

International Conference: The European Economic Crisis and its Consequences for Women, 20-21 March 2014, Sweden

Conference organised by the network Gender and Development in Practice (GADIP) and the University of Gothenburg

Keynote Speakers:

Lina Gálvez Muños: *From Crisis to Austericide: A Feminist Analysis*. Professor of Economic History and Institutions and Director of the Master's Programme on Gender and Equality at the Pablo de Olavide University. Seville, Spain.

Nieves Salobral Martín: *Subjetividades amorosas endeudadas/Indebted love related subjectivities under financial capitalism*. Grupo de deuda de Comisión de Feminismos Sol/Member of the Debt issues working group at the Feminist Commission of the movement 15-M. Madrid, Spain.

Popi Sourmaidou: *Everyday Experiences for Women in Greece*. Managing director at the Center for the Support of Employment and Entrepreneurship of Women (Ergani). Thessaloniki, Greece. Chairman of Winnet Europe.

Ulla Björnberg: *Women in the Nordic Model for Social and Family Policy: The Case of Sweden*. Professor emeritus at the Department of Sociology and Work Science. University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Wendy Harcourt: *The Economic Crisis and the Politics of Place*. Associate professor at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS). Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

Workshops:

Equality and the Economic Crisis: Moderators: Edmé Domínguez, Chairman of GADIP. School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Hauwa Mahdi, School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

The Role of Women in Crises and Conflict: Moderator: Ann-Cathrin Jarl, Internationella Kvinnoförbundet för Fred och Frihet (IKFF), the Swedish section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

Ways of Economic Empowerment: Moderator: Janan Zapata, Winnet Västra Götaland.

The report was elaborated by Linn Hultgren and Natalia Fernanda Múnera Parra, master's students at the School of Global Studies and revised by Ulla Björnberg, senior professor at the Department of Sociology and Work Science and Edmé Domínguez, associate professor at the School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg.

This report reflects the main ideas and discussions from the conference, trying to remain as loyal as possible to the speakers' ideas and arguments. It is organized into three sections. In the first part it presents specific cases that illustrate the current situation of the European crises. Later, arguments elaborated in the conference about the way the system works, which are vital to recover the capacity for action, are discussed. Finally, this report presents the strategies discussed to move out of the crisis and to modify the system.

Four main themes ran through the conference:

1. The current situation of the crisis in Europe and how it is affecting women
2. The impact of mainstream economic narratives of capitalism on individuals
3. Constructions of alternative discourses of the economic problems and strategies for creating alternative ways of coping
4. Strategies and challenges for mobilisation and organisation

The Economic Crisis: Gender and Social Consequences for Society

A common theme in the conference was an exploration of the detrimental impact of cuts to the welfare system and public services as a result of the austerity policies implemented in Europe to address the economic crisis. In particular, the cuts have affected the social infrastructure, education, health, childcare, and pensions. These cuts tend to affect women more than men for two principal reasons. First, because care-related work generally employs more women, cuts in these sectors tend to have a larger impact on their employment. Second, because in the patriarchal system women take responsibility over the (unpaid) reproductive sphere, their workloads increase as fewer care services are provided by the state. The speakers called attention to how the capitalist imaginary of economic growth and prosperity is a paradox that remains widely unquestioned, hindering the possibility of cohesion among the current social movements.

Sourmaidou illustrated the way the crisis has affected women using the case of Greece. The European country most affected by the crisis, unemployment has increased from 6,6% in 2008 to 27,7% today, income of employees has been reduced by 30%, and there has been a 100% increase in the number of people who cannot even cover the minimum living costs. According to Sourmaidou, gender equality has never been a priority in Greek politics, and this is even more the case during the current crisis. There is a sense of insecurity and fear for the future as previously stable jobs have become uncertain, a trend which is tied to an increase in the suicide rates among mothers. Moreover, as stated before, the burden of work for women has increased due to austerity policies. This has led to a new situation in Greece where many women have become the primary household bread-winners. Sourmaidou argued that this situation has changed the image of women's work as being secondary, and has encouraged men to take a larger share of the responsibilities at home. She also cited the creation of cooperatives and increased participation in solidarity movements that provide support within and across generations as positive signs. Sourmaidou said that Greece has a history of living through repression and war and that this

experience is proving to be valuable as the population has managed to survive the economic crisis for more than four years.

Gálvez Muños illustrated how the crisis has reinforced mechanisms of control over women in the Spanish society. She gave the example of the new law criminalizing abortion which tries to reinforce the control over women's bodies through coming back to the glorification of women as mothers. In addition, with the rise of unemployment, women have been encouraged to give jobs to men and stay at home to take care of the family. Gálvez Muños highlighted an increase of gender-based violence and an increasing justification among young women that this type of violence is a way of caring, such that the violence is seen increasingly as being socially acceptable. Unlike Greece, even if women continue working and men are unemployed the sexual division of labour within the household has not changed and women remain primarily responsible for reproductive work.

Björnberg presented challenges that have arisen to basic principles in social and family policy in Sweden. These principles are built on the assumption that all citizens have the right to economic independence, social security, and the provision of public subsidies that relieve families (generally women) from taking responsibility for the caring roles. However, in Sweden these policies have taken a neoliberal turn, driven by ideology more than by the economic crisis. This turn emphasises individual choice by transferring responsibility from the state to the individual. One example is the increased flexibility of labour leading to irregular work schedules, temporary contracts, and "work on-demand" situations which often also bring lower income. Since childcare facilities are adapted to standard work hours, single mothers are especially affected along with immigrants and young persons.

Another example is the privatization of elder care which has shifted the responsibility to provide quality care from the state to the individual who then becomes responsible for choosing care from several private companies. However, the lack of information about different service providers hinders the ability of to make informed choices. Moreover, as private companies strive for increased profits, care services that were previously part of the welfare system are now presented as 'extras' with additional costs. The purchase of care is not affordable for all households and

family members are increasingly expected to take more responsibilities in care provisions for elderly dependent parents. In addition, increasing levels of unemployment among young people, together with the limited availability of low-cost housing forces young people to depend economically on their parents, further increasing the burden of middle age couples who are simultaneously asked to care for their parents and their adult children. The restricted access to care services and the increased dependence of youth puts pressure on kinship as a form of social welfare, increasing the unpaid work load for women and deepening the inequalities between the households that can afford care services and support for their children and those that cannot.

Understanding the System to Move Out of the Crises

The cases shared by the speakers are embedded within the neoliberal capitalist narrative which shapes the understanding about how the contemporary economic system works for both elites and the general public. A common concern throughout the conference was the necessity of understanding how this system works because although it has created the crisis, it is societal overconsumption and debt that is blamed for the crisis within the political discourse. The speakers agreed that this collective sense of blame and guilt leads people to accept austerity policies despite their harshness. Therefore, in order to move forward from this paralyzing situation and begin to take action it is necessary to question both the system and the economic policies put into practice to solve the crisis.

Gálves Muños gave an overview of the way in which the financial system creates and promotes debt, inequality, and crisis. She showed how the debt crisis is not a new condition, but a moment that the political and economic elites have used to promote their interests. She explained that the economic system has shifted from one focused on full employment and empowered workers in the 1960's, to a system where financial capital has appropriated the power. This system was established globally, independent of national economies, during the 1970's oil crisis. Later, the fall of communism made capitalism seem inevitable as the only alternative to create economic growth and prosperity. Currently, the crisis has enabled the financial elite to make drastic cuts in welfare and employment, empowering the financial institutions and disempowering states and ordinary people. For example in the United States, 99% of recent growth has benefited only 1%

of the population. Moreover, Gálves Muños stated that nowadays the category of proletariat needs to be changed to one of *precariat* that illustrates the increasing precariousness of most working conditions due to the flexibilization of the labour market.

She argued that people accept the austerity measures because they are told that they are to blame for the crisis. The crisis is presented as being caused by both private and public overspending and the accumulation of debt—debt that now must be repaid. However, there is no empirical evidence that proves that debt stops economic growth and models that have been used to link debt to a lack of growth and have been shown to be wrong. Historically, no country has ever been able to pull itself out of a crisis through saving—all crises have been solved with lending and public spending. Moreover, it was the banks and financial elites who induced such indebtedness. In fact, a review of the Spanish economy prior to the crisis shows that public spending was below the European average. Comparing Spain to Sweden, which has been less affected by the economic crisis, only 10% of workers in Spain were publicly employed, compared with 25% in Sweden suggesting that maybe Spain was spending too little rather than too much. Additionally, even as it is said that high taxes cripple growth, a Spanish worker only pays 74% of what a Swedish worker pays in taxes and a Spanish company only 20% of their Swedish counterpart.

Salbora Martín illustrated how the image of romantic love further urges us to consume in pursuit of happiness and success. To Salbora, the notion of romantic love is built on two opposed and complementary identities—one that is entrepreneurial and active in the economic arena and the other that is caring and providing. Their success is measured in consumption, and as the anxiety to reach the ideal family motivates consumerism, more debt is incurred. This capitalist ideal is constantly supported in cultural presentations such as commercial films. More importantly, the image of the self-sufficient couple moves reproductive work from the public to the private, as being able to take care of your own children is a measure of success. This, in turn, makes invisible the reproductive work that is carried out predominantly by women.

Harcourt added to this by pointing out that financial capitalism is not a social perspective but a strictly economic perspective privileging only productive activities and the economy. From this perspective, the effects on women are discussed in order to include women in the official

economy and gain recognition for the unpaid reproductive work that women do. This can have two consequences: it portrays the women as more vulnerable and in need of protection, and by focusing on bringing women into the official economy contributes to the economic narrative of the productive subject and prevents us from finding alternative economies or ways of living.

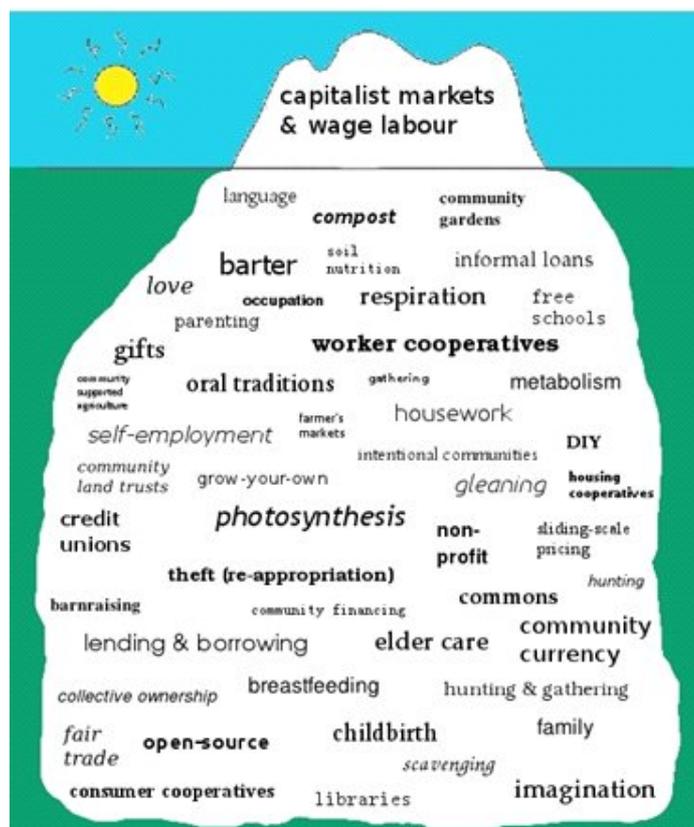
A common theme both in lectures and discussions is how the contemporary capitalist discourse is used to move blame and responsibility from the state to the individual. Not only are people told that they are to blame for the crisis but they are increasingly made responsible for matters that were previously the responsibility of the state. In Sweden for example, people are told that they can now freely choose which school or kindergarten they want their children to attend, which hospital they want to use, and how they want to save parts of their pensions. However, the responsibility for making wrong choices falls only in the individual. At the same time, difficulties in attaining relevant information make it (almost) impossible for the individual to evaluate the different options.

Another example, also from Sweden, is the current work discourse (*arbetslinjen*), promoted by the centre-right alliance currently in power. By lowering taxes for those who have a job it intends to give people a further incentive to work and consume. At the same time, unemployment benefits have been reduced. Not only does this increase the economic inequality between the employed and the unemployed, it suggests that the unemployed do not want to work and are therefore responsible for the situation that they are in. This is strengthened by the economic lens, as elaborated by Harcourt, through which we see and evaluate value, turning the unemployed and underemployed into the failed subjects of society. Harcourt exemplified this with the policy promoting self-entrepreneurship: it can work, but if it fails, the failure and blame falls only in the individual. This is especially problematic, as Gálvez Muñoz pointed out, because those working in the informal economy (and many self-employed people do) usually have even less of a social security net than those working in the formal economy. Harcourt also emphasized that maybe the biggest losers in this system are the older generations whose knowledge and experience is silenced as they are presented simply as an economic burden for their families and for society.

Strategies for Change

The politics of place

During the conference the speakers presented several strategies to spread knowledge and think outside the capitalist narrative. Harcourt proposed a politics of place, a concept she has explored with Arturo Escobar that is based on people's resistance at the micro-level. This enables an understanding of the financial system from below and, by starting from where people are, they are able to create viable alternatives based on the knowledge, experience, and capabilities of themselves and the people that surround them. In this way, the politics of place can create a counter-narrative and show that people are much more resilient than the capitalist narrative would have them believe. To illustrate the economy of real life, Harcourt uses the image of an iceberg. What is visible above the surface is the capitalist economy as the only existing alternative. However, when one looks beneath the surface there are multiple alternatives and strategies to sustain life.



To emphasise that there are possibilities within the crisis, Harcourt uses the example of Bolsena, a small village in Italy where people live with each other on the basis of what they are able to exchange. Similarly, as was discussed in the workshop on *Ways of Economic Empowerment*, there are specific initiatives in Spain where women have organized cooperatives using the social economy as a strategy to enact a feminist vindication whereby the economic sphere is placed in a secondary position and people and their satisfaction is prioritized. These are specific examples of economic empowerment, understood as the freedom to make choices about how one wants to live and work. The creation of cooperatives and collective ways of organising one's life is not always an action sprung from economic necessity or a lack of alternatives but it's a new style of life. These actions receive very little attention from the media. However, increasingly, people actively create the kind of life they want to live, growing (some of) their own food, consuming locally produced food when possible, sharing consumer goods, and recycling. Many of these actions come from the environmental movement and a growing realisation that consumerism is endangering our future survival and thus there is a pressing need to live sustainably, both environmentally and socially. Although none of the keynote speakers had a particular focus on the environmental movement they all agreed that it is of vital importance and a very good place to start in creating alternatives. After all, without the environment, we cannot survive.

Creativity and action

From a different perspective, but also aiming to find alternative solutions to the crisis, Salobral presented a workshop-based strategy developed within the Feminist Commission (started in 2012) of which she is a member. Here they developed creative strategies to talk about and reflect on the crisis as well as to change the perception of the participants about themselves as indebted subjects. This initiative aimed to analyse why, as they perceived it, the financial capitalist system was responsible for the crisis. The citizens were blaming themselves for the debt situation. Convinced that the economy should serve to sustain life and not act as a sphere separated from society, the commission decided to contribute to building a creative view of the debt.

When discussing the economic crisis and indebtedness the Feminist Commission uses several strategies and metaphors to visualise how the system works. One of the strategies used to reflect critically about the indebtedness process was to change the lyrics of a well-known *bolero* called

Si tú me dices ven. For instance, one of the phrases: *si tú me dices ven, lo dejo todo* (if you ask me to go, I leave everything) was transformed into *si tú me dices deuda, yo lo pierdo todo* (if you ask me to be in debt, I lose everything).

Another strategy was to use a shiny bow tie. The bow tie was proposed as a representation of male power within the liberal system since it is an accessory worn by bankers. However, the intention was to change its standard colours and instead use a shiny purple fabric in order to transform it into a symbol of beauty and femininity and thus make it into an object of desire that reflected the pressure of capitalism to consume. Consequently, the bow tie symbolises the cycle of indebtedness and consumption because it's an ornament, an object of status that dresses, but at the same time, like debts, strangles the neck of the consumer. This metaphor makes visible the theoretical framework that the Spanish feminist commissions use to approach debt. Here, the knot symbolizes the mechanisms of control that tie together the materialistic/economic side of the debt (investments, goods) on one side, and on the other the subjective dimension of it, which is the social constructions of the indebted subject. This metaphor addresses the debt trap. Using this kind of metaphor, people become conscious that they have been manipulated into seeking happiness through indebtedness and consumption and then into bearing part of the blame for this debt, and of this crisis. This encourages people to reflect over the whole system that has manipulated them instead of perceiving the debt as a personal failure. This reflection encourages mobilization because it neutralizes the feelings of guilt or victimization. Salobral also presented the metaphor of Pac-Man, the character of a computer game that no matter how much it consumes is never satisfied. The metaphor was used by the commission to talk about consumer-dependent subjectivities.

Using these kinds of symbols helps women to understand that they should not feel guilty for the debt situation. This, in turn, helps indebted subjects to overcome the fear and the feeling of failure that hinders the possibilities of resistance, activism, and the finding of creative alternatives.

Social Movements and Alliances

The issue of how to mobilize and the characteristics of contemporary mobilizations were discussed by both the keynote speakers and the participants during the presentations and the workshops. The general consensus was that mobilization today looks very different from what it looked like during the 1960's and 70's in Europe and in the 1980's in Nigeria and Mexico. The traditional strategies of mobilization included educational elements aimed at changing politics or the government with a clear discourse and leadership. Although these movements are still in force, new kinds of movements are taking place, especially among young people. These movements are often independent and spontaneous, motivated as responses to specific situations and organised through social media. They lack clear leadership, which makes them appear fragmented and without a clear goal.

The effectiveness of social media for organizing mobilizations and the reactive nature of them was illustrated by two examples from Sweden. In one case, hundreds of people mobilized using social media to protest outside a grocery store just hours after a racist action against a Romani woman by the shop manager. Another case was a national mobilization to protest against the beating of a feminist by members of a racist group during an International Women's Day demonstration in Malmö. The individuality within various mobilizations was illustrated by Salobral Martín with the example of demonstrations in Madrid in 2011. Under the motto "we are not against the system, the system is against us" they not only questioned the neoliberal economic system, but also representative democracy. Consequently, in these mobilizations all demonstrators claimed to represent themselves as a way to ask for a democracy that is not mediated through political parties or trade unions, but one that has effective channels of participation for all citizens. Salobral Martín said that although this mobilisation was the biggest (quantitatively and qualitatively) in many years in Madrid, the government refused to acknowledge its existence or take its concerns into consideration. Gálvez Muñoz added that in Spain the successful mobilizations have been those focusing on particular issues such as demonstrations of people that lost their houses.

Adding to this discussion, Gálvez Muñoz stressed the need for people to become "more political" by voting and mobilizing in the streets in order to reverse the trend of declining interest in

elections observed in both Spain and Greece. Nevertheless, as Sourmaidou stated, there is still hope. In Thessaloniki, a referendum on the privatization of the water will soon take place. This is important as it marks the first time that the government has asked for public opinion on a decision and also the first time that different organizations from both civil society and academia have acted together.

Reflecting on the heterogeneity of the current social movements, Harcourt argued that power is accessible and present in everyday activities. She proposed to start a transformation away from the messiness present in the disconnect between the various small movements and towards taking advantage of their common although ambivalent critique of capitalism. She explains that this ambivalence is generated by the lure of the capitalist system. On the one hand people see capitalism failing as it creates inequalities and destroys the environment. On the other hand, they see it promising individual fulfilment and happiness. This generates a fluctuation between being part of the system, trying to 'fix' it, and trying to create alternatives to it.

To sum up this discussion, there was a consensus in the final panel that these heterogeneous movements have more common than divergent elements. As a consequence Harcourt stressed the need for more investigation into the imaginary of the people participating in these movements. Although the mobilizations are often responses to single issues, the problems and injustices are related to a neoliberal structure. However there remains the problem of constructing alliances.

Concerning the difficulty of developing alliances, Harcourt stressed the importance of changing the prejudice against dialogue with political and economic elites. Instead she proposed the importance of forming strategic alliances with feminist women who occupy decision-making positions in order to have access to the media and other power spaces. Likewise, Jarl identified academics, politicians, and activists as key actors for the creation of alliances. Gálvez Muñoz agreed with the relevance of being present in every place "where power decides our future". Harcourt included the economic business schools as another strategic entry point, since they shape the mainstream discourse about the crisis and the strategies to address it.

Within the discussion of the challenges that intersectionality poses, Salobral Martín reflected on the need to define what is understood by alliances and on the difficulty to establish strategic networks. She referred, to the dilemmas of networking with political parties that claim to sympathize with feminism yet may still engage in corrupt practices or promote agendas that contradict their interests, such as supporting the criminalization of abortion or ignoring LGBTQ issues. These difficulties make clear the diversity within the feminist movement and the need to adopt an intersectional approach when establishing these alliances. Therefore, despite these difficulties, Salobral Martín stated that this heterogeneity needs to be emphasised consciously and constantly, and that the alliances should not try to homogenize the feminist movements. Moreover, Harcourt and Gálvez Muñoz agreed that feminism as well as gender needs to be addressed as a transversal category.

In the same line of argument, and highlighting the relevance of intersectionality as a tool for making identities that have not been taken into consideration visible, Harcourt stated that the feminist movement has not dealt in an adequate way with such identities as queer, homosexuals, the youth and the old and many others because many feminists have felt that such recognition and inclusion can hamper feminist struggles. However, the avoidance of such recognition has practical implications. Harcourt gave two examples to illustrate this. First is the absence of women and young people within the labour movement, as they are not perceived to be part of the classic category of workers and labour. This situation was discussed again during the workshop "Economic Crisis and Equality". The participants problematized the lack of labour oriented organisations for the unemployed and the need to include unemployed and flexible workers. The second example that illustrated the importance of considering identity politics is the case of Bolsena, where old people are not really included within existing strategies to escape from the crisis. Harcourt indicated that feminism needs to talk about the generational tensions in a context where living longer has become a social burden rather than a reason for joy. She stated that it is necessary to include the intersectional approach as we try to move towards social change as well as to bring in feminist experiences from Asia, for example, where age is given a different value.

Finally, the discussion within the workshop "The Role of Women in Crises and Conflict" stressed the need to form alliances and define a clear goal of mobilization despite the fragmented and

heterogeneous nature of the movements and the multiple spaces for action. Ann-Cathrin Jarl used the organization WILPF as an example. Founded as part of the women's movement, its quest for peace, justice and freedom motivated her to join the league. Jarl referred to the non-implementation of existing policies due to a lack of cooperation as an example that illustrates the need to organize. She quoted important ethical and legal documents such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (that calls for the equal participation of women and the adoption of a gender perspective in the peace and security efforts of the member states) that despite being agreed upon, are not being implemented. She also called attention to the need to prioritize which problems to address and stated that if the priority is peace, then the main enemy is the defence industry. She says that every year the global community spends 1400 billion dollars on war and defence, demonstrating that the origins of the crisis are not a scarcity of money, but on how it gets spent. Ironically, the biggest exporters of weapons are the members of the UN Security Council, who have a vested interest in promoting weaponry. Consequently, as a strategy to increase arms consumption, the imaginary of insecurity has been spread together with the promise of safety through armament. Paradoxically, the over-consumption and fast replacement of weapons has increased their availability in the illegal markets, such that there are more deaths in the United States from arms than from car accidents.

The conference concluded that much more work is necessary in order to understand better the problems women are facing as a consequence of this crisis. However, there are new experiences and new alternatives that have to be explored and made known if we are to continue to construct any kind of resistance that can confront the gendered consequences of this crisis and the policies that sustain them.

We sincerely hope that this report serves as a tool for work and as inspiration for further discussion to the participants and contributors of the conference as well as for the activists, academics and people who could not attend the event. Last but not least, we profoundly wish that these spaces for debate and reflection where activists and academics meet to exchange and build knowledge becomes a constant initiative in this and other issues of vital relevance.