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Spanish State

Women's Crises

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Over the past three years there have been numerous debates within the Spanish political and social left about the impact of the current economic crisis on working people, and the (in)efficacy of the measures the government adopted to ameliorate them. There has not been much talk, however, about the specific consequences that both the crisis and governmental response have had on women.

Before the initial worsening of male unemployment – the result of the massive job loss within the construction and industrial sectors – the mass media often stated that the crisis hit men more severely. In early 2007 male unemployment stood at 5.55% while female unemployment was 8.21%. By the end of 2009 the rates stood at 18.15% and 15.63% respectively.

A Feminist Approach

Yet the masculine crisis discourse masks women's specific situation. As a result the government has proven unable to examine the economic crisis from a gender perspective; it has failed to notice the real impact on the lives of women. The lower unemployment figure has led to trumpeting the achievement of gender equality in the job market without examining the feminization of occupations that have supposedly turned male jobs into female ones. This highly counterproductive conclusion dismisses the need for gender equality policies.

The increase in male unemployment has resulted in more families depending on the woman's salary, which is usually the lower of the two. In addition many women have important care-giving responsibilities, and these are not being redistributed.

While 2008 was characterized by the bursting of the real state bubble and severe decline in the industrial sector, within a few months the contraction hit the service sector, where 88.5% of Spanish women work. This skyrocketed the rate of female unemployment, now standing at 20.4%, slightly higher than the male rate of 19.29%.

But beyond the evolution of unemployment rates, women's labor conditions before and during the crisis are different than those of men. Despite the fact that women are more than 50% of the country's population, we are currently 44% of the active population and nearly half of the unemployed.

More importantly, 43% of the indefinite work contracts and 77% of the part-time workers are women. Ninety-seven percent of women take part-time work because of their care-giving responsibilities and 94.16% because of other family obligations. Women are in more vulnerable positions in the job market – particularly young women, immigrant women and single mothers.

Yet the average salary of employed women is 22% lower than that of male workers, and we continue to suffer both vertical and horizontal segregation in the labor market. We also suffer discrimination due to a reduction of working hours during our pregnancy and maternity leave. Women also have a higher presence in the underground economy, and this in turn has a big impact on our both social and labor rights.

Women have higher rates of temporary and part-time jobs as well as underemployment. We are 57.3% of those who

receive welfare benefits and 37% of those who get unemployment compensation or retirement benefits. Generally speaking, when women are unemployed, we receive 15% less than our male counterparts and do so for shorter periods of time due to less stable employment patterns. Fully 80% of the “economically active” who do not receive any benefits or compensation are women.

According to numerous feminist authors, in order to cut down on family expenses women’s domestic workload has increased. We are constantly juggling our time in order to fulfill our responsibilities in the job market and in the private household.

Many others are unable to join the formal labor market because of care-giving responsibilities. This feeds “underground unemployment,” where thousands of “unemployed” women are not captured in official unemployment statistics.

It would be interesting to know what percentage of the 9,392,400 currently “economically inactive” women in Spain (61.13% of the total) have made a choice, and what percentage are unable to make a formal job compatible with their care-giving.

Lastly, we need to incorporate into a feminist and anti-capitalist analysis other social categories. If we examine current unemployment data in relationship to national origin, unemployment clearly affects non-European immigrants more severely than natives: The former show unemployment rates of 30.67%, in contrast to 17.98% for Spanish-born workers.

In clear contrast with the message the mass media has been sending, the unemployment figure for Spanish-born men is half that of foreign-born males (34%). The rate for foreign-born women is more than 7% higher than their counterparts.

Male unemployment in Spain can be traced to the big cuts immigrant men have suffered due to their concentration in the construction sector. Consequently it would be more accurate to state that the economic crisis has affected immigrants, both male and female. Moreover, official statistics don’t reveal the full force of the crisis. This is particularly true because immigrant women are concentrated in the informal economy, where their unemployment goes unrecorded.

Government Responses

The lack of a gender perspective in analyzing unemployment rates leads to the PSOE (Socialist Party) government reproducing and reinforcing inequalities between men and women. At the very beginning of the crisis, the publicly funded rescue of banks was followed by a set of measures aimed at creating public employment.

While in the government’s recovery program (Plan EEE) there was a mention of social investments, its implementation focused on funding infrastructure-building projects that would quickly lead to job creation. This occurred despite the fact that the construction sector has proven to be highly economically, socially, and ecologically unsustainable. It also has a masculine profile, since it employs 16% of men and only 1.9% of women.

During the first year of the crisis most of the 11 billion Euros injected into public employment went to infrastructure. Only 400 million were used for in-home support services. Moreover, this short-term funding had no target that set aside jobs for women.

In early 2010, the fiscal crisis led to a frantic race toward austerity. This led to enormous cutbacks in public social spending and a reduction in the salary of government employees. Since women are concentrated in education, social services and health, these “reforms” have had a big impact on us.

We have been the main victims of wage cuts and job elimination. We also suffer more severely as the social services are reduced. As these disappear, we are the ones who, through our invisible and altruistic work, end up carrying out this work without any compensation.

Beyond its disastrous effects on the working class in Spain, the recently approved Labor Reform erases bonuses for female hires. These have not been replaced by measures that could address the structural factors behind the discrimination we suffer in the labor market. In addition, the Reform keeps the employer incentives for part-time hiring, the main cause behind gender stratification in the job market.

The greater internal and geographical mobility that the Reform introduces also affects women disproportionately, since we are usually less flexible than men.

The Labor Reform does not include household service employees and therefore perpetuates the discrimination against an historically female labor activity, today primarily performed by foreign-born women. In addition, the freezing of pensions and the widening of the time period used to determine the amount, if approved, will again particularly affect women.

Due to our concentration in the informal economy and to the frequent interruption of our professional life for care-giving, women will face greater handicaps.

Conclusion

I do not aim to minimize the impact of the economic system and its crises on male workers or other popular sectors. Rather, my purpose has been to shed light on the fact that women continue to be second-class workers and citizens.

The current crisis perpetuates and strengthens our secondary presence and our specific exploitation in the job market, continually justified by our responsibility for the care of everyone surrounding us. The vicious cycle of patriarchal capitalism condemns us to our half-way entry into the labor market and our half-way exit out of the household, with both frozen processes permanently reinforcing each other.

The government response shows a lack of interest in transferring and reducing our vulnerability and subordination. The measures supposedly adopted to fight the crisis have been designed, debated and approved in order to strengthen the neoliberal obsession of zero-deficit budgets, but whatever gender and equal opportunities policies and programs existed have become its main victims. The recent suppression of the Ministry of Equality, the government's refusal to broaden parental leaves for fathers and the government's support to the European blockage on improving maternal leaves are only a few examples.

To expose and denounce the effects that the systemic crisis and the measures applied by its managers have on women does not mean we should look away from the totality of the working class. Rather, it constitutes an additional effort to achieve greater rigor and complexity in our everyday work to build a just society. This effort stems from a constant revision of our way of viewing, describing, and understanding the world. Perhaps it could also change our method of transforming it.

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