
Economic Justice and Inclusion

A CONVERSATION WITH DIANE ELSON
AND AMIT BHADURI

FLETCHER FORUM: *To begin, could you each share your vision of a just society?*

AMIT BHADURI: My vision of a just society is one in which the poorest have the same rights as the top 10 percent in terms of access to courts, nutrition, healthcare, and education. What you give to the rich, you also give to the poor; what you give to the men, you also give to the women. That will be a just society.

DIANE ELSON: I also think of justice in terms of rights. In thinking of

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Diane Elson is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Essex, Visiting Professor at the Centre for Research on Women in Scotland's Economy, Glasgow Caledonian University, and Research Associate of the Center for Women's Global Leadership, Rutgers University. Dr. Elson is a member of the UN Committee for Development Policy, and an adviser to UN Women. She has published widely on gender equality, economic policy, and human rights, and is currently writing a book with Radhika Balakrishnan and James Heintz entitled *Economic Policy for Social Justice: The Radical Potential of Human Rights*.

Drs. Elson and Badhuri are joint winners of the 2016 Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought.

social justice, the core must be realization of equal rights for everyone. In getting to this, attention must be provided first to the most deprived – to those who enjoy the least rights. Their rights should be improved, so that everyone can live life with dignity.

FLETCHER FORUM: *In economic policy and research, we see economic growth defined as GDP growth. Human rights, gender inequality, and racism are left out. So, as economic policymakers and researchers, how do we start with a comprehensive approach, and avoid leaving these issues to be tacked on at the end?*

ELSON: I've been doing work with two colleagues—James Heintz from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Radhika Balakrishnan from Rutgers University—and we focus first on ruling out policies that violate rights—like land grabs in which people are displaced from their land because of infrastructure projects that will benefit the rich. So, we are only looking at policies that are in compliance with human rights and obligations. Then, we start to prioritize this issue of attention to the most deprived. That's the way I would go.

BHADURI: I would like to add a specific example to this. The poorest people in India—the so-called original inhabitants who are 8 percent of the population—account for 40 percent of the people displaced by development. They have lost their land, their homes, and their livelihood. In such matters, economics and justice must go hand in hand.

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FLETCHER FORUM: *Dr. Elson, in 1993, you said that "economic issues are discussed in ways that pay no explicit attention to gender issues; rather, economic issues are not [seen as] women's issues." Do you think we're any closer now to improving this view of economics?*

ELSON: I've seen some improvements, but we've still got a long way to go. There is more awareness surrounding the issue of unpaid labor that is necessary to keep society going--labor that is disproportionately done by women.

There is more work being done, both in data collection and also in terms of investment, that will reduce and redistribute this unpaid work. Although

we have data now, there is no government in the world that, when deciding to cut public expenditures, will consider the impact of these cuts on women's unpaid labor. The awareness still hasn't made its way into the design of fiscal policy.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Dr. Bhaduri, you call yourself an activist; how do we make economic justice a relevant, urgent issue?*

BHADURI: Urgency is not created, but built up in a modest way, if you're pitching yourself against powerful adversaries—whether those are the government or large corporations. From practical experience, I have learned that the basic movement has to start and coalesce around people who are the losers when it comes to the distribution of economic justice. If I go and talk about land acquisition in a village where land is not being acquired, it will only go so far and not further. But, if you really are interested in change, your work has to be done in those areas the policy affects. For example, in areas close to Delhi, land was being redistributed, and very good compensation was being offered. However, local women organized and told me that their husbands and sons would use the money for alcohol, and, after a few days, the cash would be gone. Land, on the other hand, can pass from generation to generation. So there is obviously a gender issue there, both with who gets the compensation and how the land is being passed down. We observed that the
largest opposition against land acquisition was from women, even when good compensation was being offered.

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ELSON: Adding to that, women looking for a better life concentrate on more than money; they are also focused on the social wage, or benefits received from public services. Specifically, they want good schools and clinics, as well as access to clean water, fuel, and sanitation. With that understanding, the benefits we want to see from development are not just financial, but they are also the creation of these new commons that provide public and social goods.

FLETCHER FORUM: *How do we investigate such issues when these questions are not often asked (or at least, this focus is often overlooked) by policymakers and researchers?*

ELSON: We have to question the paradigm that we're presented with – to know what's missing and what's visible; whose perspective is being represented in this paradigm and whose perspective is left out; and what we are trying to measure. Before we get into the econometrics of a problem, we have to develop what some people call the “pre-analytic vision,” or the paradigm. What's the frame of reference? What's the intuitive understanding? How do economies work, and what are the transmission mechanisms? What's really important here is to tease out what's implicit that's not being made explicit—for example, a gendered analysis—which should then be brought out and made more explicit. That means that we must inquire about and listen to the voices being excluded, and seek to learn how they understand the situation. *f*