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Feminist Economics and Agency

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Synonyms

Capabilities; Empowerment; Gender economics;
Power; Self-efficacy

Introduction

Feminist economics is a subdiscipline of economics that emerged in the 1980s as feminist economists started to interrogate assumptions embedded in their discipline that failed to take account of gendered roles and responsibilities and gendered social norms, particularly as they affected households and the market. As Benería et al. (2016: 56) observe, “mainstream economics defines the discipline principally in terms of optimizing the behavior of individuals.” Markets and transactions are theorized, and individual or group behavior is modeled mathematically with individuals or agents maximizing utility,¹ profit, or well-

being subject to financial or time constraints. Attempts to understand the household and realms where prices did not hold and transactions did not involve money or assets, theorized unpaid work being exchanged for financial or in-kind support provided by individuals engaged in market labor. But as Benería et al. (2016: 56) also point out, “this approach marginalizes or obscures the importance of social provisioning, that is how societies organize the activities involved in making a living.” This is where social and cultural norms shape expectations about the gender roles individuals have and what is appropriate for their time use. This includes whether women engage in paid work outside the household and have control over their earnings. Marilyn Power (2004) uses the term “social provisioning” and associates this with the emerging discipline of feminist economics. In Power’s view, there are five main components to social provisioning: “incorporation of caring and unpaid labor as fundamental economic activities; use of well-being as a measure of economic success; analysis of economic, political, and social processes and power relations; inclusion of ethical goals and values as an intrinsic part of the analysis; and interrogation of differences by class, race-ethnicity, and other factors.”

A central tenet of feminist economics is the recognition of the importance of unpaid and caring labor (Benería et al. 2016). Worldwide, the responsibility for unpaid care work falls disproportionately on women and girls, leaving them less time for education, leisure, self-care,

¹Utility is what economists call satisfaction. The concept of utility as it is used in microeconomics comes from Jeremy Bentham’s work on happiness in the eighteenth century. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/bentham/>

political participation, paid work, and other economic activities. Much of unpaid work is devoted to caring for household members and household provisioning such as cooking, cleaning, washing, mending, and making clothes. Caring work takes up a significant amount of time in most countries, especially where infrastructure is poor and publicly provided services are limited or absent. Women's responsibilities for care work can limit their engagement in market activities, reduce their productivity, increase labor market segmentation, and lead them to concentrate in low-paid, more insecure, part-time, informal, and home-based work as a means of reconciling unpaid care work and paid employment. Where social and cultural norms dictate that women bear the primary responsibility for caring, women frequently have little opportunity to shift or renegotiate these roles, limiting their agency and ability to choose other roles and responsibilities.

Gender as Defining Characteristic for Economic Analysis

Feminist economics uses gender as a defining characteristic relevant for economic analysis. Gender goes beyond sex to ascribe social and cultural constructs to an individual. Gender is a social construct that is being reshaped and reconstituted over time in different cultures and epochs (Benería et al. 2016). Gender affects the substantive freedoms that individuals have to be and do what they may wish to do, and it may even affect their imagining of what they might be and do. Gender also affects an individual's agency, that is, the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices (Sen 1999).

Agency and Empowerment

Agency is frequently linked to empowerment and considered to be a core component of empowerment (Kabeer 1999). While various definitions exist for empowerment, a commonly accepted definition is that empowerment is an "expansion in one's ability to make strategic² life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to him/her" (Kabeer 2001).

Agency is defined as the ability to formulate strategic life choices and control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes. Put more simply, it is the ability to define one's goals and act upon them (Kabeer 1999; Sen 1999). Agency is related to one's internal power and the meaning, motivation, and purpose that people bring to an activity. Important to exercising and having agency is having an understanding of one's values, as well as having self-esteem, confidence, and aspirations. The expression of agency can include bargaining, negotiation, manipulation, resistance, and protest. It also includes intangible processes of reflection and analysis (Klugman et al. 2014).

Integral to agency is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the perception of your capability to get something done in a way that leads to desired outcomes (Bandura 1995). Drawing from social cognitive theory, what people think, believe, and feel in turn affect how they behave. Self-efficacy is important because unless people believe that their actions can produce results, they have little incentive to act or persevere when they face challenges. Depending on how well you think you can do something (self-efficacy), your choices and actions will be affected (agency).

Agency is psychological, but resources and the institutional environment impact the development and exercise of agency (Klugman et al. 2014). Agency can be indirectly reinforced through a supportive environment and directly encouraged through psychological interventions that have people reflect on their personal values, goals, and hopes. Agency can be promoted through programs and policies that expand economic opportunities, provide young women and girls with trainings or new information and skills, promote gender-responsive social protection (including addressing unpaid care responsibilities), and increase access to quality education (Klugman et al. 2014: 47–56). The ability to undertake paid work can also increase agency and afford women

²Strategic life choices are synonymous with important life choices that help people live the lives they want, as opposed to other choices which are those with less consequential outcomes.

income and earnings that can be used to secure their well-being, acquire new skills or enable them to change their status as dependents, and influence decisions within and beyond the household (Agarwal 1997). With agency and resources, people can make important choices in their lives and gain increased control over their lives.

Nancy Folbre (1994) highlights how identity and gender affect one's agency. She describes how the collective structures of constraint in a society affect agency through the pattern of rules, norms, assets, and preferences that position individuals within a social hierarchy according to their intersecting group identities (such as sex, age, race, caste, class) and how these rules determine the scope for agency available to them. The distinction Folbre (1994) makes between rules and norms allows us to see how norms and rules interrelate and how change can be brought about by acting in either arena. In Folbre's analysis, rules have an official status and can include laws and regulations that are enforced by an external authority. Norms tend to have a more implicit and decentralized nature and are embedded in our sense of who we are and our identities. But explicit initiatives to change rules through legislation, such as whether a woman can drive a truck or work on a construction site, or to set quotas for women's participation in economic and political spheres, can also challenge existing social and cultural norms and begin to shift them over time. Similarly, interventions that support communication and behavioral change often act on social and cultural norms to challenge and reshape them. Folbre brings assets into her analysis of the structures of constraint because they too can affect agency. Access to productive assets such as land or housing changes opportunities to generate income and may also affect choices about what to do and be. Having control over assets has the potential to change a woman's intra-household bargaining power and the ability to negotiate outcomes that reflect her preferences (Agarwal 1997). As a result, having assets and/or income can also affect individual agency.

Power

Central to agency and at the root of empowerment is power. Power dynamics, which are socially constructed, are implicit in all social, economic, cultural, and political relations. These social constructions often inhibit women from being able to claim or wield their own power. Power can be categorized in four areas: power to, power over, power with, and power within (Rowlands 1997). "Power to" is about creating new possibilities and controlling, determining, or influencing what happens. "Power over" is an interpersonal form of power and involves the ability to resist manipulation or exert control over another person. "Power with" refers to collective power in a group and achieving things collaboratively that the group wants as a whole. Finally, "power within" is intrapersonal power and is related to strength based on self-respect and self-acceptance. This "power within," which arises from oneself, is important to fostering self-efficacy and ensuing agency. These types of power interrelate in various ways.

Fostering women's empowerment requires a deep commitment to understanding how gendered power relations can change in different contexts and over time. This means efforts to impact women's empowerment require longer time frames, strong partnerships, and support for local actors. Women's empowerment involves fostering an increasing ability to question, challenge, and eventually transform unfavorable power relations that are created and reinforced in the institutional environment.

Why Does Agency and Empowerment Matter?

Agency is critical for an individual to make choices and to seek to act upon them. Without agency, an individual's autonomy is limited in what they can seek to do and be. Without agency and the power to act upon choices, individuals and groups can be subject to the power and rules of others. In its extreme form, such as slavery, imprisonment, or death, but even in lesser forms as a subjugated being, the lack of agency and empowerment compromises an individual's welfare and well-being. In relations between men and

women and in the formation of families and households, communities, and nations, the prevailing norms and rules describe a system of entitlements that can privilege men over women and create entrenched social and economic inequalities (Nussbaum 2003; Sen 1999). Agency and empowerment go to the heart of substantive freedoms (Sen 1999). The failure to include agency in economic analysis allows economists to posit that observed outcomes are rational choices, maximizing utility subject to time and income constraints. This approach fails to identify how norms, rules, and the institutional environment shape choices and limit the ability to be and do. It also fails to explain some fundamental differences between markets and households. As Nancy Folbre (1994) points out, this vision of individual behavior sees individuals motivated by selfishness in markets but fails to explain why the same individuals might be altruistic in the household or indeed the community. This false dichotomy fails to conceive of markets as gendered institutions (Elson 1999) and conceive of human behavior as bearing the imprint of gender socialization. It also fails to understand that humans may not all seek to maximize utility or profits through market mechanisms but may have preference for other divisions of labor, surplus, and allocation and distribution of production (Power 2004).

Institutional Environment

The institutional environment or “opportunity structure” (McAdam 1999) includes formal/informal laws, stereotypes, values, and norms. The institutional environment largely determines resource allocation and is the context within which people not only access resources but are offered the opportunity (or not) to exert agency. Oftentimes, despite changes in formal laws, women’s freedoms can remain defined by tradition and customs that inhibit them from taking advantage of new possible choices. Gender norms are not just constructs perceived by individuals, but are very real structures and constraints that are embedded in organizational bodies and practices, economic transactions, and group identities (Gammage et al. 2016; Elson 1999).

Enhancing women’s empowerment involves a shift in the institutional environment that can be supported through formal changes in laws, but also requires women themselves choosing to reject the power arrangements that disempower them. But in order for them to do so, Paulo Freire (1973) argues that women must be able to see the reality of oppression as a limiting situation that they are able to transform. He refers to this as “critical consciousness,” which involves being able to also see that one is being oppressed and that there are other ways of being. By being able to imagine the possibility of choosing differently, one can move from an unquestioning perspective to a critical perspective. It’s important to create and promote opportunities to enhance the ability of women to reflect so they can move to a critical perspective. Moving from reflection to action is a shift in thinking in which women, using a critical perspective, question and then overturn the existing power dynamics.

With voice, women can speak up about the oppression they face, be heard, as well as shape and share in discussions and decisions that affect them. Voice is commonly referenced to in terms of political interventions and initiatives (Hirschman 1970; Sen 1999; Klugman et al. 2014). Voice as part of the politics of representation takes on particular significance in the feminist literature on collective action by women coming together in various organizational forms, ranging from cooperatives, political parties, social movements, women’s organizations, trade unions, and so on (Bina Agarwal 2000; Petra Dannecker 2000; John Blaxall 2007).

Resources

Resources describe the stock of assets or capabilities that facilitate functionings (Sen 1999) or action from which choices are made and can lead to new ideas of possibility (Kabeer 1994). Resources can be material, social, or human. Material resources include economic resources such as land, equipment, and finance. Human and social resources enhance the ability to exercise choice. Human resources can be one’s knowledge, skills, and creativity. Social resources are made up of obligations, expectations in

relationships (including related to unpaid care work), networks, and connections that are present in the different spheres of one's life. Yet coming full circle, access to resources reflects the rules, norms, and practices that prevail in certain contexts, as well as the preferences of those who have authority. It's not only important to consider if women are able to access resources but also how they access those resources, as access might also be conditional or exploitative. Resources create the potential for choice to be exercised. They are necessary but may not be sufficient for empowerment. There remains a need for individual or collective ability to recognize and utilize resources in one's own interest deploying agency.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Economic Man and Gender](#)
- ▶ [Ethics of Care](#)
- ▶ [Feminist Ethics](#)
- ▶ [Gender and Economic Theory of the Firm](#)
- ▶ [Gender and Government Budgets](#)
- ▶ [Gender and Household Economics](#)
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- ▶ [Work Family Conflict and Policies](#)
- ▶ [Work Life Balance](#)

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