
Feminist Economics and the Analysis of the Global Economy: The Challenge That Awaits Us

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past half-century, feminist economists have transformed our understanding of how the world economy functions. They have critiqued the gender-blindness of traditional economic models and challenged

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analytic descriptions of development and globalization that ignore much of women's economic activity. Feminist economists have developed analytical frameworks for examining gender relations that permeate political, social, and economic institutions including markets, governments, households, and firms. They have produced new methodologies that incorporate women's experiences in economic models, statistics, and the evaluation of economic phenomena. Their research has pushed the boundaries of knowledge by challenging conventional paradigms and concepts, ideas and categories that were engrained and therefore rarely scrutinized.¹

The result has been the emergence of a new consensus. Well-documented studies have shown that the erosion of systems of patriarchy not only empowers women economically, but also has demonstrably positive

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impacts on alleviating poverty and promoting human development. These changes in our understanding of the development process have produced a new politics as well as new forms of economic development policy. Key international institutions, donor agencies, and governments have adopted gender-sensitive policies in their development programs as part of 'gender mainstreaming,' or the process of institutionalizing gender-sensitive analysis and policy in governments and organizations.²

Advocates have also used feminist knowledge of development to strengthen women's groups raising gender issues in broader social and political movements. Knowledge of feminism allows for greater clarity of the vision of social change and has served as a guide for consciousness-raising, thus enabling feminist research to be transformative at the grassroots level. This dynamic interaction between feminist thinking and feminist activism has revealed tensions regarding the intersections of knowledge, power, and development outcomes.³ It has led to debates among feminist economists in terms of what needs to be done and how best to accomplish gender equality. These tensions and debates are necessary and vital in pushing the boundaries of knowledge and in deepening our understanding of development.

Despite this headway, several important challenges remain. The progress we can document has been halting and uneven. Moreover, in certain key areas of economic policy-making, gender-sensitive economic policy is absent, and approaches used in gender mainstreaming to assess the differential effects of a policy on women and men can sometimes legiti-

mize women's subordinate roles. Rather than treating the promotion of human rights and women's well-being as ends in themselves, their labor and productivity potential are viewed mainly as means to further increase economic growth. The important focus on long-run transformation of gender relations toward equality in the context of regional, national, and global economic processes is, more often than not, neglected, particularly when countries face economic crises. The very real setbacks women experience as a result of the gender-blind management of the economy during booms and downturns have long-term consequences. In this time of increasing economic disruptions, it will be important to systematically integrate the promotion of gender equality in the implementation of appropriate economic stabilization policies.

First, we explore the link between dismantling systems of male dominance and our understanding of the development process, with a particular focus on what is required to achieve the recently adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁴ We then turn to interventions from key international organizations in order to illustrate the impact that feminist economics has had on development policymaking. We then argue that, despite some advancements, several missing elements in the development of economic policy still allow unequal gender relations to persist or create new forms of gender inequalities. We conclude with a discussion of the challenges that we still face in developing inclusive and sustainable economic policy that promotes equality and expanded cooperation to address urgent global issues.

GENDER AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

In September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly declared seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030. These include ending world poverty (goal 1); ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages (goal 3); achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls (goal 5); promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all (goal 8); and taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts (goal 13).⁵ An important component of these SDGs and their 169 target indicators is that gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is crucial to attaining these goals. The imperative that women and girls must enjoy equal access to quality education, economic resources, and political participation, as well as equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership, and decision-making at all levels, is now included in the mandates for all governments and United Nations bodies.

While it is relatively easy for one to commit abstractly to gender equality, reaching this goal in reality will require profound transformations in social attitudes and practices, as well as the use of economic incentives and policy interventions to help bring them about. For example, one of the indicators used to monitor the SDG Agenda measures the percentage

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of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work by sex, age, and location (Indicator 5.4.1).⁶ The greater the burden of unpaid work on women, the more difficult it will be for women to participate effectively in the rest of economic life. This illustrates of the broader relevance of gender-sensitive research on economic issues and the importance of breaking down the hierarchy of gender in economic thinking that privileges stereotypically masculine traits and overvalues men's roles and experiences over those that are stereotypically women's. We can no

longer ignore the work and economic activities that take place within the household, especially in macroeconomic models that serve as theoretical foundations for policy.

The UN's initiative has increased the need for economists and social scientists trained in gender analysis in various economic fields— microeconomics, macroeconomics, labor economics, public finance, development economics, and international trade and investment, among others. To conduct economic analyses from a gendered perspective, however, one cannot merely “add women (or gender) and stir.” First, social scientists must have a deep understanding of patriarchal power and entrenched structural causes of gender inequalities in order to systematically address the problem. Second, gender relations are intrinsically linked with social relations based on class, race, and ethnicity; gender inequality is therefore part of a broader project to investigate and address other forms of inequality and power imbalances. For this reason, a gendered analysis of economic issues takes into account the varied experiences of women by class, race, and ethnicity and avoids a homogeneous perception of women's interests.

Finally, gender analysis adopts a broader notion of the economy as including a variety of provisioning activities involving paid and unpaid labor. It moves away from merely focusing on the growth of market-related

activities, instead emphasizing the importance of care and unpaid labor in household maintenance and social reproduction. It questions the use of efficiency as the main criterion of economic success when efficiency fails to take account of the spillover effects into the household or the environment. Gender analysis does not separate the notion of “choice” from the material and social preconditions that impinge on that choice. For example, a woman who has a “feasible choice” to start a business may not be able to do so due to legal barriers; social norms; social conditions, such as the enormous burden of caregiving and household responsibilities; or economic circumstances, such as lacking assets or access to affordable credit.⁷ These constraints are not currently captured in mainstream optimization models.

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Social scientists also need to employ sophisticated policy analysis to achieve a deeper understanding of the interconnection between economic change and women’s changing roles, status, and experiences. This means examining the immediate effects of policy intervention and anticipating the longer-term consequences. For example, measures aimed at unleashing women’s potential through increased labor market participation and enterprise development can bring about higher earnings, a greater voice in household spending, and greater economic and spatial mobility. Yet, unless these policies and programs are designed with an awareness of a potential backlash that intensifies discrimination and violence against women, such policies may prove unsuccessful in terms of promoting women’s overall well-being.

Capitalist-driven economic globalization presents its own contradictory challenges and opportunities for women. Significant changes since the 1980s have taken place in production processes, international trade, business, finance, communications, and labor markets. A growing body of feminist research on economic globalization has shown how the forces of intensified international trade, investment, and migration have created tensions and contradictions while at the same time creating opportunities for challenging gender norms.⁸ For many, however, the jobs are in the form of lowly-paid casual work, contract labor and subcontracted home-based work. For women workers in export-oriented manufacturing sectors, these can involve long working hours, as well as delays in or lack of overtime pay. Women’s employment can also intensify unequal gender relations in

terms of reinforcement of dutiful daughter's or wife's roles, the control of women's earnings by male relatives, or continued social sanctions and violence against women whose behavior is perceived to be a violation of patriarchal norms. In addition, norms regarding the household division of labor have evolved slowly, so that engagement in paid work inevitably creates stress for women in trying to balance their household and care responsibilities with their role as income earners.

On the one hand, findings regarding the impact of global supply chains, subcontracting, export promotion, foreign investment, and agricultural commercialization have been instrumental in identifying opportunities for women both to earn their own income and to challenge male domination in their households and communities.⁹ On the other hand, this body of work has identified significant costs for women; these costs are associated with development strategies that promote the unfettered movement

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of capital and accelerated expansion of markets.¹⁰ In some cases, then, globalization has led to the emergence of new forms of gender inequalities. While the integration of women into global commodity production circuits can reduce gender asymmetries in terms of labor market participation, this process can also exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities by adding to women's total work time, or by weakening the collective bargaining power of women workers. Finally, the instability brought about by intensified competition in

the global economy can erode women's economic position as quickly as it enhances it. The sustained empowerment of women requires a multi-faceted process that provides women with more economic options while simultaneously challenging household and political practices that continue to subordinate women in the polity.

ATTENTION TO GENDER IN THE DEVELOPMENT POLICY ARENA

International economic agencies have increasingly changed their organizational structure and practices as many social scientists realize that reducing gender asymmetries is a fundamental component of development. Over the last fifty years, the UN has provided vital platforms for women's

voices and interests to be heard, including the UN International Conferences on Women between 1975 and 1995. These conferences provided significant opportunities for women's advocates, feminist scholars, international organizations, and policymakers to exchange ideas and visions around gender issues. Specific units such as the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), and the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), as well as their successor, UN Women, were set up to provide support for women's empowerment and gender equality through programs, research, and links with women's organizations. In the 1990s, together with feminist economists, UNIFEM promoted the first gender-responsive budget initiatives in several developing countries. It is no coincidence that the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE) was established in 1992 amid the vibrant discussions and exchange of ideas in these UN-sponsored international forums. The founding of IAFFE marked a turning point in the development of feminist economics. Its conferences, workshops, and journal, *Feminist Economics*, significantly increased the visibility and range of economic research on gender and facilitated interaction among scholars, policymakers, and gender advocates.

During its reorganization in 2014, the World Bank made the promotion of gender equality as one of its Cross-Cutting Solution Areas (CCSAs). It is a clear recognition that no country or economy can achieve its potential or meet the challenges of the twenty-first century unless there is full and equal participation of women and girls. Ensuing programs and policies of the World Bank have focused on closing the gaps in education and health endowments, as well as gaps in economic opportunities. This focus is premised on the importance of unleashing women's productive potential that not only benefits them and their families, but also has a lasting impact on poverty alleviation and sustainable economic growth.

The other Bretton Woods institution, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), has begun to examine the links between gender and economic performance. For example, it has promoted gender-responsive budgeting developed by feminist economists to analyze government budgets in terms of their impact on women. This initiative is not just for in-house analysis; the IMF is encouraging and assisting member countries in the development of their own gender-sensitive budgeting practices.¹¹ This work has also enhanced the integration of gender into the study of distributive economic outcomes, as well as the regular surveillance work of the IMF, and in global discussions.¹²

In the area of economic statistics, a resolution passed during the Nineteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) provides a new definitional framework for all forms of work done by persons aged fifteen years and over. For the first time, the definition includes unpaid categories of work, such as subsistence work, household work, unpaid training, and volunteer work. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this re-conceptualization, which resulted from the combined efforts of feminist economists, women's advocacy groups, time-use researchers, development scholars, UN staff, donor agencies, and government representatives. Collecting data on work in this way will profoundly change the way that labor statistics, economic models, and policy discourses measure work. It is an important step toward broadening the notion of the economy and in making women's economic contributions visible. This breakthrough not only applies to our understanding of work and what is entailed in human provisioning, but also to our broader understanding of inequality. A large number of studies have now been done on the distribution of assets within the household; on unequal access to technology, education, and credit; on restrictions on spatial mobility of women; threats of violence; and restrictions on reproductive decision-making. Scholars and policy-makers are collecting data in these areas as well as in the more traditional areas of labor market outcomes and participation in the political process. These enable a more complete understanding and monitoring of all forms of economic and social inequalities.

TOWARD MORE GENDER-INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Despite the growing consensus on the importance of promoting gender equality, feminist analysis has still not been effectively integrated into national policy and international policy agendas. There are troubling silences in economic discourse, especially on macroeconomic policies. First, although there is an increasing consensus that reducing social inequality is an important development goal, this aspiration has not been integrated into macroeconomic policy assessment and international policy agendas. Second, while policymakers are beginning to grapple with the ways in which demographic trends increase pressures on women to provide more care for children, the elderly, the sick, and both disabled and able-bodied household members, many governments have given little thought on how to distribute this burden in a gender-equitable way. Third, during times of crisis and demands for budgetary austerity, gender concerns are often set

aside in the drive to “rationalize” budgets and promote more competitive systems of commodity production.

This tendency has been particularly evident during periods of economic and financial disruption. Macroeconomic policy responses during the debt crises of the 1980s and 1990s, the financial meltdowns in Asia in 1997, and the most recent global financial crises paid little to no attention to gender. This is not just a problem for developing countries. Efforts to control social spending through welfare reform in the U.S. and the UK have implemented changes in programs that negatively affected women more than men. In these periods of difficulty, policies are often implemented without attention to these long-term development needs. Thus, women’s well-being has not improved as much as is necessary for equitable development.

What would a more gender-inclusive response to economic crises look like? First, attempts to redress fiscal budget imbalances would need to identify the ways in which women are differently affected by government-sponsored programs. Every effort should be made to ensure that responses to short-term economic imperatives do not undermine the attainment of long-term development goals. This requires greater attention to developing redistributive economic policies and social policies that incentivize an equitable household division of labor, such as those that increase government revenue and accountability rather than cutting important basic services.¹³

There is need for accompanying policy reforms to curb the accumulation of income at the top through progressive income taxation, to regulate excessive risk-taking in the financial sector, and to strengthen the bargaining position of workers. Such a framework would be especially important for programs that provide essential education, health benefits, and economic security to poor and vulnerable households.

A second response would focus on maintaining government efforts to promote gender equality while reducing income, racial, and ethnic inequalities. Economic disruptions should not intensify discrimination against women and girls. While governments cannot always control the political responses of populations to economic

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It is more likely that gender-aware policies will persist during times of economic crisis if we change the way in which we measure short-term economic performance. Despite important changes in how we assess the ways that economies promote human development, the short-term successes and failures of governments are normally measured in terms of standard macroeconomic indices such as per capita economic growth, inflation, and unemployment. While important, these measures focus exclusively on the market sector of economic activity. Such a narrow orientation means that one cannot really understand the crucial linkages between non-market economic activity and commodity production. Economic restructuring, for example, might be considered successful when focusing on standard economic indicators, but may have placed additional burdens on women that these indicators do not capture. It is vital for economists to further expand the use of feminist methods and analytical tools, including a mix of quantitative (e.g., gendered indicators and data) and qualitative infor-

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mation, so that governments can more comprehensively measure the effects of economic policies and development strategies.

Research on the hidden costs and benefits of economic transformation would also provide an opening for analyses assessing the impact of our economic activities on the environment. A sustainable economic system that offers gender equality and decent livelihoods for all must take into account the interdependence of the economy as a whole with the ecosystem. The unpredictability and complexity of the links between systems of production and

consumption and the ecosystem should not excuse us from maintaining the resilience of the ecosystem. This recognition demands a transformative economic agenda, one that could ultimately entail a substantial change in our production methods and techniques, consumption levels and behavior, and in the way we conduct our day-to-day lives. This requires the creation of a different economic paradigm, which, by incorporating both gender

and ecological concerns, provides us with a different way to articulate our economic goals.

CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

Efforts to mainstream gender in standard economic decision-making have made steady progress over the past fifty years. There is now a general consensus that attention to gender equality and women's empowerment is an important part of the implementation of effective development policies. The UN, World Bank, IMF, and donor agencies have taken steps to place gender at the center of their work. These initiatives have led to the development of new ways of measuring economic activity that include household systems of production and distribution. We now have better ways to evaluate the impact of economic policies, which in turn has facilitated the implementation of policies that enhance the education and health of women and promoted women's labor force participation.

Despite these positive changes, much remains to be accomplished. The world community still pays insufficient attention to the challenges of care work, which disproportionately burden poor women and female children. In many countries, women still are unable to participate effectively in local and national politics, and this in turn means that the commitment to social policies that promote gender equality is tenuous at best. This problem of political and economic disempowerment is exacerbated by a short-run macroeconomic framework that is largely devoid of gender consciousness. We still predominantly measure the efficacy of macroeconomic policies through standard measures that ignore the unpaid economic activities and labor in the household sector.

The attempt by feminist economists to broaden our understanding of development processes and to introduce new methodologies for assessing their effect on women and men is more radical than it appears at first glance. A new economic paradigm requires re-framing economic questions in terms of provisioning for human life.¹⁴ It involves developing a framework to reallocate resources and provide socialized support for care, as well as promote the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men.¹⁵ It requires valuing the benefits of human well-being that societies derive from ecosystem services, and it requires integrating the costs of maintaining environmental resilience in economic theories, models, and methodologies. It requires the development of analytical tools that provide a deeper understanding of the gendered, distributional, and ecological dimensions of economic options and policies.¹⁶ These are demanding

tasks, but they are what future generations expect from us. Indeed, this new economic paradigm could challenge some of the premises of our contemporary economic system, primarily driven by competition and the incessant pursuit of material prosperity. If there is one thing that feminist economics and gender analysis of economic issues have taught us, it is that having a vision for change and having a will to bring it about can bring about social transformation. *f*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lourdes Benería, Günseli Berik, and Maria Floro, *Gender, Development and Globalization: Economics As If All People Mattered* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015).
- 2 See discussion of gender mainstreaming in Caren Grown, "Gender and Development." In William Darity (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. 2nd ed. (Detroit, Michigan: Thomson Gale, 2007), 272-277.
- 3 Sandra Harding and Kathryn Norberg, "New Feminist Approaches to Social Science Methodologies: An Introduction." *Signs* 30(4), 2009-2015.
- 4 United Nations Economic and Social Council. *Report of the Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators*. Statistical Commission Forty-seventh session. New York: United Nations, 2015.
- 5 United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals, 2015. <<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/sustainabledevelopmentgoals>>
- 6 United Nations Economic and Social Council.
- 7 Amartya Sen. *Development As Freedom*. (New York: Knopf, 1999).
- 8 See review of the feminist economics body of work, Lourdes Benería, Günseli Berik and Maria Floro 2015, op. cit.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Janet Stotsky. "Gender Budgeting" IMF Working Paper, Washington DC: International Monetary Fund, 2006. <<https://www.imf.org/External/pubs/ft/wp/2006/wp06232.pdf>>
- 12 Christian Gonzales, Sonali Jain-Chandra, Kalpana Kochhar, Monique Newiak, and Tlek Zeinullayev. *Catalyst For Change: Empowering Women and Tackling Income Inequality*. Washington DC: International Monetary Fund, 2015. <<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/sdn/2015/sdn1520.pdf>>
- 13 For example, several developing countries cut public expenditures including health services in 2010, even though the budget reduction loan conditions on new IMF loans have been relaxed (Ortiz and Cummins, op. cit.) Realizing the longer-term consequences brought about by the neglect of childcare issues in South Korea, the government in 2004 increased its public social spending on preschool education and childcare services. One study noted that local governments faced growing fiscal burdens as they expanded childcare subsidy to include free childcare. Furthermore, employed women faced difficulty in finding childcare facilities. As a result, the gender division of labor regarding home-based care provisioning continues to persist, leaving many Korean women stressed (Nowook Park, Nowook. "Gender and Economic Policy Management in Korea." Paper presented at the UNDP Gender and Economic Policy Management Initiative Expert Workshop, Seoul, Korea, May 8-10 2010.
- 14 Nilüfer Çığatay, Diane Elson, and Caren Grown. "Gender, Adjustment and Macroeconomics. Special Issue." *World Development* 23 (11) (1995): 1827-36.

- 15 Nancy Folbe, "Measuring Care: Gender, Empowerment and the Care Economy." *Journal of Human Development* 7 (2) (2006): 183–99; Razavi, Shahrashoub, and Silke Staab. 2012. *Global Variations in the Political and Social Economy of Care: Worlds Apart*. (New York and Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012).
- 16 Julie Nelson, "Economists, Value Judgments, and Climate Change: A View from Feminist Economics." *Ecological Economics* 65 (3) (2008): 441–47.