
Women's status in the new economic order

by Xanthi Petrinioti*

Summary

It has been held by most feminists that economic independence promotes women's equality since it allows women to make choices in their personal lives. For this reason the dismantling of legal and institutional obstacles barring women from achieving economic equality has been one of the main goals of the modern feminist movement.

Among such barriers one must include legal constraints on the access to occupations, pay inequality, fewer opportunities for education and training, discrimination in promotions and unequal treatment by the social security, credit and other economic institutions.

After several years of lobbying and public pressure many governments have legislated changes in the legal and institutional framework but it soon became evident that equality in law and real equality of opportunity were not synonymous.

It seems, therefore necessary to pause and consider how women's status is evolving especially in the new economic order: the economic recession affecting most western economies, the difficult transition to market economies of the former socialist countries and the widening gap between north and south.

This paper deals with this emerging "order".

1. The first issue is the consequence of the economic slowdown on employment—both on the number of jobs being created and the type of jobs—. The major concern here is regarding women's share of these jobs as income from employment is a major source of income.

If the trends in Europe, and specifically in the European Community countries, are any indication women fare well. Two thirds, or about six million jobs, out of a total of nine million created in the period 1985-90 went to women. This trend is paralleled in other western advanced economies as services are the

growth sector in terms of employment and one in which women are favoured.

However, it should be borne in mind that approximately one third of the above-mentioned jobs captured by women were part-time. This in addition to the fact that women have the largest share of such informal jobs as non-paid helpers in the family business, workers at home and temporary workers temper the optimism borne out of the respectable share in employment creation in the formal labour market.

2. The picture of employment is incomplete without knowledge of the trends in the unemployment rate. It seems that the higher rate of unemployment among women is a permanent feature in the majority of western economies. Women also tend to display higher rates of long-term unemployment.

As the unemployed grow, in absolute numbers they apply greater pressure on unemployment insurance schemes and thus on the beneficiary ratio and on the income replacement ratio. The financial position of the unemployed may become precarious especially if the unemployed happen to be divorced or separated women supporting a family.

3. A third issue is the economic fate of women in the former socialist countries attempting the difficult transition to pluralist democracies and market economies. The transition includes shutdown of state enterprises which despite economic inefficiencies did offer job security, maternity protection and family allowances which were intended to encourage women's participation in the labour force. As the state-run sector slowly shrinks and the private one expands, unemployment is becoming a grave problem but interestingly enough women's unemployment is growing at a faster pace and private employers seem reluctant to employ women while at the

same time weak credit and financial institutions and an underdeveloped business environment make self-employment an unlikely option.

While the employment situation of women in these countries is worsening, the social safety net is weakening as government budgets are facing deficits, making the economic outlook of women especially bleak.

4. A fourth issue for women, arising mainly out of the gap in living standards between north and south, is the huge wave of migrations. The U.N. High Commission for refugees estimated that there were about 15 million refugees throughout the world. In only one year—1989—it is estimated that 1,3 million East Europeans crossed the border of western Europe. One interesting feature of modern migrations is that women make up a sizeable share of refugees and migrants.

In the previous migration waves to the traditional receiving countries such as the U.S., Canada, Australia and West Europe, prime age males immigrated to seek work in industry while the women followed later with family re-unification.

In the men migration wave women are migrating to seek jobs in the service sector. But as one may well surmise, the jobs that these immigrant women get are menial, underpaid and insecure and they themselves are subject to all sorts of exploitation.

As the twentieth century draws to a finish the planet seems more fragmented than ever ethnically, politically, economically making the prospects for the status of women uncertain.

* Xanthi Petrinioti is Associate Professor of Economics, Panteion University