Contradictions in the Gender-Poverty Nexus: Reflections on the Privatisation of Social Reproduction and Urban Informality in South African Townships

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This chapter stresses the importance of two analytical considerations in understanding the relationship between gender and poverty in the Global South: first, the deep informality of the cities in spatial and economic terms, and second, the re-articulation of production-social reproduction relations for the development of cities in the context of global neoliberal capitalism.   These two conditions, I argue, simultaneously intensify the burdens that urban development places on women and hence their greater poverty, and increase opportunities for active citizenship and collective action by poor women. Combined they place women's grassroots activism at the centre of a gendered urban poverty analysis.   To substantiate this argument I will reflect on experience of poor women in townships of post-apartheid South Africa, whose burden and responsibilities for social reproduction both at home for family and at neighbourhood for municipal services has expanded.   But at the same time and most importantly through their community activism for shelter and against evictions and service cut-offs their arena of citizenship practice and collective action has expanded to achieve a more just city.

Before I delve further into this discussion I need to make two clarifications:

First, to what extent can we assume categories such as 'women' or 'Third World' in order to present a perspective based on experience of women in cities in the Global South?   Of course, women's experiences internationally are structured by class, ethnicity and race, and locally specific social hierarchies.   But in the urban formations of the Global South certain commonalities persist which set the structural bearings for common gendered experiences of urban development.   The shared history of colonialism and the process of urbanisation decoupled from industrialisation have had important implications for the development of cities in former colonies, and for the experience of their urban inhabitants and, specifically, of women.

Second, to what extent could the urban experience of disadvantaged women in post-apartheid neoliberal South Africa be relevant to other societies in the South?   The struggle for urban citizenship and against urban exclusion has been at the centre of people's in particular women's struggle in South Africa.   While during the apartheid cities belonged to white settlers and blacks were excluded from urban citizenship, women were in particular excluded as their permission to visit the cities was also tied to their relationship with their migrant male partners with temporary urban work permits. This history of overt exclusion now being subject to a global neoliberal turn offers a lucid perspective to observe the workings of the neoliberalism in relation to women and cities. The post-apartheid neoliberal city is a microcosm of the processes observed elsewhere in the cities of the Global South.

Bearing in mind these preliminary clarifications, I will now turn to the two interconnected conditions of informality and the (re)privatisation of social reproduction previously highlighted.

DEEP INFORMALITY

More than two-thirds of cities in the global South are developed through spontaneous, unplanned activities. As many as 85 per cent of Third World urban residents have tenuous claims to land, and 78 per cent live in slums (see Rakodi, this volume). In urban Africa, an estimated 57 per cent of people lack access to basic sanitation, and only 11 per cent in poor neighbourhoods in Manila and 18 per cent in Dhaka have formal means for disposing of sewage.

In terms of labour market activities, formal employment channels or formal employer-employee relationships play only a minor role in many Third World economies. Worldwide the informal economy has increased its share as a percentage of non-agricultural employment, by the 1990s reaching 43.4 per cent in North Africa; 74.8 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa; 56.9 per cent in Latin America and 63 per cent in Asia (Benería, 2003:111, Table 4.2; see also Chen, this volume). Further, women increasingly find employment in the informal sector; worldwide, with 27.6 per cent of the female non-agricultural labour force being self-employed (Benería, 2003:117).

These figures suggest that only a small share of cities in the Global South are spatially and economically developed through formal processes and the structures of state decision-making and planning. Having had to seek shelter and earn a livelihood through the informal sector, the majority of poor women in the Global South have taken into their own hands the challenge of combining the multiple responsibilities of caring for

their families and generating income.   Hence, in the developing world context, feminists' focal concern with the urban experience of poor women centres on community-based processes and practices that are outside the control and regulatory machinery of the state and its planning authorities.

This has important implications for women's urban citizenship.   Many feminist scholars who study women's community-based activism for housing, neighbourhood services or other livelihood needs have emphasised the significance of informal politics as the arena of grassroots women's collective action.   Where formal channels of citizen participation and the invited spaces for asserting citizenship rights are ineffective, grassroots women often bypass the male-dominated formal politics of the elite, asserting their right to the city through informal politics of community-based activism and invented spaces of citizenship (Miraftab, 2006).   Grassroots efforts and, in particular, grassroots women's efforts, have invented spaces of active urban citizenship, and have done so despite, not because of, formal planning and policy structures and processes.   The deep urban informality of the Global South therefore places grassroots' women's activism at the centre of urban poverty research.

GLOBAL NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM AND PRODUCTION: SOCIAL REPRODUCTION RELATIONS

Global neoliberal capitalism has altered relations of production and social reproduction and accordingly affected women's roles particularly with respect to their communities.

Whether called restructuring and liberalisation, in the Global North, or structural adjustment and debt management in the Global South, neoliberal policies withdraw public support for basic and social services and thus have intensified gender-specific responsibilities, with the burden of compensating for the service shortfall accruing disproportionately to poor women. Based on an assumption of women's infinite and elastic labour supply, capitalism relies on women's free and underpaid work to compensate for neoliberalism's erosion of the public realm and abandonment of civic responsibilities (see Roy, this volume; Tonkiss, this volume).

Socialist feminist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s connected housework and waged work to capitalist processes of accumulation and, in so doing, demonstrated that domestic work is as much a part of the productive process as is manufacturing. Such scholarship traces the relationships among patriarchy, capitalism, and the spatial structure and organisation of production and reproduction. Emerging scholarship on global economic restructuring pushes this revelation further, arguing that the ontology of neoliberalism entails 'new patterns of exploitation and control of labour in the production-reproduction relationship' (Bakker and Gill, 2003:18). These researchers assert that accumulation of capital, in its current crisis, has had to (re)privatise social reproduction, moving it to the family, where it 'naturally belongs.'

Feminist empirical scholarship in cities of the Global South carries these new insights further by arguing that the (re)privatisation of social reproduction in these cities is 'naturalised' not only within the family, but also at the community level through women's informal labour in providing neighbourhood care and municipal services (see Kumar, this volume). Such scholarship opens the category of labour not only by

rearticulating formal-informal linkages but also by expanding the scale of the analysis of providing social reproduction, *from family to community.*

As in post-welfare societies the household is the primary site of privatising social risk and social reproduction, so in the Global South, neighbourhood and community are the prominent sites.   The historical account of women asserting their public responsibility through the notion of municipal housekeeping in turn-of-the-century United States could stand as a contemporary account of women's burden in many low-income communities of the contemporary Global South, where in the absence of municipal public services women have to perform such tasks for free as an extension of their domestic responsibilities.   In the Global South, neoliberal budget cuts and cash-strapped local governments privatise the provision of basic municipal services, not only by contracting them to private firms, but also by moving the public responsibilities for urban and neighbourhood development to the private sphere of women's free work (Miraftab,2006; Samson, 2008).   Therefore, there has been a feminisation of informal urban development, whereby in many cities of the global South women act as 'unpaid urban developers and urbanisers' (Miraftab, 1998).

THE CASE OF GENDER IN SOUTH AFRICAN TOWNSHIPS

To illuminate the above point I share an example that I have developed in detail elsewhere (Miraftab, 2004).   After the 1994 political transition in South Africa, the post-apartheid state assumed the responsibility for provision of municipal services to an

expanded constituency including the populations categorised by apartheid as 'Blacks' and 'Coloureds'. This expanded responsibility in the context of state neoliberal restructuring led to municipal adoption of entrepreneurial strategies that promote citizens as fee-paying customers. Within this wider policy framework in the early 2000s Cape Town municipality launched a multi-tiered programme for collection of solid waste in its jurisdiction that nominally offered tailored services to socio-economically differentiated neighbourhoods and suburbs. While garbage collection in the affluent suburbs continued to be through paid unionised public sector employees or municipal workers, in the largest townships of the city this involved women residents in collection of solid waste without any pay. Relying on unpaid labour by women residents for collection of waste in poor townships was, however, justified to participating women and to the public at large through the rhetoric of 'women's empowerment' and 'good motherhood.'

Although major resistance from citizens and public officials on account of its neglect of labour laws and regulations led to discontinuation of the programme, the example is illuminating in how neoliberal governance privatises the responsibility of neighbourhood clean-up as an extension of women's realm of responsibility towards home and family and in doing so re-articulates the relationship between social reproduction and production that earlier feminist scholarship illuminated as a way of subsidising capital. In the neoliberal era, accumulation of capital relies on reprivatising some of the basic services that were formerly assumed by municipal authorities. (Re)privatising these social reproduction responsibilities expands the burden of poor

women who not only have to undertake additional unpaid at home for their families, but also for the community at neighbourhood and municipal levels.

The complexity of the situation is, however, that the entrepreneurial strategies in governance that intensify women's burden by relying on their free labour for municipal services provision, also increases their political participation in public arena for collective action at neighbourhood and municipal levels. Their participation in so called 'invited spaces of citizenship,' such as municipal-led and designed community-based waste collection schemes, offers the opportunity for greater presence and action by grassroots' women in community and municipal levels decision-making arena that might fall outside the control of the establishment and status quo (what I call 'invented spaces of citizenship') (for further details see Miraftab, 2006).

Grassroots women of the Western Cape Anti Eviction Campaign (AEC), for example, take advantage of similar combined and contradictory processes. On one hand they experience intensified responsibility to feed not only their own children but a growing number of impoverished children in the neighbourhood. They ask for leftover vegetables from stores, mosques, churches and benevolent citizens and offer free meals to township children once a week. On the other hand, through their grassroots campaign AEC women directly mobilise against evictions and against service cut-offs in poor townships. They launch oppositional practices that have limited, slowed, and, in many instances, stopped evictions and service suspension.[1] Here we see that while the South African state's inability and unwillingness to deal with poor populations has intensified reliance on poor women's free labour for performance of gendered social reproduction at home and in community, grassroots women's activism, like that of AEC,

has been able to exert power to affect the processes and outcomes of policy decisions and hence challenge the silent but brutal violence of capitalism through poverty.

In short, this chapter has highlighted that notions of inclusive citizenship and entrepreneurial governance in the context of deep urban informality have worked as complex processes that both intensify women's social burden and increase their political possibilities for pubic action.   The deep informality of cities where grassroots efforts afford economic livelihoods for poor populations, combined with entrepreneurial governing strategies that extend women's social reproduction responsibilities from home to neighbourhood and municipality, inevitably place women more than ever at the centre of urban processes (see also Beall, this volume)

To understand the gender and urban poverty nexus in the Global South, not only women's burdens but also their grassroots activism and transformative collective actions, need to shape the analytical centre of this debate.

NOTE

1.   A summary of the achievements of the Western Cape AEC can be found on their website: http://antieviction.org.za/. Achievements include moratoria on evictions and service cut-offs, and implementation of basic lifeline free water.

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