

## Gendered Critique of GEAR

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Given the increasing disquiet with neo-liberal rational actor approaches to the economy, in particular the South African government's stance on the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR), there has also been more interest in and concern about the impact of this policy on women. This is because of the ignored varying roles that women play in the economy; hence the impact that a specific policy proposal could have on women is rarely considered.

Orr et al (1998)\* point out the fact that without a truly gendered conceptual framework, South Africa's neo-liberal macro economic policy will not only maintain the status quo of gender inequality in the country but also worsen it. This is because economic policies often contain a strong gender bias. Thus the different roles that women play in the economy are often ignored and the impact that specific policy proposals could have on women is rarely considered. Women workers, formally and informally, have been disadvantaged by these developments, although the shift to more insecure forms of work due to the changing nature of economic policies has also affected men.

The critique of GEAR by the above-cited authors lays a foundation for understanding why women's issues are often excluded from economic policy developments by highlighting the fact that the history of economics is a history dominated by men. Thus it is important to look at the relationship between economic thinking and gender. The authors outline this through an analysis of GEAR policy principles and their implications, particularly for women: GEAR is based on the following policy principles:

*Create a stable environment for private investment:* The government's main task here is seen as being the facilitation of a suitable climate, which will attract investment, which in turn is supposed to generate growth and create jobs.

*Monetary policy:* GEAR advocates a tight monetary policy, a central element of this being extremely high interest rates. Monetary policy is geared principally to fighting inflation, rather than reducing unemployment.

*Export-oriented growth:* This basically means that our production structure should be geared towards exports rather than focusing on the meeting of basic needs or on gradually replacing currently imported goods. However, as the authors note, such an orientation also tends to put more pressure on domestic industry to become more "productive" and "globally competitive".

*No exchange controls:* Exchange controls are intended to regulate the movement of capital into and out of a country. GEAR puts into place a gradual removal of these controls, eventually allowing free movement of finance.

*Fiscal discipline and deficit reduction:* GEAR aims to reduce the budget deficit and inflation and to prevent tax increases. However the growth rate in the country remains low, far short of the anticipated higher rate that formed the basis for the introduction of GEAR policy by government. This creates tension between the two objectives because such a conservative fiscal approach is underpinned by a minimal view of the appropriate role for the state, which assumes that it is incapable of spending in a

way that increases private investment and boosts growth.

*Labour market flexibility:* GEAR advocates a model of "regulated flexibility" with flexible collective bargaining structures, varied standards and systems of "voice regulation". GEAR argues for wage increases moderated to match productivity.

*Restructuring of the public service:* GEAR intends to downsize and streamline the public service. This is obviously closely related to the cardinal principle of fiscal discipline and deficit reduction. The authors observe that while the public service is obviously riddled with problems and is highly inefficient at present, downsizing is not necessarily the only way of dealing with this or of delivering on the huge social backlog.

*Human resource development:* one of the more positive aspects of GEAR is acknowledging the need for improved education and training and the relation of human resources to economic development. As the authors point out, the question nonetheless remains as to how human resource development will be successfully pursued in such a fiscally constrained environment.

*Privatisation:* This is the main premise of GEAR and was in force even before the adoption of GEAR. GEAR advocates the rolling back of state ownership, hoping that enterprises can be more efficiently run when privately owned and also linking privatisation to the raising of state revenue.

This framework provides archetypal forms of an economic system modelled on the neo-liberal policy prescriptions of the International Financial Institutions (IFI). However, in the case of South Africa, the system is self-imposed because the South African economy in 1996 did not face any substantial imbalances that required economic reform stabilisation measures. The South African economy had not suffered from instabilities as those of Latin American and Sub-Saharan African countries in the context of extreme internal and external imbalances such as high rates of inflation and volatile real exchange rates. This is because inflation between 1994 and 1995 was below 10 percent, that is half its rate in the early 1990s. The external current account deficit was also more than balanced by long-term capital flows.

Thus, the government's economic overhaul, characterised by economic reform measures similar to those of structural adjustment programmes introduced in other African countries, is all the more remarkable in view of the limited, even negative, impact of such stabilisation measures, especially in Africa. Furthermore the introduction of economic reform measures is all the more surprising because of the lack of any leverage that the IFI had over South African policymakers, the lack of any dramatic changes in the economic and political environment to warrant such major shifts in policy orientation, and the lack of a transparent and fully argued justification for the adoption of an entirely different policy framework, which failed to deliver the promised economic growth or to effect significant redistribution

of income and socio-economic opportunities in favour of the poor. In contrast to the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), GEAR as an economic reform measure did not indicate reducing inequality as a policy goal; rather it stressed decreasing unemployment, which the RDP considered necessary but not crucial.

The authors proceed to explore the relationship between GEAR and RDP, highlighting that both policies are fundamentally different in the frameworks that underpin them. As the debate unfolds, the authors have a rather more rigorous and coherent presentation of the discontinuities between the RDP and GEAR and the role of the state in the economy. It is suggested that perhaps the most radical move towards economic reform and liberalisation was instituted when the government introduced a neo-liberal economic strategy - GEAR - as an economic reform measure. Since its initiation in 1996, GEAR has been highly controversial, and it continues to be so. This controversy has been related to whether the GEAR strategy was consistent with the ideology outlined in the ANC's 1994 election manifesto and prevalent during the anti-apartheid struggle and leading up to the 1994 elections - in other words, the RDP - or whether it marked a break with the RDP and an embracing of neo-liberal economic ideas.

As the authors argue, RDP and GEAR are fundamentally different. While the RDP emphasised people-centred development, meeting basic needs and redistribution, GEAR's focus was on export-oriented growth. The RDP placed redistribution as a central objective and mechanism for growth, while GEAR's premise is that redistribution will only result from economic growth - an approach based on the trickle-down notion of growth. A further distinction is that the RDP involved broad consultation with and input from all stakeholders before it was finalised, whereas GEAR was introduced as a non-negotiable economic strategy. Moreover, upon introduction, it became apparent that GEAR is highly technical and relies on economic calculations and models which themselves are not transparent to the majority of people, even those with an economics background.

The government still point to a consistent policy development process from the RDP to GEAR; yet, there is consensus among both critics, as in the case of the authors, and supporters of GEAR, that the key features of GEAR, like those of other typically "orthodox" macroeconomic policies, are increasingly out of line with the vision of a post-apartheid South Africa that characterised the RDP. This differentiation by the authors reflects two interpretations of the policy approach by the new government: (i) the government had shaken off the old ideology and pragmatically adopted a macro framework consistent with global economic realities; (ii) the government had embarked upon an ideologically-generated neo-liberal policy which in essence undermines the goal of redressing the gross inequalities of the apartheid period.

The RDP envisaged an integrated and unified labour market. Politically, the document represented both a consensus across different interests and a compromise

between competing objectives. Economically, the RDP was successful in articulating the main aspirations of the movement for post-apartheid South Africa, which are growth, development, reconstruction and redistribution in a consistent macroeconomic framework. While economic analysis cannot resolve this political debate it can evaluate whether the South African "experiment" with neo-liberal economic policy has achieved its objective of economic growth that would lay the basis for reducing unemployment and ensure a more equitable distribution of income and wealth between races and genders.

On the impact of GEAR on women, the authors argue that women are only specifically referred to twice in the entire body of the GEAR document, and gender is not even mentioned at all. While this is not in itself a barometer for GEAR's approach to gender, it is reflective of a complete lack of policies aimed at addressing women's needs. The above argument by the authors indicates that GEAR as an economic reform policy is gender-blind in the formal economy as well and this has gendered impact owing to the disadvantaged structural position of women in the economy. This is because trade policies and tariff reductions due to economic reform (as recommended by GEAR) have negatively affected the labour-intensive industries of manufacturing (clothing and textile) which coincidentally have seen the highest levels of feminisation of the workforce. This theoretically innovative article indicates that two main consequences of South Africa's GEAR on women are as follows:

Firstly, the employment effects are impacting most negatively on those sectors of the economy that employ large numbers of women. The restructuring processes in these labour-intensive industries have resulted in massive job losses in the sectors that have traditionally employed large numbers of women. These negative employment effects are being generated primarily through a typical macroeconomic policy strategy of rationalisation and downsizing in industrial enterprise processes, which have led to the informalisation of women's work.

Secondly the long-term trajectory of the South African economy is being shifted towards capital-intensive production, thereby favouring the employment of men in the formal sector of the economy whereas more women face labour market segmentation. The pattern that unfolds here is that the short-term trade liberalisation and economic reform are being borne disproportionately by women, whilst the potential long-term employment benefits of reform and liberalisation processes favour men.

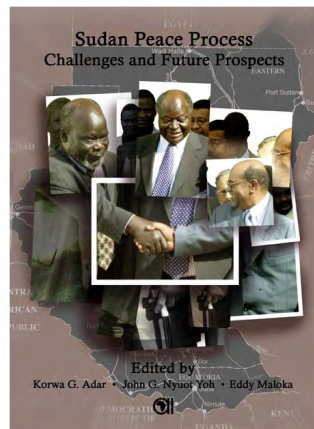
In the end, the central lesson from the article under review is that neo-liberalism and ignorance of harmonisation of gender, work and the economy exert a heavy price on the capabilities for achievement by women in key areas of the economy. Moreover, the article indicates that South Africa's GEAR policy does not take account of gender and thus effectively perpetuates the division of labour and women's disadvantaged position in the economy. There is little doubt that this article constitutes a major contribution to the literature. It provides an innovative way of understanding the gendered dynamics of economic policies and the development of the national varieties of neo-liberalism.

As pointed out by the authors, the challenge therefore is to develop a gendered economic analysis and gender-sensitive

economic policies that recognise and value women's contributions to the formal and informal economy and thus deepen services to address women's needs. By developing gender-sensitive policies, a holistic and integrated approach is critical since it is women's position in society and structural inequalities in the economy that disadvantage them. Strategies that simply attempt to alleviate the position of women without fundamentally challenging the source of their oppression are bound to fail.

**Notes**

\* L. Orr, J. Heintz, and F. Tregenna, "A Gendered Critique of GEAR," *Naledi Bulletin*, Vol. 24/98, 1998.



**Sudan Peace Process:  
Challenges and Future Prospects**

Korwa G. Adar, John G. Nyuot Yoh & Eddy Maloka

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Cet ouvrage représente la traduction du livre intitulé *Engendering African Social Sciences* (1997). Son ambition est de jeter les bases d'une analyse pertinente des rapports sociaux entre les sexes. Il propose une critique et des orientations neuves dans les sciences sociales en Afrique. Il fournit en particulier des orientations méthodologiques pour intégrer la perspective relative au genre. Les contributions réunies dans ce volume ont été rédigées selon des approches disciplinaires différentes, mais leur point commun réside dans une volonté affirmée d'opérer une véritable rupture épistémologique dans les sciences sociales africaines. Une telle entreprise est énorme mais les contributeurs ont réussi à relever ce défi. En effet, par leur complémentarité et la richesse des regards croisés de spécialistes de nationalités et de générations différentes, ce livre offre une nouvelle lecture et des catégories originales d'expression de la relation complexe entre genre, sexe et société. Mais ce livre poursuit aussi un combat d'une autre nature, en vue de promouvoir l'égalité entre les sexes et un meilleur accès des femmes au pouvoir et aux ressources. L'approche ainsi retenue est novatrice. Il constituera un outil précieux pour tous ceux qui s'intéressent au processus de production des connaissances en Afrique.

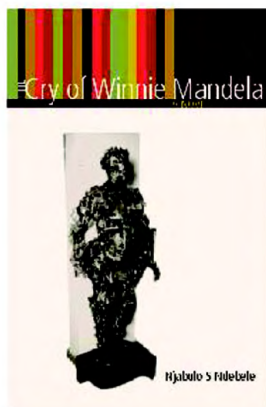
**Ayesha Mei-Tje Imam**, du Nigeria, est actuellement coordinatrice, pour l'Afrique et le Moyen-Orient, d'un programme d'action et de recherche sur les Femmes et les Lois, regroupant 26 pays, pour le réseau de solidarité international "Femmes vivant sous lois musulmanes". Elle a enseigné auparavant à Ahmadu Bello University au Nigeria et à York University au Canada. Ses travaux de recherche portent sur le développement de l'analyse de genre, les idéologies, la politique, l'économie et les questions juridiques du genre, et sur le genre et les pratiques musulmanes. Elle a publié de nombreux travaux sur ces questions, avec six collections éditées ainsi qu'une vingtaine d'articles.

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