

DSA gender study group: Global crises and the impact on women.

A brief introduction to the papers presented, notes of which are on the website to showcase the research and analysis underpinning this study group discussion.

31st March 2009

This all day meeting brought together a cross section of academics, practitioners and activists to explore what the issues are for women around the current crises (especially the economic and food crises). Several questions are posed by these crises:

- who is setting the agenda and framework for understanding and analysing the impact on women;
- how good is the data we have for understanding the gender dimensions of these different crises;
- are women getting their voices and perspectives heard;
- are the policies gender sensitive (in any way at all)
- are development agencies and academics mainly responding to agendas set by global and corporate institutions or are they able to be proactive, raising the critical issues relating to gender inequality and women's rights in the both the policy and practical responses to the problems?

Deniz Kandyotti started the day by exploring in some detail what had happened to feminist analysis in the gender studies debates and tracked the loss of strong theory and a good political grasp of reality that has occurred during the last decades. Her analysis focused on deepening our understanding of what is happening to women and women's movements in an increasingly hegemonic global agenda, where aid agencies take external (and simplistic) solutions for women into highly complex and contested terrains. She explored women's issues in Afghanistan, showing how current policies are leading to very strange alliances and at times a betrayal of women's rights. Local women's movements are often ignored or plundered to staff new gender aid structures; women's voices and perspectives are rarely heard in an approach that imposes 'gender equality' solutions.

Her paper covered a wide range of issues in feminist theory and practice. The two papers that followed were from development practitioners who highlighted the serious lack of data and the reality that gender disaggregated statistics are still not collected after calling for this for over 30 years. Gender analysis is often seriously missing from policy documents. Little attention, for example, is paid to the gendered reality of food production and consumption (Pauline Wilson), leaving policy makers unaware of the different and complex gender dimensions of hunger. The implications of e.g. rising food prices for some producers, including women farmers, the lack of access to food by many food consumers especially women who have responsibility for nutrition and yet who lack power and income in the market place and within many households are largely not discussed. Yet food shortages and food insecurity directly impact on women's rights to food and gender equality issues. Nikki van der Gaag similarly grappled with the relative lack of data on and policy

interest in girls and alerted the group to the realities of e.g. rising infant mortality and the likely increase especially in female child mortality, given the preference to feed boys over girls, and the reality of girls being withdrawn from education due to growing poverty and their status as second class citizens in many countries. Many young women are economic migrants into the care economies of other countries or work in largely unprotected export zones and companies; they will be hard hit by the recession. Their vulnerability is well known and yet remains largely unaddressed in policy options for the current situation. However, the vicious cycles of poverty cannot be addressed without paying attention to girls' access to key resources such as food, education, adequate health care and she proposes a series of proposals for taking an agenda forward that will address girls' needs.

Diane Elson looked at approaches to understanding the economic crisis from a gender perspective and presented some clear ideas about how to collect better data and analyse the issues for women. Her presentation is based on long years of undertaking feminist economics and highlighting the kinds of effects economic policies and crises have on women around the world. She highlighted some other writers and thinkers of direct relevance to practitioners grappling with the economic crisis and the gender implications, and has written a clear ten point plan for thinking and acting more coherently around the gender issues within the macro-economy.

Ruth Pearson stood back to try and understand the causes of the crisis, tracing the roots back to e.g. the reality that wages in many contexts no longer cover the basic costs of reproduction, which have to be borne by the family unit. The globalisation processes that have led to the lowering of wages has forced households to try and manage the costs of e.g. housing, food, child rearing as best they can in the absence of a decent economic wage. Getting into debt to pay for domestic reproduction costs – for example those with bad debts in USA were overwhelmingly from the black and ethnic minority communities and many women headed households - has led to spiralling debt, one cause of the current 'credit crunch'. Understanding the processes of globalisation and their economic impact on the costs of production and reproduction enables a better understanding of where women are sited within the current crisis and why.

In all cases the analysis helps to think through more relevant and appropriate policy responses, something sorely lacking at present in the international policy arena, where gender remains largely unaddressed, or tagged on as an after thought. These papers together present some rich theory and a deeper analytical approach to these crises than is commonly heard.

Most of the papers are 'work in progress' designed to stimulate new thinking and a more proactive analysis. The feedback from one of the discussion groups pulls out key issues that were taken up by the participants and ends with a call for action. How to take this work forward is the next challenge for this study group.

Tina Wallace
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