

# Practicing the Alternative. The Impact of the Crisis in Latin America through a Gender Perspective Analysis

## Practicando la alternativa. El impacto de la crisis en América Latina a través de un análisis de perspectiva de género

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Recibido: 9/11/2018

Aceptado: 5/4/2019

doi: <https://doi.org/10.20318/femeris.2019.4926>

*Abstract.* This paper intends to analyze the impacts of the 2008 economic crisis with a gender perspective, focusing on Latin America (in this case considered as a region, although the single countries have been affected in different ways by the crisis, due to the particular economic situation of each). The main target of the research is to evaluate how austerity perpetuates gender inequality in contexts like labor market and migration, and to advocate for sustained investment in gender equality. The idea is to demonstrate, through some practical examples, why there is a need to give attention to women's movements, invest on women and girls' education, knowledge, culture capabilities, competences and skills, especially during economic crisis, in order to transform the existing market and the existing models of production in society.

The paper wants to underline the correlation between the general and classic indicators of the economic crisis (work / development / migration / welfare state) and some of the possible "gender variables". The analysis of this complex scenario is framed through a feminist economic approach, in order to broaden the idea of what economy is, by looking at the consequences of the economic model in times of crisis in people's lives, bringing into light that women's economic and social contributions are invisible under the hegemonic patriarchal model we live in.

Finally, some consideration are drawn on the fact that the development of communitarian economies and cooperative systems, very relevant in Latin America, is part of an indigenous, peasant tradition and it can be interpreted as an approximation of an alternative feminist economic model, in order to compensate the lack of welfare with the women's cooperation on reproduction. In this sense, many examples of cooperatives run by women are presented in the last part of the research. This, however, should not be seen as a justification for things not to change, but an incentive to invest in women, their education and their opportunities to participate in the economy since considering care and reproductive work as the core of the commons, as Federici has stated, it is not a matter of identity but a matter of challenging the hierarchy of power from the very basis.

*Keywords:* economic crisis, gender perspective.

*Resumen.* Este artículo trata de analizar el impacto de la crisis económica de 2008 desde la perspectiva de género, centrándonos en Latinoamérica (en este caso considerada una región en su conjunto a pesar de que la crisis ha afectado de forma diferente a los distintos países). El

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objetivo fundamental es la de evaluar cómo la austeridad perpetúa la desigualdad de género en los ámbitos laboral y migratorio y abogar por la inversión sostenida en igualdad de género. La idea es demostrar, a través de algunos ejemplos prácticos, por qué es necesario prestar atención al movimiento de las mujeres, la inversión en la educación, el conocimiento, las capacidades culturales, las competencias y las habilidades, especialmente durante la crisis económica, con el objetivo de transformar los actuales mercados de trabajo y modelos de producción de la sociedad.

Este trabajo quiere subrayar la correlación entre las variables generales y clásicas y la crisis económica (trabajo / desarrollo / migración / estado de bienestar) y algunas de las posibles “variables de género”. El análisis de este complejo escenario se enmarca a través de un enfoque económico feminista, con el fin de ampliar la idea de qué es la economía, al observar las consecuencias del modelo económico en tiempos de crisis en la vida de las personas, sacando a la luz que las mujeres económicas y sociales.

Finalmente, se toma en consideración el hecho de que el desarrollo de economías comunitarias y sistemas cooperativos, muy relevantes en América Latina, es parte de la tradición indígena y campesina y puede interpretarse como una aproximación de un modelo alternativo feminista con el objetivo de compensar la falta de bienestar relativa a la falta de cooperación en la reproducción. En este sentido, en la última parte de la investigación se presentan muchos ejemplos de cooperativas dirigidas por mujeres. Sin embargo, esto no debe verse como una justificación para que las cosas no cambien, sino como un incentivo para invertir en las mujeres, su educación y sus oportunidades de participar en la economía, considerando la atención y el trabajo reproductivo como el núcleo de los “bienes comunes”, como lo definió Federici. Así, ésta no es una cuestión de identidad sino de desafiar la jerarquía del poder desde la base misma.

*Palabras clave:* crisis económica, perspectiva de género.

## 1. The main features of the 2008 economic crisis

In the last months of 2008 an economic crisis – initiated in the United States - spread and harmed financial institutions and economies throughout the world reaching both developing and developed countries. This economic crisis, together with other global crises such as the food, climate and energy ones, influenced also the quality of life of the people around the world. It was predictable that its effects would spread most among certain social groups - the vulnerable ones, suffering more and faster than others the increasing inequalities and the lowering standards of living (Espino, Sanchis 2009). In simple words, the origin of the 2008 global economic crisis - the “financialization”<sup>1</sup> as someone called it- can be observed as connected with the fact that profitability was not secured anymore on a real economic basis such as, for example, the number of products sold, instead, the “profit” was based on the financial management of “cash and banks”, on loans, on credit cards, on company liabilities, in one word on “debts”, which affected the developing countries as the financial transfers began to reduce, together with the shrinking of the export markets (Federici 2011).

A central aspect of the crisis and, therefore, a key to its long term resolution- as well as the main concern of this paper - was the raise of inequality within and among countries, strictly correlated to the increased freedom of firms to move across borders. This scenario helped to create a macroeconomic problem: as wages decline, declined also workers’

<sup>1</sup> Financialization is the trend of the economic system to grow through the use of financial tools, rather than through gains in the real economy. Rather than advancing in a fundamental and sustainable way, capital is trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of stagnation and financial explosion.

consumption, which conducts to the lack of global demand. Without enough purchasing power on the part of workers, businesses lost motivation to invest, affecting in this way the creation of jobs (Seguino 2009).

In what concerns the impacts in Latin America specifically, the 2008 economic crisis boosted at a time when the region was stronger than in previous crises (Espino, Sanchis 2009). Furthermore, it is relevant to mention that, in this context, countries decided to set aside international and regional commitments connected to gender equality as for example the Platform of Action, the Beijing Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (ECLAC 2009).

### *1.1. The overall impacts in the Latin American region*

When the 2008 economic crisis was expanding worldwide, it was expected to produce modest impacts for the Latin American region. These expectations were mostly based on the sustained growth in the region between 2003-2007 – which reached even 5.7%, and in 2008 was maintained even if with of a lower rate of 4.5%. It can be explained by internal and external factors, as for example the sustained demand for products from the region from some Asian countries, especially China, generating conditions for the recovery of prices and export volumes -such as metals and minerals and certain grains in the case of South America (Sanchis, Espino 2010). However, the crisis had different outcomes in each country, and the diversity can be explained by the particularities of the respective productive structures, by the way they depended on external economies, as well as by the political, economic and social structures. For example, the decline in demand from developed economies of some products of the region conducted to a global exports' fall, in volume as well as value (9.5%). It means that the countries that depended the most on foreign trade, and with inferior geographic variety of trade, grew the slowest (Sanchis, Espino 2010). The main point in relation to Latin American economic situation in the 2008 is that, despite the promising prospect, important weaknesses prevailed such as a dependence on exports, the high levels of inequality and poverty, and the absence of a social protection vision. For instance, even if health and education coverage increased, the quality decreased. As a result, when the economic cycle slowed down, inequality and poverty grew and situational poverty became structural poverty.

### *1.2. Specific impacts of the crisis*

In this section are presented some of the economic effects felt in the Latin America region, with the scope to offer a better understanding of the correlation between the economic situation and the quality of life. In this perspective, the decline of Latin America considered as a whole, with differences from country to country, can be described in the following way (Espino, Sanchis 2009):

- *Decline in International Liquidity*: Absence of liquidity limits firms capacity of acquisitions and mergers, which represents the most relevant form of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Latin America. As a consequence of the economic conditions related to the crisis, FDI flows to the region in 2009 fell between 35% and 45%, which worsened recession and raised unemployment. Due to its importance, the gender perspective of unemployment will be better analyzed later on in a specific section of this paper.
- *Decline in External Demand*: Economies slowdown negatively impacts global commerce. In Latin America, even though the composition of exports varies from each country, it is possible to maintain that their structure is based on primary products from the agricultural or mining sectors. The decline on the external demand for these sectors have an important impact on work, and is specially linked to women's lives in the region since their participation is dominating in free trade zones and contract manufacturing.
- *Decline in remittances*: another key aspect of the Latin America Region is the intensity of migratory flows. The connection with the economic aspect is found on the remittances that immigrants send back home - one of the most important sources of currency in the region. The fact is that the weakened labor market in developed economies- due to the economic crisis -affected negatively the money transfers done by emigrant workers to their families, which therefore influences the situation of low-income families, many of which are headed by women.

## 2. The crisis from a gender perspective

The problems in maintaining the expected progressive trend of expenditures, the increase of unemployment and informality and the raise in poverty and vulnerability are some of the consequences of the 2008 economic crisis in the Latin American Region. However, in which way this affects specifically women? This chapter intends to analyze some aspects of the crisis through a gender perspective, leading to better understanding of the implications of the global economic turmoil. It's a known fact that men and women are positioned differently in the labor market, especially due to constructed norms of behaviors and attitudes. Inequalities between sexes throughout the world imply that women are often the most vulnerable towards economic shocks, being, for example, the first to lose their jobs or see a reduction in salary, compared to their male counterparts (UNAIDS 2012).

In a certain way this explains why the costs of economic recuperation vary between sexes and it leads to the fact that women are doubly affected by the crisis: at domestic level, in order to provide basic services and supplies (as States withdraw compensatory measures) and because domestic work intensifies. But also at labor market level, where women participation tends to rise - particularly regarding precarious positions, poorly paid jobs, with deteriorating conditions. This situation reaches also migrant women that,

when lose their jobs, return home from paid employment in foreign countries to turn often to the informal sector as a way of supporting themselves and their families.

In this line, employment impacts on women vary across countries, depending basically on whether more jobs are lost in male or female dominated sectors of the economy. For example, impacted by the economic crisis, Brazil showed an overall growth in salaried jobs, and in spite of the drop in the manufacturing industry – which is mostly dominated by women (UNAIDS 2012)<sup>2</sup>, maintained and increased employment in services and construction – usually dominated by men. Alongside, unemployment in Ecuador was somewhat above the regional average (8.7%), with greater growth among women (Sanchis, Espino 2010). As an overall statistic the direct employment in the manufacturing sector in Latin America declined about 13,5% from the beginning to the end of 2008 - with the highest numbers recorded in Nicaragua (21.47%) – where approximately 65% of the people who lost their jobs were women (Espino, Sanchis 2009). It must be noted that firing women first during periods of crisis takes place in a context in which women's unemployment rates globally are already higher than men's. Moreover, even if it is expected that men lose jobs, the impact of unemployment differs from the one on women. For example, in developed and middle income countries, men are better positioned to weather the crisis, in the sense that they usually have higher paying jobs, more assets and wealth, their jobs are more likely to offer benefits and be covered by unemployment insurance. While women's jobs usually pay lower wages, and are often not covered by social safety nets (Seguino 2009).

Moreover, the fall of formal salaried jobs drives the search for opportunities in the informal market - segment that absorb proportionally more women. Additionally, women are the majority in low productivity self - employment work or in domestic services, where nine out of ten do not have access to social security (Sanchis, Espino 2010).

Finally, women joblessness is much linked to public sector budget cuts, that's because women are dominant workers in education, health, and social services sectors. Ultimately, the fall in male employment due to the crisis influences the participation of women, which characterizes a countercyclical behavior, where women - above all those in the lowest income sectors - respond to the need to balance uncertainty in their homes in view of the male head of household's job instability.

To conclude, if this situations - where a man loses his job but a woman does not, or in cases in which a woman needs to work to support her family – have a positive side, is the opportunity it creates to challenge existing gender norms.

### *2.1. The problem of the unpaid work in the household*

The main problem regarding the household work is the fact that the gendered public/private sphere division of labor - which perceives women as primarily responsible for unremunerated work in the domestic sphere – is that it arises inequalities in household

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<sup>2</sup> 23 Women make up 60–80% of export manufacturing workers in low and middle-income countries (UNAIDS 2012). 2012.

bargaining power between sexes (True 2012). In other words, once women are often responsible for the unpaid care of children and sick family members for example, the options of paid work that they are able to take on and their bargaining power within these paid positions are often jeopardized (UNAIDS 2012). Care ethics scholars have come up with a “division of labor iceberg” to better explain this situation that divides men and women’s tasks but at the same time illustrates their interdependence, which is not addressed in mainstream economics. It places the activities that are socially assigned to men on top of the iceberg, that is, above the water where they are visible, whereas those activities socially assigned to women are placed below the water where they cannot be seen, but they are the foundation and biggest part of the iceberg (Ikerd 2008). On the other side (below the private sphere) is the alternative, a different reality where care work is shared between men and women, where it is valued and properly remunerated and accounted for, a reality where human and environmental life matter more than economic profit. For example, due to the 2008 crisis, in Latin America the proportion of women dedicated exclusively to unremunerated household tasks - female population of 15 years of age and older - goes from 20.1% in Chile, up to 37% in Mexico (Espino, Sanchis 2010).

Concomitantly, as already mentioned before, in times of economic crisis poverty rises together with the deterioration of health, which ends up intensifying the care - giving activities that women engage in the domestic sphere to lighten its consequences. In conclusion, household women found themselves at great risk because of the few -when any- savings to weather the crisis, and limited ownership of wealth and other assets, in comparison to men. The paradox that can be identified in the Iceberg representation is that without the work carried out in the private sphere (domestic, reproductive, care), the public sphere could not exist. In other words, the “invisible” work that women develop is what makes production (and thus, capital accumulation) happen. As Katrine Marçal stated, “the market economy is always based on this other economy which is still primarily female, it is based on work being done by women being unpaid or very badly paid” (Marçal 2015).

## 2.2. *The role of migrant workers*

“A few years ago I was better off; I earned enough to send to my children. But now I had to bring them because my mother can’t take care of them anymore, she is sick, she is older, and things are not going well in Paraguay and whenever I can, I try to help out. And my sister came too with the two youngest ones, all to my house. She helps a bit, does some by - the - hour work, but it seems everyone depends on me, I seem to be everybody’s mother” (Sanchis, Espino 2010).

Women, usually motivated by developed countries demand for non -specialized labor, turn into independent economic actors, providing economic security for themselves, their families and also their home countries through remittances. As worldwide economies suffer from the problems caused by the crisis, the situation particularly affects the sending countries through two main aspects: first forcing migrants to return home, which

increased pressure on the local labor market; then, through a drop in remittances, a phenomenon that is very important for some countries of the region (Espino, Sanchis 2009). The decline in the quantity of money sent by migrants to their home countries, significantly impacted many economies of Central and Latin America – in 2009 the annual decline closed in 10% in countries such as El Salvador and Guatemala, while in Colombia for example, the reduction was of already of 14.3% just of the first half of the year . The situation in Bolivia is even more alarming, being the country with the heaviest dependency on remittances – mostly women migrants in Spain (True 2012)<sup>3</sup>, with an unique and extremely outstanding case of macroeconomic dependence on transfers from women (Espino, Sanchis 2009). It is essential to point out that migrants represent a way of support for poor families in regions where there is no work or means of sufficient income, and that the fall in remittances negatively influences the incomes of households, harming daily expenditures on food, clothing and education, of which women are usually in charge. For example, as families with higher levels of incomes decide that they cannot afford anymore to hire foreign women workers for the domestic labor, these workers lose what is often the livelihood of their entire family in the home country (UNAIDS 2012).

Moreover, the impacts on families of the loss of the incomes through remittances can be harsh and gendered. That is the case for example, when households trying to deal with financial problems, withdraw girls from school, while boys' education is largely sheltered from such shocks (Seguino 2009). With 96 girls for every 100 boys enrolled in primary school in developing regions in 2011. Lower levels of education mean that women are more likely than men to be involve d in lower - paying jobs or low - skilled labor and are therefore more susceptible to financial crises ” (UNAIDS 2012). In this scenario we can clearly point out a set of factors connected to women's placement in the labor markets and associated to behaviors derived from gender constructions.

### *2.3. Violence as a relevant aspect of the crisis*

“We recognize that women's poverty and lack of empowerment, as well as their exclusion from social policies and from the benefits of sustainable development, can place them at increased risk of violence, and that violence against women impedes social and economic development of societies and States, as well as the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals” (UN Economic and Social Council 2010).

Widespread discrimination against women and girls in education, employment and business together with the absence of state social safety nets implies that they are not protected from violence in times of economic shocks. Moreover, violence against women is a concomitant effect of both crisis - induced poverty and gendered assumptions about the supposedly “out of place” female body (Sutton 2010). This means that gendered in-

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<sup>3</sup> In 2010 women from Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru sent to their home countries a total of nearly \$3,2 billion in remittances, more than the total remittances of male migrants.

equalities that fuel the violence against women are rooted in structures and processes of political economy (True 2012) and that economic and social security are essential for protecting and preventing violence against women. When in a period of economic crisis, two are the main situations in which violence against women happens.

The first scenario takes place in the “public” sphere, and is connected to the destabilization of social and economic life by macroeconomic policies, which is associated with growing inequalities and increasing levels of violence against women. As represented, for example, in the situations of Export Processing Zones, where the competition between men and women for employment gives rise to frequent exchange of sex for employment, and the need to maintain any form of employment explains why sexual and verbal harassment usually are not reported by women (True 2012).

The second scenario of violence takes place in the domestic or private sphere, when men may, as a reaction to the loss of employment and economic opportunities resulted by the crisis, - reaffirm their power over women through violence. In 2010, Barbara Sutton, analyzing the crisis in Argentina, argued that: “Domestic violence is one way in which some men seemed to channel the frustration caused by unemployment, by their inability to be proper breadwinners, by their wives’ work outside the home, and by the test this situation presented to hegemonic masculinity” (Sutton 2010).

Finally, in the domestic sphere violence can also be correlated to the increase of women’s financial dependence on men, as a result of the economic impoverishment. Situation that can elevate men’s decision -making power within households, increasing the risk of intimate partner violence. Confirming what was said so far, and consequently extremely relevant to this paper regarding the gendered impacts of the economic recession, the fact that in 2009 the ECLAC framed the gender dimension of the crisis with three main indicators:

Employment (*variables*: Increasing unemployment/underemployment; Increasing vulnerable employment; Deterioration in the quality of employment; Wage differentials)

Development (*variables*: Migration; Education attainment; Family welfare; Increasing poverty reduction; Increasing outward migration; Increasing withdrawal rates; Increasing long term impact of social welfare (health, nutrition...); Household vulnerability; Cycle of poverty; Income poverty)

Care Giving Role (*variables*: Vulnerability of care giving role; Increasing economic dependence; Vulnerable coping strategies; Feminization of overseas migration) (ECLAC 2009).

### 3. Government responses to the crisis in a gender perspective

The effects of the 2008 economic crisis in developing countries generated difficulties to face balance of payments as the developed countries - their major trading partners - were in deep recession too. As already mentioned before, the effects of the crisis were different from country to country, the economies of Argentina and Brazil for example showed extraordinary resilience, and a good degree of autonomy – of course reinforced by the demand from China



for some of their major products, such as soya, iron and petroleum (Pearson 2012). However, it was not enough to prevent Latin America countries from the bad effects of the crisis.

This section looks with more detail at Governments behaviors, and how austerity measures have affected women, girls and gender equality. The fact is that economic policies implemented by governments in the region during the last decades, hoping to alleviate the economic aspects of the crisis, have worsened women's situation, increasing fragility and workload, for example, cuts in government support increased the unpaid work of women. The higher costs of this unequal capital accumulation are being paid by the poorer sectors of society, the environment and largely, also by women (Otero et al. 2016). Women are using their time, resources and their lives to sustain an economic system that pays them very little. From a feminist perspective, the analysis shows not only the inequality and disadvantages in the social and labor insertion of women, but also how political decisions have been made feasible by the elasticity that characterizes the workload supported by women in the market and at home (Espino 2009). It means that governments often contribute to this burden by not considering the different impact of public budget cuts on women and men. The feminist economic approach aims to broaden the idea of what the economy is by looking at the consequences of the economic model and its crisis in people's lives, bringing into light that women's economic and social contributions are invisible under the hegemonic patriarchal model we live in. In this sense, it proposes an alternative model that is based on the importance and recognition of all the activities that maintain life, both human and environmental, mainly those activities that do not involve monetary flows (Pérez Orozco 2014).

The absence of gender equality perspectives in the policy responses to the economic crisis at the national level seems to be a commonplace, alongside with the fact that women are mostly affected by the crisis due to their strong participation in the informal market, the non - recognition of their unpaid and reproductive work and the high levels of discrimination and inequality they face.

As a rule, for example, Latin America countries do not involve the caretaking dimension on their agendas, with the result of A) a strong limitation of women's participation in economic activities; B) a worsening of their the situation due to the work overload that ends up in precarious labor situation and in lack of access to services for basic caretaking needs (Sanchis, Espino 2010). This behavior of governments have two main consequences, first it reaffirms gender inequality, and secondly, it can further destabilize the economy, since evidences suggest that government's spending in social areas have a more stabilizing effect on a country compared with other types of investments (UNAIDS 2012).

### *3.1. Governments policies and gender inequality*

To a greater or a lesser degree, Latin America undertook the crisis and its consequences with a diversified range of policies<sup>4</sup>. Measures varied depending on the particular

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<sup>4</sup> A counter-cyclical policy works against the cyclical tendencies in the economy. The cool down the system when it is in uprising and stimulate the economy when the downturn arrives.

effects that were experienced by each country, the availability of resources, and the ability to implement counter - cyclical policies. Anyhow, there was a consensus in all countries of the region on the need of investment packages of the public sector in policies intended to reactivate the demand, increase the consumption, and maintain the production and, indirectly, foster the employment (Espino, Sanchis 2009). As regard to the counter-cyclical measures, the countries of the Latin America region implemented policies in the socio - economic field in spite of the complex scenario of the crisis. Nevertheless, in the articulation among the State, the market and the families, measures concerning care giving services continues to be avoided, a decision that, in a period of crisis, favors the tendency of vulnerability and exclusion of certain part of the population (women mostly). For example, formal employment comes along with obstacles that are complicate to overcome by the non-recognition of the burdens on women's time and cyclical ones: the reproductive burden, the burden of non - compensated work, and the burden of caretaking (Sanchis, Espino 2010). This invisibility of the work carried out in the private sphere often leaves women without the possibility and the capacity to challenge and change the social order; they have less time and energy to fully develop themselves in the labor market or to look for alternatives to make economic profit, if they must also take full responsibility of their family care (Trenow 2016). In what concerns behaviors directly correlated with the deepening of poverty and social inequalities, in Argentina for example, in 2016 the president Mauricio Macri announced social budget cuts, with the implementation of policies that dramatically increased the costs of living. As a result, the price of electricity increased between 250 and 700 percent only on that year, together with a raise in the price of public transportation, gas and water (Hardt 2016).

The overall dynamic shows that the greatest harm falls on the poorest women, disproportionately overburdened by the double workload, and with fewer opportunities to enter the labor market. This scenario, added to the financial costs of an economic crisis, and other, less visible, costs - such as stress and domestic violence - constitutes a core link to the reproduction of poverty and inequality (Sanchis, Espino 2010).

Furthermore, governments' behavior present another problem, an approach that disproportionately favored male labor, pouring money into the construction and infrastructure sectors - sectors dominated by men, as in the case of Brazil. At the same time measures directed to create female employment have not been observed. To complicate the situation, public measures to deal with historic feminist demands are generally weakened during economic crisis: reduction in social spending and cuts in budgets negatively influences the health system -free contraceptives are no longer available and public health care provision and abortion is no longer provided. The same thing occurs in the education system and with human rights programs addressing violence against women (Espino, Sanchis 2009). Finally, the 2014 ECLAC report on Latin America and the Caribbean confirms women vulnerability and that gender equality is far from being achieved in the Region. It points out that from 2000 to 2010 (and up to the expectations of 2020) men are more economically active than women - being Venezuela and Chile the countries with the highest gap. The statistics that confirm women dominating low - productivity areas and the informal market in 2013 with

an overall gap of 66.6% against 54.8% of men – and with absolute dominance in the domestic sectors in all Latin America Countries considered in the report. Moreover, to demonstrate that discrimination is present at all levels, for example, the proportion of seats held by women in the national parliaments in countries as Brazil and Venezuela from 2008 to 2014 remained unchanged, while in others as Argentina it actually declined (CEPAL 2016).

### 3.2. Gender equality as an opportunity for all

Addressing the long - term consequences of the gender inequalities is an important challenge. Greater income and wealth equality – in which growth is compatible with equality - should be the governments' objective, instead of approaches that are dependent on inequality for growth (Seguino 2009). One option to alleviate inequalities is for governments to ensure that they are spending in gender equitable job creation. That means that they should not spend only on physical infrastructure projects to stimulate demand and create jobs - a sector that largely employs male workers, with little benefit for women from such projects (Seguino 2009).

To tackle the problem of unequitable job creation, one possible solution could be to allocate resources for social infrastructure investment in sectors such as public education, health and childcare. This action can have two main benefits: it will certainly create new jobs'opportunities and, by financing activities that help the "caregivers"- who are culturally and practically speaking mostly women-, this type of measures can attenuate some of the negative effects of crisis on them and their families (Seguino 2009). Another good option is to assign resources for apprenticeship and training programs especially addressed to train women in skilled jobs. This can help to overcome gender job segregation that has kept women out of well-paid high-tech, skilled industries, for example. Furthermore, in developing countries, public policies should also focus on reducing the problem of parents who, due to economic difficulties, withdraw girls from school. Expanding and increasing payment aids in conditional cash transfer programs can help to reduce this problem, which is the case of the program implemented in Brazil – *Bolsa Familia* - a social welfare program started in 2003, that provides financial aid to low or no income families on the condition that, for those who have children, they attend schools and fulfill the vaccination program. In cases of budget cut by the government, another useful measure can be sharing employment, achieved by reducing worker hours, instead of eliminating jobs (Vicent et al. 2013). These examples show how governments can play a leadership role, encouraging businesses to endorse a similar approach, in order to prevent massive unemployment, and as a consequence, it can also reduce the practice to fire women first in time of whatsoever crisis. By addressing public resources at equitable job creation and social safety nets to protect women, governments are also funding future development, generating new productive capacities. Seen in this way, investing (instead of "spending") in social politics has both short and long term benefits, in terms of productivity. And this is not only an humanitarian perspective, it also makes sense from the economic point of view.

#### 4. Practicing the alternative: beyond the debt policies

Currently, not only in Latin America, but all over the world, social public services are being cut and reduced by states, jeopardizing people's quality of life and in some parts of the world, where welfare state is almost non-existent, people rely on their social network for economic and social support, which is mainly formed by their family and community. More specifically, those providing the fundamental knot of these nets of support are mostly women. In this sense, they have been taking on the role of shock absorbers, carrying out services that governments have left abandoned or unfunded, such as care. For example, when day care services for young children are not available, it is women who look after children, giving up their chance to obtain economic remuneration in the labor market (Vicent et al. 2013). The lack of welfare policies that can provide support for women in their double burden raises also the need to come up with sustainable alternatives and economic models that can place life at the center of society, assuming a model of development in which there is no basis for exploitation nor for the production of inequalities. In this direction there are people who are developing some kind of alternatives that challenge the current economic system, placing life (people and the environment) at the center, with a "feminist approach", in order to "resist" the capitalist system. According to Pérez Orozco (2017), this perspective has had different "nuances": in European and North American contexts the feminist approach to economy is mostly seen as a current of thought, but in Latin America, historically, it has more links with practices, for instance through local and community development and cooperatives lead or formed by women (De Castro 2014).

Today, women from Africa to Latin America are the main protagonists of the struggles for the defense of common goods and public goods. For example, in Bolivia, women were at the center of the war on the privatization of water in 2000 (Wanderley 2009). Then, facing a huge impoverishment, women created collective forms of reproduction, for example, they began to make common spending giving birth to *comedores populares*, that reduced the cost of food (Soliz-Roca 2011). Worth mentioning are also the forms of collective savings, not mediated by the banks, the *tontines*, which were so significant, pushing ahead the policy of micro-credit. Not for biological reasons, but for reasons that are rooted in the organization of the reproduction, today women are the who are making the reproductive work "common", both to reduce the cost of reproduction and to have more strength in relation to the state and to the local authorities. The development of communitarian economies and cooperative systems is very relevant in Latin America, it is part of an indigenous, peasant tradition and it can be interpreted as an approximation of an alternative feminist economic model, in the sense that this type of system based mostly on cooperation does not follow a capitalist or a profit maximization dynamic, but its main aim is to sustain the lives of the people involved, as well as the environment, challenging the hegemonic capitalist system and the stereotypic gender roles by implementing a different way of thinking and "doing things".

#### 4.1. How to compensate the lack of welfare: women's cooperation on reproduction

Within this type of economies, all the decisions are made jointly and interdependently. One of the most interesting example in this sense is the cooperative formed by 450 indigenous women in Santiago de Sacatepez, Guatemala. It is called *Cooperativa de Mujeres 4 Pinos* and it was founded in 2010 by three women leaders of their community, with the support of an NGO. In these years the cooperative has been growing, exporting vegetables in United States and in Europe. According to its members, the cooperative has managed to increase the quality of their life and have reduced malnutrition in their community. They also state that women members of the cooperative have become empowered, learning skills and increasing their decision-making power in their homes. They have formed groups to teach each other how to read and write, and have obtained funding and support from organizations to be trained in basic computer skills (Cooperativa Integral Agrícola De Mujeres 4 Pinos 2017). This group of women ensures food sovereignty in their community by working together and supporting their empowerment and economic development. Their aim goes beyond making economic profit, they have the aim of sustaining the lives of their families and the environment, without relying on the welfare state or on the capitalist system. In the last decade, in this area malnutrition has decreased, social and human conditions are more dignified. Women have been empowered to production, and now they can make their own decisions, especially in the economy, and in addition there are women who in the cooperative learned to read and write, rising in this way their self-esteem and the empowerment.

Again in Bolivia, women are the main protagonists in the fight against deforestation and reforestation. I would also like to mention the center put up in La Paz by *Mujeres Creando*, an autonomous feminist organization that was formed in the 1980s. The center, called "the breeding machine", includes a kindergarten, a legal support structure for women victims of abuse and violence, a radio with political and cultural chronicle broadcasts, a "school" for radio literacy and a restaurant. The center also publishes a newspaper, has built an archive of materials, promotes the spread of books and research such as sponsorship of a report on micro credit policy in Bolivia and the struggle of women against debt. The center is a small village where dozens of women spend every day and where material production goes hand in hand with the production of inexperienced knowledge, affections and social relationships. It must be added that *Mujeres Creando* also does a great job of cultural and political demystification, for example against the indigenous politics of the government considered patriarchal and has a large presence in the territory.

Another example is the *Cooperativa Comixul* created in Honduras in 1986 as a credit project by a group of twelve women vendors of fruits and vegetables at a local market. Currently, the *Cooperativa Mixta de Mujeres Unidas* is a cooperative that serves more than 30,000 women with microcredit and services, including financial education, training in specific commercials, and access to preventive health education. the aim of the cooperative is to provide women and their families the support they need for a better life. This group is an example of welfare state substitution for their members. Under these circumstances these women have

managed to create a network of support for women and at the same time challenging gender roles by supporting women's business development (Cooperativa Comixmul 2017).

Cooperation among women, or generally on the ground of reproduction, can lead to the construction of a new reality or at least it can be an antidote to the forms of control with which we are confronted (Pessolano 2016). This way of challenging the system generates "forms of collective identity, constitutes a counter-power in the home and in the community, and opens up a process of self-valorization and self-determination, from which it is possible to learn many things. But while it is true that forms of production and collective identity also result in the valorization and self-determination of those who are involved, building lines of "resistance" to a life of slavery, it is equally true that contradictions, as well as illusions, are still present, since capitalism is resilient and usually feeds on creative forms (Federici 2011). One of the main points is that the theme of reproduction continues to have little focus on the public debate. The non-acknowledgment of the need to invest in gender equality implicates that the long-term effects of the economic crisis might be aggravated when effects such as unemployed women, uneducated girls and the growing burden of care are understood, as elements that increase poverty and inequality for all individuals (UNAIDS 2012). The 2008 economic crisis demonstrated that sustainable development – that reduces poverty and promotes social inclusion and equity – had not been reached yet in Latin America, where the slowdown in the economic growth coupled with already existing high levels of poverty and inequalities (Espino, Sanchis 2009). In order to recognize the gendered consequences of promoting women's access to resources, to employment rights and to decision-making on trade issues, governments' policies should change a lot. Employment protection and unemployment insurance must be political options, also during economic crisis, being necessary to overcome the public infrastructure's projects that do not take into consideration the gendered segregation in the labor market. The multiple benefits of investing in healthcare, education, child care, and other social services must be finally emphasized and the investments in these sectors should be taken into account as important indicators of the development of a country. These type of investments on "the social" can A) generate jobs, mostly for women, due to their dominant participation in these sectors, B) help women with their care-giving load, permitting them to participate in the job market and, consequently, attenuating the negative effects of the economic crisis on them and their families (Espino, Sanchis 2009). In other words, investing in women also implies supporting families and therefore society at all levels – having also in mind the long-term objective of dealing with the expectation that women and girls are responsible for the majority of care work.

### **Conclusion: from reproduction/production to the policy of the *commons***

Gender differences, or more precisely, gender hierarchies, will continue to structure the organization of work until reproduction of the lives of individuals is subordinated to the production for the market and to the accumulation, and until the reproductive work continues to be instrumental to the labor force production. Nevertheless, now more than

ever, it is important to question the meaning of “development” and of “gender equity” and the feminist perspective can make a deep contribution to the search for new strategies for a life worth living (Lakshmi 2008).

"Placing the sphere of reproduction at the heart of the commons revolution", says Federici, and making it "the crucial ground for the transformation of the social relations" (Federici 2018) is the only way to produce clear evidence of both neoliberalism and globalization's critique. From this point of view, not only the structure of the capitalist organization of labor is reversed, but also reversed is the primacy accorded to “production” as a terrain of struggle and organization in the Marxist perspective. More precisely, the policy of the *commons*, in a feminist perspective, can be useful to overcome the separation between production and reproduction, and the isolation that has characterized the latter in capitalism. The extension of the principle of the commons to the reorganization of domestic work can be a way to create more cooperative forms of this work, in the perspective of the self-government of the reproductive activities. Which is not an issue of identity, which would only contribute to strengthening the stigma of domestic work as a "women's work", but, paraphrasing Dolores Hayden, the self-government of the reproductive activities is an issue of economy and labor and a way to tackle the dimensions of power and security (Hayden 1995).

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