

Economic crisis and austerity: The stranglehold on Canada's families ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The claim that economic crises and austerity have an uneven impact on the working class - with the greatest effects being felt by women and children - is one we hear often on the Left. However, with some important exceptions, this claim is all too often just an aside or a footnote.

In this article, I want to look at the economics of austerity in two ways: first, by thinking about the uneven impacts of austerity on women and families and, second, by looking at austerity itself as a gendered phenomenon.

What I mean by this is that it isn't a coincidence that austerity measures fall more heavily on women than on men. They represent efforts by capital to force the working class to increasingly take on all of the responsibility for reproducing itself, efforts that destroy the institutions and supports that socialize some of the costs of this reproduction, including social assistance, maternity leave, childcare subsidies, pensions, Old Age Security, and social housing. The gains that are under attack were fought for - and won - by working people, and women in particular.

A manufactured crisis

One of the key political and economic goals of neoliberal capitalism has been to individualize and re-privatize the responsibility for caring, socially reproductive labour. The social supports that are currently provided by the state, victories of previous waves of feminist and working-class mobilization, have long been targets for rollback. When Margaret Thatcher proclaimed, "there is no society," she was articulating precisely this neoliberal logic: there should exist no support, no caring labour outside the family.

If this is not a new agenda and austerity measures are not just a reaction to economic crisis, but rather part of an ongoing attempt to shift power relations, what is unique about the present moment is how this argument for shifting the burden onto families has been framed.

Debt has been a potent weapon in the neoliberal arsenal. But the argument that we all need to tighten our belts rings very hollow when governments that for decades bemoaned the lack of funds for public childcare programs or free post-secondary education were suddenly able to find trillions of dollars to bail out banks and corporations. And while some countries - Greece for example - do have massive national debts (Greece's national debt is at about 160% of GDP), Canada does not. Our public debt level is at 34%, compared to an average in advanced industrial countries of 63%. So what's going on?

Debt is being used as powerful ideological tool to force the austerity agenda down the throats of Canadians. At the same time, it has encouraged a race to the bottom that is profoundly gendered and that once again puts the economic burden on families.

Women and paid work: layoffs and privatization

One way that progressive economists have talked about austerity in terms of its gendered impact has been by differentiating between a "he-cession" and a "she-cession." This distinction has the advantage of bringing a gender analysis to layoffs and privatization. It talks about the first wave of layoffs beginning in 2008 as a "he-cession," since it primarily affected male workers in the private sector. For example, in the first eight months of the 2008 recession, 370 000 workers were laid off, 71% of whom were men. This was within the broader context of the loss of more than 500 000 manufacturing jobs in Canada since 2003.

The "she-cession" refers to the attacks on public sector workers and the cuts to the public services and programs they provide that are necessary for the reproduction of people, including health care, education, child care, libraries, social assistance, pensions and support for seniors. Because women are much more highly represented in these jobs - in many cases, they represent the majority of workers facing layoffs in public sector jobs - the argument is that they are much more severely affected by these cuts.

Although this way of looking at the gendered dimensions of the recession and job losses in the private and public sector sheds some light on the subject, its silence on the relationship between paid and unpaid work means that it neglects some of the most important implications of austerity.

For example, the argument that the crisis in the manufacturing sector represents a "he-cession" completely ignores the implications of male layoffs for their female partners and families. In the face of these job losses, the burden of reproducing now-poorer families has overwhelmingly fallen to women. Women's unpaid work has increased, including the stress of balancing childcare, housing and grocery

costs on a reduced budget and taking on the emotional labour associated with any job loss. Women whose male partners have been laid off also frequently become the primary wage earners for their families, taking on a second or third job. It's no coincidence that the decline in manufacturing jobs has gone along with a boom in precarious, poorly paid, non-union, feminized retail and service sector jobs.

At the same time, a focus on unpaid reproductive labour illuminates the broader impact of job cuts in the public sector - the so-called "shecession." First, it's worth emphasizing the number of jobs that public sector cuts affect. In its most recent budget, the federal government projected 19 000 job losses. And, as one review of the 2012 federal budget reminds us,

"This figure does not include the impact of previous cutting exercises that themselves will reduce employment over the next 3 years, including the 2007-2010 strategic reviews and the 2010 budget freeze. That initial 19,000 is just the start. There are another 6,300 positions from the 2007 to 2010 strategic reviews and another 9,000 positions from the budget freeze. In total, the reduction from 2011 to 2014-15 will be 34,000 positions. That is only in the public service."

It is absolutely essential to see the sustained attacks by all levels of government in Canada on public sector workers as attacks on equity. Public sector jobs are some of the only well-paid, secure, unionized jobs where women and people of colour are highly represented in Canada. Employment equity measures in the public sector were an extremely important and hard-fought victory for the working class. The attacks on job protection for higher-seniority workers that have been major components of efforts by the state and capital to weaken public sector unions directly target women and people of colour who have been hired in the last 15 or 20 years. This is a clear effort to divide older and younger workers - and to encourage divides between workers on the basis of gender and race.

Attacks on job security and seniority disproportionately affect women in other ways as well. They penalize women who took time off from their jobs to have and raise children, or care for elderly parents or other family members. In the absence of an affordable public childcare program and with few state supports for elderly people or people suffering from long-term illness or disability, women workers - overwhelmingly responsible for this unpaid care giving of various kinds - must balance paid work with these responsibilities. Public sector part-time work with benefits, including health coverage and decent provisions for sick leave, flexible vacation days, and extended maternity (and paternity) leave was one way of doing this. The alternative, of course, which will become even more prevalent, will be to hold two or three extremely precarious and poorly paid jobs in the private service sector.

Service cuts and unpaid work

In an article on feminism and austerity in n+1's *Occupy Gazette*, Silvia Federici talks about the gendered impact of the cuts implicit in the austerity agenda, arguing that "it is clearly expected that in the aftermath of the new cuts women will make up for the loss." In tandem with cuts to jobs, the austerity agenda attacks services that are for many people - to put it bluntly - the difference between life and death. Home care assistance for the elderly, homeless shelters, shelters and supports for female and child survivors of violence in the home, subsidized housing and social assistance clearly fall into that category.

The cuts to these programs are nothing short of inhuman. As the Ontario organization Health Providers Against Poverty pointed out recently in response to the 2012 Ontario budget, "A freeze in welfare rates is effectively a cut to the income of people who are struggling to live on almost 60 percent less than what they received through social assistance 20 years ago."

As has been well-documented, these cuts are racialized and gendered. Single-parent families headed by women and racialized people, including indigenous people, are much more likely to be poor and in need of these services and supports. Consider the fact that the difference in life expectancy at age 25 between the highest and lowest income groups in Canada is 7.1 years for men and 4.9 years for women.

Cuts to other types of services - pensions and Old Age Security, libraries, childcare subsidies, in-school nutrition programs, after-school programs, community centres, transit - are also critical, as they represent important efforts to socialize the work that goes into reproducing people.

The logic behind these cuts is clear: the state is increasingly unwilling to provide services that help maintain and reproduce the working class. These costs won't be paid for by taxes, and they certainly won't be paid for by taxing the rich and their corporations. The costs will be borne by individual families. Families will figure out for themselves how to manage the costs associated with raising children and with an ageing population. Women's unpaid and unacknowledged work is essential to the austerity agenda because it is considered an infinitely elastic resource, capable of stretching to meet even the most onerous demands.

But of course this labour isn't infinitely elastic, and we know that many people will fall through the cracks. Inevitably, working ever more precarious jobs won't be enough to pay the rent and put food on the table. In a context where men still make higher wages on average than women and where divorce or separation usually leads to a fall in living standards for women, economic pressure may force many women to stay in relationships that they would rather leave. For others, economic hardship will be dealt with in other ways: taking on more debt, prostitution, drug dealing, panhandling, tax or welfare fraud, theft. The state knows this too, which helps us explain the logic behind the passing of the unbearably punitive Omnibus Crime Bill.

Moving forward

Without a doubt, it's a dire situation, one that will continue to require a multi-pronged, coordinated resistance. It will be necessary for a broad coalition of social forces to come together. Some of that is already happening. In Toronto, for example, the coordinated fightback against municipal level cuts by Toronto Stop the Cuts and its allies in the community and the labour movement had a big impact. But we'll need to expand and further deepen this mobilization. It will also be important to integrate a feminist analysis and initiatives related to the unpaid work done by women in the home and in the community.

Mobilization against job and service cuts as they come down needs to be paired with a broad discussion about caring labour. These questions are only going to become more critical in the context of the record-level growing household debt burden, the lack of a national public childcare program, a rapidly ageing population without adequate elder care or pension support, and rising levels of child poverty, Caring labour needs to be seen as an essential part of our economy, and not the sole responsibility of over-burdened and under-supported families.

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