Economic Insights

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No women please – we're economists! A discipline dominated by men?

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In this paper Professor Ailsa McKay proposes that the discipline of economics has a gender bias towards men; examines the impact this has on current policy agendas and explores the potential and need for change.

In 2010 women represented 22% of all academic staff in UK University Economics Departments and only 10% of full Professors. In the US the picture is strikingly similar. In 2011 women make up just over 22% of all faculty in PhD granting University Economics departments and only 13% of full Professors are women (data derived from Blanco and Mumford, 2010, and the American Economics Association, 2011). In 2009 Professor Elinor Ostrom became the first, and to date only, woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics since it was established in 1968. Thus economics, at least as an academic discipline, is a male dominated discipline.

So why are there so few women academic economists? Perhaps more crucially does any of this matter and to whom? In exploring the relevance of this question it is crucial to consider the actual power and influence of the discipline in determining public policy. As Keynes, a very influential male economist, so eloquently argued:

> *'The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are wrong and when they are right are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.' (Keynes, 1936, p 383)*

Thus, the more relevant question in considering the gender imbalance within the academic economics profession is what influence does this male dominance have on the nature of the discipline and what difference would more women economists make?

In answering this question it is useful to begin with the premise that economics will be done as 'men do it'. That is, male economists will define the discipline in terms of what they understand, and as consequence they will study, or rather they will consider worthy of study, issues

relating to their world, how it operates and how it appears to them. Male dominance matters then in that the construction of the discipline itself displays a gender bias. It has evolved within a limiting framework - limiting in the sense that it is has been defined and documented almost exclusively by men. Thus as Julie Nelson, one of those rare 'women academic economists' points out;

> *'The subject of the economist's model world is an individual who is self – interested, autonomous, rational and whose active choices are the focus of interest, as opposed to one who would be social, other-interested, dependent and, emotional and directed by an intrinsic nature. In many ways, this description resonates with the economist's self image as well.' (Nelson, 1996, p22-3).*

So male economists study behaviour associated with male economic agents. Accordingly those male economists build into their theoretical frameworks the assumption that this behaviour is the norm and as a result preconceived notions about how modern economies do, and indeed should, operate heavily influence the research process. This privileging of a set of ideals, in particular a male defined and understood set of ideals, has not happened by accident nor is it a natural occurrence, but rather it can be criticised as part of a process that results in inherent gender bias within the discipline itself.

The gendered assumptions of economics

Economics has at its core the study of human behaviour. Concerned primarily with exploring and analysing the behaviour of individuals in pursuit of the resources required to meet a range of needs and wants, both individually and collectively determined, economics can be identified with the study of choices. Given the nature of those choices and the actors involved economics is very much a social science. That is, as an academic discipline it seeks to provide us with a greater understanding of the factors at play in informing our choices and the impact across a range of indicators of the outcomes of those choices. However, in striving for accreditation in a hierarchical academic community, economists have persisted in favouring the tools of rigorous scientific analysis almost to the exclusion of all other methods. As a result mathematical models are favoured over less formal descriptive measures that rely on qualitative approaches to study. This facilitates the economist's ability to abstract, simplify, measure, analyse and subsequently predict the outcomes of a very complex set of interactions.

If this privileging of particular approaches to study is considered alongside the framing of gender categories, where 'masculine' equals hard, strong, separate, scientific and 'feminine' equals soft, connected, intuitive or emotional, the gender bias in the actual construction of the discipline becomes more apparent. Masculine approaches are favoured over approaches associated with feminine characteristics, resulting in a polarisation of a set of 'ideals'. Those behaviours or

characteristics that do not fit with the model norm, and therefore not understood, are viewed as subordinate and in a binary sense become negative;

> *So absolutely interwoven are our existing concepts of maleness and humanness, so sure are we that men are people and women only females, that the claim of equal weight and dignity in human affairs of the feminine instincts and methods is scouted as absurd. We find existing industry almost wholly in male hands; find it done as men do it; assume that that is the way it must be done. When women suggest that it could be done differently, their proposal is waved aside – they are 'only women" – their ideas are 'womanish.' (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 2001, p88)*

In my view Gilman's words, originally published in 1914 in a text entitled the 'Man-Made World or Our Androcentric Culture', seem just as relevant now as they were then. Indeed for Gilman the subordination of woman and women's ideas was particularly obvious in the 'infant science of political economy' in that 'current teachings are naively masculine' (ibid, p186). Perhaps no longer an 'infant science', but rather economics, as indicated above, is a well established and very influential academic discipline yet it continues to be dominated by both the physical presence of men and a 'naively masculine' approach to study.

Economics as an academic discipline therefore continues to be almost wholly in male hands, done as men do it and with the associated assumptions that that is the way it must be done. So where are all the women? Have they been waved aside? Is there any evidence to suggest that the practice of studying economics is defined by a 'naively masculine' approach and if so is this because a feminist approach is 'scouted as absurd". The gender imbalance within the academic economics profession is of course a cause for concern with reference to equal opportunity in employment. In addition, viewing and understanding the world through a masculine lens has resulted in a very constrained view of the choices we make, both in terms of what choices are considered relevant to study and with respect to the variables at work in influencing those choices. As a result the economist's world is a very partial world that serves to limit the terms of reference for conceptualising human relationships. It would seem therefore, that the gender imbalance within the academic profession is not simply a reflection of barriers to occupational choice but also acts in framing the discipline in such a way that excludes issues of relevance to women from both the research agenda and the approach to study.

Why it matters

The marginalisation of women throughout the economics profession has effectively rendered the discipline impractical and it would appear that women and 'womanish' ideas are not welcome. The 'norm' is understood in terms of gender constructs and the masculine continues to be privileged over all that is feminine. This results not only in a limited understanding of the world in which we all live but

perhaps more crucially informs policy prescriptions that are designed in accordance with economist notions of how we should live. For instance, policy aimed at improving labour market participation, which fails to account for the very different sets of socially and economically determined constraints faced by men and women, will have differential gender impacts. Policy designed and implemented with a sole focus on the impact of behaviour in the paid economy will have gender effects. Activity in the paid economy is inextricably linked with activity in the unpaid economy and men and women occupy very different positions within each. Economic policy tends to ignore this interdependence, primarily because impacts in the unpaid economy, which is predominately occupied by women, are less visible and therefore less tangible than impacts that appear in the mainstream. They are ignored simply because they do not fit the model.

This exclusion is particularly pertinent when considering the impact of current austerity measures, a dominant feature of the macroeconomic policy agenda across Europe. Policy measures directed at reducing state deficits by slashing public spending have involved both a transfer of responsibility for the production of certain goods and services from the public to the private sector and an absolute cut in particular areas of service provision. The consequences of such measures will have an impact on individual welfare as well as overall economic performance. Thus assessing the effectiveness of the cuts will require reference to standard market based indicators including the change in public expenditure, output levels and prices. This will provide quantifiable data on how effective the shift in emphasis from public to private provision, within a public policy context, has been in reducing state deficits. However the exclusive reliance on such data will fail to account for the distributional consequences of the cuts and is therefore a very limiting approach to policy analysis.

State intervention in the provision of public goods and services is itself a response to an identified market failure. That is, the private market will fail to provide certain goods and services, such as health care, education and care services, in sufficient quantities due to the nature of such goods. The very significant social benefits, as opposed to private or individual benefits, associated with the consumption of 'merit goods' such as education and health care are not accounted for in private market transactions and thus the free market will not supply a level of goods deemed to be socially efficient. Hence the justification for public provision, either directly or through state supported subsidies. The shift from public provision to a greater reliance on the private sector should thus be assessed with reference to the impact on the overall level of provision and any subsequent third party or 'spill-over' effects. These effects tend to be gendered in that the shift from public to private has knock-on effects for the functioning of the domestic or household economy. Much of what takes place within the household economy is unpaid and is thus 'invisible' in terms of market-based criteria. However, this unpaid activity, primarily undertaken by women, is

crucial to the efficient functioning of market based economies. Significant and prolonged public spending cuts, involving the withdrawal of key public services, is taking place within a framework that provides little guarantee of the private sector stepping in to fill the gap. Questions remain as to who will fill the gap, how this will be sourced and the impact on individuals and communities.

Analysing the impact of deflationary fiscal policy should therefore include an examination of patterns of distribution both within and across households; an assessment of how a lack of affordable care services impacts on access to the formal labour market and an evaluation of how patterns of social reproduction are affected by a process of economic restructuring that transfers costs from the formal paid economy to the unpaid household economy. That is, policy analysis should consider more than standard market based indicators and should include a closer examination of the impact of policy change on the household and the interaction between the paid and unpaid economies. Assessing policy within such a framework would serve to incorporate a range of relevant social outcomes into the policy process and would facilitate a more inclusive approach to economic management.

Conclusion

Feminist economists have sought to reshape their discipline to be more inclusive and to reorient the approach to study in a more gender-neutral fashion. What would that reshaping look like? That question is perhaps a rather difficult one to tackle in a short review article such as this. However, what can be succinctly stated is that what is required is a more useful mechanism for understanding the complexities of human activity, the life experiences of all individuals, women in particular and a widening of the debate to include the whole range of factors that contribute to human well-being. So it's not simply a question of ensuring more women do economics but also about ensuring more economists engage with the woman question?

Perhaps now more than ever we are in need of this reshaping of the discipline. The economics profession failed to predict the most recent and catastrophic global financial crisis. Perhaps more concerning is the subsequent failure of the profession to come up with suitable and effective remedies to counteract the effects of the most widespread and significant economic slump since the Second World War. The economics discipline is a discipline in crisis. Robert Skidelsky, leading scholar of Keynes's life and works, highlights the relationship between the financial crisis and the crisis in ideas within the mainstream economics profession;

'To understand the crisis we need to get beyond the blame game. For at the root of the crisis was not a failures of characters or competence, but a failure of ideas…. the present crisis is to a large extent the fruit of the intellectual failure of the economics profession.' (Skidelsky, 2010, p28)

The current economic crisis and crisis in economics presents as an opportunity to generate new ideas – reshape the discipline perhaps?

In considering those 'new ideas' I am drawn to one of my favourite feminist economists, Marilyn Waring, who urges us to examine and critique our existing discourse, particularly with respect to how we understand the concepts of economics, value and worth. In particular she reminds us that the word economics derives from the Greek 'oikonymikos', meaning the care and management of a household (Waring, 2012). In thinking of that definition I want to end this article on what some may consider a rather controversial point. Maybe it's the case that women remain absent from the economics profession not because the male economists have waved them and their ideas aside but because they are simply too busy managing and caring for the lifeblood of our communities – our households. Women are the economists.

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Ailsa has been employed on a consultancy basis to work with HM Treasury, the Irish Government and the government of the Basque community to work on their respective pilot gender budget initiatives and she has been contracted by UNIFEM and UNDP to provide specialist training on gender budgets. She has also acted as special advisor to the Equal Opportunities Committee of the Scottish Parliament for the budget scrutiny period 2007/8 and 2008/09.

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