The International Affairs Program is one of the largest majors in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Northeastern University, which is located in the heart of Boston, MA, USA.
A conference on *Gender and Macroeconomics: Current State of Research and Future Directions* took place in New York City, organized by the Levy Institute of Bard College and the Hewlett Foundation, on 9-11 March 2016. Participants were members of the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE) and related researchers who work on gender and development or gender and macroeconomics issues. Dr. Bilge Erten, assistant professor of economics and international affairs, attended as a speaker and discussant, and Dr. Valentine M. Moghadam, director of the International Affairs Program (IAF) and professor of sociology and international affairs, attended as an observer – in both cases as part of the activities associated with Northeastern University’s Gender and Development Initiative. Launched in 2014 by the International Affairs Program and the Department of Economics, the GAD Initiative is currently funded by the Tier 1 grant with the support of the College of Social Sciences and the Humanities and is led by Dr. Moghadam, Dr. Erten, and Dr. Catalina Herrera-Almanza, assistant professor of economics and international affairs.

The field of gender and development is multi- and interdisciplinary, with the participation of feminist economists, sociologists, and political scientists. There are links with development economics, macroeconomics, and microeconomics; with the sociology of development, world-systems analysis, and global and transnational studies; and with political economy and the politics of development. The conference in NYC was attended largely by feminist economists (including several male researchers), some of whom had been present at the IAFFE annual conference, which took place in Berlin in July 2015.¹

At the Levy Institute conference in NYC, sessions were organized around the themes of the care economy and macroeconomic analysis; gender, work, and economic inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa; empirical investigations of gender inequalities in Africa; time and consumption poverty in Ghana and Tanzania; new approaches in gendered economics; gender perspectives in policy analysis; growth, employment and gender inequality; and policy interventions.

Issues that were raised pertained to modelling techniques that may account for different aspects of women’s lives while also resonating with policymakers and non-feminist economists; the role of social norms in the persistence of women’s care work and how to account for that in models; the need for more research on gender and macroeconomics in low- and middle-income countries; diversification of methodological tools and moving across disciplinary borders. A major focus was on the “care economy”, regarded by feminists with a Marxian background as being part of the sphere of social reproduction: how to bring research on care into the policy domain and political sphere; how to bring social reproduction into the macroeconomic accounting systems. Care had been a topic at the Berlin

conference as well, where the moral obligations and joys of care were also considered; here the focus was more on links to the macroeconomy.

Nancy Folbre of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, who has long written about the economics of care with a focus on the U.S., argued for a redefinition of investment – spending on children, for example, should be seen as an investment, a public good, and an input to economic growth. Sue Himmelweit of the Open University echoed Folbre in explaining that public investment in care is advocated by feminist economics because it builds a stock of human and social capital leading to a stream of future benefits (such as jobs and wages, not to mention a more egalitarian gender order), although this is not currently integrated into national accounts.

Because of the conference theme, few micro-economists were present, although Stephanie Seguino of the University of Vermont made the interesting observation that micro-dynamics such as household consumption patterns are tied to macro issues, and vice versa. This is in fact a basic assumption in the sociology of development, which sees household-level gender inequalities as shaped by larger social arrangements and features, whether they be the structure of the economy, or government spending, or women’s mobilizations. Macro-level patterns such as labor and capital flows across the economic zones of the world-system (e.g., global commodity chains) have gendered effects at national, local, and household levels. Care work itself can only be understood in terms of micro- and macro-level linkages. It has long been understood that women’s unpaid family labor, as well as gender gaps in salaried employment, reflect societal gender asymmetries as well as state policies; these patterns in turn reinforce gender inequality in the household, the community, and the polity in a sort of vicious circle.

Research on gender and macroeconomics and the significance of care work was triggered by the effects of the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s, which feminist economists saw as adversely affecting women’s reproductive as well as productive activities. It has produced two special issues of the journal World Development, in 1995 and in 2000, along with articles in the IAFFE journal Feminist Economics and of course many books. Two of the founders of the field, Diane Elson and Nilufer Catagay, argued in their 2000 paper that macroeconomics revealed three biases: a deflationary bias, a commodification bias, and a male breadwinner bias. At the Levy Institute conference, Ipek Ilkkaracan of Istanbul Technical University added that a fourth – the deregulation bias – had had serious implications for women’s work: a decline in public provisioning of services, unregulated labor markets that de-incentivize female labor force participation, and insufficient employment generation. Caren Grown pointed to research showing that in some cases care can be a constraint on growth.

What follows are key points of some of the presentations.

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4 For a discussion of these patterns in connection with the Islamic Republic of Iran, see Moghadam, Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013, 3rd ed.), ch. 6.
The Purple Economy (Care work) and the Green Economy: Making the Connections

As noted, women’s care work was extensively discussed at the IAFFE conference in Berlin, and at the NYC conference it was also discussed in terms of its relation to gender inequality, women’s wages and capacity for advancement, national economic growth, and complementarity with the “green economy.” In her presentation, Ipek Ilkkaracan discussed the importance of the redistribution of the caring burden. Advocacy for the “purple economy”, she pointed out, is a response to persistent inequalities of gender, class, and origin, and to the unfair burden of care, which limits access to resources, jobs, and leisure. Ilkkaracan made the interesting point that the crisis of care reveals itself in growing divides among women themselves, leading to conservatism and vicious cycles. She also pointed out the double crisis of care for children and the elderly and the ecological degradation of many rural or impoverished communities. In asking what a gender-egalitarian economy look like, she answered that it would have elements of both the purple economy and the green economy, and she mapped out the complementary features of both. To address the environmental crisis, the strategy of endless growth and accumulation would need to shift to a green economy; to address the care burden, which is largely assumed by women or low-paid immigrants or migrant workers, communities and governments need to invest in a social care infrastructure (e.g., pre-school, kindergartens, childcare centers, paid maternity and family leaves). To achieve both would require an enabling macroeconomic environment, including an increase or reallocation of public spending.

The benefits of such a development strategy, she argued, would be multiple. On the supply side there would be increases in female labor force participation and attachment, with a possible move to the dual earner, dual carer model. Of course it would have to be accompanied by reformed labor market policies, including the creation of what the International Labor Organization calls “decent work”, including a shorter work day and week, healthy work conditions, and benefits. On the demand side, such a strategy would create new jobs in both the purple and green economies. She cited studies on the USA, South Africa, the European Union, and Turkey showing that in the short term poverty would decrease, jobs would increase, and the desired work-life balance would be possible.

Much of Ilkkaracan’s work has focused on Turkey, and this is an important complement to the many studies that analyze the advanced capitalist countries. Caren Grown of the World Bank correctly noted that unlike the OECD countries, very few low- or middle-income countries have a policy on care from a life-cycle perspective. Existing policies or infrastructure tend to be fragmented and divided across schooling, health, and social security rather than connected in a policy framework. This is, in fact, an argument made in a recent paper by Karshenas, Moghadam, and Alami, in connection with social policy after the Arab Spring: the optimal social policy regime would be integrated, democratic and developmentalist, providing citizens with social rights as well as creating better functioning labor markets. In her presentation, Grown added that financing of such policies needed to account for the trend toward decentralization and the presence of local-level provisioning.

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Elissa Braunstein of Colorado State University and UNCTAD, presented a paper entitled “Economic Growth and Social Reproduction: Gender Inequality as Cause and Consequence”, which showed the two-way causality that feminist sociological research has long emphasized and that Stephanie Seguino also referred to in her later discussion. Braunstein began by defining the macroeconomics of care in terms of the time and commodities it takes to reproduce the labor force (that is, social reproduction) for purposes of creating what she calls “human capacities” – a concept, she explained, lying between human capital and human capabilities. The question for many policymakers, she said, pertained to the long-term strategies for investment that would contribute to growth and development, as well as future productivity. But the feminization of responsibility and obligation, she argued, creates a time squeeze for women. Even with higher wages for women, the squeeze on women’s time lowers growth and productivity. Policymakers in different types of economies addressed the problem in different ways; for example, some countries provided education and health, along with social insurance for industrial workers, but the care systems are family-based or highly privatized, and female labor force participation is low or relatively low. (Examples from my own research would be Algeria and Iran.)

Sue Himmelweit reported on an international comparative study of seven OECD countries – conducted by the UK Women’s Budget Group, led by Jerome de Henau, for the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) – that compared jobs and wages in the construction sector and the care sector. They found that the USA and UK have the lowest wages for care workers; Italy has the lowest difference between construction and care, possibly because care workers are fulltime employees; interesting enough, Japan’s construction workers are paid less than the care workers. Both sectors are very sex-segregated. The study found that investment in care increases employment by women and reduces the gender wage gap; the opposite occurs with construction.

**Focus on Sub-Saharan Africa: Trade Liberalization, Banking, and Employment**

For some time, feminist and mainstream economists alike have debated the effects of trade liberalization – has it benefited women or not? Stephanie Seguino reported on research for Sub-Saharan African countries grouped into three types of economic structures. The research found that trade as a percentage of GDP increased, but so did trade deficits; that female employment as a percentage of male was narrowing (though the gap was highest in the oil exporting economies – no surprise here given my own previous research on oil economies in MENA); that public infrastructural spending had positive effect on employment. One somewhat counter-intuitive finding was that food exports benefited women’s employment, irrespective of structure. Of course, changes in commodity prices are bound to affect women’s employment as well as household consumption and well-being; in a later presentation, it was pointed out that falling cotton prices were adversely affecting women in Benin. Seguino’s main recommendation, in keeping with the conference theme and feminist economists’ main preoccupation, is that social as well as physical infrastructure spending should be regarded as investment and not just a cost, and that it helps to reduce gender inequality.

Maureen Were of the Central Bank of Kenya presented a paper on financial access and women’s financial inclusion. Bank accounts, microcredits, bank loans, credit and debit cards, and mobile phone usage for banking all have increased but gender disparities persist, especially in Nigeria, Angola,
Rwanda, and women’s usage is generally low on the continent as a whole. Where women seem to be doing best are in Kenya, Mauritius and South Africa, but even so, gender disparities exist there, too. What is needed, she said, are forms of financial intervention or promotion strategies, such as by the central banks, for both accessibility and affordability. The impact on poverty reduction and women’s economic empowerment also needs to be better understood.

Sharmitha Sinha of the National Institute of Labor Economics Research and Development, Delhi, discussed aspects of the gendered structure of work in Sub-Saharan Africa, characterized in part by high female labor force participation (FLFP), low human development, and a large and growing population of working poor. At around 65%, African women’s FLFP is very high, and they continue to dominate the agricultural sector and cross-border trading. Apart from women in the higher-paid professions, the quality of women’s employment is low, with much vulnerable employment and unpaid family labor. Because of restrictive inheritance rights, women constitute just 15% of landowners. Meanwhile, the gender dynamics of food production have undergone change: with global value chains and cash crops such as cassava production in Angola and Nigeria, the labor force shifts from female to male, and more women resort to working informally for household consumption. As noted, the effects of trade liberalization are variable and contested. In some cases, rising household income could result in lowered FLFP; in other cases, the drop in the price of cotton or oil could affect women workers’ jobs and income. During the discussion, it was pointed out that there has been a decline in FLFP in Tanzania, the result of either rising household incomes or family care responsibilities. The transnational employment opportunities for African women were also noted; these include outmigration to work in hospitals, nursing homes, and hotels in Europe and North America.

Bilge Erten’s paper on trade liberalization in South Africa and its effects on the racial and gender composition of local employment in the mid-1990s showed that districts that were exposed to higher loss of protection experienced larger employment losses than comparable districts. The employment of African and female workers was particularly negatively affected. These differential effects are highest in manufacturing, and particularly strong for low-skilled manufacturing workers. Her research, therefore, confirms that rapid trade liberalization can hurt disadvantaged groups.

With a focus on Morocco, Daniela Marotta, a senior economist at World Bank, referred to the growing literature and policy papers finding a negative correlation between gender inequality and growth. The region with the largest income loss (fully 38%) due to gender inequality and low FLFP is MENA followed by South Asia (25%). Morocco has had accelerated growth in past years, which has reduced poverty; there also are gains in human development indicators such as fertility and maternal mortality. Moroccan governments have introduced legislative reforms around the family law, labor law, sexual harassment, and nationality, as well as the constitutional amendments of 2011. Although the economy has been shifting from agriculture to services, most employment remains in low productivity sectors, and Moroccan women have been losing ground. Apart from those in agriculture, Moroccan women also are found in the textile sector, and as unpaid family workers, and there remains a large stock of uneducated women, mostly older or rural women. Other, more educated women are found in the sectors of health and education, and to a lesser degree in public administration. Gender, she said, remains a barrier to

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6 As Bilge Erten mentioned later, the Moroccan case similar to the case of Turkey, where gender inequalities in labor markets, access to public goods, and political participation did not close despite rapid economic growth and structural change.
schooling, access to banking, and entrepreneurship. Women’s mobility is consistently worse than men’s, low land ownership is a function of unequal inheritance rights, and World Values Survey scores show the persistence of traditional social norms. Intrahousehold decision-making, therefore, remains largely in male hands, and it will take some time before the confluence of rising female educational attainment, the effects of the family law reform, and women’s rights mobilizations affect the nature of gender relations.

How to Move the Agenda Forward?

Several of the papers presented showed how gender equality, along with income distribution and public spending, can have a positive effect on growth and development. Collaborative research by Eurydice Fotopoulou, Ozlem Onaran and Cem Oyvat, for example, seeks to develop a macroeconomic model to analyze the various channels through which gender equality can influence growth and employment outcomes. Others referred to mechanisms such as gender budgeting and gender impact assessments, which have been adopted by some countries (with variable effects) and promoted by international organizations. Feminist economists have had some influence on policymakers within multilateral organizations, though less so, as Stephanie Seguino noted, on the discipline of economics itself. And this despite the highly technical work that many of them do, their experience in the field, and their use of modelling techniques.

But there is another constraint on the adoption of their arguments and models. The issues and aspirations raised at the conference – redistribution of income and time, and investments in social and physical infrastructure – assume a certain type of state and system of social provisioning, what Massoud Karshenas and I have defined as a democratic developmentalist social policy regime. The democratic side of the equation is the product of socio-political coalitions and alliances involving women’s rights organizations, trade unions, other civil society/social movement citizen groups, certain political parties, and allies within certain state agencies or the government – all of whom mobilize around universal social provisioning. At the multilateral level, agencies such as UNWomen may be able to push the feminist economics agenda forward, but politics is made at the national level. Different countries have different state capacities and forms of leverage (as well as different economic structures), and this is where world-systems theory can be especially illuminating. The decision to adopt an economic strategy and social policy regime is a political one, reflective of the configuration of socio-political power, or what Marxists call class power. Changing the power configurations in the direction of social rights for all citizens, the redistribution of care work, and public investments in social infrastructure is then a matter of political mobilizations, alliances, and coalitions.

In the 1990s and the early 2000s, transnational feminist networks such as Women in Development Europe (WIDE) and Development Alternatives with Women in a New Era (DAWN) included feminist economists who led economic literacy workshops in various countries. Today, such networks are less active, with the result that the ideas remain limited to small groups of highly educated academics. Moreover, at a time when right-wing governments are spreading in Europe and the “pink tide” in Latin America is waning, one wonders where the impetus for the desired redistributive measures would come from. Still, the feminist economics agenda is timely and important. Moving it forward will require a combination of continued academic research, the training of students and new generations of feminist economists, advocacy within international organizations and sympathetic national agencies, and collaborations with activist networks.