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Social Policy and the Changing Context for Work and Well-being of Women: Some Notes and Discussion

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Social policy and the changing context for work and well-being of women:
Some notes for discussion
Jayati Ghosh

The various significant roles of social policy are now well-known (incidentally thanks in no small measure to work done at UNRISD). Quite apart from the direct welfare effects of social policy, which have tended to be brought together under the broad rubric of “welfare state” activities, there are other political economy related features of social policy that are of significance. Thus it is a means of managing transitions, of dealing with and possibly reducing or minimizing the social, political and material tensions and pressures that arise in the process of growth and development. It can alter both the primary distribution (in terms of direct returns to economic participation or to labour, capital and wealth) and secondary distribution of incomes (after the combination of fiscal revenue mobilization and spending and transfers is taken into account) in progressive directions. It is also now recognized that social policy has direct and indirect economic functions: ensuring consumption smoothing over business cycles, reducing the impact of crises by acting as a built-in stabilizer and generating the wherewithal for economic expansion and productivity increases by enhancing social capacities for growth and development.

These roles are obviously more necessary when the growth process itself is inherently more unequal, yet it is in such situations that social policy has tended to be less up to that task. That is because social policy is both a driver and simultaneously a product of social and political configurations: a reflection of the balance of class forces and gender relations in that society; existing and changing patterns of hierarchy, discrimination and exclusion; and the extent of social mobilization to demand specific rights of citizens. These aspects in turn affect the degree to which social policy is transformative, or simply reduces existing inequalities, or even reproduces them. Obviously, therefore, context is crucial in any interpretation or assessment of social policy, and it would be foolhardy to generalise beyond a point.

So for many reasons social policy is inextricably linked with economic policy and with material processes. Just as the material basis of economies across the world has shifted in recent times, the conditions for and the nature of social policy perforce have changed. Both in turn reflect changing national and international power balances, as well as broader processes that have generated new risks and challenges. In both developed and developing countries, social policy tends to be directed towards the reduction or minimization of certain types of risk: physical risks related to survival in terms of adequate nutrition, housing, protection from the elements, health and freedom from violence; risks related to employment and livelihood; risks related to fluctuations in asset holdings and their values; risks related to the changing environment and ecological damage and constraints. The degree to which it is successful in any of this is not only a result of the specific types of social policy instrument used, but also of the broader macro context and processes within which such instruments operate.

Given these caveats, it is still possible to draw important insights into the nature, effectiveness and emerging challenges of social policy. In developing countries, the problems posed by the broader context of informality and the proliferation of self-employment have long been recognised not only as difficulties in the implementation of social policy but as circumstances that social policy can seek to ameliorate and improve upon. This has in turn been associated with the

recent emergence of innovative forms of social policy that underscore the importance of the public provision of basic needs in the form of goods and services as well as direct cash transfers. Increasingly, it has become evident that particularly in the developing world, social policy needs to confront and address new and current concerns, such as issues related to urbanisation, migration, financial fragility and ecological and environmental challenges.

All of these issues have particular and sometimes varying resonance for women, who tend to be differentially affected by these processes not only by virtue of class and social category but also even within families because of the gender construction of societies. Therefore, examining and redefining social policy particularly with reference to the conditions facing women is also necessary. In this note, while recognising the significance of other issues such as access to adequate food and nutrition, health and education, I will focus on the issue of women's work in particular.

The first requirement in enlarging the scope of social policy and making it more responsive to the current needs of women across the world is to broaden the definition of work. It is true that governments and international organisations have attempted to move beyond dealing with formal employment structures to addressing the problems of informality and home-based work, even if to a limited extent. But there is a critical area in which its definition of work is still unreconstructed, in terms of not recognising the huge economic contribution of unpaid work in homes and communities and addressing the concerns of these workers. Unpaid work - performed in households, families and communities - is not just essential for human life, but makes a huge contribution to the economy. Yet all too often, this is not even recognized, much less measured properly or adequately rewarded. Indeed, it is sadly the case that societies, governments and even multilateral organisations simply take for granted the "social reproduction" that is an essential feature of economic life. As a result, it tends to be unrecognised and undervalued in most countries. And those performing it, who are dominantly (but not exclusively) women and girls, are thereby not treated as workers and their conditions of work are not considered to be areas of public concern and intervention.

A significant amount of unpaid work relates to care services: the care of the young, the old and the sick, as well as other family members. However, this is not all - it also includes various processing and service activities that are often recognised in the SNA as contributing to national income. Common forms of unpaid domestic work thus include looking after children; taking care of the sick and the elderly; preparing food; washing, cleaning and other tasks associated with household management. In many developing countries, they also include what are called expenditure-saving activities (since these products or services would otherwise have to be purchased) geared mainly towards household consumption, such as maintenance of kitchen gardens, and orchards, taking care of household poultry and cattle, free collection of firewood, fish etc., husking of paddy, grinding of food grains, preparation of cow dung cakes, collecting and fetching water, making baskets and mats for household use, sewing, tailoring, weaving, and tutoring children and so on.

Since women tend to be the dominant (though not the only) performers of these essential care services, the extent to which care work is recognized and valued is often also a useful barometer of the status of women in a society. Improving the conditions under which such work is performed - whether it is paid, unpaid or underpaid; whether it is adequately valued and socially appreciated;

whether it is marked by comfortable and dignified working conditions – is obviously significant for those who perform it. But it is also necessary for improving overall productivity in a society and laying secure foundations for the future.

So there is need for social recognition of unpaid work, which is not necessarily the same as trying to put a value to it to add to national income. The aim should be to recognise it and give social value to those who perform it, while at the same time trying to reduce the time and drudgery involved in such work, through greater social provision of basic services and through other interventions that reduce time spent in household provisioning of essential items like fuel and water. And of course the gender construction of society whereby most such work is seen as the responsibility of women and girls in the family also needs to change, to ensure that the remaining unpaid work is shared across both male and female family members.

This immediately points to what should therefore be priority areas for social policy: the social provision of the goods and services that are otherwise provided by unpaid private labour; and social attention to investments that would reduce the time and drudgery associated with such work.

Not all the tasks of social reproduction are unpaid, even in many relatively poor countries. Indeed, it has now become a major terrain for paid employment, as paid domestic work has become one of the “emerging” activities that account for the work of increasing numbers of women workers. This reflects demographic patterns that place increasing requirements on the “care economy”, as well as patterns of GDP growth and macroeconomic processes that are associated with rising inequalities and do not generate sufficient productive employment opportunities in other activities. The greater the income inequality in a country, the greater is the likelihood of the proliferation of paid domestic work, because it generates greater demand for such work in families whose incomes are high enough for them to outsource at least some tasks, as well as greater supply of such workers as poor families seek survival strategies or methods to increase their meagre incomes. But on a more fundamental level the nature of the expansion of this form of women’s work is determined by the gender construction of societies across the world, whereby women remain responsible for the care economy and social reproduction even when they are engaged in outside work, and so transfer some of this burden of previously unpaid work on to paid workers (usually other women).

This is because the requirements of social reproduction in the sending society still remain. It has usually been the case that migrant women’s own

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