

FEMINISM REDEFINING ECONOMICS OR FEMINISM AS A GOOD ACCOMPANY

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ABSTRACT

Feminism defined as an attempt to eliminate the inequality between women and men by engendering the analysis of the social construct has been and is being challenging for the contemporary economics. Feminist approach argues that without critical analysis, economics rationalizes and naturalizes existing social hierarchies based on gender, race, class and nation. Therefore feminist economics is a revolutionary attempt with a transformative theoretical approach and transformative methodologies for a fuller understanding of real life economics for real people.

Keywords: Feminism, Economics, Feminist Economics, Feminist Methodology, Feminist Critique, Engendering Economics

FEMİNİZM İKTİSADI YENİDEN Mİ TANIMLIYOR YOKSA İYİ BİR YOL ARKADAŞI MI?

ÖZET

Kadın ve erkek eşitliğini hedefleyen feminizm, sosyal inşanın cinsiyetli yapısını ele alırken, iktisat alanını da sarsmaya başlamıştır. Feminist yaklaşım, eleştirel analizden uzak haliyle iktisadın toplumsal cinsiyet, ırk, sınıf ve ulus temelinde oluşan sosyal hiyerarşileri doğallaştırdığını ve akılçılaştırdığını iddia eder. Dolayısıyla feminist iktisat, gerçek yaşamı daha iyi kavramayı ve insanları gerçek yaşamdaki haliyle açıklayabilmeyi hedefleyen, bunun için iktisat alanını dönüştürücü teorik ve metodolojik bir yaklaşım geliştiren devrimci bir girişimdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Feminizm, Feminist Ekonomi, Feminist Metodoloji, Kurumsal İktisat, Feminist Eleştiri.

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Feminism defined as an attempt to eliminate the inequality between women and men by engendering the social construct has been and is being challenging for the contemporary economics as well as other 'sciences'. Before going deeper into feminist critique of economics it is important to clarify what gender is and what it is not.

There are two common misunderstandings about gender. One is taking "gender" as "about women", although it is both man and woman that have a sex and a social construct built upon this. This confusion is largely a result of the universality of maleness, which makes us forget maleness as a sexual identity and remember only female sexual identity when we talk about sex. A second common misuse is reducing gender to sex. Contemporary feminism puts a big emphasis on the difference between sex and gender, and distinguishes the inborn activities and socially created stereotypes from each other (Nelson, 1996:3). This socially created stereotype is based on a hierarchical dualism. The basic dualism in terms of gender is the Masculine/Feminine construct, described as two opposites in which masculinity is considered as the superior and feminine as the inferior. Masculine is associated with concepts such as mind, strong, rational, hard, civilization whereas feminine is associated with the ones such as body, weak, sentimental, nature. Hence gender is a construction that attributes different roles, opportunities and rights to men and women.

Feminists using gender as a category of analysis have opened a new realm on many disciplines, carrying the potential of transforming those fields. Techniques such as literary criticism, historical analysis and psychoanalysis have been used to read science as a text. In other words feminist theory "explores links between social construction of scientific disciplines and the social construction of gender to suggest why such differences should not be dismissed as just 'historical digressions or biographical coloring'" (Ferber and Nelson, 1993:1)

In this respect the feminist studies have pointed the gendered nature of the Cartesian Thought. In the Cartesian thought the duality attributed to man and women is mind and body. Nelson, as well as many other epistemologists would argue, claims that due to the anxiety created by the loss of medieval feeling of connection to nature, mind is radically separated from the body.

This brings out the question of how a mind detached from the body gains knowledge, which brings out the relevancy of mathematization of the world.

The mainstream definition of economics as well as many other social sciences is based on this Cartesian thinking. The high status definition of economics in many textbooks is: “economics is the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses.” This definition addresses economics as a choice theory fitting in the picture of the Cartesian ideal as it is based on some assumptions to describe this human decision-making process. According to choice theoretic models: more is considered as better (nonsatiation), people are utility maximizers and there is perfect information that leads you through out the decision making process. These assumptions rely on an implicit description of human nature according to which, people are selfish, disconnected individuals having separative selves, valuing endless consumption, all knowing and having exogenous endowments and preferences. It is a theory of markets and exchange that concentrates on the production sphere and leaves out the re-production sphere. In this context self-interest is associated with man whereas altruism is associated with woman. This kind of definition makes man’s behavior central to the theory, and the theory becomes basically theory of markets and exchange. It excludes household production, creates a synthetic division between production and reproduction and ignores their intertwined nature (Folbre, 1998).

In this context, in the current general understanding of economics, Cartesian view values mathematical models of individual rational choice, which are completely disconnected, and purely abstract. On the other hand, theories bringing in some institutional details are considered as merely applied theories, and are relatively under-valued. Men’s domination both as numbers of researchers and as ideologically in the construction process of the discipline is the main reason of exclusion of women’s experiences or biased representations of those in the discipline. Hence, “The world of economic man” has been constructed in women’s absence not only as economic researchers but also as the subjects of the economic study.

Has women’s increasing participation made any difference and in what context? With the increase in women’s participation in the labor force in

1950's, neoclassical economics have paid attention on analysis of this phenomenon in the labor market and also 'new home economics' emerged to study the non-market activities. Two of the feminist approaches value this change in realm of economics more than the other feminist approaches as they put emphasis on studying topics that are concerned with women. One of those is, affirmative action that thinks that under representation is the main problem to be overcome. The second approach in this context is feminist empiricism that argues:

"It is not the (neo-classical economic) theory that is patriarchic, but the questions male economists have asked and the conclusions they have drawn and particularly the policy implications based on the research" (Ferber and Nelson, 1993:8)

Although we may consider that having women as topic of analysis makes a difference and is a step forward, how this analysis is made is more important. The effort mentioned above is criticized in this respect since it is not an attempt to incorporate gender into economic analysis, and it does not aim to transform the economics discipline. Transformative analysis needs to do more than just applying an 'add women and stir' approach; it requires an analysis of the role of gender in shaping the discipline. Leaving the implicit assumptions that construct the theory unexamined means to give way to distortions and discrepancies. In this respect considering outdated assumptions about 'natural' male and female behavior as gender-neutral concepts serve to hide the existing gender privilege. Hiding the hierarchical structure of the society by assuming away the basic assumptions of theories that explain the social phenomena is largely criticized as they served to preserve the status quo and has done nothing more than describing it (Peterson and Lewis eds., 1999:390).

Feminists criticizing the given definition of economics as a discipline have argued that models of free individual choice cannot explain the real behavior that is constructed in a world of dependence, tradition and power. The ahistorical description of human behavior is defined as a detachment from the subject of the study.

"Feminist theory suggests that the definition focusing on choice which looks at human decisions as radically separated from physical and social

constraints, and definition stressing material well-being, which ignores non-physical sources of human satisfaction, are not the only alternatives. Such a dichotomy reinforces the separation of humans from the world... what is needed is a definition of economics that considers humans in relation to the world.” (Nelson, 1993:32)

Feminist economists claim that the primary objective of economic activity is the self-preservation of human species. Hence argues that the Cartesian divisions between man and nature, rationality and embodiment reflect a masculinist and separative view, and it also provides basis to mathematical models of individual choice, which is recognized and valued as the only way of developing “The Theory”.

Feminist economists aiming to transform the field of economics claim for a richer economics that does not exclude the formal models or the study of choice but also includes the other forms of knowing that are left out. They suggest an economics that also make use of provisioning and make full use of the tools of ‘imaginative rationality’ (Nelson, 1993:33). Then the economics would be no longer masculine and it would not be transformed into feminine as well, it would become a human science that tries to meet the human needs. In this respect it is the term economics that should be reclaimed and redefined rather than trying to find ways to fit into the masculine jacket of the economy.

Feminist Methodology

As presented above feminist approach brings a strong criticism to the existing understanding of economics and it can be seen as a project of transformation of economics using gender as an analytical category. Barker argues that without critical analysis, economics rationalizes and naturalizes existing social hierarchies based on gender, race, class and nation. And therefore transformative methodologies should have “concerns about whether and how customary approaches to knowledge production promote or obstruct the development of more democratic social relations.” (Harding and Norberg, 2005:1)

Harding and Norberg state that conventional standards for “good research” discriminate against or empower specific social groups no less

than do the policies of legal, economic, military, educational, welfare and health-care institutions; and in fact enable the practices of those institutions. Discovering that value-free research is unachievable and also undesirable feminists insisted on adoption of research principles and practices that are both intellectually alert to and sensitive about what disadvantaged groups want to know.

In this respect, feminist literature has been developing a critique of existing empirical approaches in social sciences and their understanding of 'objectivity' in last twenty years. Its concern has been to drive attention to the "implicit male bias of 'objective' social science frameworks" (MacDonald, 1995:160). Feminist economists bringing in new methods and providing a critique of existing ones, questioned the objectivity criterion of the conventional economics which they had a hard time in fitting in. Julie Nelson says that feminist economics raises questions not because economics is too objective but because it is not objective enough, and sees feminist project as an improvement of all economics.

Conventional economic models are based on an agent that is autonomous, rational, self-interested, successfully making optimizing choices subject to exogenously imposed constraints. Benhabib (1985) calls this kind of man as the "mushroom man" that does not have a background and he is completely detached. This model of human behavior is perceived as being most useful and most objective starting point for economic analysis. However, it is neither a description of women nor men; both the autonomous, rational, detached masculine projection and the dependent, emotional, connected feminine one are equally mythical and distorting.

M Power (2004), attempts to summarize the least common ground for feminist economists as "social provisioning" and describe it in 5 topics. The first one is the incorporation of caring and unpaid labor as fundamental activities which are normally not even the subject of conventional economics that basis its objectivity on a mushroom man. Secondly, use of well-being as a measure of economic success (Floro 1995, Sen 1999). Thirdly, making analysis of political, economic and social processes and power relations is an important component of feminist methodology. Feminist economists are

concerned with providing a fuller and a better representing picture hence they do not ignore the role of the power relations and give importance to processes no less than the outcomes in the evaluation of a topic. Another very important common point among feminist economists is the general consensus on inclusion of ethical goals and values as intrinsic part of the analysis (Lourdes 2003, Nausbaum 2003) And last but not the least is the interrogation of differences by class, race, ethnicity and other factors.

Conventional Economists, doing empirical research, are highly concerned with developing a testable model and an estimation method. Data they use are generally generated by census or survey questionnaires with pre-coded categories. Jacobsen and Newman (1997) analyzing the published 4,234 articles in four leading US journals devoted to labor economics and industrial relations in between 1947-1995, they saw that 61% of those articles use data to test hypothesis which are not self-collected data. They also see that economists rely heavily on a few data resources, particularly on data collected by the federal government, on the other hand they see that non-economists are more flexible on this and are much more likely to use self-collected data. The reason behind economists' behavior is their concern about the unquestionability of their data as being value-free and objective. Hence, even they do field work their tendency is to minimize the contact with the surveyed in order not to risk the 'objectivity' of their data. Jacobsen and Newman's article show that economists are a lot more conservative in their understanding of 'objectivity' compared to non-economists. Not surprisingly this research culture creates a lot of barriers for the feminist research. Berik (1997) states those difficulties as follows;

"First, survey-generated data bear the imprint of values and ideological beliefs in survey design and implementation, and often produce male-biased accounts. Second, the economist when isolated from the subject of his/her study by deductive-positivist approach, loses the opportunity to understand the subtleties of economic life and enrich his/her analysis accordingly. Since empirical questions are circumscribed by the nature of available data, the method may prevent asking different questions, especially questions which are of marginal concern to both the discipline and the official statistics enterprise" (Berik, 1997:121-122)

Feminist economists asking different questions than economists and shooting for a new economics that includes gender as a building block have been dealing with all sorts of problems due to the limitations of the available data. Some have been gathered their own data, and used qualitative methods such as unstructured interviews, participant observation and fieldwork. Feminists themselves being subject to the limitations of the conventional understanding of 'objectivity', have a broader sense of 'objectivity'. Recognizing the influence of the researcher's hierarchical 'objective' position on the study and including this awareness leads to strong objectivity. (S.Harding, 1995) This ethical standing point motivates feminist economists to look for new research methods that minimize problems stemming from subjective perspective. Fonow and Cook (2005) provide a rich list of those methods used by the feminist scholars. However, economics being more conservative towards qualitative methods compared to other fields neither trains nor rewards this type of work.

On the other hand, both Kim's (1997) and Kabeer's (1999) studies show that feminist methodology leads the analysis to feminist methods which enables researcher to have a fuller understanding of the subject matter as well as more trustable results. Marlene Kim, in her essay examine how applying feminist principles in scientific inquiry changes both the process and the results of the research by allowing poor women interview poor women. By doing so she has reduced the interviewer bias, improve response rates and facilitate trust in answering questions that are often quite sensitive. It is important to find ways to minimize the amount of hierarchy in the research. Instead of acting as an outside expert, closing the distance between the researcher and the research subject can make "our processes accessible to each other." Kabeer also provide a good example of feminist analysis that help to see different aspects of the topic in her research on a credit program in Bangladesh (SEDP) and its effects in terms of empowerment of women. She analyzes the topic on basis of women loanee's testimonies rather than assumptions from selected aspects of their behavior. In her analysis, she sees that even though increasing mobilization of women and making use of the credit themselves are seen as empowerment indicators in the literature; the perception of the women receiving credit is very different. In their speeches most of them consider going to the bazaar as something representing lower status and something that a women would not do unless has to. It is socially

not acceptable. Statements as such helps the researcher to see the contradiction between what the researcher values and what researched values and maybe helps to revise the meaning of empowerment for women in that region.

Feminist economists challenging hierarchy of methods claim that research question rather than the method should drive the research (Berik, 1997:122). In this respect the experiences reflected by Esim (1997) and Olmsted (1997) provide good examples in terms of the research pushing the researcher towards a certain type of method. In her analysis on patterns of education, migration and employment of Palestinian men and women in Occupied Palestinian Territories, Olmsted neither could rely on Israeli statistics nor could generate answers out of those data basis for the questions she was interested in. Therefore she decided to collect her own data; she carried out a household survey out of 262 households in Benthlehem region. After she came back to US and started to work on her data she realized that her data was far from reflecting her experience, and the rich knowledge she gathered during the surveying process was considered as valueless in economic analysis. Realizing the limitations of the model she is using to explain the fruitful diversity she observed she decided to conduct alternative analysis based on participant observation and interviews. In this way she could transform her data points to actual people and learned and reflected about the perceptions and process differences that give a more complete picture than the sole survey analysis. Hence, throughout her research Olmsted being aware of the bias in Israeli statistics not only created her own data but also went further and complemented her quantitative analysis with qualitative analysis.

Similarly Esim declares that she experienced the constraining dynamics of asking specific question and demanding limited concrete answers mostly during her structured survey questionnaires. Her research concentrates on gender-based constraints faced by women micro- and small entrepreneurs in Turkey and her objective is: 'to identify some of the power hierarchies involved in research settings and how the use of feminist methodology was instrumental in reducing these hierarchies' (Esim, 1997:137) She used structured survey questionnaires and qualitative analysis methods such as focus group interviews. Esim argues that structured survey questionnaires are not only constraining in terms of creating knowledge but also less preferable due to its highly hierarchical characteristics. She argues that rather than being

trapped in the roles of the researcher and the researched in structured survey questionnaires, doing a focus group interview is more preferable in terms of decreasing the hierarchy and giving more voice to the subjects of the study.

Van Staveren (1997) provides a more informative study on one of the most important qualitative research methods. She introduces the method of focus group not only on a theoretical level but also by the help of her own study on moral values such as freedom, justice and care and on the various roles of people in these moral domains in Africa. She describes the focus group as a nonstructured group interview on a given topic with five to ten persons who do not know each other or at least who do not have a formal relationship such as persons married or the relationship between employer and the employee. The objective of the focus group interview is reaching diversity rather than consensus, it aims to understand what participants think and why they think as they do and the group interaction and open discussions help to sort this out. As it is the case also in this methodology the researcher starts with an already formulated hypothesis which is derived from a theory or which is guided by a policy, but different than any regular modernist research methodology that makes a sharp distinction between theory and empirics, focus groups transcend this dichotomy. First of all, the researcher gives away the role of objective and detached scientist who knows the right questions ahead of time. S/he is aware of the complexity and unpredictability of social life, in other words s/he steps down from “narrow theoretical assumptions to embed research questions in a life context” (Van Staveren, 1997:131). The interviewer is rather a careful listener or a facilitator than a controller of the process. After the first question the process is generally to continue with follow up questions that aims to find out all participants ideas on the subject, and does not look for the dominant idea.

In her own research experience, Van Straveren focused on a group of African women who worked in universities, businesses and NGO's and were activists for women's economic empowerment. During this focus group research she realized the limitations of her understanding of the concept of empowerment and economic independence. For instance, rather than understanding 'economic independence policy' as a basic right or a goal in itself, some of the African women in the focus group was considering economic independence and empowerment as a necessary but insufficient means for human flourishing

and some of them were emphasizing the importance of understanding those concepts as a group issue for women rather than an individual matter.

Conclusion

Feminist critique and methodology has opened the way for a fuller understanding of real life economics for real people. This is no less attempt than revolutionizing the discipline. It redefines the aim of economics as well being of people and (as people is inseparable from) nature. Feminist economists recognize the unity in life and carry a wholist approach in understanding the problems and addressing the needs of people.

Moreover it has given the first attempts of investigation to develop new ways of knowing. Feminist economists incorporated the interdisciplinary methods, and have ignored the synthetic boundaries between economics and other fields. They argued that the topic of study should determine the method, and welcomed any theory and method explanatory into their studies. No matter how marginal and marginalized they are today, Pandora 's Box is open now.

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