

# 'Gender and Employment in Times of Economic Crisis'

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## Introduction

The global economic crisis that started in the USA financial markets in 2008, has now spread its consequences around the world, affecting not only the banking systems but also the fiscal policies of many developed nations. That happened because the policymakers and governments are required to address two major problems. The first is the dramatic decline in aggregate demand, leading to extensive destruction of jobs and livelihoods. The second is the problem of a credit freeze, which has led to a virtual halt in lending for investment and consumption. The sharp drop in spending by businesses and households has led to massive layoffs, which have further exacerbated the crisis, highlighted the gender dimensions of these demand-side problems.

Although in most economies (developed and developing), job losses initially hurt more men than women (since the former are employed in construction and durable goods manufacturing industries that have been hardest hit by the sharp drop in demand), the medium- and long-term effects of the current crisis seem to bear a traditionally 'gendered' dimension.

Women, who were already in disadvantaged positions in the labour market prior to the economic crisis, have globally suffered less in terms of the number of job losses, but in some cases disproportionately more than men.

The global economic crisis has increased the vulnerability of the working poor and caused job losses of millions of workers, in particular, poor working women who have been engaged in export-oriented labour-intensive manufacturing, export-oriented agriculture, and in family businesses (Otoabe, 2011). This is something that needs to be assessed in combination with the pervasiveness of the idea that –despite of decades of feminist awareness and gender-mainstreaming policies— work outside the home is less important to women than men (Oakley, 1974; Edgell, 2006). Thus, it seems that in times of financial hardship, fiscal austerity and general retreat of the Welfare State, women are, much more likely than men, the one who are expected to resume their traditional role of the 'homemaker'.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, female joblessness can be expected to rise disproportionately as public sector budget cuts are made, since women workers in the public sector are concentrated in education, health, and social services (European Parliament, 2011; TUC, 2009).

In the private sector, it has been widely documented that most of the employment performed by women is characterized as 'non-standard paid work', 'informal paid work' and 'unpaid work'. The first one refers to the engagement of women in various precarious forms of work that are characterized by 'flexibility', 'temporality', 'insecurity' and lower levels of pay (Beck, 2000; Castells, 2000): *part-time work, self-employment, temporary and seasonal work, on-demand work, fixed-term work* etc. These types of

employment have expanded along with contemporary structural configurations of Capitalism (e.g. globalization of trade for goods and services, adoption of 'just-in-time' methods of production in order to respond to fluctuations in demand and consumer habits for certain products), and their 'female' identity is today indisputable (Edgell, 2006, chapter 8-9). Although some writers argued that non-standard forms of work are increasing and indeed they are unavoidable to contemporary 'postindustrial' or 'network' societies (Piore & Sabel, 1984; Rifkin, 1995; Beck, 2000; Castells, 2000), accumulated evidence shows that the expansion of these forms of employment involves 'a deterioration in the quality of jobs, particularly in terms of security, but also in pay, prospects and fringe benefits' (Edgell, 2006: 151).

The same holds for the second form of employment, that is 'informal paid work' and 'unpaid work'. The first term refers to unofficial and undocumented forms of work, which may also be described as belonging to the 'hidden economy' or the 'black market'. This is a characteristic mostly of the developing countries –with low productivity levels, weak state structures and labour-market monitoring mechanisms and more traditional values concerning the functioning of the markets— although it seems that it has not a marginal phenomenon in the developed ones as well (Beck, 2000; Castells, 2000; Williams and Round, 2008), something that might be exacerbated during the current financial and fiscal hardship spreading across the developed countries. As various studies documented, workers in the informal economy, where women are often over-represented in many countries, have also been negatively affected by the global economic downturn, since demand for manufacturing and agricultural products has been declined dramatically, affecting that way any employment opportunities for low-cost, labour-intensive industries (Otoabe, 2011).

Unpaid work is also mainly a 'female' feature, since –apart from voluntary work in various NGOs— this form of work is associated with, either the housework, where the division of labour is still unequal in favour of men, or the work offered in a family business. For the latter, it must be said that in times of shrinking domestic and foreign demand for goods (manufacturing and agricultural) and services, small family business – administered or invariably supported by women- 'have little or less access to financial resources', and 'are particularly vulnerable to downturns' (Otoabe, 2011:2). Women tend to receive lower wages and salaries even in job posts with high levels of security, promotion opportunities and attractive remuneration packages (Lyberaki in this issue). This is true –surprisingly so— for women in science and academia as well. For example, a recent study by the European Commission and the 'Helsinki Group on Women and Science' showed that women's academic and research career remains markedly characterised by strong vertical (position in the hierarchy) and horizontal (field of study and specialisation) segregation, and that the overall gender pay gap covering the entire economy stood at 25% in the EU-27 in 2006, a slight improvement from 2002 when it stood at 26% (European Commission, 2009).

So what are the prospects of female employment in the midst of the current financial – and subsequently, generally economic, political, ideological and cultural— crisis? Has there been precedence in the working situation of women? Have there been trends that

are simply perpetuated and reinforced by the current crisis, or are there unique characteristics in the labour market today that denote a different course (for better or worse) in the future? Are all women in the same situation, or there are differences across *economic sectors, occupational statuses, levels of education, positions within the organizational hierarchy and/or forms of employment (full- or parttime, formal or informal etc.)*? Are there any differences across countries, and if yes, to what extent do country-specific characteristics of the labour market might provide differentiated responses at policy-making level?

The present issue deals with some of the above aspects of female employment *before* and *during* the current economic crisis. Its focus will be Greece, a country that has been particularly hit by the collapse of the global financial markets, found insurmountable difficulties in servicing its sovereign debt and finally resorted to two rounds of bailout, by the European Union, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (the so-called 'Troika') in the last two years. The fiscal discipline, for example, imposed by the 'Troika' in May 2010, in exchange for the €110 billion rescue package, meant –among other things— slashing pay in the public sector, raising taxes and starting to 'reform' the labour market by decreasing the minimum wage, making lay offs easier, undermining collective bargain etc. That caused a spiralling recession, with a drop in GDP of more than 5% in 2010 and almost 7% in 2011, a public deficit reaching 9% in 2011 (official estimates) and an (official) unemployment rate skyrocketing to more than 20% in the end of 2011, from less than 9% in the end of 2009. According to official data (the unofficial estimates are much worse), in the fourth quarter of 2011, female unemployment stood at a 24.5% rate compared to a 20% of the whole active population (HAS, 2011), while recent estimates put the corresponding figures at 26% and 23% respectively (Lyberaki in this issue).

Greece being the focus does not mean that there will be exclusive references to the Greek case only. For example, **Antigone Lyberaki** attempts a comparative evaluation of female employment across Europe, and investigates –providing the most recent data sources— how financial and economic crises can have a direct adverse impact on labour market indicators (unemployment, participation rates, types of jobs and working conditions), poverty (financial deprivation) and social services. By reviewing certain prevailing theories on women's position in the labour market and by showing recent statistics on quantitative and qualitative aspects of labourmarket participation, she puts in perspective parallel developments at European-wide level, concerning the situation of female vs male employment patterns. By turning her focus on the labour-market situation in Greece in the last two years, she identifies handicaps that affect both genders, such as the evident disadvantage of *younger generations* or *immigrants* and *foreign-born workers*. Nevertheless, by highlighting the gendered division of work inside the family, the role of women in the 'informal' economy –or in economic activities on the fringes of the 'formal' economy— and the disintegration of the formal social protection system as a result of the severe public finance constraints, she argues that '[C]uts in social expenditure, shrinking incomes [...] and unchanged policy priorities may soon lead to a dead end: this conundrum may well be resolved by reverting to calling on a

more traditional gender division of labour, at the expense of women. The progress of the past 30 years may be under serious threat’.

By placing more importance to women’s rights today, **Maria Gasouka** raises issues concerning the serious threat that the current crisis and the corresponding fiscal austerity poses for the comprehensive ‘Strategic Framework on Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities’, which was initiated in 2001 by the European Union. More specifically, she argues that, under the current prevalent macro-economic policies in the EU, two main policy instruments for gender equality will be undermined: 1) the ‘positive discrimination’ measures, namely measures aimed at providing to a social group and/or gender preferential treatment, in order to prevent and eliminate discrimination, and 2) the ‘gender mainstreaming’ policy framework, i.e. the diffusion of equality to all social fields (economic planning, labour-market regulation, political representation, family planning, educational provision etc.). By focusing more on the Greek case, she stresses the adverse effects that the expansion of precarious forms of employment might have on the quality of work, as liberating human activity, as well as on the social relations between sexes, with phenomena that previous European strategies tried to eliminate (e.g. domestic violence) being on the increase. She also concludes that ‘under conditions of increasing insecurity, the implementation of gender quality at work is pushed in the margin and the reconciliation between work and family life seems unrealistic, as there are no more jobs’.

**Dionysios Gouviás** and **Eleftherios Michail**, carried out a field-work dealing with female ‘flexible’ employment before the crisis broke out. Initially, they critically examine the ascendancy of flexible-employment policies across Europe. After giving a brief picture of recent trends in dominant macro-economic policies in the European Union – especially inside the Euro Zone— and how these are connected to a deterioration of unemployment across the whole continent, they describe the current situation in the Greek labor market, especially as far as new ‘flexible’ forms of employment are concerned, which have been promoted by the first *Memorandum of Understanding* (May 2010) agreed between the Greek government and the ‘Troika’, as part of the financial assistance provided by the latter after the sovereign-debt crisis of the country had broken out in the late 2009. Their aim is not to evaluate the effects of the new labourmarket rules under implementation, or their future effects on employment of both men and women, but rather to highlight patterns of employment that had already existed in the Greek labour market and, most of all, legislation that has already been introduced in Greece in the last decade or so; legislation that has clearly promoted more ‘flexibility’ in a purportedly ‘rigid’ labour market. They examine in general terms the various training programmes and subsidised placement schemes for *unemployed women* implemented in the last few years, usually funded by EU money (mainly through the European Social Fund). Moreover, they specifically focus on a case-study concerning the experiences of unemployed women in the island of Rhodes (Greece) who took part in subsidised placement schemes and got part-time jobs. The participating women were interviewed through face-to-face meetings and were asked –among other things— to evaluate their experiences from the programme and express their views on the type of employment they would prefer if they had choice. The findings of the study raise important issues

concerning strategies for the promotion of the so-called 'flexicurity' in the labour market, especially in the light of the recent economic crisis and the 'labour-reform' measures taken at national (Greece) and international level (European Union).

**Ilias Efthymiou, Chryssi Vitsikakis and Dimitrios Gakis** focus on the female participation in the Greek ICT industry, which is supposedly more 'modern' than other working environments, and one would expect better working conditions, promotion paths and remuneration packages for women. They state that they aim to 'investigate the existence of genderbased *horizontal* and *vertical* division of work and in particular the extent of the 'glass-ceiling phenomenon'. The paper represents a case-study that deals with the issue of female under-representation in one of the ICT sector's leading companies in Greece. The paper initially examines the company's personnel data, in an attempt to compare men and women employees according to some critical variables, such as *age, educational level, years of experience, kind of work, administrative duties, level in the company's administration hierarchy, etc.* Within the same context, the company's human resource and professional development policy is investigated with the aim to examine whether there exist any gendered approaches and/or regulatory norms. Furthermore, by means of a qualitative empirical approach, the factors that affect women's prospects to occupy administrative positions are examined. The sample consisted of employees who participated in the process of selecting the company's administrative staff, at *low, middle and high level of management*. The results support the hypothesis that there exists gendered bias in the company. Lastly, certain policy proposals at *social* and *organizational* level are suggested, which –according to the authors— could 'strengthen women's position in the ICT industry as well as in the society in general'.

**Eleni Sianou-Kyrgiou** studies *gender inequalities* in the transition from university to the labour market. By utilising official statistics, on the one hand, and data from an on-going qualitative research (carried out with students who are about to complete their undergraduate studies), she explores how the two genders make their plans for the transition to the labour market in a time of crisis, and how the *gender* dimension is also linked to *social class* as well. Based on the findings of her research, she reaches the conclusion that there is a relationship between gender and graduates' transition to the labour market. She argues that participation of women in higher education is higher than men, but inequalities and discrimination in the labour market are maintained, since women are more frequently affected by unemployment and social exclusion. She stresses the fact –emerging from her data— that female students prefer the traditional 'female' occupations, obviously taking into account the possible conflicts between family 'obligations' and professional mobility, and she concludes that, as the labour market becomes more competitive, the position of the women, who face forms of professional and social exclusion, becomes disadvantaged as well.

**Jan Currie** provides an international perspective on gender inequalities in the academia, by attempting a comparative examination of 'Gender Pay Equity Reviews' in Australian and Swedish Universities. Using a case-study of four universities (two in Australia and two in Sweden), she tries to explore the strategies that universities in

those two countries use to reduce gender inequities, in times of unprecedented financial hardship in Higher Education around the globe. Firstly, she presents an overview of the respective national legislation and policies on gender equality. Secondly, she discusses the model used for the analysis and how the data were gathered for the study. Thirdly, she describes case studies in four universities before turning to a discussion of the political processes of implementing gender equity programs in these universities. Lastly, she discusses the concept of changing gender regimes and the constant struggle against what Thornton (2008) described in Australian universities as 'gender fatigue', which feminist activists must confront. Although different in many perspectives (e.g. Sweden's legislation requires mandatory pay analyses and wage remediation, whereas Australia has voluntary pay equity audits with no wage remediation) both countries –and academic systems of course– seem to 'proceed down this neoliberal path', as she argues at some point. She explains that, whether 'in Australian universities individual pay negotiations are commonplace and men appear to be gaining higher salaries from these negotiations', in Sweden too universities decide to use individual contracts, something that is likely to 'disadvantage women'. She concludes by stressing that, quite surprisingly for countries that have implemented for decades gender pay equity reviews, 'gender change is hard work in the academy and remains a continuous struggle, which must take place simultaneously on multiple fronts: discursive, cultural and structural'.

The papers of this journal's issue bring together different theoretical and methodological viewpoints on matters of *labour market*, at national and international level, and most of all on problems of *female employment patterns* within the current economic situation. The contributors range from academic to non-academic researchers, from economists to sociologists and social folklorists, and from private-sector managers to employment councillors working for governmental agencies. All those viewpoints, we believe, promote an interdisciplinary –and therefore a 'holistic'—approach to a complex and under-researched area, such as the emerging employment patterns during the current (capitalist) economic crisis.

The focus is in some papers *macroscopic*, while in some other is of a rather *microscopic* nature. Additionally, there are *theoretical*, as well as *empirically*-based papers, some of them dealing with a thorough *secondary* analysis of already existing data sources, while other are based on *original data* collected through field research in contemporary labour-market settings. Furthermore, papers attempt, *not just to describe* structural or conjectural elements of current developments in the labour-market (s), but rather to *highlight* –if possible— certain temporal trends that preceded the current 'crisis', and offer that way various tools to evaluate those trends in the light of policy reforms at global level.

Despite the fact that the focus of the papers –apart from one—is on the situation in Greece, we believe that there is a conspicuous effort to link – either through detailed literature reviews, or through attempts to elaborate on established theoretical models—the 'domestic' experience to the 'international' and/or 'global' ones. Finally, the papers may –with a degree of reservation—provide something that is –we believe— very important in today's climate of widespread but highly 'contested' economic and political reforms around the globe: a critical view of certain 'orthodoxies', in the sense that they are taken for granted and are 'naturalised' in public discourses in such a way as to start becoming a 'non ideological "common sense"' (Fairclough, 2010: 30).

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<sup>1</sup> This is of course something that depends on the dominant 'welfare regime' in a particular country, since past research has shown that the 'uneven development of what have been called "welfare regimes affects the risk of poverty and social exclusion due to unemployment and the nature and extent to which the experience of unemployment is gendered' (Edgell, 2006: 114).