



Time for a new model: The Feminist Economy

Graciela Rodríguez

There's a great number of online news reports and articles on the pandemics haunting us as a health related crisis but also as a looming economic collapse, but also from its various other perspectives: political, social and environmental. However, few of them really train their analyses on looking back to see how we ever got to where we are now.

As I write from Latin America, this retrospective outlook should not be an effort in rhetoric but rather an attempt to delve into the causes that have led to this gigantic crisis in neoliberalism, now escalating to dramatic proportions because of the pandemic consternation.

This is why I consider it important to first emphasize that this crisis—anticipated to last long—is mostly a result of neoliberal policies implemented in recent decades. Those macro policies are varied in nature and now show their harmful effects. We shall focus on two of them: the promotion of “free trade” and the liberalization of investments. They can be considered ground roots for expanding globalization ever since the 1980's, whose effects have gone from bad to worse, as we repeatedly warned.

Free trade agreements (FTA) and capital flows made flexible through investment agreements (BTA) imposed by northern countries, particularly the US and the UE, and later by the WTO (the World Trade Organization), nurtured an integration of the agricultural and the industrial worlds as well as most economic activities, including various services.

Liberalization of agricultural trade has fostered a brutal concentration of single crop land in most Latin American countries for the export of commodity products (soy beans, beef, chicken, and so on) as well as other extracts that include timber and fish, which was further aggravated by “an exacerbated use of pesticides, the presence of antinutrients, water contamination, ecosystem depletion and socio-environmental crimes”, and blatantly contributed to weakening our individual immune systems and to increasing the chances for a collapse of our national food safety and the nutritional sovereignty of our countries.

In its turn, opening national borders so that large corporations could make their way into the services sector was a decisive element for the privatization of, particularly, essential services such as health, water and sewer, energy, education and scientific research, telecommunications, etcetera. Those services that have been targeted by the effort to dismantle states and public policies are central to this social and health crisis.

When we add Intellectual Property negotiations based on extending the patent system, especially for medication, medical materials, seeds, industrial technologies, audiovisual techniques, and so on, it will compound the image of the world's ongoing collapse.

We should finally outline the importance of global liberalization of investment flows promoted by financial deregulation and based on the legal security transnational corporations often demand as crucial underpin for the growth of a private and public debt system and financial speculation bubbles. As they burst in 2008, with consequences that extend to this day, they are bursting again, now disguised by this virus, where to all of their related costs will be attributed. The coronavirus has but precipitated and tragically magnified a crisis that had been thriving upon the chase for neoliberal financial deregulation. This is a brutal capitalist crisis that, upturned by the pandemics, will eventually cause an unprecedented economic collapse at the global scale, made even more intense because of the elites' national and global wager to continue with this casino style capitalism.

We could list a number of other neoliberal policy elements and international negotiations that have, for decades, paved the way to the current crisis. Nevertheless, these four elements of trade and investment agreements are the hard core of the problem that has dragged us all into this economic, social and health crisis.

Want of public health policies for universal care, insufficient personnel to tend to those who fall to the virus, inappropriate facilities, lack of medical materials, absent investment in scientific research and other crucial needs for a proper fight against the epidemics in each country crudely expose the failure of those neoliberal policies. It all adds to a food supply model that is based on chemical agriculture, industrial animal husbandry and significant biodiversity loss—one of the many proven reasons for the appearance of new viruses—that reflects a productive model designed by the neoliberal globalization and a malicious international division of labor that have been made ever more intense and thus condemned Latin America to strand on extractivism. In their turn, pharmaceutical pressure groups competing towards a potential vaccine and other hospital and health supplies—conveniently protected behind their patents—and investors making use of international legal demand systems to exert their pull on States are also very upsetting.

Within this framework, women, who are in close connection with everyday life and also responsible for the daily subsistence of millions of people, will suffer major impacts caused by the pandemics enhanced absence of public policies, since they will have to increase both their already great efforts to meet those people's needs and their already huge footprint on informal markets as they will also be facing further unemployment in most countries of this region. The costs borne and debts incurred by having to make do with scarce resources everyday, which are all substantially increased by the epidemics, are already being heaved upon the shoulders of the women and that will soon reverberate on even worse gender inequalities in Latin American societies.

Food insecurity and the collapse of food sovereignty in various countries are likely to materialize in the short and medium term, accelerated as they are by a toxic industrial agribusiness feeding system, and further aggravated by the debacle of an international trade system that was allegedly a resource for those countries, as those who are always nurturing agribusiness exports in Global South countries would have it.

The several trillion dollar aid provided by US and UE governments to the larger private banks for distributed support to affected populations and business boasts the style of a

revisited movie that we have certainly seen to increase the 2008 crisis. The governments are resuming loans to companies and people at a time when there are high levels of private debt as a percentage of the debt of many countries. Resorting once again to family and business debt chains in order to avoid reducing global consumption flows is certainly not encouraging.

Nevertheless, “there are no neoliberals in crises” as usual, and nobody remembers those harmful policies. This is why capitalist system solutions shamelessly point, again, to requesting the support from their States—utterly dismantled by their “austericidal” policies—to recover international trade and failing world production chains that will thus save the financial system and the banks that are “too big to go bankrupt”.

However summarized they may be, these notes and questions seek to trigger urgently needed insights that will allow us to move forward with renewed attitude in the midst of local, national and international realms to face this transition in international production and trade systems and to implement the changes that are needed to ensure a dignified life to the world’s populations.

In face of these dilemmas, feminism has repeatedly offered a feminist economy perspective that insistently speaks of an egalitarian world view that “puts life at the center of it all”.

It might be high time we listen to this voice...