

WHY WE NEED FEMINIST ECONOMISTS

FOUR REASONS

By Naila Kabeer

The author is a professor of gender and international development at the Gender Institute, London School of Economics.



Naila Kabeer

A brief look at the history of feminist economics and why it matters today for the future

1. Male voices and perspectives tend to dominate economics, but feminist economists are challenging this.

Throughout history, women have been subject to systems and structures that privilege male perspectives at their expense. As in many other areas of life,

male voices have tended to dominate economics. Feminist economics challenges this version of reality.

Emerging out of the women's movement in the 1960s, feminist economics has played a crucial role in exploring gender relations within the different social and economic situations in which we find ourselves. Feminist economists dispute the gender-based assumptions that underpin the way our economies work – especially the many policies and programmes established to help

“

It is the pattern, rather than the pace, of growth that determines its impact on gender equality.

improve the lives of people in less well-off regions of the world.

Take Ester Boserup. In 1970, the Danish economist's *Woman's Role in Economic Development* questioned the way the typical household was represented by development policymakers. Based on stereotypical assumptions about an idealised Western “nuclear family” made up of the male “breadwinner”, female “homemaker” and their dependent children, this model informed the way data was collected and determined how resources were allocated. The problem was that this picture was a myth.

In fact, the division of labour within families and communities varies considerably, with women putting more hours than men into agriculture and trade in much of the world. This failure to recognise women's productive roles had led Western (and Western-trained) policymakers to >>



More recently, economists' attention has shifted to the relationship between gender equality and economic growth.

channel financial resources like credit to male “heads of household” and welfare programmes, like maternal and child healthcare, family planning and nutrition, to women.

Boserup's work sparked a series of studies that challenged the notion that households worked this way, replacing it with a model that acknowledged the different preferences and priorities of household members, and paid greater attention to conditions for co-operation and conflict among them.

2. Mainstream economic policies can disproportionately affect women.

Feminist economists offered further challenges to the mainstream in the 1980s. As neoliberal economics became the new normal, policymakers began shifting away from development projects to focus on macroeconomic policy, reducing the role of the state, cutting back on public expenditure and liberalising markets and trade. It was believed that this would encourage people to allocate the resources at their disposal via the free market, maximising economic growth.

Feminist economists criticised these policies in a number of ways. They pointed out that the uneven division of roles, resources and responsibilities within the household made it difficult for women to respond

to market prices on the same terms as men. Not only did women generally have fewer resources at their disposal, they also had primary responsibility for unpaid care of family members. Gender discrimination within the wider economy further disadvantaged women in their ability to respond to changing market forces. State interventions that had helped to make their efforts easier had been shelved.

3. Feminist economists are interrogating mainstream economists' simplistic linking of gender equality and economic growth.

More recently, economists' attention has shifted to the relationship between gender equality and economic growth. Policymakers say the “business case” for gender equality is proven by findings that gender equality in education and participation in the labour force contributes to the pace of growth.

However, feminist economists are digging deeper to discover under what circumstances this is so, and whether economic growth brings gender equality. Presenting a more complicated picture, studies show that the apparent relationship is strongly influenced by which measures of gender equality are actually used. If increasing equality in *productivity* is not matched by an increased equality in *wages*, growth rates may indeed be increased, but only by exploiting women's weaker position in the market.

In addition, feminist economists have pointed out that, whether or not women's contributions increase economic growth, there is very little evidence that economic growth necessarily promotes their wellbeing or rights. The most recent World Economic Forum report looked at the

gender equality index of 149 countries. It found that 6 of the 49 countries in the highest income group were ranked below 100, while 7 of the 19 countries classified as lowest income countries were ranked above.

It is the pattern, rather than the pace, of growth that determines its impact on gender equality, together with efforts on the part of both the public and private sectors to distribute the gains from growth more equally between men and women.

4. Feminist economists are rethinking economics and bringing questions of power back into the conversation.

Feminist economists play a key role in rethinking the way we do economics and building a discipline that can better reflect the various contexts in which men and women participate in the global economy, and the often unequal terms on which they do so. They stress that power is a factor in economic life and want an approach that takes account of how our behaviour shapes, and is shaped by, relations of power that operate in everyday life and at the societal level.

Finally, they want to see an economics that operates with a total rather than a truncated understanding of the economy, that recognises the interdependent relationship between the productive and reproductive spheres, between paid and unpaid work, and between earning a living and caring for the family. This would make it easier for economists to realise that getting it wrong in the productive sphere of the economy can have disastrous consequences in the reproductive sphere – and vice versa. NA

NOTE

This article first appeared on Rethinking Economics' Economy blog (ecnmmy.org) on 8 March 2016.