

ECONOMICS

A Gendered Perspective

dis-count!

Economics is presented as an objective mathematical science that has identified how to understand and measure what as a society, and as separate groups within society, we put into and take out of the economy. The dominant macro economic model of the economy uses a circular flow of income and is a model of exchange processes focusing on things like imports and exports, government spending and taxation imbalance, consumer spending and consumer borrowing. In this model the household is measured by the amount of money earned versus the amount of money spent. But what this model fails to measure is the unpaid work that happens within the home (and amongst extended families) that is predominantly undertaken by women. Our economic model, which creates statistics such as the UK's GDP and is a key way in which we understand success and progress in our society, is tied to the selective norm of the traditional heterosexual family that is underpinned by stereotypical and discriminatory gender roles. The consequence of this is an economic system that continues to understand and value only work undertaken outwith the home, and explains economics through an unrecognised and androcentric bias based on socially constructed gender roles and a sexist values system. Consequently, although the burden of unpaid labour that falls predominantly on women actually subsidises the economic system by providing essential work for free, this model of economics tells us that men are more valuable to our society than women because on average they earn more money.

The oppression of women has historically been tied to their economic disadvantage and articulated by gender roles and the consequent division of labour and distribution of employment, income and wealth. The importance of recognising and challenging the unacknowledged discriminatory assumptions that underpin economics, and appreciating the role that economics has in creating and maintaining these discriminations can't be overestimated. Economic thinking dominates the policy world and the work of policy translates into how our society functions; added to this is the fact that one of the key aims of government is to maintain the economic status quo, so when the Scottish government talks about wanting to achieve 'sustainable growth of the

economy' are they really saying that they want to maintain the sustainability of an economy that relies on discriminating against certain groups in society for profit and growth? Currently women are oppressed by an economic system that uses a double bind of discrimination – it uses gender stereotypes to limit women's access to the job market and therefore status, pay and pensions by devaluing their skills, and it burdens them with the unpaid work of the social reproductive system, again limiting their access to status, pay and pensions. But more insidious than this double bind is the fact that it is an economic system that masquerades as an objective analysis of how things work, and how things should be valued in our society.

The extent to which the sexist discriminations that prop up our economic system are hidden yet essential to the continuation of the current power system can be understood when one looks at examples of the arguments and progress that feminists have made in challenging the current economic theories, using economic knowledge. Arguments that began in the 1970s that challenged the unpaid work undertaken in the social reproductive system have become bogged down in the idea of paying women for childcare and housework. Paying women to work in the home does not challenge the gender roles that inhibit women from making choices in a free and equal society because it propagates the stereotypical idea of women that is at the heart of their oppression. Recently the issue of the disparity between paternity and maternity leave has arisen, but has been limited to the idea that fathers need a few weeks to bond with their children before they return to their real responsibilities in the workplace, leaving women to continue to fulfil the gender stereotype of primary carer. Attempts to financially address the unpaid childcare undertaken by women through the informal networks of family, friends and neighbours has necessitated that this care be formalised and commodified in order to access the benefits system which enables the cost of care to flow through the Market in order to give it value – albeit a much lesser value than its worth. The commodification process was driven by a value system that is narrowly defined and economic in focus and not by the needs of women, and one of the results has been to shrink this

kind of moral economy and the support that it gave to women. What is needed in each of these examples is the redistribution of social reproductive responsibilities so that they are equally shared between women and men. But what happens is that the system is modified, so benefits are given to working mothers, women's pensions are slightly adjusted to account for work in the home, men are given a couple of weeks unpaid leave when their children are born, but the systems and institutions that create the inequality in the first place remain unchanged. These amendments work within the structure without changing it or challenging the discriminatory thinking that underpins it.

One of the reasons why it has been difficult for feminists to shift focus and discussion into changing and not just amending the economic structure is because such changes ask people to fundamentally challenge the way that they have been taught to value and understand ourselves and other people. It is a challenge to the roots of our society and why specific groups and skills are valued more than other groups and skills. Economic discrimination is not confined to women but is used to oppress groups at risk from discrimination so that their labour can be exploited through low pay and in some cases no pay for work. This kind of exploitation happens through identity groups so that certain attributed characteristics can be used to dehumanise people and make it easier to oppress and discriminate against them without guilt or consequence. The wholesale approach to devaluing women in our society sets the tone and allows us from birth to start to understand how to place people within the incredibly complicated pecking order that is a dance of privilege and discrimination, which examines a person's gender, their race, their sexual orientation, their age, their religion and their disability before deciding their value and assigning them a position in the hierarchy. Some groups of people are perceived to be useless because they cannot be exploited in the market economy: so for example people with disabilities, those who are mentally ill, those in travelling communities and asylum seekers are judged to be useless because they are understood to be either unable or, unwilling to work, or in the case of asylum seekers are simply denied the opportunity to work. To challenge the notion of objective economic value is to ask people to question

the parts of society that they value and are linked to their own personal self-worth ('I may not have a highly paid job but at least I do not scrounge off the State like asylum seekers do'), as well as question the aspects of society that they understand need to change.

Wider economic discrimination is systemic in nature and mirrors dominant discriminatory beliefs, so people who belong to groups at risk from discrimination are far more likely to be economically disadvantaged than other groups. So for example, disabled people are far more likely to live in poverty than non-disabled people; white people earn more than black people on average; younger and older people are generally paid less than those in the middle; it is harder to be accepted into a workplace as a transgender person. The discrimination faced by other groups works in the same way as the economic discrimination faced by women – groups are devalued in the marketplace limiting their access to certain jobs and increasing their need for welfare support. The reasons why groups are devalued differ and are varied (some groups are understood to be unable to work, some are too lazy to work, some too uneducated or not intelligent enough) but the basic understanding is always the same: it is not that our economic system fails to reward different groups in society equally but that different groups are ascribed differing levels of ability and therefore value. The system fails to understand the effects that the disparity of access and quality of education amongst different groups in society has; the limitations that discriminatory stereotypes place on access to jobs; the personal prejudices of interviewers; the negative effects of discrimination on self-worth and ambition. Instead it works as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. The debate and solutions to the economic disadvantage of other groups at risk from discrimination has been as constrained as the debate and solutions offered to the economic discrimination of women, and have all focussed on adjusting and adding to the current system without dismantling the discriminations that cause the problem in the first place. So for example the Disability Discrimination Act and the Race Relations Act each seek to increase the numbers of disabled and black people working in a discriminatory job market but do not directly challenge the racist and disablist foundations that create this disparity.

Feminist economics has begun to focus on how to create an economic system that recognises and values all of the work that is undertaken by all sections of our society, and which values all of the time that people spend sustaining society and does not create and maintain sexism. Although the focus of this work is on discrimination against women, the idea of changing what we value and how and what we measure as 'success' can only be beneficial to all discriminated against groups. The tools of the formal economist are very crude and focus primarily on the relationship between production, consumption and profit, including the monetary cost of employing certain groups in certain ways. The benefits of employing groups who according to the single minded measurement of a market economy analysis are less cost effective are not explored, so the discriminations that are inbuilt into the economic system persist and the inequalities in pay and position endure between for example women and men, black people and white people, able bodied and disabled people. Challenging economists (and crucially governments and businesses) to acknowledge that systemic discrimination is the result of value judgements made about people's worth that are founded in an economic analysis that only counts what matters to the market is a key piece of work for all groups working in discrimination.

Sexual and religious identities and some forms of disability (specifically mental ill health) could be said to enjoy an aspect of personal autonomy in whether or not an individual chooses to disclose them to others, that is assuming they manage not to be 'outed' by their behaviour, social networks, name, previous schools etc (although it is noted that the cost of such behaviour, to both an individual's and an identity group's wellbeing is enormous). A gay person, religious person or person who has recovered from mental illness for example could choose to wait until they are established in a job or career before they disclose their sexuality, faith or mental health history, if they choose to disclose at all. Obviously women can't do the same, nor can young or old people, black people or many disabled people so the ability to systematically discriminate is much easier. Whilst not condoning the denial of one's identity, a cross-equalities analysis and dialogue around this 'foot in the door' non-disclosure 'opportunity' could provide a new perspective in understanding how to break down economic discrimination and the attitudes that underpin it. Even if the non-disclosure itself is not the answer to the problem of systemic economic discrimination, it might provide a way to discuss and create a system of value and measurement that is robust enough to challenge the current system and the values that underpin it.

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