

# Women and the European crisis

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## Abstract

The article raises questions about how the economic crisis is being played out ‘in place’, taking an embodied, generational and gender perspective. ‘Place’ is used in a political context by examining how global realities are experienced in place, and the author argues the need to look at the everyday realities of the crisis from a gendered ontological perspective in order to counter grand narratives of gloom and doom where women (whether old, young, migrant, heterosexual or otherwise) are particular victims. By discussing local contexts of the gendered realities of the crisis in three southern Europe areas, the author shows the possibility of changing the crisis narrative from one of overwhelming paralysis to one of potential transformation. The focus is on the rise of resistance, solidarity economies and new types of communities in the search by women in southern Europe for alternatives to neoliberal capitalism.

## Keywords

Austerity, European economic crisis, gender, social justice

## Introduction

This article seeks to move away from a view of the European crisis as necessarily one where women are worse off, exposed and vulnerable, to seeing it as part of an ongoing set of historical circumstances where gender inequalities are being played out, challenged and lived in neoliberal capitalism. It contrasts mainstream narratives of the impact of the crisis on women with alternative narratives that move away from an economic approach to one framed in terms of social justice, feminism and women’s agency. Using perspectives derived from the work of Nancy Fraser (2009, 2013) and J.K. Gibson-Graham (2007,

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2008), the discussion is framed in terms of women and the politics of place. To illustrate the argument, case studies from Bolsena (Italy), Madrid (Spain) and Thessalonica (Greece) are discussed.

## **Mainstream narratives of women and the crisis in Europe**

The first studies and reports are coming out about the impact of the crisis on women in Europe. A report commissioned by the European Union (EU) and undertaken by economists based in Italy, 'The impact of the economic crisis on the situation of women and men and on gender equality policies' (Bettio et al., 2012) and a report by the women's rights network, European Women's Lobby (EWL, 2012) titled 'The price of austerity', set out the gender dimensions of the crisis, based on detailed studies of the economic and social impact on European women.

Bettio et al. point to the gender impacts of across the board increases in unemployment levels and wage dampening, with a concomitant rise in poverty and deepening inequalities. The study suggests that owing to labour-market segmentation, the early narrowing of the gender gap in employment is now over. Whereas at first more jobs in the male sector were lost and women's jobs were more sheltered from the crisis, more recently, with fiscal consolidation, there is a significant curtailing of public sector jobs where women are concentrated. The EWL (2012) report states that women account on average for almost 70% of public sector workers in the EU (p. 3); therefore anything that happens to public sector jobs and wages affects women more. For example, in Italy, in education alone, 19,700 women's jobs have been cut since 2009 and 87,000 more are predicted to be lost in the immediate future (EWL, 2012: 4).

Bettio et al. (2012) argue that the crisis in Europe has affected women and men differently rather than 'more' or 'less' (p. 8). Although differences in gender equality vary considerably among countries, these authors suggest that disparities in gender equality within Europe are widening and that austerity measures have impaired the functioning of the gender equality infrastructure in several member states. They point to the housing crisis as affecting single mothers and low-income households (among whom women are over-represented). They also show how the cost of healthcare weighs more heavily on women. The rights of pregnant women to maternity leave and benefits have been curtailed and discrimination against pregnant women is being documented. Budget cuts in the health sector also hit women's jobs as more women are employed in the public health sector.

Fiscal consolidation has cut long-term care allowances and monetary benefits in many countries, with disproportionate impact on women. In the field of childcare, public expenditure on monetary allowances has been reduced more consistently than public expenditure on the provision of services. Reductions in care benefits have reduced the real income of women with caregiving responsibilities, weakened their economic independence during care periods and increased their burden of care responsibilities within households.

The conclusion of both studies is that overall the current austerity measures will ultimately reduce welfare provisions, leading to poorer services in health and education and that, given the existing gendered social and economic inequalities, women will suffer from severe material deprivation in all countries.

While not disputing the findings or their political intent, nor questioning whether they use a correct gender lens or whether they lack social awareness, I would like to argue that it is important to move beyond this economic focus on the crisis and its impacts on some universal woman, 'European' or otherwise, who is more at risk than men, and lost without adequate and specific state support.

## Reframing the discussion

My proposal is to move away from seeing the crisis as something insurmountable and paralyzing, to seeing it as something that women are living through, resourcefully and with agency. We need to see how it is being experienced in ways that invite possibilities for change in our daily lives. Not that we can ignore what is hard and difficult and unjust, but we need to observe what is going on, without assuming we know where the crisis will lead us.

Adopting this viewpoint involves scrutinising the mainstream framing of a universal narrative of crisis and its impact on women. It means moving away from economic prescriptive givens and learning from insights coming from social justice movements, feminism and their understanding of the links among body, culture, ecology and economy. Rather than relying on pre-determined ideas of what measures to take, it is important to look with more openness at the contradictions, the failures and the messiness, which contain within them the hopes for social change.

In this approach, I am influenced by the writings of US feminist Nancy Fraser on the crisis. Fraser writes from the New School in New York and frequently contributes to the UK-based radical intellectual journal *New Left Review*. I am interested in her discussion of the shift to new forms of politics in the neoliberal era. Fraser argues the need to move from Polanyi's 'double movement' in which relations of production and class once shaped the alignment of political parties and social movements on either side of a fault line of opposition between commodification and social protection. She sees a contemporary politics of crisis as calling for emancipatory projects based on a 'triple movement' of response to today's economic, financial, ecological and social crisis. Such a politics looks beyond economics to the broad terrain of social reproduction, and beyond the nation to a struggle for justice on a global scale.

Fraser (2013) asks the following: Why is there no European-wide movement against austerity? Why has the current economic crisis failed to produce as in the early 20th century a strong counter-hegemony to capitalism and marketisation? Why is there no coalescence around alternatives? (p. 127). She points to how organised labour with its focus on social protection is no longer providing an alternative as it fails to speak for society in today's new global capitalist formations that bypass labour organising. The grammar of protest today – the struggles over gender, sexuality, religion, language, race/ethnicity and nationality are different from the old class/capital battles. The large number of emancipatory movements (anti-racism; anti-imperialism; anti-war; feminism; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) liberation; multiculturalism; and so on) are strongly critical of the forms of social protection institutionalised in the welfare and developmental states of the postwar era.

She sees the emancipatory movements (including here feminism) as repeatedly having to cross the line 'that separates a valid critique of oppressive protection and

legitimate claims for labour-market access, on the one hand, from an uncritical embrace of meritocratic individualism and privatised consumerism, on the other' (Fraser, 2013: 131).

This is an interesting dilemma to ponder as we consider women and the European economic crisis.

## Women and the politics of place

In order to unpack the dominant framings of women and the economic crisis and to pick up on the dilemma posed by Fraser, I propose to frame the discussion in relation to women and the politics of place.

I use the concept of place in a political context – examining how global realities are played out in place (Harcourt and Escobar, 2005) – and argue that we need to look at the everyday realities of the crisis from these perspectives in order to counter grand narratives of gloom and doom where women (whether old, young, migrant, heterosexual or otherwise) are particular victims. One place to begin in order to pry out and move with and around and through the crisis is from our ontological knowledge of globalisation processes in place. By contextualising the gendered realities in place, we change the narrative of overwhelming paralysing crisis of capitalism to one of creative potential, understanding and transformation.

The work of J.K. Gibson-Graham (the shared pen name of the late Julie Graham, US feminist economist, and Kathie Gibson, Australian feminist geographer) is very helpful in this regard. In their work since 1996, they have pointed out that we need to move beyond capitalism as it is represented in dominant narratives and understood by macroeconomic theory and policy – as a unified system: bounded, hierarchically ordered, vitalised by a growth imperative and omnipresent (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006). Such is the hegemony of dominant capitalist narratives that the very idea of a non-capitalist economy is seen as unlikely or even impossible to imagine. Given its omnipresence, it becomes difficult to see daily or partial replacements of capitalism by non-capitalist economic practices, or of capitalist retreats and reversals. Gibson-Graham and others have engaged in researching and documenting non-capitalist economic practices in order to help allow new forms of anti-capitalist politics and imaginaries<sup>1</sup> to flourish.

Some of us working on the politics of place have identified new forms of localised economic politics emerging. This is what Michal Osterweil (2005) calls 'place-based globalism' (p. 23), where different community economies are linking through the politics of place to create an ethical and political rather than structural conception of economic dynamics. In this imaginary, the economy is seen as a diversified social space. At the centre of these forms of economies are new economic subjects and ethical practices of self-cultivation. Place is a site of becoming and the ground of a global economic politics of local transformations where power is every day negotiated (skirted, marshalled or redirected) through ethical practices of freedom. Place-based globalism is not a potential or actual movement but an alternative logic of politics, one that invests not in what is to be replaced, but in what is to become. To quote J.K. Gibson-Graham (2008), 'Place signifies the possibility of understanding local economies as *places* with highly specific

economic identities and capacities rather than simply as *nodes* in a global capitalist system' (p. 39).

Place-based globalism offers a crucial role for alternative discourses of feminism which allow us to understand the economic crisis in more helpful ways. We are able to connect the private and public, the domestic and national, the local and global, changing the rigid boundaries of established political and economic discourse. In this imaginary, local economic transformation is about ways of cultivating economic subjects with different desires and capacities and greater openness to change and uncertainty. Place becomes the site and possibility of becoming, the opening for politics:

In the place-based imaginary, every place is to some extent 'outside' the various spaces of control; places change imitatively, partially, multidirectionally, sequentially, and space is transformed via changes in place ... Place-based globalism recognizes that there is a continual struggle to transform subjects and places and conditions of life under circumstances of difficulty and uncertainty. (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 34)

## **Women and place-based politics in Southern Europe: Three case studies**

As instances of the gender politics of place, this section presents three case studies, one from my own experience in Italy, and two based on initiatives in Spain and Greece, respectively, reported at a March 2014 colloquium on women and the economic crisis (Gender and Development in Practice (GADIP) and University of Gothenburg, 2014). Each illustrates how women are working with and around the crisis, searching for survival strategies but also for alternatives to unfettered neoliberal capitalism. As a result of the crisis, they are creating new forms of political, economic and social relations. The argument is that a new economics demands a new politics which can support real change for communities. There is a crisis of democracy as people lose faith in party systems, seeing elected politicians take care of the state apparatus while the bankers and business class make the real decisions (Roos, 2013: 9).

### ***Bolsena, Italy***

In Italy where I live, I am working with a small community-based feminist organisation Punti di Vista (PdV) (Points of View) based in a 17th-century Franciscan monastery 'The Convento S. Maria del Giglio' on the outskirts of Bolsena. The members of PdV work voluntarily in the Convento and undertake paid work in academic, government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based in Italy and further afield. There is an uneasy balance between the international knowledge and experience that people from outside bring to PdV and the local realities of running the Convento, given the politics of the local town, particularly as the local economy stagnates and the austerity measures imposed by the State are being felt. There is a struggle over livelihoods as local environmental groups of the slow food movement battle for sustainable agricultural practices, in the face of tourism and of the town's history, where Church and State and aristocracy have fought for centuries over ownership of the place.

Negotiating who decides what happens in Bolsena is a continual struggle among the town hall, local committees, the church, local parties and progressive groups. PdV works with local women who have been leading the alternative to mainstream tourism, running the book and coffee shops, 'eco' wine bars and 'bio' cheese farms, holding workshops on local food and Etruscan cultures.

Discussions about the viability of local enterprises are shaped also by the everyday politics of taking care of family. Survival is via the 'black economy' which provides the food and care that enables people to overcome the downturn in tourism, the increase in local and national taxes, the closure of vital services and complexity of EU laws on food and safety. The community survives through reliance on the goodwill of many who live under the shadow of both the uncertainties of the Italian political system and the insecurity of the economic situation.

The general high levels of precarity and deepening unemployment among young people in Italy are clearly evident in small rural communities like Bolsena. Young people, along with migrants, are employed mainly in the shadow economy, without contracts or access to rights. Particularly in sectors dominated by tourism, as in Bolsena with its seasonal or casual work in restaurants, hotels and wine bars, most are working in the black economy.

Public protests including occupation of schools, marches on the streets, as in other cities in southern Europe, happen with regularity in the big towns (people from Bolsena go to the nearby capital of the province Viterbo). Along with the protests, there are also new initiatives happening – from communal gardens, sharing of local produce in cooperatives, time banks, the organising of pageants celebrating local historical events, fairs at harvest time and so on. There is a re-embracing of histories of different sorts – forming a sense of the culture of the Tuscia area with its Etruscan history, as well as more conservative histories based on the Catholic Church, fishing and hunting communities. Attempts are being made to build communities around youth wings of local parties, new forms of fair trade shops and local restaurants promoting locally grown food and wine

Talking to young people conveys a sense of looking for new forms of cultural identity and politics, with a strong distrust of the national politics and of the possibilities of making it in today's global market. Labour rights and social protection are not seen as something to be fought for, such is the distrust of state politics, including 'Europe'. Many speak of moving to Germany, England or Holland where they see chances are better. As this article was being written, young women and men were occupying Porta Pia in Rome outside government buildings, asking people to stop and talk to them and consider together what the economic crisis means for young people who face precariousness, in a situation where 80% of people aged under 30 years of age reportedly live at home (ISTAT, 2014).

But though attention is on youth, the majority of the people in Bolsena are over 60 years of age – staying in the medieval borgo as younger people move to find work in other places. With the austerity measures, the increase in medical costs has changed their lives. Medicine is less affordable, there is one less doctor and the local hospital has closed so they have to travel 20km for medical care. There is a concern about security and being an economic burden to their children. This raises the question of what living

longer lives means when older people are seen as problems rather than as contributors to our social and economic well-being.

These generational tensions alongside new livelihoods and activities in Bolsena are a sign that things are shifting. It is important to understand the impact of the crisis on the different generations and their role in the community. Bolsena's survival depends on shifts in the economic imaginary in order to revalue ways of living in our times.

### *Madrid, Spain*

At the Gothenburg meeting, Lina Gálvez Muñoz and Nieves Salobral Martín from Spain spoke about the hundreds of new civic movements emerging in Spain in the wake of the crisis, as millions of people take to the streets to demand a radical change in Spanish politics. Feminist groups have been active in the 15-M movement that began in May 2011 in 57 Spanish cities, as well as in other popular movements such as 'Take the Squares', the 'Indignados' movements and 'Youth without a Future'.

The protests are about unemployment, welfare cuts, political corruption and economic injustice, with a demand for systemic change. One of the 15-M mottos is 'We are not against the system, the system is against us'. The resistance is also about creating new possibilities in place. There is a sense of hope in building alternatives alongside and outside the system that is failing to provide jobs, education, housing and well-being. The focus is on creating the reality that people want today – not waiting for tomorrow either for utopia or for further economic and political failure.

As in Italy, it is young Spanish women who are the most visibly hit by the crisis. Precarity is becoming a way of life as young people take up temporary jobs to make ends meet, with no security let alone pensions. Many young people in Southern Europe leave to look for jobs – in Spain there is a campaign 'We are not leaving: they are kicking us out', which connects young people on the move for jobs. They have set out an interactive map where they ask young people to write themselves into the map, with stories about their experience – the statement is that precariousness and nomadic lives are now the way of life for young people (Trejo Mendez, 2013: 16).

All across big cities like Madrid, neighbourhood assemblies are forming. Initiatives by people from 15-M and by other activists provide food for people who cannot afford it, through self-managed foodbanks and popular free meals in the squares (Trejo Mendez, 2013: 21).

Part of the questioning of authority includes thinking about new types of economies. For example, in Madrid, in the *Campo de Cebada*, a self-managed, autonomous space at barrio La Latina set up a popular university in the summer of 2013 for people of all ages. Everyone was free to join the courses meeting in a space that had held a now-demolished public sports centre. People sit on wooden movable benches made by the wood collective and eat from the edible garden tended by the people of the barrio (Trejo Mendez, 2013: 43).

The talk in the university is how to move beyond the past and the sense of a lost generation to seeing a new type of economic model that springs out of the economic crisis (Trejo Mendez, 2013: 46). The debates around alternative economies, communities and societies are not only happening in the popular universities in the squares of Madrid.



Gálvez Muñoz, a professor of economic history from Seville, spoke about her work in and outside the university – giving seminars not only to her students at the Pablo De Olavide University, but also to students of community universities in the squares. These seminars are about the history of the crisis and the need for alternative economic models to overcome what she called ‘austericide’ (Gálvez Muñoz, 2014).

### *Thessalonica, Greece*

At the Gothenburg seminar (GADIP and University of Gothenburg, 2014), the managing director of the Ergani Centre in Thessalonica, Popi Sourmaidou (2014), described the increasing levels of gender inequality and deepening poverty and unemployment in Greece. The Ergani Centre was set up in 1991 with EU money to support women’s cooperatives and foster the entry of women into the mainstream workforce, building a network among Greek universities, vocational training centres and entrepreneur groups. For women who came to the Centre it provided retraining, computer and language skills. Since the 2009 crisis, the Centre has shifted focus to address the increase in unemployment and widespread insecurity. There has been a huge increase in women coming to the Centre for counselling and basic survival needs. As in Spain, local assemblies are emerging in Athens and other large centres as well as rural areas.

The Centre has become part of a network that helps connect women and provide support for survival. Whereas pre crisis the focus was on vocational training, there is now a need to confront deepening poverty through social networking on the best ways to distribute food and build community gardens. Seminars are organised on how to create community support for economic experiments particularly for young people, who, as in Italy and Greece, are facing unemployment and precariousness. The mark of the crisis is that the Centre, from having worked mostly with women entrepreneurs, now works with women from rural areas, immigrants, Roma people, unemployed people over the age of 45 and with families with more than three children or with low income or without homes (Ergani, 2014).

As Sourmaidou explained at the Gothenburg seminar, the name ‘Ergani’ – diligence and creative ability – refers to the attributes of goddess Athena by the ancient Greeks. Both are qualities that she sees as features of Greek women’s responses to the crisis – coming from long histories of survival that confront challenges with creative imagination.

### **Conclusion**

I see the role of feminist researchers committed to social change as being to provide new imaginaries coming from trenchant critiques of dominant thinking and ways of life, including strong critiques of economic ideas that have framed the crisis. We need to think about how our research and actions are creating the foundations of social and economic innovation. What are the socially creative thinking practices that can allow our feminist analysis to release the positive effects of hope and possibility and generate alternative discourses?

Thinking about the economy cannot be separated from our emotions and bodily sensation. We cannot afford to be taken down by the fear generated by crisis narratives. We need to remain hopeful towards connections and openings. How we represent something



like an economy influences how we think about what is possible. If we see the economy as naturally and rightfully ‘capitalist’, then any economic activity that is positioned as different (for example, as involving non-market transactions, or non-waged labour) cannot be viewed as legitimate, dynamic or long-lasting.

The ‘capitalocentrism’ of economic discourse subsumes all economically diverse activities as being ultimately either the same as, the opposite of, a complement to or contained within capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 37). We need to pose questions that open up rather than close down the possibility of becoming economically innovative in our ways of living. These questions can move us beyond the deep inequalities of capitalism and towards social change. As we move out of the crisis, we can work with resistance that is pushing for new economies that can fit the emerging realities.

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### Note

1. The term is derived from Lacan’s (1997) notion of the imaginary as one of three interacting orders (along with the symbolic and the real) structuring an individual’s identity and mediating the capacity for action, based on a mental image of the body as coherent unity. The concept has been extended by post-modern scholars writing critically about international development to signify alternatives to dominant understandings of world orders, and by sociologists engaging also with the work of Jürgen Habermas (1987). Arturo Escobar (1994) sets out the imaginary of the third world in his influential argument for moving beyond the paradigm of modernity: ‘imperial globality, an economic-military-ideological order that subordinates regions, peoples and economies world wide’, and looks instead to social movement networks which, he argues, foster a ‘counter-hegemonic globalization’ and ‘represent the best hope for re-working imperial globality and global coloniality in ways that make imagining after the Third World, and beyond modernity, a viable project’ (Escobar, 2003: 3).

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