

Study exposes global recession's heavy toll on girls and women

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A study published by Plan International and the Overseas Development Institute reveals a sharp drop in basic conditions and quality of life for many of the world's girls and women. While the world's poorest have been worst affected on the whole, persistent and pernicious disparities exist between boys and girls in rates of infant mortality, levels of education, malnutrition, abuse, and neglect, and in conditions of child labor.

The main cause of the poor conditions for girls and women since 2008 is that the crisis has worsened existing inequalities. These inequalities are life-threatening for millions of girls, worse now than they were even five years ago.

"Girls are the largest marginalized group in the world," Nigel Chapman, head of Plan International, a children's rights organization, has said. "It is little surprise that the most vulnerable suffer more in times of austerity but to see the impact in higher mortality rates, reduced life expectancy, less opportunities and greater risks for girls and boys is stark."

The study opens by making an important observation: global poverty has been exacerbated by the shift away from the initial stimulus policies pursued by governments in the immediate aftermath of the crisis, money spent in effort to stabilize national economies. By the year 2010, governments focused on implementing austerity policies in order to pay for the bailout of the world's financial elite and banking institutions, and hedge against a poor global economic outlook.

The authors note, "Austerity measures are either being implemented or under serious consideration in 138 countries, including 94 developing countries.... This shift towards austerity has been most pronounced in the Middle East and Africa, where three-quarters of the region's countries have seen their GDP contract by 5.3 percent on average."

Cuts to state-funded social services like basic maternity

care, immunizations, schools, and food assistance negatively affect women and children especially. However, the effects of uneducated, malnourished and ailing populations reverberate throughout the entire society.

When basic resources are scarce, children are prioritized and girls frequently lose out to boys. Infant mortality rates among girls and boys are extremely unequal. The study notes that for every percentage point drop in a nation's GDP, the main measure of economic contraction, 1.5 boys die per thousand children compared with 7.1 girls.

High food prices and dropping incomes are the primary culprit of the recent increase in child malnutrition. The ongoing financial crisis pushed food prices up to record levels in 2012. In 55 developing countries, food prices shot up over 80 percent. Women and children—especially girls, the study shows—eat less than boys and other male family members. This has led to unprecedented rates of wasting among girls in Bangladesh and Cambodia. It has also contributed to increased infant mortality among girls in the countries studied.

When household budgets drop, or education and transportation costs rise, boys are typically favored over girls for education. It is common that girls in poor households miss a lot of schooling, or drop out entirely.

When the cascading effects of economic contraction and falling household income hit girls and women hard, it affects the entire society. Primary caregivers are usually women and girls. In both developed and developing countries, women are increasingly the main income earners as male unemployment rises and women take up one or more lower-paying jobs, typically in service jobs.

Due to unaffordable school fees and transportation costs—no doubt exacerbated by war and political instability—children in Egypt, Sudan and Yemen have been taken out of school. Before the onset of the crisis, 46 percent of girls completed primary school in Yemen,

compared with 74 percent of boys. In Nigeria, girls are 10 percent more likely than boys to drop out now than they were in 2007.

Entrenched gender roles result in girls being kept at home when mothers take on more work. Many women must work long hours for little pay, leaving the basic needs of the household in the care of their daughters. Girls are also being married off earlier, placing them in danger of dying in childbirth, a leading cause of death for those under 20.

Among girls aged 10-16 living in Brazil, parental unemployment sharply increased the likelihood that they would drop out of school to find work. For 16 year-old girls, the likelihood is about 50 percent.

Young women in both developed and developing countries are worse affected by current high unemployment. Close to the onset of the crisis, the world saw one of the highest youth unemployment levels ever recorded, 79 million people aged 15-24 unemployed. Considered secondary earners and occupying low-wage, low-skill jobs, women and girls are more likely to lose their jobs. In North Africa, women's unemployment increased by more than 9 percentage points, compared with men's unemployment increasing 3.1 points. In Cambodia, 17 percent of all garment workers—50,000—were made jobless due to the crisis.

In poor countries, when girls end up working instead of going to school, they often seek work as domestics. This means taking on multiple risks by migrating, working for little pay and working inside people's homes. Removed from the public sphere, abuse of domestic workers often remains hidden.

Sharp increases in HIV and other sexually transmitted infections have been found in women aged 15-24 in developing countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, women are 59 percent of those living with HIV. In the Caribbean, young women are 2.5 times more likely to contract HIV, mainly transmitted via prostitution.

In developed countries, where there have been massive cuts to the operations of the public sector, in which there is a greater share of women workers, these have contributed to making the existence of the poorest households—those headed by single mothers—even more precarious.

The authors focus on the sharply deteriorating social conditions in Greece, writing, "For instance, the unemployment rate among young women is 60.4 percent, compared with 46.1 percent for young men.... A staggering 67.4 percent of Greek women 15-19 were

unemployed in late 2011—an almost 40 percent increase since 2008—compared with 44.5 percent of young men in the same age group. Unlike in northern European countries, tertiary education graduates also have high rates of unemployment and underemployment."

In developing countries, high unemployment, low wages and job insecurity send desperate young women into high-risk jobs, like drug peddling and sex work.

In developed countries, high youth unemployment, costly tuition, and mounting student debt have brought about an increase in prostitution among young women—and men. Websites like SponsorAScholar.co.uk and SeekingArrangement.com put desperate young people in touch with wealthy older men.

It is the authors' position that austerity policies are counterproductive to economic recovery, and instead fiscal stimulus and social spending are required. The study contains policy proposals to mitigate the harshest effects of the recession and retain some of the gains toward Millennium Development Goals achieved in the five years before 2007 by investing in social programs immediately. Forecasting that the children whose conditions are reported on will have their entire lives determined by the consequences of this crisis, governments are advised to account for these children's needs and listen to their opinions.

Since none of the fundamental causes of the 2007-2008 global economic crisis have been resolved, austerity policies, and even the economic contraction they create, are preferable to spending in times of profound economic uncertainty. These conditions require that working people draw definite political conclusions. Nothing will create meaningful and lasting change in the inequalities reported in this study short of the mobilization of the international working class to reorganize society in order to meet human need.



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