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The Beijing Platform for Action charted a future we still need to bring up: building feminist economic policy

Valeria Esquivel and Corina Rodríguez Enríquez

ABSTRACT

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), written 25 years ago, is remarkable in its economic diagnostics, analytical framework, and policy prescriptions, which remain fully relevant today. In this article, we revisit the main economic problems identified by the BPfA: GDP growth, employment, care, and poverty. In terms of GDP growth, the BPfA was clear that not any type of growth would suffice, calling for sustainable development *avant la lettre*. It left open the question of what feminist macroeconomics would look like, on which there has been much progress in defining, if unfortunately not in applying. On employment, it is still the case that sectoral, labour, and employment policies, working in tandem with macroeconomic policies, are necessary to make the promise of decent work for all a reality. On care, this 25 years saw the transition from ‘valuation to transformation’, complementing and deepening the BPfA’s agenda; and the need for social protection for all remains key to alleviate poverty. In the most challenging of times, while the COVID-19 crisis is unfolding, the BPfA charts a future that we urgently need to bring up.

KEYWORDS

Growth; feminist macroeconomics; sustainable development; employment; unpaid care work; paid care work; poverty

Le Programme d’action de Beijing (Beijing Platform for Action – BPfA), rédigé il y a 25 ans, est remarquable du point de vue de ses diagnostics économiques, de son cadre analytique et de ses prescriptions en matière de politique générale, autant d’aspects qui continuent d’être entièrement pertinents aujourd’hui. Dans cet article, nous revenons sur les principaux problèmes économiques identifiés par le BPfA – croissance du PIB, emploi, soins et pauvreté. Pour ce qui est de la croissance du PIB, le Programme stipulait clairement qu’il ne suffirait pas d’assurer n’importe quel type de croissance et lançait un appel pour le développement durable avant la lettre. Il laissait ouverte la question de la forme que prendrait la macroéconomie féministe, aspect sur lequel on a accompli de grands progrès en matière de définition, mais malheureusement pas en matière d’application. Pour ce qui est de l’emploi, la réalité continue d’être que les politiques sectorielles, et celles relatives à la main d’œuvre et à l’emploi, en tandem avec les politiques macroéconomiques, sont nécessaires pour faire de la promesse de travail décent pour tous une réalité. En matière de soins, durant les 25 dernières années on a assisté à la transition de «l’estimation à la transformation», ce qui est venu compléter et approfondir l’ordre du jour du Programme. Et la nécessité de protection sociale pour tous reste essentielle pour atténuer la pauvreté. Durant cette période des plus difficiles, alors que se développe la crise du COVID-19, le Programme d’action de Beijing trace un avenir auquel nous devons donner forme, ce de toute urgence.

La Plataforma de Acción de Beijing (PAB), escrita hace 25 años, es notable por sus diagnósticos económicos, su marco analítico y sus medidas de políticas públicas, los cuales siguen siendo plenamente pertinentes hoy en día. En el presente artículo revisamos los principales problemas económicos identificados por la PAB —el crecimiento del PIB, el empleo, el cuidado y la pobreza—. En cuanto al crecimiento del PIB, la Plataforma tuvo claro que no bastaría con cualquier tipo de crecimiento, sino que exigió un desarrollo sostenible, antes incluso de que este concepto estuviera en boga. Dejó abierta la cuestión de cómo sería la macroeconomía feminista, y, si bien se ha avanzado mucho en su definición, desafortunadamente no ha sucedido lo mismo con su aplicación. Respecto al empleo, sigue siendo cierto que las políticas sectoriales, laborales y de empleo, en conjunción con las políticas macroeconómicas, son necesarias para hacer realidad la promesa de instaurar un trabajo digno para todos. En lo que tiene que ver con la atención en salud, en estos 25 años se ha pasado de la “valoración a la transformación”, complementando y profundizando el programa de la Plataforma. Además, la necesidad de protección social para todos sigue siendo clave para aliviar la pobreza. En estos tiempos aún más difíciles, mientras se desarrolla la crisis de la Covid-19, la Plataforma de Acción de Beijing aborda un futuro que debemos trazar con urgencia.

Pursue and implement sound and stable macroeconomic and sectoral policies that are designed and monitored with the full and equal participation of women, encourage broad-based sustained economic growth, address the structural causes of poverty and are geared towards eradicating poverty and reducing gender-based inequality within the overall framework of achieving people-centred sustainable development. (Beijing Platform for Action, Strategic Objective A.1, point 58, para c).

Vivas, libres y desendeudadas nos queremos. (Alive, free and with no (foreign) debt we want to be; title of the document read at the massive feminist mobilisation and women’s strike in Buenos Aires, 9 March 2020).

Introduction

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), written 25 years ago, reads in a remarkably contemporary way regarding its economic diagnostics, analytical framework, and policy prescriptions. It forcefully acknowledged that the transformations in the world economy were ‘changing the parameters of social development in all countries’ (point 47), and that ‘[t]he uncertain global economic climate has been accompanied by economic restructuring as well as, in a certain number of countries, persistent, unmanageable levels of external debt and structural adjustment programmes’ (*ibid.*). It stated that these factors had in turn brought with them recessions, ‘lack of employment in the private sector and reductions in public services and public service jobs that affect women disproportionately’; one of those disproportionate effects on women being their uptake of more unpaid care work to compensate for lost household income (point 160). The BPfA contests the targeted ‘anti-poverty programmes’ fashionable at the time, and takes a clear structuralist

view when calling for ‘democratic participation and changes in economic structures in order to ensure access for all women to resources, opportunities and public services’ (point 47) plus ‘social protection’ (point 52).

The diagnostics of multiple forms of gender-based discrimination in the labour markets and their root causes also have strong resonance today, and are worth citing at length: due to

difficult economic situations and a lack of bargaining power resulting from gender inequality, many women have been forced to accept low pay and poor working conditions and thus have often become preferred workers ... Women have been particularly affected by ... restructuring processes, which have changed the nature of employment and, in some cases, have led to a loss of jobs, even for professional and skilled women. In addition, many women have entered the informal sector owing to the lack of other opportunities. (Point 151)

Discrimination in education and training, hiring and remuneration, promotion and horizontal mobility practices, as well as inflexible working conditions, lack of access to productive resources and inadequate sharing of family responsibilities, combined with a lack of or insufficient services such as child care, continue to restrict employment, economic, professional and other opportunities and mobility for women and make their involvement stressful. (Point 152)

These two excerpts read as if they had been written today. They offer a balanced analysis of demand-side issues¹ and supply-side ones.²

The BPfA is also strikingly contemporary in its analysis of the role of violence and abuse of women in the workplace, and its impact on women workers. Point 161 about women in wage employment notes amongst other dimensions that ‘[t]he experience of sexual harassment is an affront to a worker’s dignity and prevents women from making a contribution commensurate with their abilities’. Remarkably, it was only last year, in 2019, that the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention (C190, 2019) on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work was adopted, and will soon enter into force.³

In policy terms, the BPfA notes that ‘macroeconomic policies need rethinking and reformulation’ (point 47), and that ‘employment strategies continue to pay insufficient attention to the occupations and sectors where women predominate’ (point 160). As a result, point 58 quoted above emphasises the need for macroeconomic and sectoral policies that encourage economic growth and sustainable development – a language close to that of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 and the ILO’s recent call for a human-centred approach (ILO 2019a). Women’s participation in economic policy design and monitoring is deemed central to making them gender-responsive, politicising macroeconomic policymaking, something that we know but still have few examples of.⁴ The BPfA was also ahead of its time in relation to its focus on sustainable development in order to avoid the global environmental crisis that we now face: point 56 brought this issue to the fore: ‘Sustainable development and economic growth that is both sustained and sustainable are possible only through improving the economic, social, political, legal and cultural status of women’. We could not agree more with this statement.

These excerpts confirm the relevance of the BPfA today – and unfortunately, the insufficient progress – or indeed regression, in many respects – experienced in the last 25 years.

In the years in between, many policies have replaced the ones directly criticised by the BPfA, with similar aims and conceptual underpinnings. An example is the debt-relief policies recommended in both the South and the North in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis (Karamessini and Rubery 2013). These policies had conditions similar to those typical of the 1980s structural adjustment policies. Feminist economists had denounced the gendered impacts of such policies on poverty, on the deterioration of public care services and on women's unpaid care work in work undertaken before the Beijing Conference (Elson 1991).

In an echo of this earlier period and the feminist criticism it inspired, feminists today are calling out the current stage of capitalism – referred to as the era of ‘financialisation’⁵ – for increasing financial vulnerability, and extending and shifting it from countries, to food markets, to households (Fraser 2018). Household debt in turn has increased as a result of sustained contractions in real labour income, and it has feminised as a result of microfinance programmes targeted at women (Bateman and Maclean 2017).⁶ Today, as in the 1980s, women are still hit harder when employment contracts. They are disproportionately crowded in low-paid, informal jobs, and they are even less likely than their male counterparts to be able to remain unemployed, as fewer women are covered by unemployment benefits (ILO 2017).

As in the past, women today are not fully benefiting from structural transformation processes, as gender sectoral segregation persists and the necessary policies to revert it are not in place (Seguino and Braunstein 2019). Women are still shouldering the brunt of unpaid care work, and they are particularly hit when public care services contract and the working conditions of care workers deteriorate (Addati *et al.* 2018).

Perhaps the main gains for women in this last 25 years lie in a drop in the global average incidence of poverty, and in particular extreme poverty, defined in monetary terms, for example through different measures of dollars per day (purchasing power parity).⁷ A reduction in poverty was and is a key focus in both the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which guided policymakers from 2000 to 2015, and the SDGs, which run from 2016 to 2030. However, there are two important caveats. First, anti-poverty programming has relied on predominantly female labour and responsibility, effectively ‘instrumentalising’ women (Chant 2008). Second, there has been a broadening and deepening of income and wealth inequalities, which intersect with – and reinforce – gender inequalities (Oxfam 2020). All in all, the old economic problems pointed by the BPfA remain, and some have exacerbated while new ones have emerged.

Policy responses to these challenges return the state to centre stage, reminding us of its critical role in human development. The BPfA was clear in highlighting the centrality of the state in implementing the necessary transformative policies, in collaboration with other institutions. It stated: ‘Implementation is primarily the responsibility of Governments, but is also dependent on a wide range of institutions in the public, private and non-governmental sectors at the community, national, subregional/regional and international levels’ (point 286). However, the role of the state has been challenged during these 25 years by mainstream economics’ policy prescriptions, including letting markets function with the least possible interference, minimising the role of the state, and

achieving macroeconomic stability by means of austerity policies, as well as by a growing process of corporate capture.

The COVID-19 crisis is unfolding while we are finalising this article in late March 2020. It brings new and unimaginable challenges that add complexity to all the above. It might also open new opportunities to draw renewed attention to the importance of the state and public policies, and give new pre-eminence to the idea that there is such a thing as the public good. The feminist vision of the ‘sustainability of life’ – when societies see the survival and flourishing of life as their main objective (Carrasco 2001; Nelson and Power 2018), appears today as strongly as ever as the ultimate goal of economic policies. The goal should not ever be ‘the economy’, as an end in itself.

In the sections that follow, we revisit the main economic problems identified by the BPfA – growth, employment, care, and poverty – to chart an economic future in this most challenging of moments.

Growth, but not any growth

Twenty-five years ago, the experience of the 1980s ‘lost decade’ for development and the low GDP growth rates of the first half of the 1990s were fresh in the minds of those who were in Beijing. By then it had become clear that women bore the brunt of the structural adjustment costs, as outlined earlier – and that globalisation was not benefiting them (Elson 1995). The deterioration of public care services (critically, health and education) and the increase in poverty rates stemming from unemployment and higher costs of living were having both direct and indirect impacts on women.⁸ The indirect impact came through increasing their already weighty and disproportionate burden of unpaid care work.⁹ Broad-based economic growth was then seen as a pre-condition for reverting structural adjustment policies and expanding women’s employment.

The terms of the debate changed during the 2000s, as sustained growth in GDP and in commodity prices benefited commodity-exporting Southern economies (and the poor, as the export boom gave room to finance re-distributive social policies). Debates on growth turned ‘supply-side’, with the seeming triumph of orthodox views focused on trade liberalisation, minimal states, and low inflation. Within this framework, there was much academic and political debate about the relationship between gender equality and growth that painted a win–win, rosy scenario: given long-term GDP growth ultimately comes from productivity growth, and women’s better education, skills, and access to credit increase productivity, then gender equality (measured along those variables) is good for growth (Klugman and Tyson 2016).¹⁰ This type of reasoning is also behind calculations that put dazzling figures to expected increases in global GDP if the barriers that women face to participate in the labour force were removed, via the provision of care services and access to credit (Woetzel *et al.* 2015). But this is as if women’s productivity contributions were intrinsic to them, and not the result of them finding the appropriate jobs. Where the demand for these jobs would come from is never properly stated.

This recent, mainstream debate about gender equality and growth lacks the critical, policy-oriented take of the debate that happened at the time of Beijing, around the

same question. Parallel to that 1995 debate, a complementary body of scholarship analysing the impacts of macroeconomic policy on women and men was emerging. This was reflected in the publication of two special issues in the *World Development* journal (Çağatay *et al.* 1995; Grown *et al.* 2000). Heterodox feminist macroeconomics gained renewed strength in the last decade in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis (Antonopoulos 2014) and is now a consolidated subfield within macroeconomics (Elson and Seth 2019; Seguino 2019).

This approach takes both supply and demand perspectives; is structuralist in its attention to the relationship between gender inequalities and the productive structure; and expands macroeconomic analyses to include unpaid care work. Most importantly, it also emphasises the need for gender-responsive macroeconomic policies – that is, macroeconomic policies that pursue gender-equality objectives based on diagnoses of how different policy options affect women and men differently. Growth in this framework is not an automatic trick but the result of policies that sustain it.

Whether growth contributes to gender equality depends crucially on two issues. First, it depends on growth patterns: that is, which sectors are behind GDP growth, and whether they are able to offer protected, well- and equal-paying jobs to women. For example, debt-led growth, usually combined with exchange-rate appreciation, generates short-term consumption booms but increases systemic risks, bringing about periodic economic crises. This makes employment and incomes volatile. Growth based on a handful of dynamic sectors with few linkages with the rest of the economy – that is, extractive industries, monoculture for export, financial sectors – tends to increase inequalities in incomes and wealth. Only a few benefit from growth based on this pattern, and meanwhile large costs are imposed to populations by despoiling the environment, displacing populations, and ruining livelihoods for which mostly women are responsible. Such a growth model can hardly generate decent jobs, let alone at the scale needed. When good jobs are scarce, gender exclusionary norms become a rationing mechanism, and women crowd into low-paying, low-productivity sectors (Seguino and Braunstein 2019). So not only does this model reinforce income and gender inequalities, but it also biases public policies away from redistribution (Sen 2019).

This is the second issue connecting growth and gender equality. Whether growth contributes to gender equality also depends on how the gains of growth are distributed, and how states play their redistributive role (Kabeer 2016). Reformulating macroeconomic policy, as the BPfA suggested, entails a focus on monetary policy, including debt and exchange-rate management and controls on financial short-term flows. States need to work in tandem with trade, industrial, and employment policies to progressively shape sectoral production and employment dynamics to generate better employment outcomes for all; and fiscal policy, including tax policy and public spending, needs to focus on creating fiscal space to fund the expansion of social infrastructure, social protection, and public care policies. Gender-responsive social protection policies, including the expansion of social protection benefits, and care policies, particularly public investments in good-quality child care, in turn, have the potential to further boost GDP growth (Addati *et al.* 2018; Ortiz *et al.* 2019).

But this has not been so simple in the context of globalisation. The free trade and financial liberalisation that have characterised the global economy at the end of last century and the beginning of this enabled a race to the bottom in all standards: labour, fiscal, financial, environmental. Transnational capital circulates, building value chains that take advantage of lower wages, weaker labour rights, and loose environmental standards. In turn, increasing deregulation also leads to tax-dodging mechanisms that allow capital to flow from the global South to the global North, therefore damaging the financial capacity of states, leading them to resort to foreign indebtedness, and weakening their ability to implement redistributive policies (Bidegain *et al.* 2016). Growth patterns that generate insufficient and poor-quality jobs together with weak social protection systems, as well as social policies that, although expanding, are insufficient to sustain livelihoods, are behind the increase in household indebtedness. Households are indebted not for luxury consumption, but because of their need to satisfy basic needs. This feeds a process of ‘financial extractivism’ that particularly impacts on poor women (Cavallero and Gago 2019).

To summarise: achieving economic growth that favours equality goals, as proposed by the BPfA, takes political will, strong regulatory frameworks, and international co-ordination. It requires reorienting capital flows from short-term gains to activities that generate quality jobs for all; and it requires sufficiently financed public policies to guarantee that economic gains from growth are distributed fairly.

Employment: decent work beyond productivity considerations

While women’s unemployment was at the centre of the BPfA preoccupations, as it was at the root of much of the impact on poverty, there was an early acknowledgement that women’s lack of bargaining power and poor working conditions were an instrument for competitive advantage in labour-intensive exports like garments (Ghosh 2018). The ending of the multi-fibre agreement, the dismantling of labour protections in many places, the lack of social protection coverage, and the increased volatility of the economy have made workers, and particularly women workers, more precarious and vulnerable than at the time of Beijing. If in 2002 roughly 60 per cent of women workers outside agriculture were in informal employment in the developing world (ILO 2002, 8), by now that figure stays at 55 per cent in middle-income economies and 78 per cent in low-income economies (ILO 2018, 21).

Women continue to be a sizeable proportion of street vendors, home-based workers, and waste-pickers. These occupations do not qualify as decent work. Women are less numerous as compared with men in new forms of Web-based work, notably the ‘gig economy’, in which Web-based platforms act as intermediaries for a large, ‘flexible’ workforce (Berg *et al.* 2018). Yet the women who *are* in the gig economy are more likely than their male counterparts to be unprotected when this work is their main or sole source income (*ibid.*). Evidence shows that most unprotected workers do not work informally by choice, but in the absence of other means of livelihood (Bonnet *et al.* 2019).

While currently women’s unemployment levels are relatively low (5.6 per cent world average) (ILO 2020a, 30), they mask the difficulties women face in finding jobs, which

makes them being available for but not actively seeking work (the discouraged worker effect) or remain in time-related under-employment (they would like to work more hours but they do not find a demand). The combined effect of these two measures plus unemployment (the ‘labour under-utilisation rate’) is 15 per cent, compared to 11.9 per cent for men (*ibid.*). This is a worrying figure. Women’s labour force participation is globally still 27 percentage points lower than that for men (47.2 per cent versus 74.2 per cent, respectively; *ibid.*, 28), and it is clear that the majority of women who are not in the labour force are so because of their family responsibilities (Addati *et al.* 2018, xxxi). This is particularly the case for young women who also miss school: the proportion of young women who are not in education, training, or employment (NEET) is almost a third (31 per cent), a proportion that doubles that for young men (14 per cent) (ILO 2020b, 38).¹¹

Policies that promote women’s labour force participation through financial inclusion and entrepreneurship typically fail to recognise women’s family responsibilities. Some of these initiatives may achieve positive results in certain circumstances, but in most cases they result in an increase in women’s total work and greater dependence on financing mechanisms (indebtedness) without really altering the structural barriers that prevent women’s economic autonomy (Rankin 2002). Without demand for their products – if not for their wage labour – these strategies might only feed women’s unemployment.

A persistent feature of women’s and men’s employment is sectoral segregation. Men dominate employment in sectors such as construction, transport or communications, and manufacturing industry in high-income countries, while health, education, and other social and personal services, and agriculture in low-income countries, are female-dominated. As highlighted by the BPfA, when the sectoral composition of employment changes, women tend to lose their jobs in greater numbers than men, as they tend to dominate relatively low productivity sectors (subsistence agriculture, traditional services), without gaining them in high-productivity sectors (manufacturing industry, ‘modern’ services). Yet these are the sectors that would, at least in principle, be able to pay better wages. Frequently, sectoral segregation persists even if women’s educational credentials improve, as they may lack the specific qualifications and skills required to enter high-productivity jobs, reflecting the complex feedback effects between the gender-stereotyping of jobs and educational choices (Borrowman and Klasen 2017).

Labour productivity (that is, the value added per worker, calculated as total value added over number of workers) is, however, a misleading measure to guide investment when it comes to care services. Health and education appear to be low-productivity, but this is, in many cases, the result of not measuring well what these sectors produce (their outputs). Instead, it is common to calculate their value by adding up their costs, which are overwhelmingly labour costs. In care sectors, workers are offered lower wages than they would for work of equal value in other sectors – a ‘care pay penalty’. Using the conventional way of measuring labour productivity, this work is lower-cost and has lower value, hence it is seen as having low productivity (Esquivel 2019). Yet care, and other public-sector jobs that are female-dominated, are precisely the sectors that are crucial to sustain economy-wide productivity and well-being. To support them, public investment is key (Addati *et al.* 2018). Moreover, cuts in public-sector jobs that are female-dominated have been justified on the

grounds of low productivity. This leads in turn to further deterioration of women's working conditions and average earnings. In extreme cases, cuts have led to contractions in women's labour force participation (Fedi *et al.* 2019).

Among wage workers, the gender pay gap is still 18.8 per cent (hourly) throughout the world (Beghini *et al.* 2019, 44). In high-income countries, the gender pay gap is wider at the top of the earnings scale, while in low- and middle-income countries, women in informal wage employment receive lower wages than informal waged men, and lower wages than formal workers, frequently below minimum wages. In a world where women's education has improved dramatically, education is not the main explanation for these gaps, but how women's educational credentials are valued. Indeed, women working in the same occupation are systematically paid less than men, even if their educational levels equal or exceed those of their male counterparts. Gender segregation, at the level of the enterprise – which in aggregate builds into sectoral employment – is a much more significant cause (*ibid.*).

As called for by the BPfA 25 years ago, the current situation underscores the need for sectoral, labour, and employment policies, working in tandem with macroeconomic policies (ILO 2019b).

Unpaid care work: from valuation to transformation

The BPfA was pathbreaking in making visible and recognising unpaid care work, and in framing it as an economic issue. Much of the time-use data collection efforts in the last 25 years, particularly in the global South, derive from it. However, the BPfA's call for measuring and valuing unpaid care work was not connected to a clear distributive agenda (Esquivel 2011). Since then, much has changed in the understanding and framing of unpaid care work, and the policies needed to address it. New and better time-use data have confirmed that unpaid care work is women's work everywhere, although differences in household structure, incomes, and social and economic policy all shape the ways in which some women and households more than others, and in some regions more than others, provide unpaid care work (Addati *et al.* 2018).

Care provision entails costs in terms of time and effort that have consequences on women's labour force participation, and the quality of the jobs they gain access to, leading to lower incomes and deficits in their access to social protection. But also, the social undervaluation of unpaid care work, provided for free outside market relations and seemingly a natural feminine trait, leads to the deterioration of working conditions and wages of care workers – in health, in education, and in domestic work – who are predominantly women. The numbers and working conditions of care workers, in turn, depend on the public policies in health and education: public provision is associated with better working conditions, whilst unregulated private provision worsens them; and insufficient care provision is closely linked to the extensive employment of domestic workers (Addati *et al.* 2018).

In normative terms, the debates that were left open in Beijing – in particular, whether to remunerate unpaid care work, or the 'wages for housework' agenda – converged in what

was first called ‘the Triple R’ framework: recognise, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work (Elson 2008; Esquivel 2014), and then came to be ‘the 5R’ framework. The two additional ‘R’s in this framework are rewarding care workers properly,¹² and representing them via social dialogue and collective bargaining (Addati *et al.* 2018).

Twenty years after Beijing, the SDGs completed and broadened the BPfA care agenda, setting concrete redistributive goals ‘through the provision of public [care] services, infrastructure and social protection policies’ (Target 5.4; United Nations 2015), that is to say, through care policies. Care policies are policies that assign resources to care in the form of money (including income, transfers, and subsidies), services, and time. They cut across sectors, including health and education, social protection (including maternity and paternity protection), care-related basic infrastructure (water and sanitation), and also labour policies, like the regulation of working times (Esquivel and Kaufman 2017). These policies mould the ways in which care is provided and funded, for whom and by whom, and have the potential to contribute to gender equality and to mitigate other dimensions of inequality, such as class, cast, and ethnicity – this is the reason why they figure prominently in SDG 5, on gender inequality, and have been flagged by the recent Oxfam Inequality Report (Oxfam 2020).

Care policies work in synergy, complementing one another. From a social justice perspective, transformative care policies simultaneously guarantee the rights of care receivers and caregivers, as well as their agency, autonomy, and ultimately, well-being (Esquivel 2016a). In other words, care policies are transformative when they succeed in making care a matter of rights, and we all identify ourselves as caregivers and care recipients, we recognise our vulnerable and inter-dependent character, and we collectively provide for our care needs.

Poverty and social protection: towards universal protection floors

‘Women and poverty’ was the first critical area of the BPfA – and the BPfA’s understanding of poverty and policy recommendations were pretty provocative in its time. It highlighted that

[p]overty has various causes, including structural ones. Poverty is a complex, multidimensional problem, with origins in both the national and international domains ... eradication of poverty cannot be accomplished through antipoverty programmes alone but will require democratic participation and changes in economic structures ... The failure to adequately mainstream a gender perspective in all economic analysis and planning and to address the structural causes of poverty is also a contributing factor. (Points 47, 48)

The concept of ‘feminisation of poverty’, proposed by the BPfA, has since been much debated (Chant 2008). But it had the political power to draw attention to the specific experience of women in poverty. Yet, it also led to female-targeted poverty interventions based on neoliberal approaches that ‘enlist the agency of individuals to solve their own problems’ (Chant 2015) and the belief that ‘income in female hands may lead to more beneficial outcomes for them and their families’ (*ibid.*). In response to these ideas, Conditional

Cash Transfer programmes (CCTs) have spread all over the global South in the years since Beijing. CCTs – in common with micro-credit schemes and newer initiatives based on smart economics approaches – aim to boost women’s economic efficiency as producers and carers for their households.

CCTs are also employed as a response to the weakness of social security systems to serve parts of the population facing structural difficulties that prevent their participation in the labour market. The BPfA acknowledged the persistent gender gaps in social protection, even in schemes that developed stronger institutions and broader coverage. Social protection systems built around the individual’s position in the labour market reproduced, quite directly, gender gaps in employment. Against this backdrop, CCTs are one of several proposals on social protection that have been developed since Beijing, based on the idea of guaranteeing basic social protection floors for all, as recommended by ILO Resolution 202.

From a feminist perspective, CCTs have had mixed impact. CCTs were, from the very beginning, targeted at women as mothers, as a way to serve children. This was because their objectives were to address income-poverty in the short run, as well as to interrupt the inter-generational reproduction of poverty in the long run (World Bank 2009). CCTs have had mixed effects on women’s living conditions and autonomy, and have been extensively analysed from a feminist perspective. On one hand, CCTs can improve material living conditions, and reinforce women’s economic autonomy by strengthening their position in the bargaining processes over economic resources within households (Martínez Franzoni and Voorend 2012), and in some circumstances, they also give women better conditions to face and escape from gender-based violence (Rodríguez Enríquez 2011). However, CCTs also consolidate the maternalistic bias of social policy, which implies that women are viewed only as mothers, while their care role is reinforced by the way of conditionalities linked to the education and health of children (Molyneux *et al.* 2016). Moreover, the conditionalities can discourage women’s participation in the labour market, or they may reinforce the informality of women’s employment (Rodríguez Enríquez 2011).

However, advances beyond the CCT approach to low-income populations and those to overcome lack of social protection are slow and face concrete challenges. First, the design of inclusive policy instruments requires the allocation of adequate resources through public budgets. Fiscal restrictions and austerity policies that many governments implement not only delay the guarantees of basic security floors to mitigate social risks, but also worsen living conditions of women and widen inequality gaps (ONU Mujeres *et al.* 2013). Similarly, there is a current trend to privatise social protection in some countries, mainly (but not solely), in the areas of education and health. This includes the promotion of public–private partnerships to build basic social infrastructure. But even when just seen in terms of service provision, this approach is proving to be risky and counterproductive (Romero 2019).

Second, challenges imposed by current and future changes to the nature of work add pressure to the persistent inequality gaps in social protection. Jobs available through new technologies are jobs where production is increasingly decentralised. These include

tele-work and ‘gig economy’ jobs involving online platforms. These are increasingly leading workers to new forms of vulnerability and lack of protection.

Third, social protection systems still need to solve how to include care as one of its central pillars, in line with SDG 5’s Target 5.4 (ONU Mujeres *et al.* 2013). Care services based on the principle of universality, while respecting people’s diverse needs, are key to guaranteeing the rights of caregivers and care recipients, and to generate the conditions for the redistribution of care responsibilities. As mentioned above, these services must include not only services for children, but also for the elderly, chronically ill, and disabled people, and must guarantee decent work conditions for care workers.

Conclusions: towards feminist economic policy

The BPfA was not just a political declaration or a wishful policy list endorsed by governments. Twenty-five years after it was signed, it remains a framework for policymaking that both implicitly and explicitly is based on a different model of growth and development than that which has dominated national and international policymaking in recent decades. The BPfA still represents a call for an egalitarian, inclusive, participatory, people-centred, rights-based, sustainable, and accountable development model (Expert Group Meeting (EGM) 2009, 55, point a, cited by Esquivel 2011). The call for accelerating the BPfA’s implementation is also a call to work towards such a radically different development model (ECOSOC 2020).

Twenty-five years after Beijing, we are still far from achieving its vision. The goal of economic growth as an end in itself has been pursued via economic policies that have typically led to greater economic inequality, intersecting with increased ‘horizontal’ inequalities based on identities including sex, gender, race, and nationality, among others (Kabeer and Sweetman 2015), dominating economic agendas. Economic and financial globalisation has promoted a race to the bottom in people’s living conditions and in the ability of states to implement public policies. As a consequence, labour markets continue to exclude significant numbers of workers, among which women are over-represented, to unstable, poorly paid, and weakly protected jobs. Care work continues to sustain social reproduction, and even though its contribution has been made increasingly visible, the distribution of time and effort of this work continues to be extremely gender biased. Improvements in poverty incidence took place along with an obscene increase in income inequality, and the feminisation of social policies brings with it tensions and contradictions that limit women’s autonomy.

As we have departed from the vision in Beijing, a more subtle change has also taken place: the neoliberal narrative of meritocracy and individual success has taken hold, elevating it to the equivalent of individual freedom. Even the ‘women’s economic empowerment’ narrative has frequently focused on expanding the labour market participation of individual women, erasing underlying power structures and structural barriers to their participation, focusing instead on equality of opportunity, not of outcomes (Esquivel 2016b). This individualistic, neoliberal narrative also reduces the idea of feminism to a

focus on individuals, not women and other feminised identities as a social (and heterogeneous) group. Hence, it shuts down the space for collective action.

Yet, the extraordinary energy of the thousands of women who met in Beijing in 1995 and made the BPfA possible is revived today by the renewed strength of feminisms, which in many parts of the world have gained massive support, including vibrantly among the youth. These renewed feminist movements are successfully putting back the BPfA's vision on the public agenda. *Vivas, libres y desendeudadas nos queremos* (Alive, free and with no debt we want to be), to build up the world outlined by the BPfA. Then or now, feminists have never had it easy. But the current context poses unprecedented challenges, and perhaps also unprecedented opportunities. And we have each other.

Coronavirus postscript: 2020, the year cracks showed in plain sight

We were finalising this paper when COVID-19 was named, moved from China to Europe to the USA, became a pandemic, and was heading towards Latin America and possibly Africa, and to India and Pakistan, home of a fifth of the world's population – all in less than a month.

Devastating news of overwhelmed hospitals and pictures of exhausted doctors and nurses went around the world, as did those exposing the queues of people trying to get a sickness certificate to avoid being fired, or to get food in a soup kitchen. Lockdowns have been imposed to contain contagion, to 'flatten the curve' of the pandemic's rate of infection, and to gain time to expand the capacity of health systems – and have brought economies to a halt. The daily count of infections and deaths come along with ever-gloomier forecasts as to how much the economies will contract if states do not act, swiftly and in a co-ordinated manner, to support people, incomes, workers, and firms. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed in one go the fragilities of developing economies, the inequalities and weaknesses of health systems, the vulnerabilities in labour markets, and the failing of social protection systems in plain sight.

The stimulus packages put in place as of now vary between countries in size, timing, policy instrument (fiscal/monetary policy), and focus (income support, wage subsidies, and/or financial assistance to businesses) (Overseas Development Institute 2020). Perhaps there is one common factor: the ramping-up of public expenditure towards strengthening the public health system. First-hit developed economies have reacted with bigger packages targeted to formal businesses and workers, while developing economies are only beginning to react, some also supporting informal workers. Financing these packages is an issue for low- and middle-income countries, which see their borrowing costs soar and their export prices plummet, putting in question the sustainability of their foreign debts (UNCTAD 2020). Co-ordination, in particular for supporting less-developed countries, has not yet taken place.

It is often said that COVID-19 is a great equaliser. But of course this is hardly true. Although highly contagious, the poor are more vulnerable to it. Social distancing is impossible if living in a township or slum, as is respecting hygiene recommendations

without clean water and soap. Malnutrition and chronic respiratory conditions typical of poorer countries increase risks of experiencing its most severe forms (Krishnan 2020). Lack of intensive care units and trained doctors is blatant in comparison to developed countries, and averages mask that these beds/units are frequently in the private sector, where access is restricted to those who can pay (Ortiz and Stubbs 2020). COVID-19 will possibly reinforce income inequalities within and between countries, given countries' differential capacity to face its health and economic impacts.

This crisis, as many in the past, has a woman's face: in the female nurses and doctors who make up 70 per cent of health and social work labour forces (Boniol *et al.* 2019); in the women who have lost their jobs in the service sectors – the hardest hit by lockdowns (ILO 2020c) – or whose livelihoods have been wiped out as street markets close and mobility is constrained (Alfers 2020); in the domestic workers that are told to stay put, many migrants with no home to go back to; in children at home to care for with no schools and no food supplements served (Wenham *et al.* 2020). It is also women who organise to sustain community ties, who cannot isolate themselves if they are to get supplies for their families, who take up more care work than usual in trying to keep everyone safe.

The way out of the crisis needs to have a woman's face as well. It is time to recognise the centrality of care provision in all forms – for the sick, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and children – and the value of this work to humanity. Time to develop and fund long-term public health systems, to realise the right to health, and to reward care workers properly (Ortiz and Stubbs 2020). Time to protect jobs, to extend unemployment benefits, and to put in place income-replacement measures to reach informal workers – both women and men. And in a moment when state intervention is called back to centre-stage and expansionary fiscal policies gain consensus (International Monetary Fund (IMF) 2020), it is time to rethink macroeconomic policies, on the fiscal, monetary, and external fronts. This rethink is essential for developing countries to be able to finance the urgently needed emergency policies, to spare women from bearing (again) the lion's share of the costs of the crisis, and eventually to usher in a better, gender-responsive recovery.

Notes

1. By 'demand side' we refer to the demand side of the labour market, i.e. the firms that employ women. For example, the BPfA quote mentions that women have lost jobs due to restructuring processes (changes in the composition of sectoral employment).
2. By 'supply side' we refer to issues associated to the characteristics of workers, like lack of access to productive resources and inadequate sharing of family responsibilities, amongst those referred to by the BPfA quote.
3. For more information on the ILO Convention (C190, 2019) on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work, see www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190 (last checked 13 April 2020).
4. See, for example, the 'Gender Equality and Macroeconomics' project, www.brettonwoodsproject.org/gender-equality-macroeconomics/ (last checked 31 March 2020).
5. Financialisation describes an economic process of increasing influence of the logic of finance in the world economy and the progressive decoupling between the real economy and the financial

sector, which has been a distinctive feature of capitalist development since the mid-1970s (Abeles *et al.* 2018).

6. The Microfinance Summit Campaign of 1997 demonstrated and stimulated the interest of development organisations of all kinds in microfinance as a ‘magic bullet’ that could end poverty and turn millions of women into entrepreneurs, empowering them in households and wider society in the process. The focus on microfinance has been critiqued by feminists from many different vantage points, notably for exposing women in poverty to the ‘discipline of the market’ (Lairap Fonderson 2003); for depoliticising the notion of women’s empowerment (Mahmud 2003); and defining empowerment from outsider perspectives (Kabeer 1998).
7. World Bank data on this are available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.DDAY> (last checked 13 April 2020).
8. The ‘feminisation of poverty’ argument started around the same period. It should be noted though that women are not necessarily poorer than men, or the majority of the poor. For a critical take, see Chant (2015).
9. The unpaid care work includes the care of persons and housework, performed in households and communities without a remuneration (not for profit or pay). For definitions, see Esquivel (2014).
10. Feminist economists have explored this suggested synergy between gender equality and growth in depth. See, for example, Kabeer and Natali (2013).
11. NEET rates include those who are unemployed (actively seeking and available for work), hence in the labour force. However, young women’s NEET rates are typically associated with inactivity (being out of the labour force).
12. Note that this is *not* the wages for housework agenda: care workers are in employment, and provide care for pay.

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