



Unemployment, poverty and inequality in SA

as seen through a feminist political-economy lens

- By Sbusisiwe Sibeko

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Much social reproduction is based in households, with women at the forefront, yet this work is still delegated to the periphery of political-economic policy discussions. In this article Sbusisiwe Sibeko provides a feminist political-economic perspective to investigate how women's bodies and labour might be conceptualised as the 'last colony' of accumulation.

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Introduction

Much has been written about the structure of South Africa's economy and the drivers of unemployment, poverty and inequality from a formal economic perspective. This article, however, is concerned with advancing the understanding of South Africa's social reproduction – the reproduction of the totality of the capitalist mode of production through market and non-market spheres.

Critiquing mainstream economics and heterodox schools of thought, Folbre (1986:247) asks:

Why are both the neoclassical and the Marxian paradigms so “silent” on the issue of inequality within the home? Their convergence is somewhat ironic: On the one hand, we have a paradigm, largely unconcerned with issues of conflict, which offers a well-developed theory of nonmarket production. On the other hand, we have a paradigm with a well-developed theory of conflict that is largely unconcerned with nonmarket production.

In this article I investigate how women's bodies and labour might be conceptualised as the basis of financialised capital accumulation (see Mohamed in this issue). Historically, black women were the basis of producing and reproducing black migrant labour – upon which the enormous wealth of colonial capitalism was built. The increased feminisation of labour markets and unpaid care work in the domestic economy shows that in almost all areas of life, women are disproportionately discriminated against. I suggest that intensified oppression of women is both a premise and result of capitalism. Feminist economists and other heterodox scholars have continuously highlighted the importance of contextualising social, economic, political processes throughout history to understanding economic phenomena.

The family and household structure, employment, sexual assault, education, climate change and health are some of the factors contributing to the feminisation of poverty. Kabeer (2015:194) highlights that:

The processes of poverty can be divided into those which explain why poor people remain poor over extended periods of time, the so-called ‘poverty trap’, and those which explain why people, both poor and non-poor, become poorer over time.

This requires that we assess vertical and horizontal structures and how they change over time. Inequalities tend to intertwine, magnify and exacerbate each other. Gender disparity intersects with both hierarchical inequalities and various other societal disparities. But women are not a monolithic group, and they experience overlapping oppression, exploitation and extraction depending on their intersecting identities. It is important to note here that while the feminist economics approaches (theoretical and empirical) provide us with heterodox understandings of these intersections they are still limited in their inclusion of non-binary genders.



This said, black women and youth have been the most vulnerable in the labour market and bear the burden of unemployment. In 1994, there were 41 million South Africans, with only 8.9 million of the population employed. The unemployment rate was estimated to be 22% in 1994 (Stats SA, 2015). The official unemployment rate peaked in 1999 at 36.4%, fell below 25% from 2006 to 2015, and then fell to 21.5% in 2008, at the onset of the Global Financial Crisis. In the third quarter of 2023, the unemployment rate in South Africa was 32.1% (expanded definition: 40.3%) (Stats SA, 2024). Black African unemployment rates have been much higher than whites.

Poverty was higher for female-headed households than for male-headed households (49% versus 33%) while black South African life remains unviable for the majority. According to Statistics South Africa (2017), in 2015, 55% of the population – 33 million people – lived below the official poverty line of R992 per person per month. A quarter of the population lived in ‘extreme poverty’, unable to afford enough food to meet their basic physical needs. Vulnerability to poverty is highest among teenage girls living in rural parts of the Eastern Cape and Limpopo.

Apartheid policies entrenched racial inequality, distorted economic structures and shaped patterns of ownership and control within the economy. When the new democratic state was established in 1994, much needed to be done to put South Africa on a different trajectory. However, as Mohamed (2019: vi) argues, “[t]he end of apartheid during the 1990s coincided with widespread neoliberal deregulation and economic globalisation of trade and financial markets and growing financialisation” which ultimately led to a “disconnect between equity and financial markets and the real economy”. These mainstream economic approaches have failed to adequately address the structural challenges facing South Africa, including high levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality.

The feminist lens, black households and the feminisation of poverty

Feminists have described the trends in disparity between men’s and women’s standards of living as the “feminisation of poverty”. This phenomenon is partly explained by the fact that, relative to men in the same socioeconomic rank, women and children are disproportionately represented in the lower socioeconomic status.

South Africans have been experiencing a protracted cost of living crisis, which is compounded by inadequate access to basic services and transport. In South Africa, “[p]overty patterns continue to be gendered and female-headed households are more likely to have low incomes, to be dependent on social grants, and less likely to have employed members” (Stats SA, 2013: iii). South Africa has a very high number of female-headed households which is a legacy of the migrant labour system. According to Stats SA (2017), the typical profile of a poor household in South Africa:

- is headed by a black African female who is younger than 35,
- is in a rural area in a rural-based province,
- has lower levels of education,
- lives in a dwelling that usually has between 0 and 1 bedrooms,



Source Diego Delso

- is less happy than they were 10 years ago, with the general health status of its household head being poor, and
- is more likely to be unemployed and located in the lower quintiles.

Black women are the most deprived. A recent study found that more than 60% of the black population experienced severe deprivation, whereas the Indian/Asian and white populations encountered deprivation at rates of 16% and 17% respectively. Furthermore, women exhibited a higher susceptibility to deprivation compared to men, and employed individuals experienced lower levels of deprivation than the unemployed (Adelzadeh and Ngangelizwe, 2024).

There is a long history to black household formation. For almost 50 years before 1994, economic activity in South Africa was orchestrated by the apartheid state that reshaped society on racial and spatial segregationist lines. Dutch and British settlers under colonial racial capitalist property relations violently dispossessed the natives. The 1913 Natives Land Act was a significant facet of law that deprived black South Africans of access to fertile land more extensively than in most other colonised countries. Only about 7% of arable land was accessible to black people (Davenport, 1991). Federici (2021) discusses how expropriation of land was not only a means of capital accumulation but also coerced men to join the labour force (the widescale integration of women as migrant workers would come later).

The labour migration system, designed to provide “cheap” (or undervalued) labour to the mining sector, marginalised the rural population’s land-based livelihoods while offering limited alternative employment prospects. Those remaining in the former Bantustans (black homelands) – delineated by the colonial regime and formalised during apartheid – were compelled to engage in unpaid activities such as subsistence farming and child care to sustain the labour force migrating to urban centres and mines. Townships emerged as spatial organisations of inexpensive migratory labour to drive the capital-intensive sectors owned by white elites with a white welfare state.



The state also enforced a “separation” between the reproductive and productive spheres of the economy. Black men were the source of labour while black women reproduced the labour power both in black and white families (as domestic workers). Racial discrimination under apartheid meant that women were trained in line with the education system designed for their race. African women studying through Bantu education could only hope to become either doctors, nurses or teachers in the public sector. Those who did not get into these positions ended up as domestic workers or informal sector traders (Okeke-Uzodike & Ndinda, 2012). Black men worked in places far from their families and spent extended periods away from home (Budlender & Lund, 2011). Federici (2021: 115), writing about the development of capitalism, states that:

[T]he construction of a new patriarchal order, making of women the servants of the male work-force, was a major aspect of capitalist development. On its basis a new sexual division of labor could be enforced that differentiated not only the tasks that women and men should perform, but their experiences, their lives, their relation to capital and to other sectors of the working class. Thus, no less than the international division of labor, the sexual division of labor was above all a power-relation, a division within the work-force, while being an immense boost to capital accumulation.

This brief history is fundamental in understanding how social reproduction, particularly the non-market sphere in South Africa today is shaped by the development of capitalism.

The household economy in democratic South Africa

Thirty years of democracy have produced a South Africa with obscene inequality (see Mohamed in this issue). This also means that those who own more and have higher incomes gain disproportionately from the benefits that accrue to the economy and society from the extra burden of unpaid work pushed onto women. During a crisis, like Covid-19, approximately 80% of women were spending more than four extra hours per day on child care during the strict lockdown, compared to 65% of surveyed men. Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen and Von Werlhof (1988) speak of women’s bodies and labour as the ‘last colony’ of accumulation, which is defined by a set of processes whereby new subjects have been brought into the structure of capitalism in exploitative and often violent ways. But arguably women’s labour and bodies are also the first colony. Using the 2010 Time Use Survey, Oosthuizen (2018) shows that males spent more than 60% of their total productive time in waged work whereas females spend 71% of their productive time on household production averaged across all ages.

Household production is essential to social reproduction yet remains on the periphery of economic discussions. Mainstream economic theory has been reliant on methodological individualism. Samuelson (1956) asked, “how can individual preferences collapse into an aggregate one for the whole household, so that it

could fit neoclassical economic models?" (Kabeer, 1994) The feminist economics critique of mainstream conceptualisations of the household is that they are based on theoretical shortcomings underpinning the conceptualisation of the household as well as intra-household dynamics. The assumptions are void of bargaining power. According to feminist economists an individual's bargaining power is determined by both quantifiable – such as economic assets – and non-quantifiable factors – such as community-based support, social norms and institutions, or perceptions about contributions and needs (Agarwal, 1997). Rules, social norms and institutions define the boundaries on the resources on which bargaining is socially accepted (Agarwal, 1997; England & Folbre, 1999).

Households are internally fragmented, they are one of the sites where inequalities and power differentials are reproduced. While gender is an ideological and cultural construct, it is also reproduced within the realm of socio-economic practices, and in turn, influences the outcomes of such practices. Gender relations play a systematic role in the division of labour, work (paid and unpaid), income, wealth, education, productive inputs, publicly provided goods and the like. Paid work refers to income-generating activities which are generally linked to markets, while unpaid work relates to the care and development of people and their capacity to work. There is strong empirical evidence that depending on who controls resources in the household, production, consumption and welfare outcomes are likely to be different (Jones, 2010; Udry, 1996; Quisumbing and Maluccio, 2000; Duflo and Udry, 2004; Duflo, 2000).

Feminist economists have continuously highlighted how households subsidise the capitalist economy through unpaid care work (see for example Agarwal, 1997; Folbre, 1986; Federici, 2021). A continuation of the deliberative division of labour, women and girls undertake a disproportionate amount of unpaid work on vital household duties, which is not included in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) calculations. The injustice of this feature of GDP is that vital unpaid work that is essential for the health and productivity of household members and communities is treated as being without value in the country's national accounts.

Housework was transformed into a natural attribute, rather than being recognised as work, because it was destined to be unwaged. Capital had to convince us that it is a natural, unavoidable, and even fulfilling activity to make us accept working without a wage (Federici, 2012: 16).

Whether GDP should be modified to include unpaid care and domestic work remains a much-contested area in feminist economics.

Systems of National Accounts (SNA) documents, which are a set of internationally standardised measures of economic activity,¹ explain the exclusion of services produced in households as follows:

A large volume of household services including the imputed values derived from production would distort the usefulness of the accounts for policy purposes and for the analysis of markets and market disequilibria – the analysis of inflation, unemployment, etc. (quoted in Varjonen *et al.*, 1999:12).



The SNA documents also argue that household production “is relatively isolated from, and independent of, market activities” (Varjonen *et al.*, 1999:14).

Assa (2019:82) highlights that “recent critiques consider GDP to be a statistical measure, flawed but nonetheless designed to objectively measure economic activity such as total production and income... the proposed remedies for GDP’s shortcomings are likewise statistical patches”. Assa (2019) highlights how GDP has been a political tool – unpaid care work has been excluded from this production frontier. The core argument here is that GDP is a biased measure and a non-objective tool. Highlighting the history of GDP, Assa (2019) shows how the changes in the 1968 SNA made finance productive, in that it changed the status of banks’ financial intermediation profits. Before 1968, finance was treated as a cost to business not value added to GDP. One could argue that if governments were willing to include finance in GDP (even at the risk of distorting) GDP, why can’t household unpaid services be included?²

There have been continued efforts by feminist economists to quantify unpaid care work to demonstrate its value and to show how market and non-market activities are interrelated. In South Africa, Budlender (2008) reports results of a study that used two variants of the average earnings approach (all earners and all employees), and two variants of the generalist approach (the average earnings of occupations involving work similar to housework, such as cleaning and cooking, and the earnings of paid domestic workers). The use of the average earnings approach finds that the value of unpaid care and domestic work is a higher percentage of GDP than the use of the generalist approach. Using median average earnings, Budlender (2008) finds that the value of unpaid and domestic work is 30% of GDP. Using earnings of paid domestic workers, the value is 11% of GDP. Measuring the relative size of SNA to unpaid care work, Budlender (2008) finds that men spent 30% of total hours spent on work on SNA work, and 20% of total hours spent on work on unpaid care work in South Africa. Women spent 13% of total hours spent on work on SNA work, and 37% of total hours spent on work on unpaid care work. The relatively low levels of SNA work for men and women are explained by the high unemployment rates. Budlender finds that men were undertaking 86 minutes per day on housework versus 225 minutes per day for women.

Using the 2010 Time Use Survey, Oosthuizen (2018) concludes that household production was valued at R749.9 billion in 2010. Almost three-quarters of this household production was contributed by women. Oosthuizen used a specialist replacement wage to calculate household production in monetary terms and found that such production was equivalent to 27.3% of GDP (close to Budlender’s average earnings approach). Elson (2021: 46) argues that:

[a]mong the ways to provide gender analysis of the macroeconomic strategy embedded in the budget is to incorporate the unpaid care and domestic economy into macroeconomic modeling, using data from time-use surveys that reveal unpaid as well as paid work. This approach would ensure that the sustainability of the aggregate budget deficit or surplus would be assessed not only in

financial terms but in social terms, revealing for instance depletion of women's capacities and undermining of the social framework through budget deficit reduction strategies that place too much reliance on women's unpaid work to substitute for public services and income transfers.

As Assa (2019: 94) highlights: "GDP is a numerical tool of political rhetoric rather than a true statistical measure". Moreover, Assa (2019) argues that "to change a tool of political rhetoric, a political process rather than a technocratic one is needed". As highlighted, household and household reproduction are already not prioritised in mainstream literature, which means there is still a way to go on this front.

The ongoing feminisation of labour markets

South African women's labour supply increased considerably before the democratic transition. According to the data from the population census, women accounted for 23% of the economically active population in 1960 and 41% in 1991. Women's labour force participation continued to grow in the post-apartheid period. In 1995, women accounted for approximately 44% of the economically active population and by 2001 this had risen to 49.7% (Posel, 2014). Moreover, the rise in women's labour supply was far more than the rise in their employment and consequently women's unemployment rates also increased considerably over the period. An increase in women's employment was derived from the growth in work typically associated with low earnings and few opportunities for advancement. Of the 1.7 million additional jobs recorded amongst women from 1995 to 2007, almost 40% were self-employment in the informal sector, employment that includes subsistence or survivalist activity and that typically is associated with very low and insecure earnings (Posel, 2014). Casale and Posel (2020) note that while there has been an increase in women's employment in higher-level occupations in South Africa, a large part of the increase was due to women entering low-paid work, especially subsistence farming and informal self-employment and domestic work.

As of quarter four, 2023, the unemployment rate for women was 34.4%, compared to 30.1% for men. Statistics South Africa (2018: para 1) reports that "the South African labour market is more favourable to men than it is to women and men are more likely to be in paid employment than women, regardless of race".

The "male breadwinner" bias constructs the rights to make claims on the state for social benefits around a norm of full-time, life-long working-age participation in the market-based labour force. The assumption is also that the wages paid to the homo-economicus (or economic man) are then redistributed to a set of dependents. The result has been the exclusion of many women from entitlements, and the reduction of the scope of the entitlements of many others, making women dependent upon men. Macroeconomic policy approaches that rely solely or principally on full employment to achieve social goals such as equitable income distribution and elimination of poverty suffer from the male breadwinner bias.



The full employment, and male breadwinner bias, needs to be contextualised within capitalistic competition that “encourages firms to seek cheap sources of labour and deregulated investment conditions that maximise profits locally and transnationally” (True, 2012: 45). This has been characterised by poorly regulated economies of low pay and insecure jobs, and attracting women from developed and developing societies into wage employment on a large scale. Informalisation has been another means through which companies have sought to reduce their wage costs. Informalisation is a process accentuated by globalisation for work and workers to become informalised (Munck, 2002). Chang (2009) describes this process as the common substance of capitalist labour that becomes socialised labour. The premise of informalisation is that labour lies on a continuum of securities and benefits. Employees who are informally implied do not have formal contracts that might protect them to a certain level from losing their job. Informalisation is a form of precarious work whereby the person is poorly paid, insecure and unprotected – this applies to both formal and informal work. Informalisation is not confined to the informal sector, it can occur in formalised institutions and systems. Munck (2002: 12) notes, “informalisation is a critical component in capitalist globalisation today, particularly but not exclusively in the global South”.

With the globalisation of the 1980s-1990s, there were transformations in women’s integration in the global economy – feminisation of labour, labour-intensive and export-oriented industries, global care chains with domestic labour becoming global. True (2012: 45) argues that:

While the neoliberal policy environment has led to the expansion of women’s employment, it has also led to the intensification of their work-load in the market and at home, and to the ‘feminisation of poverty’ especially among unskilled and marginalised poor women in developing countries who lack access to productive resources or public services. Such poverty, marginalization and lack of protective mechanisms make women easy targets for abuse and undermine the prospects for their empowerment. These conditions also disempower many men who may react to the loss of employment and economic opportunities by reasserting their power over women through violence.

During the period of feminisation of paid work, more men were marginalised in the labour force, if not pushed out altogether. The types of employment typically performed by women – insecure, low-paid, irregular – have been expanding relative to forms of employment typically performed by men – regular, stable, unionised. Standing (1989) argues that there have been two types of feminisation processes: one relates to the increased share of women in paid employment, while the other concerns the degradation of male jobs whereby the conditions associated with them deteriorate to a level characteristically associated with female jobs. In other words, the feminisation of labour in the second sense has been closely linked with the so-called flexibilisation of labour.

What is clear from the evidence is that women enter the labour force on unequal terms and are exposed to super-exploitation (Elson and Pearson, 1981).

Prior to the introduction of the minimum wage in South Africa approximately five and a half million workers across South Africa did arduous work that did not pay them enough to keep them and their dependants out of poverty; these are the “working poor” (Finn, 2015). Statistics South Africa (2019) reported women earned 30% less than their male counterparts, with black women earning 40% less (StatsSA, 2019). Despite orthodox macroeconomic claims of neutral wages based on human capital, there are persistent wage gaps. In South Africa, it is observed that often returns to education are the *same* or *higher* among women than among men, but within occupational categories, women are often paid less than men – pay discrimination, different job tasks, certain highly feminised occupations are valued differently by society (Mosomi, 2019).

Mainstream programmes prioritise women’s contribution to capitalist development rather than considering how development can be reconceptualised to promote gender equality. In an attempt at the latter, the National Development Plan (NDP) mentions unpaid care work once, stating that:

Social, cultural, religious and educational barriers to women entering the job market should be addressed. Concrete measures should be put in place and the results should be evaluated over time. Access to safe drinking water, electricity and quality early childhood education, for example, could free women from doing unpaid work and help them seek jobs. (South African Government, 2012: 249)

Neoliberal mainstream approaches have tended to legitimise and reinforce existing unjust structures by not challenging the concept of unpaid domestic work which is seen as polarised from decent work (a Western concept). Gender instrumentalism has focused on speeding economic development by raising productivity and promoting the more efficient use of resources (Razavi and Miller, 1995). This has led to the rise of the “business case” for gender equality. For a just society, the purpose of economic policy should be to ensure that the socio-economic rights, as envisaged in the Constitution of South Africa, are realised. If we understand household production to be an economic good (and not polarised from waged work), economic policy then will be orientated differently.

Conclusion

Economic policies are predicated on a set of gendered production and distributive relations across different social groups. These relations are informed by historical and ongoing social, economic and political processes. The purpose of this article is to nuance the discussion around unemployment, poverty and inequality such that solutions emerging do not accommodate and naturalise power in the form of gender mainstreaming. It is important to understand how women have always been crucial economic actors, both in the productive and reproductive spheres. Thus, addressing



unemployment, poverty and inequality requires that we critically question the structure of social reproduction, both the market and non-market spheres, holistically and how it continuously reproduces the high levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality in our society, particularly for black women. **NA93**

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ENDNOTES

- 1 GDP is the central measure of national accounts.
- 2 I'd like to acknowledge Dr Seeraj Mohamed for suggesting this point to me.