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Gender and Social Policy in a Global Context: Uncovering the Gendered Structure of "the social"

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Abstract

This paper explores the interface between gender and social policy in three key, inter-related arenas: the changing nature of labour markets; the institutional basis for social policy formulation (families, communities, markets and states); and the nature of political contestation around social policy. The first section sets out the gendered nature of economic transformations in the late twentieth century, drawing out the implications for gender equality of shifts in the nature of labour markets (especially of both feminization and casualization of labour) and the relationships between paid and unpaid work. The changes in the structure of labour markets are then linked to the discussion of the impacts of social sector restructuring. The second section explores the institutional basis for social policy formulation, examining more closely the assumptions about gender roles and entitlements, especially in the key institutions of family and community and how they interface with the state. The relationship between political democratization and the development of gender equitable social policy is then examined.

Resumen

Género y política social en un contexto mundial : discubriendo la estructura que tiene en cuenta las consideraciones de género de "lo social"

En el siguiente documento se analiza la relación entre el género y la política social en tres ámbitos claves interconectados: la naturaleza cambiante de los mercados laborales, las bases institucionales de la formulación de la política social (familias, comunidades, mercados y estados) y la naturaleza de la controversia política en torno a la política social. En la primera sección se exponen las transformaciones económicas basadas en una perspectiva de género a finales del siglo XX, y se describen las implicaciones que para la igualdad de género han tenido los cambios en la naturaleza de los mercados laborales (en especial tanto la feminización como la "informalización" de la fuerza laboral) y las relaciones entre el trabajo remunerado y el no remunerado. Seguidamente se enlaza la cuestión de los cambios en la estructura de los mercados laborales con el debate sobre las repercusiones de la reestructuración del sector social. En la segunda sección se examinan las bases institucionales para la formulación de la política social, y se exploran con mayor detenimiento los supuestos sobre el papel asignado al género y los derechos, sobre todo en las instituciones clave como la familia y la comunidad, y como interactúan con el Estado. Finalmente, se aborda la relación entre la democratización política y el desarrollo de una política social equitativa desde el punto de vista del género.

Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a renewed interest in social policies, and some governments have increased social spending to soften the impacts of economic reform. These changes have come in the wake of widespread realization of the failure of the neoliberal economic model to generate economic growth and dynamism, and to reduce poverty. Meanwhile, processes of political liberalization have opened spaces for social movements in many parts of the world to articulate demands for more inclusive social policies to mitigate the effects of market failures and reduce inequalities. However despite the movement away from the standard neoliberal approach of the 1980s, and the increasing recognition given to "institutions" and the state, there is little agreement on a number of critical issues, including the scope of

social policy and the values underpinning it, as well as the role of the state as regulator and provider.

A gender perspective on social policies in the South, as in the North until quite recently, has remained on the margins of these debates. From their different regional perspectives, the chapters in the volume map out the complex ways in which social policies are always filtered through social institutions—families and communities; markets; the care economy; health and education systems; the public sector—that are "bearers of gender". Three important sets of findings emerge from the analysis, with a direct bearing on the design of social policies.

Paid work, unpaid work, and social sector restructuring

Despite the claims to universalism, welfare systems, and in particular social protection programmes, have tended to be stratified rather than inclusive, bringing into their fold only some privileged segments of the workforce (such as the military, state functionaries, and "core" industrial workers). Much of the rural sector as well as the large numbers working in the urban informal sector and in domestic service (a major employer of women) have been left out. Normative assumptions about men's and women's roles (as "breadwinners" and "mothers/carers" respectively) have been surprisingly universal and enduring, even where many women engaged in paid work, sometimes continuously throughout their lives. Yet it would be wrong to assume that women were absent from state social provisioning and protection altogether. Not only did women make up a significant proportion of social security beneficiaries as wives and daughters of male workers, they were also direct beneficiaries of some public services (health, education) as well as being targets of so-called maternalist programmes aimed at mothers and their children

The small size of the formal economy in most developing countries meant that job security and work-related benefits remained privileges available to a relatively thin stratum of workers, predominantly men. While these benefits could have been extended gradually to other sectors of the population by specification of new eligibility criteria (underpinned by political coalitions), since the early 1980s there has been a global trend in the opposite direction. Paid work is becoming increasingly informal and casual; workers are either losing their work-related social benefits or will never be able to obtain jobs that will give them such benefits. Existing data show that the informal economy tends to be a larger source of employment for women than for men in most countries, and that women informal workers tend to be over-represented in the more precarious and less remunerative segments of informal work.

Processes of labour informalization and casualization—which have coincided with women's increasing presence in the workforce—have been largely driven by corporate interests, increasingly unhindered in their search for "appropriate" forms of labour, and no longer forced to take responsibility for the social wage.

If work-related social protection mechanisms are inherently masculinist (because of the gendered construction of paid work), are women faring any better with respect to public services and transfer payments that are supposedly citizenship-based? Social sector reforms (health, education, pensions) in many countries have, among other things, entrenched the commercialisation of public services through the imposition of

"user fees" and other charges (e.g. in health), entrenched the role of private-for-profit providers, and shifted some of the unmet need for welfare onto families (re-familialization).

A common policy response to the exclusionary effects of "user fees" has been the promotion of mutual health insurance and social health insurance (SHI) schemes. Enrolment in the latter is very often employment based. In low income countries some women may be covered in SHI as dependants of employed men, but as income earners, women are less likely than men to be in formal sector employment, and if formally employed tend to be concentrated in low status poorly paid occupations or lower level positions. Furthermore, the individualistic design of SHI in countries undergoing health sector reform (e.g. in China), based on individualized accounts with little scope for cross-subsidies, is likely to entrench gender differences in benefits given the structural inequalities between women and men (women's lower wages, fewer years of employment, lower retirement age, and higher life expectancy).

In the education sector, while progress in girls' access to primary education has been impressive (though geographically uneven), the logic of "targeting" which has been promulgated at the international level, has prioritised primary education, with some unforeseen implications. Public social expenditure has in some contexts been re-allocated from higher education to primary education, ignoring the systematic inter-connections between different parts of the education system, and allowing an expanding role for commercial provision at the secondary level. This raises questions about affordability and access for both girls and boys from lower-income households, and particular problems for girls in cultural contexts where parents prioritise sons' education (e.g. India). This is unfortunate given the fact that many of the benefits that girls reap from education (access to employment, contraception) materialize at the post-primary level.

The resurgence of interest in "productivist" or "developmental" social policy (or the "active labour" agenda in the EU context) seem to be partly driven by long-standing anxieties about the disincentives that welfare "handouts" can create for work effort. While it is of utmost importance for public policy to create economic dynamism and employment (though, decent employment), a problematic side to the "productivist" logic (and the "active labour" agenda) is the way in which it undervalues and de-legitimises unpaid forms of work (especially unpaid forms of care work) which are essential for human welfare and economic growth. Transfer payments tend to take on a Cinderella-like status for finance authorities, especially when they compensate women for their unpaid care work. This has been the fate of family benefits in several countries undergoing "transition" (e.g. Poland, the Czech Republic) and reform. There needs to be a place for cash transfers and non-contributory income supports (such as child allowances, family benefits, and social pensions)—resisting the notion that these are "handouts" for passive clients and highlighting the multiple ways in which they can enhance welfare and security and at times even kick-start some forms of local economic development.

States versus markets? Families, households and communities

Existing welfare state models are based on culturally and historically specific conceptions of the divisions between public and private (and in particular on

relatively secularised public sectors), of the nuclear nature of the family, and of fairly differentiated institutional spaces occupies by the care economy and paid work. The debates on "decommodification" and "defamilialization" are thus difficult to apply in contexts where families and social networks (e.g. extended families, religious networks) remain important social and economic reservoirs. This kind of social embeddedness is not only a primary source of identity for many; it also structures women's (and men's) economic entitlements by offering them some access to resources, housing, childcare and social security.

Yet it is also clear that a) informal social institutions are not always bearers of equality and justice, whether along gender or ethnic/race lines, and b) nor do they operate as a "separate sphere" in the way liberal theorists have suggested. Indeed contemporary state reforms in many contexts have carried enormous implications for what is expected of families. They show how "the familial" can be deployed and naturalized to assist states' reform of, and sometimes retreat from, social life. The care burden imposed by the HIV/AIDS epidemic has exposed in a dramatic way the inadequacy of the assumptions about the unlimited coping capacities of "families" and "communities", and the ways in which state withdrawal can entrench gender inequalities.

Democratization, state capacity, and women's voice

Even with the recognition of the need for a more activist state in global lending institutions and the provision of more comprehensive social protection, in many developing countries the impetus to provide social protection was externally set, as part of the conditionalities of debt relief. The combination of this factor with the weak tax base and small middle class in very poor countries had the effect of removing social policy from the arena of national politics. These factors have consequences for the quality and financial sustainability of social programmes. However, they also impact on the process of building a social value consensus and on the political sustainability of social programmes. Building programmes that provide protections beyond the "poorest of the poor" becomes more difficult in the face of the combination of residualism promoted from above by global lending institutions and populist arguments that employed workers represent a "labour aristocracy".

In some "transition" countries pursuing a rapid reform path (e.g. Poland), there has been a wholesale dismantling of the welfare benefits system that had existed under state socialism. The resulting residual, familial model, apparently gender-neutral, downscaled "costly" benefits and services that supported women's dual role as worker and mother. The absence of strong, local feminist lobbies or allies in political parties allowed the adoption of a residualist welfare model that seriously undermined women's social rights.

A different dynamic was at play in East Asian developmental states (e.g. Korea), where the process of democratization was more successfully pushed by local actors, and with clear consequences for the expansion of social protection. The male bias in these systems only softened as a consequence of demographic shifts – declining birth rates and an ageing population – that in turn became the touchstone for political competition. These demographic changes, together with broader social changes (increasing employment rates of women, especially married women), facilitated the

erosion of traditional living arrangements. These social trends created a tension between caring needs on the one hand (of children and the elderly) and the availability of women to provide unpaid care on the other. Together these factors resulted in shifts in social policies, and an expansion of social care. All of this was facilitated by political regime shifts, the extent to which social policy became an electoral issue and increasing numbers of women in political office.

Similar processes of democratization in South Africa have not had the same effects on the social welfare system. There, the potential redistributive effects of regime shift and expansion of women's access to political office were mitigated by a dominant party system in which social policy did not become part of electoral contestation, and by a labour market characterized by high levels of unemployment rather than labour shortages.

The infrastructural capacity of the state impacts heavily on its ability to implement developmental programmes. In weakly developed states social groups and individual citizens may disengage from making demands on the state, instead entrenching informal, traditionally based systems of governance and resource allocation that may be hostile to arguments for gender equity. Women clearly have an interest in a responsive and accountable state, but one that is responsive to their particular needs. As several chapters argue, there are gender-specific capacity failures in all public institutions targeted for reform. As the Latin American and East Asian chapters suggest, competent public bureaucracies that are at least internally accountable can be made responsive to the needs of women. In these regions states appear to be more able to act on political agreements struck between political parties and other actors. East Asian states inherited highly evolved bureaucracies. In these contexts, the development of gender-equitable social policies was dependent far more on winning political support and social consensus over the direction of social policy than on state capacity to absorb women's demands.