



*Econ Journal Watch,
Volume 5, Number 2,
May 2008, pp 193-198.*

SYMPOSIUM: GENDER AND ECONOMICS

On Gender Balance in the Economics Profession

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A COMMENT ON: CHRISTINA JONUNG AND ANN-CHARLOTTE STÄHLBERG, “REACHING THE TOP: ON GENDER BALANCE IN THE ECONOMICS PROFESSION,” *ECON JOURNAL WATCH* 5(2), MAY 2008: 174-192. [LINK](#).

ABSTRACT

JONUNG AND STÄHLBERG SPEAK TO THE ISSUE OF MISSING WOMEN IN THE economics profession in five industrialized countries—the United States, Australia, Great Britain, Canada, and Sweden. As their article indicates, women have made significant strides in the last third of the twentieth century in expanding their representation as students in higher learning in these and other countries throughout the world. However, what they ask us to consider is the sometimes ticklish question of why we have not seen a proportional increase in the representation of women as faculty—particularly in the discipline of economics.

They are not the first ones to ponder this question. In the US, where women have made the most progress, it is increasingly obvious that while women are present as students, they are distinctly absent as faculty in the halls of ivy—at least in some halls. As the former president of Harvard University, economist Lawrence Summers discovered, it requires some finesse to try and explain their absence.

Of course most economists are ill-equipped to answer this question. “Academic Anthropology 101” it would seem, might just require a historical perspective, critical habit of thought, and an understanding of the importance of “shared tacit knowledge,” academic rituals, and hierarchy.² Most important of all, it may require an appreciation for the ways in which power is distributed in institutions and gender is reflected in power relationships—all of the things that economists

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² Michael Polanyi, 1958.

eschew or that have been beaten out of them in graduate school.

Jonung and Ståhlberg provide support for the notion that the paucity of women in certain disciplines, including economics, is widespread—not just a matter of a few “bad apples,” be they departments or counties. We might expect to see this in the US, but when we see this same pattern in Sweden, the apotheosis of a country tuned-in to gender equity, we cannot help but be somewhat concerned. Moreover, when countries such as Sweden, Canada, and Norway, have implemented programs to increase the representation of women faculty, these programs have often been bitterly criticized by male faculty and thrown out by (mostly male) courts.³

Economists, not surprising perhaps, have been instrumental in providing an explanation for these missing women across the academic globe. They have tended to focus on investments in human capital—an explanation that seems to perform double duty in blaming women themselves for their own absence while providing the soothing balm that it is just a matter of time before their representation in the dismal science increases. In this, Jonung and Ståhlberg are appropriately skeptical.

While the view of that it is just a matter of time may make for good bedtime reading, it is, in the light of day, a bit more problematic. Take, for example, the US which has the most experience from which to draw. Women, who had worked to gain admittance into institutions of higher learning in the later part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century, were, however, increasingly segmented into disciplines thought to be appropriate for women.

Not only were women driven from the field of economics to the feminized field of home economics in the early decades of the 20th century, but evidence that they were ever even present seems to have been carefully wiped away through “systematic misattribution” and “lack of citation of the work of women economists.”⁴ As Mary Ann Dimand, Robert Dimand, Evelyn Forget and many others have shown, women were active participants in researching and publishing in the emerging professions of the social sciences including economics. It will surprise many to learn that the lead article in the inaugural issue of the *American Economic Review* was by Katherine Coman, a female economist.

More helpful perhaps, are other studies that Jonung and Ståhlberg discuss that ask questions about an institutional culture that works to vet women early in their coursework, makes their graduate school experience less satisfying, prevents

3 In 1995, the Swedish government created 32 posts at the full professor level, the so-called Tham professors, especially for women. Men were allowed to apply but would only be given the job if there were no qualified women. But in 2000, the EU Supreme Court turned down the Tham proposal. In 2000, the University of Oslo implemented a plan to improve gender diversity among faculty by reserving 12 full or associate professorships for female candidates. However, in January 2003 the European Free Trade Association Court ruled it illegal for the University of Oslo to reserve faculty positions for women. See Chronicle of Higher Education, World Beat, “Court Bans Female-Professor Quota at U. of Oslo,” February 29, 2003.

4 Mary Ann Dimand, Robert Dimand, and Evelyn Forget, 1995, ix.

women from achieving tenure at the same rates as men, and provides fewer opportunities for co-authorship, hence diminishing their publication record.

However, neither the human capital explanations nor these insights into women's systematic disadvantage in the academic culture of economics, probing as they do, a set of important, but narrowly constructed questions, seem to fully explain the unique situation of economics as a social science.⁵ To do this may require that we think more carefully about the ways in which power is distributed in institutions and about the political economy of knowledge. This may, of course, be more than most economists can muster. However, we might do well to consider the views of one of the original economic anthropologists of the modern era—Thorstein Bunde Veblen.⁶

In *The Higher Learning in America* and *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen reminds us that we must view academia as an institution that distributes power (much like any other institution), is preoccupied with status maintenance (probably more than other institutions), and is influenced by the values and imperatives of society. Veblen argued that women play a central role in status maintenance in higher education and he viewed the reluctance of institutions to accept women as a ceremonial vestment aimed at status maintenance.⁷ That higher education today is driven by status maintenance should be uncontested and the role that women have played in this status maintenance is significant, even without a t-statistic propping it up.⁸

To the extent that women were allowed the privilege of admission into the higher learning—in other words, when serving as a useful source of revenue, Veblen points out that women were thought to be constrained to acquire knowledge in those areas that would allow for the “better performance of domestic service” or to the “quasi-scholarly and quasi-artistic” areas that come under the head of a “performance of vicarious leisure.”⁹ In other words, women are accepted as consumers in the higher learning and segregated in areas thought appropriate to women.

5 There is disagreement on the assertion that the discipline of economics is different than other disciplines in its failure to accept women and integrate feminist insights. Psychologist Virginia Valian (1999), whose important book *Why So Slow?*, examines these issues in a variety of professions, disagrees with me a bit on the unique nature of economics. In a session at the AEA meetings on women in the economics profession which included the pre-eminent psychologist along with MacArthur Foundation award-winning economist Heidi Hartmann, only two men found the topic of sufficient interest to attend—one of whom was the president-elect of the sponsoring association and the other a reporter for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. The reporter, who wrote a nice little piece about the progress that women were making in economics, apparently missed the significance of a room full of women and one lone male economist! The degree to which sessions on topics related to gender often fail to attract the interest of male economists would appear to reflect the unique nature of economics—at least among the social sciences.

6 For a full discussion of Veblen, women and higher education see May forthcoming.

7 Thorstein Veblen, [1899] 1998, 376.

8 For further evidence see, for example, May and Moorhouse's unpublished paper which shows a direct relationship between status measures, such as Barron's Profiles of American Colleges, and the representation of women faculty at research universities.

9 Veblen [1899] 1998, 376.

Veblen provides a key, perhaps, to understanding the relationship between increased competition and increased pressures for status maintenance. Periods of increased competition put a premium on reputation and heighten status-seeking activities. I agree with David Colander, that the discipline has changed such that mathematical model building is no longer *as* fashionable as it once was and empirical, statistical analysis has gained in stature. Increased competition in higher education, with its pressure to publish the “unread and unreadable,” has made ideology in a narrow sense less important than having a skill set that is easily transferable. Marxist economists (if any still exist) can work along side neoclassical economists (if any still exist) so long as they can “take an obscure little problem that no one has thought much about, blow it all out of proportion, and solve it, preferably several times, in prestigious [journals].¹⁰ The degree to which women are willing to engage in such activities is a question yet to be answered. I would venture to say that, to the degree that they may be more likely to eschew such nonsense, they will continue to be marginalized in this discipline.

Why does it matter? Jonung and Ståhlberg suggest the following: “... if more economists are women, economic analysis will be richer, and if more women are familiar with economic reasoning, public debate will be stronger and deeper.” On this I would agree, with the caveat that women’s familiarity with economic reasoning may indeed allow them to better articulate the often flawed nature of that reasoning. But I think it is more important than even this.

At the heart of the matter is the question of identity and agency. Those with the access to write the canon are powerful shapers of identity—how we view ourselves and others. The construction of identity is particularly important in that it so strongly influences agency—the ability of individuals to act within the context of being affected by institutions. While most discussions on the importance of education by economists focus on pecuniary considerations, the role of education in determining agency is potentially profound. As Amartya Sen¹¹ and Martha Nussbaum¹² have argued, education adds not only to *human capital* but *human capability*, enabling women to exercise their legal rights as well as strengthening their political and civic engagement. It is perhaps because central economic questions concerning provisioning might well change with the full inclusion of women’s voices, that this terrain is so deeply contested.

10 Kenneth Lasson, 1990, 936.

11 Amarta Sen, 1999.

12 Martha Nussbaum, 2000.

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[Go to *Gender and Economics* Symposium Page](#)

[Go to May 2008 Table of Contents with links to articles](#)

[Go to Archive of **Investigating the Apparatus** Section](#)