively impossible without a redistribution of economic resources on the other. In making the case for a status, as opposed to an identity, model of recognition, for example, Fraser outlines the interdependency of both systems. Drawing on the work of Max Weber (Gerth and Mills, 1947) she suggests that social justice encompasses three separate and interdependent dimensions (the economic, cultural and political), the former two of which are analysed in her paper<sup>iii</sup>: “ a dimension of recognition which concerns the effects of institutionalized meanings and norms on the relative standing of social actors; and a dimension of distribution which involves the allocation of disposable resources to social actors” (Fraser, 2000: 116).

The issue of inequality therefore is no longer being defined in simple economic terms (as it was in traditional Marxist thought) or in simple cultural terms (as it was in many of the recent work in political and cultural theory). There is a realisation not only of the interdependence of both systems but also of the interdependence of democratic processes (politics and power) with both economic and cultural equality. If there are great economic inequalities in particular, Phillips (1999: 80-83) suggests that these seriously undermine the principle of equal citizenship, not least because those who own and control more resources are socially situated in a place in which those who own less are seen as lesser in terms of human worth - “.. the problem with economic inequality is not just that it constrains the exercise of political rights but that it shapes (and damages) perceptions of fellow citizens. “ (ibid.: 83). Political equality is therefore inextricably linked with both cultural recognition and economic equality. The question which will be addressed below is the way in which poverty is an integral part of the inequality chain, not only arising from economic inequality, but also exacerbated by, and contributing to, political and cultural inequalities.

## *Part III*

### *Forms of Inequality and Their Relationship to Poverty*

Poverty is a structurally generated condition of social exclusion, one which is economically generated in the final instance, but which is the outcome of a host of non-economic generative forces as well. The generative causes of poverty are relational; they emanate from the systems of political, sociocultural and economic relations dominant within our society, including those of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, ageism and disablism. State action which fails to challenge sets of unequal relations, serves to reinforce the inequalities generated inside and outside the state sector.

### *The Three Contexts of Social Action for the Creation of a Socially Just Society- Economic, Political and Cultural*

There are three core social contexts in which the generative causes of inequality may emerge: these are the economic context, the political context and the cultural contexts. The economic sphere is concerned with the production, distribution and exchange of goods and services; the sociocultural sphere is concerned with the production, transmission and legitimisation of cultural practices and products, including various forms of symbolic representation and communication; while the political sphere refers to all activities where power is enacted, including decision-making procedures within all types of organisations and institutions, policy-making procedures, and decision-making within political life generally. Correspondingly, therefore, in the pursuit of a socially just society, there are three core equality issues which must be addressed.

#### *Economic Equality*

In welfare capitalist societies like Ireland, there are three core mechanisms for acquiring economic resources: earning an income, inheriting, receiving or benefiting from unearned wealth, or having an entitlement to a welfare-related income. The first of the key equality projects therefore is the just distribution of wealth.

To have substantive wealth equality not only requires the more equitable distribution of wealth at a given time, it also requires the equalisation of the systems of wealth ownership and control which determine wealth distribution in the first instance. Without ensuring that systems of ownership and control are egalitarian, any redistribution of wealth which may be achieved at a given time, can be readily withdrawn. Economic inequality therefore must be addressed through the effective democratisation of ownership and control, as well as through effective mechanisms of distribution. The effectiveness of any system of distribution or redistribution is heavily dependent on the systems of democratic control which exist over wealth.

Earned income, unlike wealth is not a fixed and immanently transferable asset. The rate and level at which one is rewarded for work is not only determined by the demand

for the goods or services produced, but also by the institutionalised systems of wage bargaining within a given labour market, and the consequent status and income negotiated by particular groups for their given occupation; at the individual level, Earned income is also dependent on one's education, health and general developed abilities to earn an income in the first instance. Equalising earned incomes therefore is a complex process, as it requires a reassessment of the value of particular occupations, an equalisation of incomes across occupations, and introducing procedures to ensure that all people have equal opportunities to develop their capacities to work, for example by having fully accessible and effective health and education services.

Across all societies, there are many people at a given time who cannot earn an income and who are largely or wholly dependent on others (often on state transfers of income) for a living. Clearly, any system which is economically just, must also ensure that such people are also in a position to participate fully in the relevant institutions of society, in a manner comparable to those who earn an income and/or whose income is based on wealth. This means that economic equality demands a commitment to an adequate incomes system for all members of a given society (including those without citizenship status). It requires that those who cannot earn a living are not worse off than those who can.

Economic injustice refers therefore to the unequal distribution of material resources and inequality in their ownership and control. It is manifested in various forms of exploitation and deprivation of a material kind, notably in exclusion from employment and wealth ownership. It is also evident in inadequate welfare or income provision, or exploitative pay. While poverty is not an inevitable outcome of economic inequality, in the sense that it is logically possible to have an economically unequal society in which there is no poverty, in practice most societies in which there are substantive wealth and income disparities also tend to have a sizeable number of people living in poverty. One important political and cultural reason for this is that societies which tolerate, or even foster economic inequalities, also tend to be societies where there is limited allegiance to eliminating poverty. The cultural mores which promotes economic inequality also tend to those which easily tolerate poverty.

Another factor which reinforces the link between economic inequality and poverty is the manner in which the cost of living is set in society. The cost of living in a given country is not set in the abstract, it is determined by the cost of participating in the relevant social, political and civil institutions of a given state. In market societies when most of basic services are dependent in whole or in part on the ability to pay, those who are poor either do not have access to the service at all, or if they have access have access at a level which is significantly below that enjoyed by most people in the society.<sup>iv</sup> Even though a formal right to access services such as health or education may exist, often one can only access these at a low level. In addition, those who are poor have little choice or control over the nature or quality of the service and they also generally lack the power to maximise gain or influence within it. In an economically unequal society, not only is access to health, education, housing and leisure most accessible to those who have good, secure incomes, even political participation itself is affected; those with most money are best positioned to buy the time that it takes to be involved in political life (Phillips, 1999: 74-76). This further

exacerbates the exclusion and marginalisation of those in poverty making it difficult for them to influence the very decisions which determine their own economic future.

One of the factors that makes economic inequality so pernicious is that it that who are economically powerful can so easily and visibly convert money (economic capital) into other valued forms of capital. Those with most economic capital are also best positioned to acquire cultural or social capital, a fact which further reinforces their dominance (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1974). They are also best positioned to exercise political power (Phillips, 1999).

Although education (a cultural process) is presented as a neutral exercise, endowing credentials on those with greatest competence, it is clear from the persistence of social class inequalities in educational achievement in the post war era across several countries, that this is far from being the case (cf. Blossfeld and Shavit, 1993). Rather, those with wealth can buy credentialised cultural capital in the form of education credentials through the exercise of procedures such as exclusive schooling, extra investment in their children's education both in and out of school, and investment in ancillary goods and services which boost educational achievement including grinds, summer schools, travel, student exchange etc.. The perpetuation of elite power in higher education has been facilitated in some countries by the development of expensive private third-level colleges, especially where the competition in the State sector is too intense, or the resources are not sufficiently focused on the elite (the US being a case in point). Groups which already exercise power and influence in society economically therefore are able to utilise their superior economic forces to acquire the cultural license of credentials (higher education credentials especially). The acquisition of cultural legitimacy through economic investment reinforces the political power of the elite outside of the cultural and economic spheres. They are enabled to exercise power more effectively in the name of competence (Bourdieu, 1996).

What the aforementioned analysis demonstrates therefore is that it is no good trying to maintain that economic inequality would be acceptable if only we had equal opportunity. Research to date shows what economic inequality inevitably undermines equality of opportunity by ensuring that the children of privileged parents have greater opportunities than the children of the disadvantaged (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993).

Because of the imbrication of cultural, economic and social<sup>v</sup> capital, the relatively wealthy and privileged in society exercise considerable symbolic influence over lifestyles and expectations. They become the arbiters not only of economic value, but also of cultural and social values; their tastes, modes of dress, lifestyles etc., are presented as the 'ideal type', the pinnacle of 'high' culture for other to emulate (Bourdieu, 1984). The process whereby elite lifestyles are constructed, commodified and sold as an image commercially to subordinate groups takes time; it often appeals initially to the social ambitions of the upwardly mobile middle or better off working classes, gradually permeating other classes. Over time, however, it recreates a sense of cultural value, changing the norms of participation and modes of self presentation which are defined as socially appropriate for all classes. Social exclusion for those who are poor does not arise simply therefore from lack of money, it arises also when those who are economically excluded also become culturally and socially excluded.

Their lifestyles and values are negatively defined, being both non-normative and subordinate.

While it is evident from what is said here that economic inequality is not synonymous with poverty, it is a powerful factor in its perpetuation in most societies. First, it is evident that the cultural norms and values which allow significant economic inequalities to develop also facilitate the perpetuation of poverty. Second, because the economically powerful exercise a strong normative role in determining desirable lifestyles and tastes, the tastes and lifestyles of the economically marginal become subordinated. This is especially problematic in societies where the majority are reasonably well off, as relatively high-cost norms of participation become modal, thereby excluding the poor from involvement in what would widely regarded as desirable forms of participation in leisure, education, housing, health etc. The inability of those who are economically marginal to participate further exacerbates their poverty and isolation over time, as they lose access to the forms of social and cultural capital which can be acquired when associating as equals with those who are rich in both.

### *Cultural Equality*

Cultural equality is concerned fundamentally with the status systems which exist in a given society. The core concern is with the mutual respect and recognition which is due to all members of society independent of their race, gender, age, marital or family status, sexual orientation, physical or mental capacities, ethnicity, social origin, or political or religious affiliations. Because a person's status is both a function of personal status and affiliated group status, equality of recognition relates to both individuals and groups.

Cultural equality is about institutionalising systems of recognition for differences. It is about moving beyond tolerance to the respect and celebration of diversity. It requires an end to cultural imperialism whereby dominant groups in society project their own values and mores as representative of humanity as such (Baker, 1998). It requires a change from a situation in which ethnic, religious, linguistic or other minorities find their lifestyles and values are either made invisible in public discourse, or if visible are represented stereotypically or even denigrated (Young, 1990: 58-60). Such a move demands that dominant groups in society critically evaluate their own norms, values and practices. The culture of the dominant is subjected to appraisal, not just the lifestyles and values of the excluded. As the exercise of dominance is often itself an integral element in the identity of powerful groups (Connell, 1995 claims, for example, that dominance is a core element in the definition of masculinity in most societies, while Hall, ...date? suggests that racial supremacism is an integral part of white identity) exploring the cultural assumptions of dominant groups is essential for promoting equality. This is an especially important issue for subordinate groups, as it is they who are generally subject to analysis and investigation by diverse cultural institutions including research bodies, welfare institutions and the media. In a culturally egalitarian society, the focus of analysis would be re-balanced to focus on the dominant.



As the systems for cultural production, transmission and legitimisation are highly developed in Western societies, through highly advanced systems of communication, media presentation and education especially, it is not really possible to conceive of systems of recognition without examining the ways in which these institutions and systems legitimate certain cultural forms and values while omitting, denigrating or marginalising others. Cultural injustices need to be addressed therefore in institutional contexts in the media and education especially, as the specific forms which they take for individuals and groups can and does vary with the values and interests of those involved in cultural transmission and/or production.<sup>vi</sup>

What are cultural injustices? Basically they are injustices rooted in patterns of representation, interpretation and communication. They take the form of cultural domination, symbolic misrepresentation or non-recognition all leading to a lack of respect.

Because living in poverty, is a negatively defined status, the lifestyles, tastes and values which become associated with the poor are generally negatively valued. Thus, regardless of which cultural practice is involved- be it clothing, music, accent speech or sport- those which are modal among the poor are rarely high status. Such cultural devaluations are visible daily when Dublin working class accents are privately are publicly ridiculed or in the low status accorded to sports associated with the working class such as boxing.

As noted above, as the poor are disproportionately drawn from the working class; in a certain cultural sense therefore they experience a double burden of negative status designation; they are defined as subordinate because they are poor and because they are working class. Yet there is an inherent tension and potential contradiction in the status of those who are poor and working class. Working class status is construed positively in the political domain; it is seen as a force for mobilisation and radical social change, at least in traditional labour politics. While the message of social mobility clearly suggests that one should abandon one's working class origins and identity for a middle class lifestyle and values, working class politics presents working class status as a platform for action. How to ensure cultural equality for those who are poor is clearly not a simple matter therefore once it moves beyond respect for the person. It is illogical claim to celebrate poverty at the same time as one is naming it as an undesirable state.

### *Political Equality : Representation/Power Issues*

Political injustice occurs when and where ever power is enacted - for example, in the realms of decision-making, including policy-making, and in political life generally. It may take the form of political exclusion, political marginalisation, political trivialisation or political misrepresentation.

Equality of power, the third core egalitarian principle is about eliminating relations of dominance and subordination in social life. It refers to all types of political equality, including the protection of civil and political rights and the democratisation of decision-making procedures in public and private institutions.

Political equality is first concerned therefore with making democratic government more representative and accountable. Representative democracy has been shown increasingly to have serious limitations, not only in terms of how it can be seriously undermined by the alliances which develop between political and economic elites, but also in terms of how truly representative and accountable it is in highly diverse, mobile complex societies<sup>vii</sup>. In most of our political institutions, representatives have considerable autonomy at the point of decision-making; it matters both who they are therefore and how they are held accountable. As Phillips (1995: 44) points out: “when there is a significant under-representation of disadvantaged groups at the point of final decision, this can and does have serious consequences”. Their interests can be easily ignored in the privacy of the decision-making table. It is only when people who are affected by particular decisions, are consistently present in the process of working out alternatives that they have much chance of challenging dominant discourses and conventions (ibid:45). This is a particularly pertinent issue for people who are poor as they are almost universally excluded from decision-making positions in the policy-making arena. When and if poor people get to the decision-making table, they are rarely resourced, supported or educated sufficiently to be fully effective. Democratising structures of power and decision-making therefore, not only involves recognising the importance of having those directly affected by poverty involved in decision-making forums, especially where these bear directly on their quality of life, it also involves working out proper procedures of accountability for all those who claim to represent the interests of those who are poor, and providing resources as required for those who want to be part of the decision-making process but lack the educational, financial or other means to be effective within it (Baker, 1998).

Political equality therefore, is about ensuring that the formal political system is restructured in such a way that it empowers those who are currently marginalised in terms of political influence, something which is especially important for low income working class groups. But political equality is not simply concerned with local, regional or state governance, important as these may be. It also demands that we ensure the democratisation of social relations in other institutions where power is exercised, including work, education, social welfare, health, the family, and the administration of justice. The equalisation of power is essentially about challenging hierarchical relations of domination wherever these persist.

Given the subordinate status of those in poverty, and their high level of dependence on services (and forms of employment) over which they generally exercise little choice or control (be these housing, health, education or welfare) the democratisation of service planning, provision, and delivery seems central to realising equality in their case. It is especially important given the social (and oftentimes, geographical) distance between the poor and service providers. As with all systems of democracy, however, democratising service provision will be symbolic rather than substantive, unless those who are poor are enabled, by resources, training, child care supports etc., to be effective participants in the democratic process, and unless systems of accountability, appraisal and replacement are built into the representative structures.

*Interrelationship between the various forms of Inequality*

Although we have treated economic, political and cultural or status inequalities as if they were discrete entities, they are strongly inter-related. Those who depend on poorly paid work or are on low welfare incomes, for example, lack not only economic capacity *per se*, they also frequently lack the capacity to exercise political power due to lack of time, energy and financial resources. Their inability to exercise political influence may also arise from factors which have either contributed to their low income in the first place, such as lack of formal education and credentials, or factors which are derivative of their economic position, such as the lowly social status of their occupation, which may be regarded as unsuitable preparation for political office or influence.

At the other end of the economic spectrum, the wealthy are advantaged politically, not only through their access to privileged social networks in expensive schools, colleges, clubs or societies, but also through their ability to buy political influence through the funding of political parties and/or political causes. In addition, they are generally holders of valued educational credentials, occupational positions and roles which develop the skills and experiences deemed necessary for political offices of different kinds.

Economic inequality also impacts on the cultural sphere as it negatively affects the status of the marginalised in a negative way. That is to say, economic inequality does not only shape our relationship to property, income or wealth, it also shapes perceptions of fellow citizens (Phillips, 1999: 83). Thus those who are poor (without choice) do not simply experience economic inequality, they also frequently experience cultural marginalisation or even denigration. Their accents, tastes, lifestyles, music etc., are often defined as socially inferior (Bourdieu, 1984), a factor which further exacerbates their social exclusion.

The interface between economic and other inequalities is not one way however. Lowly status, or lack of recognition in the cultural sphere can have profound implications for economic well being. Research within Ireland on the relationship between sexual orientation and poverty (NEXUS/Combat Poverty, 1995), between disability and poverty (Combat Poverty, 1994) or Traveller status and poverty (Government of Ireland, Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community, 1995) or gender and poverty (Daly, 1987; Nolan and Watson, 1999) shows that lack of recognition of differences in the cultural sphere impacts negatively on several types of social groups economically. This can occur in different ways: in the case of married women their subordinate status has led to their official designations as dependants in the welfare systems which, in turn, exacerbates both their poverty and their subordination to men; the lowly status of Travellers has led to experiences of discrimination in housing, often being forced into types of accommodation which are not of their choosing, and which further reinforce their isolation and marginalisation. Subordinated groups like Travellers, asylum seekers or persons with certain disabilities may also avoid unnecessary social contact with dominant groups to minimise their experience of prejudice and discrimination. In so doing, they are precluded from occupational and social opportunities which may assist them economically. Indeed, their segregation further exacerbates their exclusion as they have fewer opportunities to interact with dominant groups on an equal footing. When there is little social or occupational convergence in people lives it is difficult to develop equality of respect.

Cultural marginalisation can also exacerbate political marginalisation. Groups which are ignored, misrepresented, trivialised, or otherwise negatively portrayed in institutions such as the media or education, are generally not granted political credence in other social contexts. Consequently, they may be excluded from consultative arrangements, decision-making processes, or other relevant political engagements. The exclusion of the Unemployed for many years from Social Partnerships, and of Gay and Lesbian organisations from bodies such as the NESF, are each examples of how lack of cultural recognition can impact negatively on the level of political equality granted to a particular group. Another example is the case of those who use Sign Language; they are not recognised as a linguistic minority in Ireland. Consequently it is difficult for them to be granted the political opportunity to influence language policy, a factor which further reinforces their cultural subordination.

Lack of political equality, can, in turn, exacerbate cultural marginalisation. The absence of democratic procedures within decision-making systems in the media and education, for example, will mean that there is no opportunity for those who are marginalised to define what is culturally valued. Only those who have immediate and direct access can influence cultural policy. In an Irish context, Travellers have traditionally been an example of a group who have not exercised influence in cultural spheres, such as education. They have not been defined as ‘educational partners’, consequently, much of the education provided for Traveller children failed to take sufficient account of their culture and lifestyles (*Report of the Task Force on Travellers*, 1995). Their lack of power to influence education policy added to their experience of cultural imperialism in education. The sense of alienation which ensued from such cultural imperialism precipitated Travellers’ early departure from education, further reinforcing their marginalised status in society, economically and socially, through lack of education. Political exclusion, working through and being reinforced by cultural exclusions led ultimately therefore to particular forms of economic marginalisation through lack of education.

### **The Equality Schema: Locating the Generative Causes of Inequality across social groups<sup>viii</sup>**

Although the three forms of inequality, economic, cultural and political, are closely interrelated they are not of equal significance for all social groups. They may also vary in significance for any given group at a particular point in time. In addition, what may be identified as a generative force in the precipitation or perpetuation of poverty from a sociological, economic or political perspective, will, very likely, not be synonymous with what a given group might identify as an immediate priority in terms of alleviating poverty. One of the issues is that what may matter for the alleviation of poverty in the longer term, may not be visible in the short term, or if visible may not be seen as a priority.

It is also the case, that the ability to name the causes of inequality in one's own case requires the time, opportunity, and in some cases education, to do so. There is a language to be learned, and those who are poor are frequently deprived of that language by lack of education and information about the politics and economics of their own position. In addition, their voice is often taken by 'experts', who claim to know their world and speak on their behalf (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994). This is an important consideration when analysing inequality as groups vary considerably both in their level of education, politicisation and awareness of their own inequalities. Lesbian Gay and Bisexual groups, for example, have been highly politicised and educationally well-informed about the causes of their own oppression in Irish society. Other groups, however, such as racial minorities who are asylum seekers, are at a very early stage of education both of themselves and of the public about the inequalities which they experience. The Learning Disabled are also a group who do not have a self-advocacy movement behind them to research, name and support them in seeking equality. Thus, even if one engages in empirical research about the causes of poverty and its links to other inequalities, there is a need to be mindful of the differences in resources, abilities and experience of different groups which impacts on how groups name their world.

In this section, we try to identify what, from a sociological and political perspective, could be defined as generative causes of inequality for different groups (Figure 1) We realise that this is an ideal-type model and is open to empirical investigation. It is presented as a heuristic device to enable us to identify the range and types of inequality across social groups. We realise that research with different groups, especially research which takes account of the heterogeneity within groups, may arrive at a different ordering of priorities, especially given what is stated above.

To clarify the interface between different forms of inequality for various groups identified in the Poverty Proofing Guidelines and in the Equal Status Act, an outline of the interrelations between their status and different forms of inequality is presented in Figure 1 below. Each context is defined as being of some (one asterisk) or of major (two asterisks) significance for a particular group in generating an inequality. A dash - indicates that this context does not create inequality in any significant way for this group. While there is a sense in which most groups experiences all of the inequalities in different degrees, depending on what sub-category of the group one belongs to, particular contexts of social action are more important in generating inequalities. Selected groups have also been partially disaggregated in Figure 1 (within the limits of the space allowed) for the purpose of illustrating the diversity within groups, many of which are defined as homogenous in public discourse, but which are highly diverse in practice. The nature of the inequality experienced by large diverse groups, such as women and people with disabilities, varies greatly within the group itself. We give particular attention to the case of women in our analysis to demonstrate the way in which different statuses or identities occupied by women may generate poverty in particular cases.

What is clear from Figure 1 is that the contexts which generate inequality and poverty, vary with different groups. The differences between groups is most visible where economic, political or cultural inequalities are highly polarised. It is less clear

however, for those groups which are internally diverse and where inequalities are cumulative across all three areas with no one context predominating.

While the economic context may be the principal one generating inequality among those groups whose most defining status is an economic one, (the homeless, low income workers or those who are welfare dependent such as the long-term unemployed) other groups may experience economic inequality or poverty as a derivative of either cultural and/or political inequalities.

**Figure 1**  
**The Relationship between Different Statuses and Different Generative\*\*\* Factors Reinforcing Inequality In Ireland**

<b>3 Key Contexts of Inequality</b>	<b>Form of Inequality 3 Rs</b>	<b>STATUS GROUPS</b>													
		Travellers	Homeless	Age older people	Age children	Social Class low income welfare /work/class	Disability	Gender *Women*	Ethnic/Racial Minorities	Family /Marital Status	Sexual Orientation				
							Learning impairment	Mental illness-related impairment	Low Income Welfare dependent women	Middle class professional	Refugee/Asylum seekers	Arab/Jews/Chinese	Lone parent	Home maker parent	
<b>Political</b>	Powerlessness & issues of Representation	*	*	*	**	*	*	**	*	**	**	*	*	*	*
<b>Economic</b>	Lack of adequate Resources	*	**	*	*	**	*	**	**	—	**	—	*	*	*
<b>Cultural</b>	lack of Recognition of culture, values, lifestyles	**	*	*	*	*	**	**	*	*	**	**	**	**	**

\*\*\*As noted above, it is recognised that the factors identified here as generative may not always be so defined by the groups, or sub-groups themselves. This is a separate empirical research question. The discrepancy between the social scientific and the experiential definition of the generative causes of poverty also raises a further question about the capacities of various groups to identify the generative causes of their own oppression. If groups, or sub-groups within larger groupings, have not had the opportunity or reason to analyse their own social position in political terms, their capacity to name their own oppression is seriously circumscribed. It is also clear that the hypothesised view of the underlying causes of equality from a structural perspective presented above need to be more fully investigated through research on structures and institutions.

Low income working class or welfare status is undoubtedly one of the major statuses associated with poverty, not least because economic inequality is institutionalised in those statuses within society. Consequently, for those whose poverty is primarily class specific, the key issue is greater economic equality between waged workers, an equitable distribution of wealth, and income provision within the welfare codes which is above the poverty line. While those living in poverty for class reasons, may also experience political and even cultural marginalisation associated with their class position, the elimination of their poverty is fundamentally an economic matter. Political or cultural inequalities cannot be changed in any significant way without the economic injustice being changed in the first instance. Those who are poor cannot avail of political or cultural opportunities, when and if they present themselves, as they lack the resources (time, energy, money) which is necessary to do so.

To say that economic equality is a priority for those who are poor for class reasons is not to underestimate the interface between other inequalities and economic factors. People are not singular in their social identity. They have multivalent identities, that is to say, at any given time, any given person is a member of a multiplicity of social groups in society, some of which may be oppressed, some of which may not be.

This is particularly evident among people with disabilities, and, as we will discuss in more detail below, among women. For those whose poverty arises from their inability to access work, arising from a lack of support services for disabled workers, including accessible transport, inclusive work environments, etc., their main concern may be with having substantive (fair) equality of opportunity in employment. For people who are severely learning disabled, and who are unlikely to enter formal employment, poverty may be derived primarily from their lowly status in society generally, and the failure of welfare and other state and voluntary institutions to grant them their full educational and welfare entitlements due to the low value placed on them as disabled persons. Their inability to voice their concerns in political terms further exacerbates their low status, and reinforces their poverty. There is a sense therefore in which those with extensive learning impairments experience all three forms of inequality equally severely.

The poverty experienced by children, while undoubtedly social class specific (Callan et al., 1996), is clearly compounded by their state of institutionalised dependence on, and subordination to, their parents. The cultural code governing adult-child relations is strongly protectionist and hierarchical (Devine, 1999). Under the Irish constitution, and in Irish law, generally children are defined structurally as subordinate to the power of adults, mostly their parents (see Duncan, 1996, CRG, 1996). In common with many other countries, children are treated in many respects as the property of their parents in law; the family has inalienable and imprescriptible rights while children are subject to parents within this family context (Duncan, 1996). Children lack power therefore, their dependence and subordinancy being enshrined in law. They are unable to act autonomously to protect their economic interests (until after age 16) and the State does not guarantee them control of the child care benefit paid to parents on their behalf. When and where children come to experience poverty therefore, it is a derived state, arising in significant part from their economic subordination to adults..



While it is evident that most children in society are not poor although they are subordinate to parents, the proportion of children living in poverty is much higher than of adults. The lack of any independent entitlement to an income separate from their parents, does significantly increase children's chances of poverty therefore.

Travellers are very clearly a group for whom a generative cause of inequality has been a prolonged history of cultural exclusion, marginalisation and denigration. While they also experience economic and political marginalisation, the generative cause of poverty among Travellers has not been because of poor pay, exclusion from wealth ownership or welfare dependence. Where welfare dependence has occurred and where it precipitates poverty among Travellers, the generative causes of this has often originated in prior exclusions which were cultural in origin, including the lack of a culturally-sensitive education, exclusion from mainstream schooling and prejudicial attitudes and discrimination in housing and employment.

While the generative cause of inequality for gays, lesbians and bisexuals is generally defined as cultural, arising from the lack of recognition and respect for sexual difference, (Fraser, 1995), the implications of this extend far beyond the cultural sphere. Given Section 37 of the Employment Equality Act in Ireland, for example, those who are gay or lesbian are especially vulnerable in educational and health employments which are controlled by religious organisations that regard same sex partnerships as immoral. People who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and are in same sex relationships could be regarded as being a threat to the ethos of the organisation in which they work. Not only does the lack of recognition impact on employment opportunities in particular areas, it also impacts on political participation in the wider cultural sphere. The denigration of homosexuality generally precipitates the political subordination of a sexuality-specific politics.

#### *The Particularities of different Identities: case of Women*

Women are a particularly important group to analyse, not only because they comprise half the population, but because the problems of inequality faced by women are complex, given the high level of diversity among them. Focusing on women, highlights the problems of diversity within all groups. Women, are not just women, they are also women of a particular social class, age, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, ability type etc.

Given the male-dominated nature of Irish society, in its socioeconomic and legal infrastructures (Connelly, 1993; O'Connor, 1998) and the relative absence of women from formal politics with some notable exceptions (Galligan, 1998), it is not unreasonable to suggest that women as a group are generally subordinate to men in Irish society. This is not to suggest that all women are subordinate to all men at all times<sup>ix</sup>, rather that, *ceteris paribus*, women are unequal to men. be that in literature (Boland, 1996), in or in the wider cultural, economic or social spheres (Commission on the Status of Women, 1993; Moane, 1998; Nolan and Watson, 1999; O'Connor, 1998).

The general subordination of women does not take away from the fact that certain women are subordinated to other women, working class to middle class, those with

impairments or disabilities to those without disabilities, or those who are lesbian to those who are heterosexual. In other words, gender inequalities are compounded by other inequalities.

Given the multivalent character of women's social identity, on some occasions, it may be a woman's social class which is the principal generator of her poverty, in other cases, it may be her age, marital status or disability. Thus, while economic status and social class are clearly powerful precipitators of poverty for women, as for other groups, women's poverty is not singular in its cause.

The reasons why women are poor is an important consideration in addressing their poverty. Women who are married and are dependent on a husband's low wages or a low welfare income are clearly not only adversely affected by the poverty emanating from their class position, they are also further impoverished by their lack of an independent source of income arising from their marital status. The poverty they experience, arising from an involuntary state of welfare dependence on her husband, derives from both the patriarchal assumption that married women are dependants on their husbands, and from the subordinate cultural standing of care work and domestic work which (with some minor exceptions) receive no remuneration. Addressing the economic inequalities experienced by women therefore need to take into account the gender specific or family/marital-status specific inequalities which may exacerbate their poverty.

The poverty, experienced by poor women employed in the low paid, often temporary, labour market, is different from the case cited above. While their poverty is derived directly from their social class status (i.e. the deliberate stratification of the paid labour market which is one of the hall marks of capitalism) it is also compounded by both the vertical and horizontal segregation of the labour market along gender lines. As a result of the latter in particular, working class women are disproportionately socialised, educated and guided into low status stereotypically feminine, service occupations (cleaning, catering, assisting, etc.) with low pay and insecurity. Given the lack of state-founded child care supports, such women may earn little when child care costs are taken into account, or they may be forced back, by lack of care supports, into a spouse-dependent or welfare status, which perpetuates their poverty.

As most adult disabled people are not in employment, disabled women who are poor are undoubtedly most often poor because of their dependence on low levels of disability-related welfare. Yet, the poverty of disabled women may be exacerbated by the unique way in which disability interacts with femininity. Given the importance of appearance and 'the beauty culture' which underpins conventional definitions of femininity in our society, and the cultural codes which assumes women will be carers (O'Connor, 1998), women with physical impairment are especially vulnerable to stereotyping or prejudice. This is the case not only in intimate relationships where their physical impairments make them less desirable as partners but also in employments where appearance is valued. For many women with physical disabilities, the sense of denigration and isolation which they experience because of their physical disabilities can be so overwhelming that cultural recognition and celebration of their differences is the crucial equality concern (Lonsdale, 1990). It is a priority beyond political empowerment, which may be the priority of the male-dominated disability

(physical) movement, or even economic independence, as they cannot engage effectively in either work or politics without experiencing the affirmation and recognition which their difference commands in the first instance.

What the foregoing analysis suggests is that it may be inadvisable to treat a given group, especially a highly diverse and large group such as women (or indeed disabled people) as homogenous entities when addressing their inequalities. All groups need to be disaggregated in equality terms. Moreover, all forms of inequality are imbricated with one another. While it is true for example, that certain injustices are more purely political, cultural or economic in form, and that certain groups may be subjected primarily to one form of inequality more than others, because all human beings operate within multiple and overlapping identities, there is no person whose status, and correlatively whose experience of injustice, takes a singular form.

## **Conclusion**

Poverty is a manifestation of economic inequality but it is not synonymous with it. While economic relations are especially powerful in determining whether particular groups and individuals experience poverty, poverty is sometimes generated systematically by systems of political and/or cultural relations. The three potential contexts in which inequalities may arise therefore (the economic, political and sociocultural) need to be examined for any given group experiencing poverty to determine to what extent each influences their position. While it is hypothesised that certain contexts are more powerful for generating poverty for some groups than others - the poverty of children for example, is generated in the political sphere by their legal and financial subordination to parents, while that of dependent married women is activated in the cultural sphere of valuation - these are not the only contexts generating poverty for the groups in question. Within any social group there is a need therefore to take cognisance of their multivalent identity in terms of how any given dimension of it generates poverty. While old age may exacerbate poverty for some, for example, the extent to which this happens depends on the prior occupational (social class) background of the person, their marital and family status, their gender, and even their regional location. Poverty is not singular in its determination.

Given that material poverty is a state of economic deprivation, social class position is undoubtedly a common generator of poverty across all groups, yet, it by no means the only one, nor may it be the most powerful one in a particular case. The organisation of gender, ethnic, sexual, age or ability relations, can and does generate poverty in ways which are more political or cultural in origin than economic.

What has to be recognised in the analysis of poverty therefore is that there is not only a capitalist global order generating poverty, there is also a gender order, an ability order, as well as racial, age and other orders. While the social and cultural orders outside of capitalism are deeply imbricated with it, they are also separate from it, with their own operational value systems and their own ordering of human relations. As the State plays a key role in managing the relations within and between these orders, it also plays a central role in generating poverty.

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<sup>i</sup>Although we recognise that poverty can and does take non-material forms, the focus of this paper will be on material poverty.

<sup>ii</sup>For Marx, equality was about the abolition of social-class related exploitation and alienation. The goal was to abolish the capital-wage relationship which had been built up under capitalism, and this involved public ownership and control of the means of production. Social class differences in access to, and control over, the means of production was identified with alienation and false consciousness in his earlier work (respectively in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*) and was defined as producing domination and exploitation in the economic and political realms in *Capital*. The group which Marx identified as being treated unequally in capitalist society were the working class; the means through which exploitation occurred is capitalist appropriation of proletarian labour; the solution to the problem of exploitation was the development of a communist society which would ask ‘from each according to his ability’, and give to each according to his need’. Public rather than private ownership and control of the means of production was seen a central to the realisation of the communist agenda and the ending of exploitation. Marx believed that the increasing capitalist dominance of the world, and ensuing class exploitation would eventually lead to a proletarian social revolution and the emergence of a communist society.

<sup>iii</sup> She also points out the importance of the political dimension of social justice (as opposed to the economic and the cultural) but she does not analyse it in the paper.

<sup>iv</sup>In the Irish case, for example, those who are poor have minimal access to the civil legal aid as legal services are largely privatised in this sphere; while they do have access to ‘free’ education as this is a public service, the quality and level of education which they can avail of is often significantly lower than that of other groups because of both the direct and indirect hidden costs of schooling.

<sup>v</sup>Bourdieu (1986) makes an important distinction between social and cultural capital. Cultural capital exists in three forms :the embodied (tastes, accent, vocabulary etc); the credentialised (degrees diplomas etc.)and the material (works of art, music, books etc). Social capital however refers to the range of social and political benefits which accrue from holding certain statuses or positions or which accrue from being associated with persons who are such holders. It can refer to the benefit of titles of nobility, religious titles, or even social networks which advantage people in accessing a diverse range of goods and services, be these jobs, credit etc.

<sup>vi</sup>Within education, for example, heterosexuality is presented as the norm in Irish schools. This reflects not only widespread cultural beliefs about sexuality but also, in the Irish case, the specific values and religious beliefs of the Catholic Church which controls most schools. While heterosexuality is also presented as the sexual norm in the media, it is much more likely to be challenged in this context due to the diverse range of interests and values invested in the media.

<sup>vii</sup>In our own society, for example, political constituencies are drawn up on the basis of regional interests (fundamentally along geographical lines), yet many of the major social and political divisions in our society today are not regionally-based, gender and social class differences being the clearest examples. There is no mechanism within the present political structures to take account of the representation of diversity *within* regions. Moreover, there is no recognition of the serious problems posed by a politics of ideas (although it is now arguable whether we have such a system in Ireland any more) divorced from a politics of presence. It is assumed that through the party system, men can effectively represent women, middle class people can represent the interests of working class people, settled people can represent Travellers etc.

<sup>viii</sup>The following groups/identities have been identified as being associated with poverty in the Poverty Proofing Guidelines: age, gender, disability, Travellers, ethnic minorities, family and marital status - lone parents, single adult households, households with homemaker parent-, the unemployed, especially

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the long-term unemployed, the homeless and children (esp. in large families). It does not name name religion, sexual orientation or race as being associated with poverty although these are included in the Equal Status legislation as three of the nine grounds on which discrimination is prohibited.

<sup>ix</sup>While middle class professional women experience inequalities arising from their feminine status, in social class terms they are generally neither culturally or economically subordinated, and in fact enjoy the privileges of their class denied to women and men in working class occupations. However, such women, can and do experience social inequalities in the political and the cultural areas which are specific to their gender, although these do not generate poverty given professional women's strong occupational status, they do generate economic inequalities between men and women.