

## **Feminist Economics as a Challenge to Mainstream Economics?**

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### **Introduction**

*Bina Agarwal*

This special issue of the newsletter brings together five plenary presentations made at IAFFE's Thirteenth annual conference at Oxford this August. The first four were presented at the closing plenary and the last one at a plenary celebrating ten years of IAFFE's journal *Feminist Economics*. All the presentations in different ways contribute to the theme of the closing plenary: "Feminist Economics as a Challenge to Mainstream Economics?" They are being published together on popular demand and with the hope of provoking further discussion on a subject that engages all of us.

When I had first conceptualized a plenary on this theme, I had thought of it as a kind of stocktaking: after twelve years of IAFFE's existence - what kind of impact has feminist economics had on mainstream economics, what are our constraints, and where do we go from here? But on further reflection it became clear that we needed to judge the effectiveness of feminist economics much more broadly, recognizing feminist economics as a transformative project not just in relation to the discipline, but also in relation to women's lives in the real world.

The papers contained herein address these concerns in different ways. The first three papers focus on how feminist economics might pose a challenge both to mainstream economics and beyond, and the last two examine the impact of feminist economics by analyzing citation patterns, using as a benchmark IAFFE's journal *Feminist Economics*.

In the opening paper I argue that while it is important to assess the impact of feminist economics on mainstream economics, it is equally important to evaluate the effectiveness of feminist economics by other criteria, such as whether it has helped to reduce gender inequality and improve women's lives in the real world. A

pursuit of the latter goal could, in some contexts, make feminist economists less effective in mainstream forums but would count for a great deal by alternative criteria, such as relevance and responsibility. The paper also outlines several parameters (presented as a typology) which are argued as likely to impinge on the effectiveness of the feminist economics challenge to the mainstream.

The second paper, by Diane Elson, focuses on the feminist challenge to mainstream macroeconomics. She distinguishes between extending the mainstream paradigm and challenging it. She argues that feminist economists must do more than simply

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extend the paradigm - they must challenge the fundamental assumptions of the mainstream. She discusses some of the ways in which feminist analysis has on the one hand extended mainstream macroeconomics and on the other hand challenged it, by building on more heterodox traditions within the discipline.

Sanjay Reddy approaches the subject somewhat differently by first critiquing some of the blindnesses and narrow assumptions that characterize the mainstream and then outlining what he sees as at least three elements in the challenge that feminist economics poses for mainstream economics. First, he argues, it calls upon the mainstream to address the complexities inherent in the real world, to

prioritize observations and to give special importance to perceptions and contexts. Second, it asks for a broadening of the mainstream's evaluative framework and for grounding the assessment of actions and policies in explicit normative commitments. Third it calls for greater pluralism in the space of explanatory concepts - one which admits the experiential and the institutional.

The last two papers analyze journal citations. Frances Woolley suggests that one of the ways of challenging the mainstream is to cite articles published in *Feminist Economics*. This would further enhance the journal's ranking as well as the career advancement prospects of authors. However, the most important reason for

citing the journal, she emphasizes, lies in the high quality of the papers published in *FE* which warrant such citation. She also makes a case for self-citing articles published in the journal.

Finally, Cecilia Conrad compares *Feminist Economics* with four other feminist journals from related disciplines to see to what extent there is a crossover by feminist scholars from feminist journals in their own disciplines to those of other disciplines.

The presentations contained here are in the nature of explorations rather than definitive statements. They will, I hope, catalyze a discussion that will carry over into the coming years.

## Challenging Mainstream Economics: Effectiveness, Relevance and Responsibility <sup>1</sup>

*Bina Agarwal, IAFFE President and Professor of Economics, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi University*

To what extent has feminist economics (FE) effectively challenged mainstream economics (ME) and how? Thinking about this subject, I found myself asking: is the relationship between ME and FE necessarily adversarial or are there complementarities as well? Equally, should we be judging the achievements of FE by mainly using ME as the benchmark? Should we not identify our own evaluation criteria based on broader values? I will briefly address both the point and the counterpoint.

### I. What makes for an effective challenge?

Consider first the relationship between FE and ME. "Feminist economics as a challenge to ME?" appears to pitch the relationship as adversarial. Also by implication it places FE outside the mainstream. I question these premises.

I will argue first that FE and ME economics have a complex relationship part adversarial, part complementary.

While we critique many aspects of the mainstream we also often draw on some aspects as building blocks or stepping stones for departure. And the effectiveness of the feminist challenge could in fact depend on the extent and nature of complementarity or opposition to ME. Before I elaborate let me provide some definitional clarifications.

#### (a) Some definitions

First, what do I mean by ME? For my purpose, I divide economics into three broad categories:

*Orthodox mainstream:* We could include in this not only neo-classical economics but also developments such as game theory. The subject areas would cover the range of standard fields, including, say, labor economics and agricultural economics.

*Heterodox mainstream:* This could include, say, ecological economics, institutional economics, and Marxist economics

*Heterodox marginal:* Here I include newly emerging fields, such as the care economy, and new developments in behavioral economics such as the interface of psychology and economics expressed both in formal models and in experimental games (in fact, I expect this field to soon become part of the heterodox mainstream).

Second, what do I mean by an effective feminist challenge to ME? It is not easy to frame this, but broadly I mean the extent to which the economics profession comes to recognize the shortcomings of standard assumptions, gaps in knowledge, and inaccuracies in measured outcomes and predictions, and begins to see feminist analysis as an important corrective or as an alternative. I must emphasize that this is but one ground for judging effectiveness, in a sense internal to the economics profession. Even if FE is unable to dent ME, it can yet provide an effective intellectual challenge as a body of knowledge in and of itself, and in its impact on other disciplines and on the real world.

Third, I include under feminist economics all forms of gendered economic analysis, even if the authors themselves eschew the title "feminist economist".

*(b) Some Relevant Parameters*

I would like to suggest that a number of parameters are likely to impinge on the effectiveness of the FE challenge, of which the following four appear to be especially important:

*Parameter 1: The main focus of the initial challenge:* Is its main focus theory? Empirical findings? Public policy? Ethical concerns? Or some mix of these. I recognize that it is not always possible to categorize research fields neatly in these terms, and often what may begin, say, as a theoretical challenge, may serve as a catalyst and lead to methodological innovativeness, empirical testing, and policy formulation. Or the sequence may follow a different even the reverse - track, moving say from policy concerns to theoretical challenges. Nevertheless, I feel it is helpful to identify, at least in broad terms, what might have been the "initial" main focus of the challenge.

*Parameter 2: The intellectual stepping stone that serves as the point of departure.* The point of departure for the feminist challenge can come from orthodox or heterodox ME or from heterodox marginal economics, or from outside economics altogether. Most feminist economists, I believe, use some branch of economics orthodox or heterodox - to build on or depart from.

*Parameter 3: The potential for formalism and empirical testing:* Is it possible to express the feminist alternative in formal models or as

empirically testable? Given the importance accorded to formalism within mainstream economics, this is likely to carry particular weight.

*Parameter 4: The potential efficiency and equity effects of any policy shift resulting from the feminist alternative.* Challenging the assumptions of ME and providing a feminist alternative is also likely to have implications for economic policies. Any associated policy shifts could have both efficiency and equity effects, and the strength of these effects would also impinge on the effectiveness of the challenge. But given the weight accorded to efficiency by the mainstream, the potential efficiency gains might matter more than the potential equity gains in determining the strength of the challenge.

This list is not comprehensive and no doubt other parameters could be added. But these parameters, I believe, at least broadly define the spectrum of feminist economics analysis: at one end are those who do theoretical or empirical work, building on orthodox mainstream economics and formalism. At the other end are those who consciously eschew both orthodoxy and formalism. The engagement with policy is variable.

*(c) A Typology*

The table given further below, seeks to provide a typology based on these parameters. This should be read as an initial attempt to systematize the factors for further debate, rather than as a definitive or comprehensive statement. Drawing on the typology I would like to suggest the following:

**FEMINIST ECONOMICS AS A CHALLENGE TO MAINSTREAM ECONOMICS?  
WHAT MAKES FOR AN EFFECTIVE CHALLENGE? A TYPOLOGY**

<i>Main Focus of Initial Challenge*</i>	<i>Intellectual stepping stone for Departure</i>	<i>Potential for formal models and empirical testing</i>	<i>Potential efficiency effect of associated policy shift</i>	<i>Potential welfare/equity effects of associated policy shift</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Effect on mainstream economics</i>
I. Theoretical	Orthodox mainstream: Game theory	Strong	Strong	Strong	Household bargaining models	Strong
I.1 Theoretical/ Empirical	Orthodox mainstream: Labor economics	Strong	Strong	Strong	Labor market discrimination/ segmentation	Strong
II.2 Theoretical/ Empirical	Orthodox mainstream: Agricultural Economics  Heterodox mainstream: Marxist economics; and other disciplines (e.g., law)	Medium	Medium	Strong	Land and property rights for women	Medium
II.3 Theoretical/ Empirical	Heterodox mainstream: Ecological economics, Institutional economics	Medium	Medium	Strong	Common pool resource management; environmental issues	Weak, will Grow
III. I Public policy	Orthodox mainstream: Public finance	Medium	Medium	Medium	Gender Budgets	Weak. Will Grow
III.2 Public policy	Heterodox marginal/ Philosophy	Weak	Weak	Strong	Care economy	Weak, could Grow
IV. Ethical	Philosophy, politics	Weak	Mixed	Strong	Gender Inequality in a human rights framework	Weak, could grow

\* These distinctions are very broad, since what might begin as a theoretical challenge could subsequently lead to empirical and methodological developments, and vice versa.

I: The feminist economics challenge to the mainstream appears to be the most effective where its initial thrust is theoretical; it uses some branch of orthodox mainstream theory as a building block or stepping stone for departure; it has a strong potential for formal modeling and empirical testing; and any associated policy shift could lead to strong efficiency gains, in addition to equity gains. Household bargaining models as a challenge to Gary Becker's unitary household model are a case in point. They build on game theory, which today can be seen as part of the orthodox mainstream; they have a strong potential for formalism and empirical testing; and they can have strong efficiency and equity effects by inducing policy shifts (say in resource transfers) in a more gender equal direction.

The application of bargaining theory to explain gender-differentiated intra-household outcomes have, in my view, provided the most effective FE challenge to the standard assumptions of neoclassical economics, both in theoretical and empirical terms.

Theoretically, those who have contributed notably to this challenge through formal modelling have been both feminist economists *and* other economists whose work has been a significant part of the feminist challenge (even if they may not be seen as feminist scholars *per se*). Among this range of contributors would be Shelly Lundberg, Robert Pollak, Elizabeth Katz, Frances Woolley, Cheryl Doss, Notburga Ott, Marilyn Manser, Murray Brown, Marjorie McElroy, Mary Jean Horney, Pierre-Andre Chiappori, and Francois Bourguignon, to name but a few.<sup>2</sup> Empirically too, over the past decade or so, many studies have demonstrated the relevance of the bargaining approach to the household, both in the context of developed countries, such as work by Patricia Apps, Shelly Phipps, and Shoshana Grossbard-Shechtman; and in the context of less developed countries, such as writings by Christine Jones in the early 1980s, and by Agnes Quisumbing, Lawrence Haddad and others from the

International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington DC, in recent years. These have shown that the burden of proof now lies with those still upholding the unitary model.

Here, in a sense, feminist analysis has used the tools provided by one branch of the orthodox mainstream (game theory) to challenge another branch of the orthodox mainstream (neo-classical economics), as well as depart from standard game theory itself.

II: Next in effectiveness appear to be feminist challenges initiated partly by theory and partly by empirical results. Some in this category appear to have the potential for a strong impact on ME, some medium, others weak.

II.1: The strong impact is likely to be of those that use orthodox ME as stepping stones, have a strong potential for formalism and empirical analysis, as well as a strong potential for inducing policy formulation that enhances efficiency and gender equity. Studies of labor market discrimination and segmentation are cases in point. This subject has engaged a large number of feminist scholars globally over an extended period of time. And many aspects of gendered labor economics are now standard and accepted as mainstream.

II.2: The medium impact among the theory plus empirically driven studies is likely to be of those which use orthodox ME as intellectual stepping stones (although they might additionally draw on the heterodox mainstream or on other disciplines); which have a medium potential for formalism and empirical testing; and have a medium potential for efficiency gains via policy shifts, although the equity effects could still be strong. An example is work on women's land and property rights, which has challenged standard assumptions in agricultural economics and Marxist economics, while also drawing on other disciplines such as law.

II.3: The weak impact in this category so far (although it will grow) is of gender analysis on the governance of the commons,

and on environmental issues more generally, which have challenged aspects of standard ecological economics and institutional economics. The weakness of the feminist challenge here is not intrinsic but stems, I believe, more from the relatively limited engagement with this field by feminist economists. Within heterodox mainstream economics, research on environmental and ecological issues is amongst the fastest growing, but this potential has been tapped rather little so far by feminist economists.

III (III.1-III.2): A third category of the FE challenge is the challenge initiated from a public policy perspective. [This is not to deny the theoretical or methodological underpinnings in this challenge, but it is to highlight the particular focus on public policy as the initial thrust of this debate.] The issues in this category could range from gender budgets to the care economy. Gender budgets, for instance, take as their point of departure mainstream public finance, and have a medium potential for formalism. The care economy writings use as stepping stones studies of labor markets, women's work, as well as moral philosophy, with a weak potential for formalism (in fact many eschew formalism). I feel both topics have so far proved to be somewhat weak challenges to ME, but the influence is likely to increase over time. For instance, the impact of gender budgeting might grow, given its potential policy implications and especially if the discussion on budgets is embedded in a larger critique of macroeconomic policy. Interest in the care economy could also grow within the discipline, with emerging concerns for an aging population in large parts of the world.

IV. A fourth type of feminist challenge, which I broadly term the ethical challenge, draws more directly on moral philosophy to question various forms of gender inequality, framed, say, in terms of human rights. Attempts to frame gendered poverty in this way is a case in point. The impact on ME has been weak thus far.

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In short, FE would prove the most effective in challenging ME where the challenge is theoretically driven, uses orthodox economic theory as its building block and point of departure, has a strong potential for formalism and empirical testing, and a strong potential for the framing of policies which would enhance efficiency outcomes. Equity outcomes would also matter, but perhaps less so.

The challenge is likely to be least effective where it is neither theoretically nor empirically driven; which uses as its stepping stone the more heterodox and marginal fields of economics or even another discipline; is not very amicable to formalism; and has a weak potential for efficiency gains from associated policy shifts, even while the equity effects may be strong.

Also, in a sense, mainstream economists are more likely to be persuaded if what is being critiqued and the tools used to critique it are familiar to them. In this context, it would be worth the while of more feminist economists to engage with fields that are fast growing within the heterodox mainstream today, and which also have great relevance from a gender perspective, such as ecological economics (mentioned above); the psychological dimensions of economic behavior; and the use of experimental games to test standard economic assumptions about rationality or about self-interest being the driving force of human behavior. Contributions by feminist economists in these fields would both be of notable interest to feminist research *and* have the potential for making an impact within the larger discipline.

Finally, it needs emphasis that the parameters I have identified as likely to make the challenge to mainstream economics effective are by no means comprehensive. Other factors could also matter, for instance, whether the author is based at an elite university or elsewhere, in which journals the work is published, and how many feminist economists are writing on the topic. (A large body of scholarship is likely to get more attention than a limited engagement by a few.) Similarly, the distinctions

embodied within the first two parameters are far from neat. But I hope the typology, as set out, can still prove to be thought-provoking and serve as the starting point of an engaged discussion.

## 2. Relevance and Responsibility

This leads me to the counterpoint: should ME be the main touchstone for judging the contributions of FE? I believe not. FE should stand on its own, and set up its own criteria for assessment. In my Barbados keynote (IAFFE newsletter August 2003, pp. 7-10), for instance, I had suggested two such criteria for judging the effectiveness of feminist economics - one whether FE is fulfilling its intellectual responsibility and two whether it is fulfilling its ethical responsibility.

### (a) Intellectual responsibility

Intellectually, a significant aim of FE is to understand the nature and causes of gender inequality in all its forms. By doing so it can help to orient economic and social policies. Effectiveness on these counts can depend on the relevance of the subjects we research and the methods we use to research them.

In so far as gender inequality adversely affects millions of women and their families, relevance is in some sense implicit in the aim itself. Yet we might go further in examining the topics of feminist research. On many counts, FE has been pioneering: to name but a few of the contributions, at the micro-level it has focused attention on intra-household inequalities; at the meso-level it has drawn attention to inequalities in communities and in the functioning of the care economy; and at the macro-level it has highlighted the gendered effects of macroeconomic policies, and international labor and capital flows.

Yet, there are many topics which await more attention, such as the gender dimensions of environmental change, women's wealth and property status, the globalizing economy, collective action, and the nature of social and economic power - some of which were themes in IAFFE's Oxford conference.

But a focus on gender inequality also requires theoretical, empirical, methodological and policy innovativeness, to deal with the complexity that characterizes the real world. It might require eschewing formalism and including qualitative factors, many of which cannot be modeled easily. In other words, *some of the features which might weaken the FE challenge of ME, could also be features that make feminist analysis more relevant.*

### (b) Ethical responsibility

Another criteria for assessment is what I have earlier termed the ethical responsibility of FE. For instance, are we sharing our research findings to help improve women's lives? If what we research has to benefit people, we need to reach our research beyond the academia to governmental and non-governmental forums where policies are formulated and interventions made. Outreach outside the academia can be done in different ways: through the popular media (newspapers and TV); through booklets written in a language accessible to grassroots groups; via policy briefs; by building partnerships with organizations working with the communities from whom or about whom we gather field data; by sharing our results in workshops for NGOs and government officials; and so on.

All this involves time away from what counts in academia. This again might make us less effective in mainstream professional forums but would count for a great deal in terms of alternative criteria for judging the impact of FE. In other words, effectiveness should be judged by the impact of FE in multiple forums, of which the academic profession is but one. Grassroots groups, government policymaking bodies, international networks and organisations, are among others.

In fact, in the long run, it is possible that issues that capture the attention of policy makers and grassroots groups, including women's groups, on a wide-enough scale, could, in turn, have an impact on the discipline. The issue of women's land and property rights in developing countries, for instance, which is now making a mark in many national and international

forums and policy making bodies, including in the United Nations, is a case in point. Discussions by feminist social scientists and philosophers in Europe and the USA on welfare policy reform, around the caregiver parity model and other models seeking to combine care work, paid work and leisure, is yet another example.

What constrains more of us from taking up these challenges and extending our outreach beyond academia? Is it the limited professional space that ME provides? Has it to do with our own proclivities? Possibly both? Clearly factors such as the conceptual and methodological rigidities and time requirements of the discipline, the stranglehold of neoclassical economics and of formalism in economic departments and journals - the hegemony of the mainstream - job security considerations, can all restrict our ability to take risks with new areas, new methodologies, and new forms of outreach. But equally, we need to ask: have we ourselves set constraints by being too preoccupied with the challenge to ME, and paying too little attention to other evaluation criteria based on other values? And are we doing enough to mentor younger faculty and graduate students, who would, among other things, help extend the range and reach of our ideas and add to them?

Perhaps we need a reminder that there are also potential prizes to be won for innovativeness and difference. My vision is of mainstream economists flocking to IAFFE's conferences and panels at professional meetings, because we have something new, innovative and different to say.

### 3. To sum up

To end, let me iterate three points:

One, the relationship between FE and ME is potentially both complementary and adversarial. While clearly there is much that needs challenging in ME, there is some that is also useful for FE. For challenging ME effectively, we need to build on both aspects.

Two, the effectiveness of the FE challenge to ME could depend on a range of parameters, such as what is the main focus of the initial challenge - theory, public policy reform, ethics? What intellectual tradition we build on and depart from - orthodox or heterodox economics or another discipline altogether? The possibility of formalism and empirical testing. And the potential for framing policy based on the feminist alternative that has efficiency and equity enhancing effects. Initially theory-focused challenges that take on the orthodox mainstream, that can be presented in formal models and empirically tested, and which have demonstrably

strong efficiency benefits from reframing policy, are likely to be the most effective.

However, three, we should not judge the impact of FE mainly in relation to ME. We need to devise our own criteria which even if less effective in challenging ME professionally would be relevant to our larger goal - namely FE as an intellectual endeavor that helps enhance gender equality in the real world, and transforms the lives of real women, men and children.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Janet Seiz, Frances Woolley, Sanjay Reddy, Seeta Prabhu, and Ingrid Robeyns for their comments on the ideas expressed here. However, they hold no responsibility for the end product.

<sup>2</sup> In addition there have been many feminist contributors to this field who even while not presenting formal models have furthered the discussion in important ways, such as by providing strong critiques of the unitary approach, by focusing on qualitative aspects of intrahousehold bargaining, and/or by tracing the links between intrahousehold and extrahousehold bargaining power (see, among others, the work of Amartya Sen, Gillian Hart, Nancy Folbre, and the present author).