Gender Equality in Challenging Times: A Report on the Annual Conference of the International Association for Feminist Economics

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A Report on the Annual Conference of the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE)
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The IAFFE was established in 1992 by feminist economists concerned about the gaps in economic theories and curricula and the social implications of economic policies as they had recently evolved. The organization has held annual meetings in various countries and has produced the journal Feminist Economics since 1995. Among its members are the founders of the Gender and Macroeconomics network (GEM), who published two symposia – in the journal World Development in 1995 and 2000 – on integrating feminist concerns and gender analysis in macroeconomics. GEM has since organized its own networks, one of which is focused on Europe (including Turkey), and has held regional conferences in Istanbul in 2011 and in Krakow in 2012.

What took place in Berlin in July 2015 was the annual conference, which is international and revolves around a theme. This year’s theme – Gender Equality in Challenging Times – revolved around Europe’s policies of austerity and their gender implications; the ethics of care and the salience of social reproduction; the gender dynamics of paid and unpaid labor; household inequalities and other dynamics; social programs, public works, and welfare; and fiscal policy, financialization, and implications for gender equality and for democracy. The conference began with a plenary panel entitled “Gender Equality in Europe: The Necessity to Develop Better Policies”; had a keynote address entitled “Global Care Workers and Global Justice: The Political Economy of Drudgery”; included a talk by the minister of labor and social affairs on her mission for gender justice in Germany; and ended with a plenary on “Gender Equality and Austerity Measures.”

On everyone’s mind, of course, was Greece’s debt crisis and the imposed austerity plan, which actually represents the European Union’s moral decline and its crisis of legitimacy. At the close of the conference, therefore, a resolution was adopted that condemned the austerity measures forced upon Greece by the EU leadership. (The resolution may be found at the end of this report.)

I attended the conference as a scholar of gender and development but mainly in my capacity as director of international affairs and co-PI of a Tier I grant received also by Dr. Bilge Erten and Dr. Catalina Herrera-Almanza, jointly appointed in Economics and International Affairs. Along with Professor Bill Dickens, chair of the Economics Department, we have launched the Gender and Development Initiative, which entails research activities, curriculum development, and a lecture series. Dr. Erten and Dr. Herrera-Almanza made presentations at the conference; Dr. Erten is also involved with the Gender and Macroeconomics network, which I describe below.

Women and Employment

The opening plenary panel, Gender Equality in Europe: The Necessity to Develop Better Policies, began with a talk by Ute Klammer of the University of Duisburg-Essen, who spoke of the considerable gender gaps in fulltime paid employment, incomes, and pensions in Germany. German women make 24% of
men’s wages; their pension gap is as large as 60%; and half of all working women are in part-time jobs. These issues were also taken up later in the day by the German Federal Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, Andrea Nahles, who explained that she is working on a mechanism that would allow part-time women workers who want to increase their hours to do so. In the past, she explained, women wanted part-time work, but now they prefer full-time or close to it, while the men want a shorter working day. She also discussed ways to make production more women-friendly, through the use of advanced technologies such as robots, and gave a BMW production line that she observed as an example.

Concurrent panels that took place throughout the conference included presentations on the situation of women in the labor forces of other countries as well. For example, at a panel on women and labor in Turkey, one speaker pointed out that Turkish women’s labor force participation rate is just 30%, or half of that of OECD (of which Turkey is a member). Another noted that nearly half of the female labor force (44.6%) is found in the informal sector, and of that amount, 23% of working women are in unpaid family work. Clearly, there is an absence of decent jobs for Turkish women, especially those from working-class or low-income households. There are other barriers, too, notably the absence of support structures for working mothers, such as affordable childcare centers or workplace nurseries and childcare facilities. The provision of childcare is only available at enterprises with 150+ workers; because 75% of Turkish enterprises have fewer than 50 workers and most women work in those small enterprises, the vast majority of Turkish women workers have no access to a workplace childcare facility. The absence of care services – whether for children or for the elderly – keeps Turkish women’s labor force participation low, although women with higher education attainment also have higher employment levels.

The Turkish government has instituted programs for women’s employment and vocational training in Turkey; in 2013, some 113,074 women took the labor force training, but mainly in traditional female fields. In addition, the government sends mixed messages. On the one hand, there is the narrative of better preparing and integrating women for labor force participation. On the other hand, the president in particular has called for Turkish women to produce at least three children.

A solution in Turkey, therefore, has been to create advocacy activities for women’s employment, and especially for the developed of decent jobs for women. KEIG – the Women’s Labor and Employment Platform – is an umbrella group of various activist organizations with activities such as the kindergarten advocacy campaign and a number of study groups.

At a global level, data were provided by Naoko Otobe, the senior employment and gender specialist at the International Labor Office, in Geneva. Speaking at the final plenary, she noted that globally, women’s unemployment rate is 6.5% while that of men is 5.8%; of course, this hides the great variations across countries and regions, some of which, such as the Middle East and North Africa, have double-digit unemployment figures, as do young people in southern Europe. Ms. Otobe spoke of the employment shortfall since the Great Recession, with 61 million fewer workers in 2015 than before the 2008 crisis, mainly due to discouraged workers. Women, she added, account for 73% of the global jobs gap. In terms of the distribution of labor globally, manufacturing accounts for 17.5% of female labor (compared with men’s 24.5%); the rest of the female labor force is found primarily in public and private services, though in some parts of the world women remain concentrated in the agricultural sector.

Ms. Otobe ended her talk by drawing attention to demographic changes that affect the global employment picture. One such set of changes is fertility and the “graying” of the population, which affects women’s roles in production and reproduction. Many countries in the Global South, as well as those in the Global North, are faced with the question of who takes care of the elderly, and how? Another demographic change pertains to the so-called youth bulge – the result of earlier higher
fertility rates – and the high rates of youth unemployment. In my own work, I have written of youth, and especially young women’s, unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa region; as a result of the great recession, austerity measures and cutbacks, young people in many European countries and in the US also face joblessness. In countries such as Ireland, Portugal, and Spain, as well as in Greece, young people find themselves with no option but to leave their countries and try to find employment in other European countries – and in the case of Portugal, in the former African colonies such as Angola and Mozambique.

Lastly, Ms. Otobe drew attention to how environmental factors affected population health and well-being (e.g., pollution and premature deaths, malaria risks) and the implications for what feminists call the care economy: how do women and families care for sick relatives? How do states and economies manage? How are working people affected by environmental degradation?

**Women’s Work, Care, and Social Reproduction**

If feminists, following Marx, have stressed the interconnection between the spheres of production and reproduction, panels at the conference showed the relations between employment and care, and indeed, certain types of women’s employment, social investments, and sustainability. On one of the Gender and Macroeconomics panels, Ipek Ilkkaracan, professor of economics at Istanbul Technical University, spoke about a study which found that public expenditure on care expenditures in Turkey would have far more job creation potential than would investments in construction. Such social investments also would create more decent work (as defined by the ILO), including decent work for women. Echoing the issues raised at the panel on women and labor in Turkey, Professor Ilkkaracan said that social investments would lift restrictions on female employment – and they would alleviate household poverty. She then briefly mentioned another project in which she is involved, which entails showing the links between the "purple"/care economy (women’s employment and social provisioning for care) and "green" jobs (environmentally-aware employment); such a connection, she said, would have positive outcomes for sustainability.

The issue of care is one that preoccupies many feminist social scientists, whether economists, political scientists, or sociologists. Joan Tronto, feminist political theorist at the University of Minnesota, delivered the keynote address on the topic "Global Care Workers and Global Justice: The Political Economy of Drudgery". She is the author of *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for anEthic of Care* (1993) and *A Caring Economy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (2013). In her talk she asked: Who does the drudgery work? The answer is, of course, native women as well as migrant workers, and she showed the origins of such migrant care labor in the colonial period. She pointed out that today, migrant labor does have some individual, community, and social benefits, such as the uses to which remittances are put. However, there are also costs, in terms of not only a brain drain but also a "care drain", by which healthworkers from the Global South are recruited for jobs in the Global North. (I should add that I have direct experience of this “care drain”; my mother is in a nursing home which is staffed largely by women from various African countries who are bi- or tri-lingual, well-educated, and very competent at their jobs.) In addition to the loss of human capital there is the loss of social capital as a result of the mobility of such skilled care workers. To me, this raises the following question: should Global North countries compensate African and other Global South countries for the loss of their care professionals?

Continuing her lecture, Professor Tronto dismissed the idea that new technologies such as robots and the like could cure the care crisis, pointing out that instead of the proliferation of nursing homes, many families would welcome support for the care for their loved ones at home. So let’s think of care in more equal terms, she said; let’s propose new policies so that people can stay at home. For that, social
movements and advocacy networks will be needed to overcome the economic policies that create care burdens and to create instead new social institutions, norms, and ethics.

Related to this topic was a presentation by Ruth Pearson and Rhys Jenkins on tax avoidance and the burdens placed on social reproduction as a result of the allocation of resources to tax recovery and to bank bailouts. One problem is that of tax havens and the disjuncture between the transnational nature of capital and the national bases of tax systems; related to this problem is that of tax competition among countries. What is needed is transparency in tax reporting in order to eliminate tax havens and the competition that leads to capital flights and thus job losses and fiscal challenges. As Ruth Pearson pointed out, such a transformation in rules and practices would generate more financing for reproductive activities and help resolve the care crisis.

“The EU House is Disintegrating”

The EU and its agencies – especially those responsible for economic or financial policy – came in for much criticism at the conference, and plenary speakers highlighted the various deficits in the current EU model. For example, at the first plenary panel, Daniela Banker of the European Commission, who is also director-general for justice and head of the EC’s gender equality unit, spoke of the “professionalization” of gender equality approaches, the loss of passion and commitment, and the malaise that had seeped into the EC’s gender narrative. There is a general sense, she said, that gender equality has been achieved and the laws are positive and gender-neutral, so “let’s move on”. At the same plenary panel, Sylvia Walby, professor of sociology at Lancaster University, noted the great distance that the EU had come from its early days – when it represented a strong welfare state and a community devoted to social solidarity as well as peace – to the current model of neoliberalism, austerity, and militarism. Professor Walby is the author of a recent book on the economic crisis, and she spoke of the cascading effects from an unregulated finance sector to the real economy and on to the democratic deficit. She urged feminists everywhere to focus on the big pictures of the macroeconomy and especially its financialization, and to taxation. Pointing out that a kind of “herd mentality” of the men in finance brought us the great recession, she suggested that more women in the financial sector could be an important corrective. She also argued that for all its problems, the EU is not over; “we can still embed gender equality issues in the broader programs.”

Other conference participants were not convinced. One pointed out that Angela Merkel, Hilary Clinton, and similar women are wedded to the neoliberal model; the point is not just more women in power but more women who can challenge neoliberal doctrine. Diane Elson, one of the founders of feminist economics, said that at this point, embedding gender equality cannot work; the response should be to contest the neoliberal model head on and to offer alternatives. I would agree. Gender equality goals, I would argue, are not possible under conditions of general social inequality, which is the pattern in the EU as well as across the globe (as Thomas Piketty and others have shown). Gender equality will only come about in a context of social transformation.

Later in the day, the German minister of labor and social affairs was challenged from the floor. Elisabeth Klatzer, a co-author of the resolution on Greece (see below), said: “The EU house is disintegrating under the weight of the crisis and the democracy deficit. How do you, as a minister and member of the Social Democratic Party, address this?” The minister’s response was to call for deeper European integration and to assure the audience that she and her colleagues did not want “Grexit”. But the dominant narrative in Germany, unfortunately, was that “Greece has been eating up our resources”. She conceded that much had been destroyed in Greece and that the plan “was not the best”.
Rania Antonopoulos, a key member of the GEM group, had been initially scheduled for the final plenary, but her work as Minister of Employment in the current Greek government, along with the parliamentary debates on the austerity measure imposed by the EU, prevented her from attending. Nonetheless, the discussion of “Gender Equality and Austerity Measures” proved to be informative and lively. Myra Strober – professor emerita of economics at Stanford University and a staunch Keynesian – bemoaned the insultarity of mainstream economics, its lack of interest in other disciplinary approaches, and its focus on austerity rather than social provisioning and the fulfilment of people’s material needs.

Lourdes Beneria, retired professor of city and regional planning at Cornell now based in Barcelona, spoke of living through the crisis in Spain, witnessing the bursting of the housing bubble, very high (26%) youth unemployment, the dismantling of the welfare state, the re-familialization of care, the rising poverty rate (with about 30% living under the poverty line), and huge numbers of evictions. Spanish cities became known for their “people without homes and homes without people”, she said. This is what neoliberalism looks like. Professor Beneria added that European solidarity has lost its meaning. Similarly, European democracy has lost its meaning, as seen by its response to the Greek referendum, which was an even tougher set of austerity measures than the ones that the Greek people had rejected in their referendum, along with a total restructuring of the Greek economy. She ended her talk by saying that she agrees with Syriza (Greece’s ruling, left-wing political party) that another Europe is possible, a Europe of social solidarity.

Antonella Picchio, of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, was even harsher on the contemporary policies and their agents. She contrasted classical political economy and the feminist emphasis on social reproduction with neoliberalism; the latter, she said, had waged a class war. She noted the discrepancy between the narrative of no money for social services and the narrative of banks being too big to fail and needing bailouts, quantitative easing, and the like, along with huge expenditures on the military. “We need new narratives to counter those lies”, she said.

Returning to the issues of care and austerity, Nancy Folbre, professor emerita of economics at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, began by noting that women’s commitment to care is precisely the source of their economic disadvantage, but that the public debate on who pays for care has become more prominent in recent years. When she suggested the introduction of a "care tax" along with a "carbon tax", I recalled Ipek Ilkkarcan’s proposed purple and green strategy.

The conference ended with the adoption of the resolution on the Greek crisis, which is reprinted below.
Resolution of Feminist Economists gathering at the IAFFE conference in Berlin, July 16-18, 2015

We are shocked that the EU institutions and European leaders are imposing on the people of Greece a further program of austerity that will severely undermine the living conditions of women and men and plunge them into a deep crisis of deprivation. This hits Greek women particularly hard as they will have to provide the safety net of last resort through intensified work of taking care of their families, friends and communities.

As feminist economists, as well as many other economists, have stressed over many years, the debt burden is unsustainable, this fact has recently even been acknowledged by the IMF. Thus, the hardship imposed on Greek people will not resolve the problem of its indebtedness, but it will rather worsen the great depression.

The fate of women, men and their families should not be abandoned by EU institutions and politicians and left in the hands of financial powers. The same neoliberal political perspective under the name of “structural adjustments”, has led to enormous sufferings and political instability in Latin America, Asia and Africa. As we know, the vicious circle was only interrupted by a drastic change in political perspective and policies.

Women across Europe, although in different ways according to class, citizenship and ethnicity, have already been disadvantaged by the neoliberal policy of the EU institutions and member state governments. The proposed action against Greece will further damage women’s economic and social status and autonomy in all EU countries.

In addition to jeopardizing the independence and democratic basis of a Member State government, austerity imperils women’s and men’s power to design and implement transformative policies for a sustainable and democratic future that puts women’s and men’s well-being at the center.

Painful lessons of history, especially of the First and Second World War, should never be forgotten. Europe has to be alert to the political and economic dangers that are embedded in this austerity approach. Furthermore, history teaches us that these problems can only be solved by significant debt reduction, as for example in 1953, and by international solidarity and collaboration.

We call upon EU leaders and in particular the government of Germany to come to an agreement with Greece respecting the dignity of Greek people and democratic processes, including

- an immediate moratorium on Greek government debt and negotiate a write-down of this debt,
- a progressive fiscal policy that takes into proper account the distribution of income between labour and financial capital; sustains the process of social reproduction that enables women and men, in their life cycle, to live and work with dignity; promotes the creation of high-quality jobs, aiming at a substantial reduction of working hours for all, and investment in public services and care infrastructure.