

Conference Report: Gender, Neoliberalism, and Financial Crisis: Gendered Impacts and Feminist Alternatives

 Sydney Calkin, convenor of the Gender, Neoliberalism, and Financial Crisis Postgraduate Conference, is a PhD candidate in the Department of Politics at the University of York. Her research is in the area of feminist political economy and development, focusing on critical feminist approaches to empowerment and 'smart economics' policies in global governance institutions. She tweets at @sydneycalkin.

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The politics of austerity and crisis are deeply gendered and open up a wide range of feminist debates around neoliberalism, resistance, and gender justice. The **Gender, Neoliberalism, and Financial Crisis Postgraduate Conference**, which took place at the University of York on 27 September 2013, sought to map the multiple impacts of financial crisis, austerity, and neoliberalism on women and to articulate an alternative feminist agenda. It brought together researchers from around the world working on feminist political economy, sociology, development studies, economics, and related disciplines to present their findings and build networks for future research collaboration.

While the conference sought to respond to the current political moment and provide a feminist account of the crisis and post-crisis context, it also aimed to employ a critical gendered analysis of the discourse of crisis and austerity, and to bring a gender lens to bear upon these issues, inspired in part by V. Spike Peterson's continuum of feminist research. Peterson notes the task of feminist scholarship begins from the desire to 'add' women into the realms in which they are invisible, but she challenges feminists to move beyond correcting female invisibility, to employing gender as a conceptual hierarchy and politicising gendered hierarchies [1]. To this end, conference participants presented papers that noted how the crisis impacts women, but moved to critique the political and economic forces behind the crisis and the ways in which the discourses of crisis and austerity work to reconstruct and re-embed gendered hierarchies of public/ private, political/ social, and masculine/ feminine.

The conference was well attended by a diverse audience that included undergraduates, postgraduates, and academic staff. Participants commented on the need for more events that bring together feminists to address the intersection of gender in economic and political policy, a task that is particularly urgent in a post-crisis discursive context in which gender equality and other 'social issues' are rendered invisible and unaffordable. The discussions and presentations during the day generated exciting discussion and will hopefully prompt future events to build on the links established here. In particular, a few questions continually reemerged during the day and will no doubt continue to inspire research and debate: Firstly and fundamentally, how are neoliberalism and austerity gendered? How does neoliberalism impact on feminist politics, from 'femocrats' within

institutions, to feminist civil society organisations, and beyond? Following on from this, how can feminists challenge the dominant neoliberal discourse and its permeation of public dialogues? How can feminists resist and articulate economic alternatives? The papers and keynotes at the conference began to address these issues and, in doing so, opened up promising avenues for research while contributing to existing debates.

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Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson delivered the opening keynote address [2] on impacts of the financial crisis and alternatives to the current economic arrangement. While Diane Elson reviewed

the disproportionate impact of the financial crisis and austerity policies on women and detailed some of the feminist fight back, she did so in the context of a broader call for feminists to contest dominant neoliberal narratives of crisis and austerity. Because the case for austerity is superficially plausible and neoliberal beliefs are deeply entrenched among the public, Elson asked us to consider ways to disrupt these narratives of ‘common sense’ neoliberalism. Ruth Pearson sketched a vision for alternative economic structures in which investment in social reproduction – not just in childbearing and childcare, but in youth services, care for the disabled, elder care, and beyond – is given the same, if not more weight as investment in physical infrastructure. Pearson suggested that feminists must challenge the dominant notions of economic value and stress the importance of social reproduction which not only reproduces life itself, but the social institutions that make it liveable. The keynote speakers thus opened the conference by mapping the impact of crisis and gendered neoliberalism on women, but challenged conference participants to move beyond critique towards articulating feminist alternatives.

Panels throughout the day presented a diverse range of perspectives on gendered neoliberalism and austerity, both demonstrating the impact of the financial crisis and advocating alternative approaches to the current political and economic gender regimes. From a feminist institutionalist perspective, several researchers [3] presented findings on gender equality policy in governmental and financial institutions, from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, to the European Union and Macedonian government. Others examined the impact of austerity on the third sector and feminist organizations in particular [4]. Both groups of researchers, those concerned with government and with civil society, articulated a trenchant critique of the neoliberalisation of government policy and the impact of austerity on funding, policy, and discourse. In particular, they challenged the dominance of reductive efficiency-based gender policy, evident in the popular ‘business case’ for gender equality narratives which render equality a function of economic growth strategies and marginalise transformative approaches. Particularly invisible in discourses of crisis and austerity is the role of social reproduction and its value. Another strand of researchers [5] challenged the marginality of social reproduction from dominant political discourses and sought, through a variety of methodological approaches, to demonstrate its centrality to what Ruth Pearson called “making life liveable”. Although participants at the conference came from a diverse range of departments and disciplinary backgrounds [6], their works presented a coherent narrative of feminist analysis on the financial crisis and resistance to the politics of austerity.

The day ended with a closing keynote address in which Sylvia Walby provided an account of ‘gendered neoliberalism’. Walby, like Elson and Pearson, noted both the prevalence and limitations of the ‘Lehman Sisters’ counterfactual argument, in which post-crisis analyses of finance have imagined the presence of women in financial institutions at the center of a new mode of responsible finance. Without adequate regulation and democratic mechanisms to fundamentally finance it, however, gender balance in finance will not have a significant impact. Walby challenged feminists to articulate a gender growth model, using feminism as a counter-hegemonic project to critique and dismantle the current neoliberal gender regime. To this end, she proposed a social democratic gender regime with high levels of female wage labour and political representation, substantial public expenditure on welfare and state provision of health, education, and care services.

The conference was an invigorating and inspiring event, not least because of the energetic and diverse group of international feminist researchers gathered in York. The excellent panels and keynotes throughout the day provoked interesting discussions and contributed to some of the most important current debates in feminist literature. Part of the joy of convening and attending feminist academic events is the atmosphere of a community of supportive researchers, critical but constructive intellectual engagement, and energetic dedication to a transformative and egalitarian feminist project. I want to thank all the participants for their attendance, enthusiasm, and engagement at the conference.

[1] V. Spike Peterson (2005). *A Critical Rewriting of Global Political Economy: Integrating Reproductive, Productive and Virtual Economies*, Routledge.



[2] This keynote is available as a [podcast](#)

[3] Sara Wallin, Sara Reis, Maja Dragosavac, Agus Pratiwi

[4] Tanita Maxwell, Anne Marie Joyce, Bridget Lockyer, Lisa Rodan

[5] Haley Swenson, Cigdem Gedikli, Eleni Anna Bourantani

[6] This brief summary does not cover all panels or presenters; for more information and abstracts please see the full [programme](#). Contact details for the presenters are also available in the programme.

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