Gender, Sexuality & Feminism

Introduction

Vol. 1, No. 2, December 2014: 1–4

Introduction: Economic crisis and recovery: gendered impacts and discourses

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The global financial crisis of 2007 to 2008, and the subsequent economic, recession which continues to this day with no stable ‘recovery’ in sight, unleashed a social and economic upheaval that affected the social contract of government with its citizens, gender relations, and nature of the labour market. It is widely agreed now that the global financial and economic crisis involved a banking crisis, which morphed into a fiscal crisis for governments, and an economic recession with a drastic decline in economic growth since 2007.

Women and men of all ages have been severely affected by the financial and economic crisis. In the literature, a common theme has emerged regarding the effects of global crisis in reducing gender gap in employment, unemployment, wages, and poverty (see Bettio et al. 2012; and Karamessini and Rubery, 2013). This is explained partly by the huge losses in male employment concentrated in sectors such as construction, which were first hit in the economic crisis. In fact, the recession became popularly branded as a ‘man-cession’ as the historical gender gap in unemployment was reversed in most countries with male unemployment outstripping female unemployment. And, for the first time, women employees constituted more than half of all employees in countries such as the United States and Ireland.

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MPublishing, ISSN: 2168–8850

Gender, Sexuality & Feminism-GSF

www.gsfsjournal.org

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/gsf.12220332.0001.201>

These initial trends were seen as a hallmark of significant change in gender relations, with popular discourse suggesting that a 'new gender order' was taking place with men taking on domestic duties (see Edmonds 2010; O'Connell 2010; Rampell 2009).

All of the papers in this special issue reflect on this theme of how the crisis has affected the gender gap in the labour market. Nata Duvvury and Caroline Finn develop this theme in detail by exploring the trends in employment and unemployment of women and men from 2007 to 2013. Their nuanced analysis disaggregates by categories such as age, sex, and marital status. A key argument they make is about older women who have either increased their participation in the labour market and/or have exhibited an *added worker* effect in the initial stages of the economic crisis. Interestingly, Duvvury and Finn point out that in the period of 'recovery', however slight, a subtle shift is evident with men making faster gains in employment – or, as they name it 'man-covey'. However, they point to the subtlety of this recovery in terms of men's gains in employment taking place in a context of a revamped labour market in which part-time, temporary, and insecure employment are predominant.

Ursula Barry also reflects on some of the similar trends from a European perspective as well as within Ireland. Barry reinforces the conclusion of the Duvvury and Finn article, suggesting that the precariat, those with zero-hour contracts, part-time employment, and other insecure forms of employment have become widespread in the crisis. She adds another layer of analysis focusing on gender equality policies and how they have regressed in the course of the economic crisis. A central argument of Barry's article relates to a problematic focus on recovering men's employment, while gender equality targets have taken a back seat and, more critically, gender equality mechanisms have been eroded.

A second important theme emerging from the recent literature on the economic crisis addresses the point that the austerity policies implemented by governments to address the 'fiscal crisis' have increased the risk of poverty for various groups in society. These policies have included drastic reductions in social welfare benefits and an introduction of new taxes affecting consumption. For Ireland, as Barry argues, Ireland is a case in point, with risk of poverty particularly increasing among lone-parent families. For example, the Universal Social Charge, presented by the government as progressive, is in effect highly regressive, drawing the lowest earners into the tax net. In addition, changes in social welfare rules have specifically targeted lone-parent families and low-income households. Particularly important is the shift to reduce the level of earned income to qualify for receiving welfare payment by lone parents and low-income households. This reduction strengthens compulsory attachment to the labour market for all families with no specific policies to address the issue of childcare. Childcare costs are a significant obstacle preventing lone-parent women to seek employment. Even if labour participation increases, Duvvury and Finn point to the changes in pension rules and benefits that make it difficult for

men and women workers to build a pension for the future, particularly among the emerging precariat. Austerity policies have fundamentally renegotiated the social contract increasing risk of poverty now and in the future.

Megan Carney picks up this theme in her discussion of migrant families in California and the effect of the crisis on everyday food practices in these communities. She highlights how the crisis in employment has been accompanied with a rise in food prices and a decline in food assistance by the government. Together, these have led women to reduce expenditures in food, resorting to strategies such as bargain hunting, limiting the number of meals, and decreasing the time to cook the main meal, which is a central part of Mexican family life. Overall, she argues that due to the crisis, the nutritional security of migrant families is thus undermined.

Another theme found in the literature examines the extent to which the changes in the crisis have impacted gender relations within households and in the public. Diane Negra addresses the gendered articulation of economic recession in popular culture. The focus on crisis of masculinity that has been portrayed through public discourses is utilized in the Irish media at the expense of promulgated abiding femininity. While at the peak of the Celtic Tiger era men were depicted as de-masculinized, recession seems to offer a return to an essentialist notion of male toughness and endurance. This is accomplished through restoration of 'appropriate gender roles', which became destabilized during economic boom, and women's greater participation in the labour market. Woman's joblessness lacks representational vocabulary in popular culture, while the man losing work is depicted 'as a sign, symptom, and victim of recession'. This gendered representation of men's and women's joblessness in public culture valorises a return to traditional gender roles with active males and passive females. Negra stresses the importance of economic and political discourses in shaping cultural conceptions and representations of masculinity and femininity in the public domain, both during the Celtic Tiger era and the recession in Ireland.

This public discourse is also reflected in the degree to which women have had a voice in the political and economic decision-making with respect to the crisis. An early theme in the literature on the crisis was that masculinity, or 'the testosterone driven risk taking behaviour', undermined the banking system and, therefore, there emerged a need for women to come forward to 'clean up the mess'. Iceland represents a unique case, where in fact women came to position of political power in a new left-wing government elected in 2009, with a woman president and a cabinet equally comprising men and women. Thora Kristin Thorsdottir explores the specific gendered nature of the economic crisis in Iceland. She asserts that during the recovery phase, from 2011 onwards, the greatest contraction in employment was in education and public administration. Therefore, women's unemployment rose in this period reflecting the 'man-covery' highlighted by Duvvury and Finn. What was different in Iceland, in contrast to the European trends, was that during the period of 2009 to 2013, the new

government implemented several gender-equality policies in the labour market, addressed gender-based violence through legislation, and ensured women's access to power through laws in 2008 and 2010 to apply gender quotas on public corporate boards. However, once the Icelandic economy reverted to stability, a new conservative male-dominated party came to power in 2013. Thorsdottir argues that the new government's focus shifted to gender-blind austerity policies that have gendered implications, especially in terms of public sector spending cuts and policies around a flat-rate tax system.

The collection of papers in this volume provide a more nuanced understanding of the gendered impacts of the global financial and economic crisis and its associated austerity policies. An important point raised by all the articles is that the progress in gender equality has come to a standstill in the context of the austerity policies implemented across Europe. Gender equality is once again 'a luxury issue'. For households, however, gender equality is central to survival as more families struggle to meet the burdens imposed on them by austerity policies. A question that must be explored is how this disengagement between policy makers, who operate with gender tropes of man as breadwinner and woman as carer, and families, who are increasingly dependent on female breadwinners, will be enacted. Is there a possibility for a new public discourse to emerge as resistance to austerity policies grows that will recognize the specific needs of women and men without representing them in a conflictual, binary opposition to each other?

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