

REFLECTIONS AFTER THE 2006 IAFFE CONFERENCE ON FEMINIST ECONOMICS

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Two ideas in Stage One Economics really took my fancy. The first was the Keynesian notion of pump priming to lift countries out of depressions. The second was the absurdity of GDP going down when “a man [sic] married his housekeeper”. At the end of that year, I abandoned English and set on a path for an Economics major, with lofty ideals of playing a small part in bringing about a world that valued unpaid work and took action to combat poverty. Before too long, however, the ascendancy of neo-classical economics was evident in universities and public policy advice, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE) provides a forum for feminist analysis within economics. IAFFE’s 15th Annual Conference on Feminist Economics took place in the Women’s College at the leafy heart of the University of Sydney, 7–9 July 2006. As the first university in Australia to teach a feminist economics course, this was an appropriate, though arguably a too establishment, Oxford look-alike, setting for the three days of feminist economic thought, analysis and debate.

Understanding how socially defined roles and power dynamics create gendered economic outcomes is a key feature of feminist economics. Core territory includes: gendered roles in households and labour markets and the social, political and institutional structures that impact on these; studies of human activities that do not fit with the notion of autonomous, self-interested, “economic man” such as emotional and other-regarding motivations; and caring work.

Many internationally well-known feminist economists presented at the conference, including Nancy Folbre, Julie Nelson, Marianne Ferber and Rhonda Sharp, as well as Prue Hyman from New Zealand. Academics from other disciplines, including Michael Bittman from Australia, and Jane Kelsey and Marilyn Waring from New Zealand, also presented papers or led workshops.

Several papers reported on empirical studies of factors that influence incomes. Topics included household bargaining, women’s access to jobs and their pay, the impacts of technology on gender wage differentials, the impacts of caring responsibilities on women’s work and incomes, women’s access to and control over land, and the impact of trade on developing countries generally and women in particular.

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Policy-oriented studies covered the expected topics of childcare, labour rights, pay equity, minimum wage, social protection and services, parental leave and payment, retirement incomes, micro-credit and gender budgeting. There were also suites of papers and panels exploring the impacts of macroeconomic policies, from trade agreements and direct foreign investment, to country policies on tax regimes.

A recurring theme was how engaging in the economy on very unequal footings – for example, where some individual incomes are not enough for a sustainable livelihood, and debts skew the development of many countries – predetermines who will be better off in the end.

Another theme was that “women-friendly” regimes do make a difference to labour force participation and women’s incomes. The empirical evidence about what to do is well-established, and in developed countries, at least, not unmanageable for firms or for government budgets. Nevertheless, there is quite a way to go in practice.

A Swedish project that invited third-world experts to evaluate the outcomes of gender equity programmes in Sweden was humbling and instructive. For the Swedes, being subjected to an evaluation framed up by others left them with a sense of frustration and powerlessness that drew attention to the experience of all third-world recipients of foreign aid programmes. While Sweden got a big tick for actually implementing policies – something that cannot be taken for granted in many countries – the reviewers questioned how much gender equity there really was given the high rates of violence against women and the intransigence of the gender pay gap. Sound familiar?

Papers on the history of economic thought reminded me that the concepts of “usury” and “exploitation”, which were deep concerns of economists in the late 19th and early 20th century, have all but disappeared from mainstream economics. The dissecting of orthodox thought provided a jolt about how important language is, and how a too-narrow lens, tidy and measurable as it might be, can generate results that are “precisely wrong”, or indeed irrelevant.

A most amusing paper that psychoanalysed Adam Smith’s writing highlighted how his personal issues influenced his scholarship. It suggested that this most famous promoter of the “invisible hand” and the importance of self-interest to generating a nation’s wealth had real issues with the idea of “dependence”, so much so that he convinced himself that dependence did not exist in the animal kingdom, but was a solely a “problem” for humans.

Issues were framed in ways that made sense to me, and some of the empirical studies left me wondering at how little attention most economists and policymakers collectively devote to addressing issues of equity at their source, rather than through stigmatised programmes and “hand-outs” when the damage is done.

Despite feeling personally validated, feminist economics is largely marginalised within the economics profession and the policy world. I was left wondering what it would take to get the preoccupations of the conference taken more seriously. The crisis in care services, the difficulties families have achieving work–life balance, hardship in single-parent-headed families, and even skill shortages, could be better addressed if an understanding of the life-cycle needs and daily worlds of the predominantly female group who keep our families going was a central focus.

Ten years ago, the parallel conferences of Beyond Poverty and Beyond Dependency could not have been more different in the way they framed the issues and the sets of concerns that were endorsed as valid. The divisions between those who initiated the conferences were never bridged. Have we made much progress since then?

If you want to learn more about the International Association for Feminist Economics, you may visit their website, www.iaffe.org, or check out their journal, *Feminist Economics*, published by Routledge.