

BEING FEMINIST ECONOMISTS TODAY: IDENTITIES, CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

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ABSTRACT

Feminist Economics challenges mainstream economics by emphasizing the social provisioning process and social justice through a holistic account of ongoing relationships between gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and different social identities. Nevertheless, not all feminist economists self-identify as heterodox economists, and a significant part of Feminist Economics work is performed outside heterodox economics circles. In this chapter we present a collective reflection, and survey analysis, to answer the question: what is the relationship between Feminist Economics and heterodoxy in academic and research practice today? . We conclude that working on the seam between the mainstream and heterodoxy is a key feature experienced by early-career feminist economists, and reflects a more general perception of Feminist Economics as a 'big tent' pluralistic discipline. We also find the sense of community, commitment to social change and recognition of the importance of social reproduction are fundamental for changes within mainstream and heterodox economics.

KEYWORDS: FEMINIST ECONOMICS; HETERODOX ECONOMICS; YOUNG SCHOLARS

INTRODUCTION

The award of the Nobel Prize in economics to Claudia Goldin, the first woman to be the sole winner in this prize's history, and moreover for her scholarship that has dealt with gender issues from a historical perspective, is certainly a happy moment. It also causes reflection on the profound significance of what it means to deal with gender analysis, between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, particularly for young feminist economists outside the United States (US), which we are.

Claudia Goldin can, without much controversy, be considered an orthodox neoclassical economist who has dealt with gender inequality in economics. Indeed, she does not identify herself as a feminist economist. Feminist economics challenges orthodox conceptions of the economy with its emphasis on the social provisioning process and social justice through a holistic account of the ongoing relationships between gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and different social identities (Power 2004). In fact, while for mainstream (orthodox) economics the discipline represents the study of the processes through which scarce goods and services are exchanged, feminist economics studies the processes through which goods and services are provided (Mezzadri 2024). Thus, the distinction between what is conventional economics (market-oriented activities) and what is not considered economics (unpaid activities) is blurred, introducing a relationship of

interdependence between economic activity and social processes (Folbre 2019; Nelson 2022).

However, the heterogeneity of approaches co-existing under the umbrella of feminist economics nowadays makes more complex its relationship with mainstream economics. For example, there exists feminist economists who do not self-identify as heterodox economists, and some others who use mainstream theories or econometric models to raise doubts about their use, and sometimes simultaneously develop a thorough critique of the same models. Then some feminist economists self-identify with one or more heterodox approaches, such as Institutional Economics, Social Economics, Marxist Economics, Ecological Economics, Post-Keynesian Economics, Post-postmodernism and Postcolonialism. There are also feminist economists who criticise some heterodox approaches as being constructed with gender biases similar to those of mainstream economics (Orozco Espinel & Gomez Betancourt 2022).

The boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in feminist economics also depend on the different generations of researchers and their geographical location. For the early generation of feminist economists (as the founders of the International Association for Feminist Economics, that is, IAFWE), the lines between Feminist Economics and mainstream economics were clearer and the discrimination was blatant. For our generation the lines are fuzzier making it possible to exist in both 'groups' and nevertheless continue to challenge the field. As such, feminist economists can also operate in spaces exhibiting different mixtures of mainstream and heterodox approaches. The complexity of navigating between mainstream and heterodox spaces is a fundamental feature of the experiences of early-career feminist economists today. For many of us, the challenge today is how to be a feminist

economist, work (research and teach) within the mainstream and challenge it from inside, as that is where the power lies.

In this chapter, we start by questioning what it means to be feminist economists, and how a broad spectrum of feminist economists, the IAFFE members, relate to heterodox economics. Through analysis of responses to an online questionnaire, we try to identify some common features. Then we move to the first-person narrative, describing ourselves in the first-person singular (I/me) coming from different countries, contexts and backgrounds. Then, we change the narrative to the first-person plural (we/us), particularly with regard to possible strategies for survival and career advancement within academia. We believe that solutions are derived from a multitude of voices, which absolutely and inescapably requires collective work. The “I” narrative that identifies the diversity of our experiences, becomes the “we” narrative when we must identify future paths.

FEMINIST ECONOMISTS AND HETERODOXY TODAY: A FIRST ANALYSIS

We conducted a survey through the dissemination of an online questionnaire in March 2024 to IAFFE members to provide an up-to-date picture of the state of Feminist Economics. We sought to understand the vision of feminist economists today in terms of three major issues: the relationship with heterodox economics, the integration into academic practice of the feminist vision and current barriers to entry and advancement in academic careers and possible strategies for survival in such competitive environments.

The online questionnaire included binary and Likert scale questions, with an optional space to explain each response. We received responses from 57 feminist economists¹. The respondents were heterogeneous in terms of working/academic age (46% senior scholars,

21% mid-career scholars and 33% early-career scholars) and representative of the community with over 80% of respondents being from academic institutions. Also, the geographic dispersion of institutional affiliation (rather than a scholar's origin) reflects the larger IAFEE membership with roughly a third based in North America (37%), a third in Europe (33%) and a fifth in Latin America (21%).

After collecting demographic information, we asked: 'What is the JEL code that best represents your research'. Over half of the respondents chose a single JEL code and among them, the dominant categories were Labor and Demographic Economics (28%, JEL code J) and Economic Development and Innovation, Technological change, and Growth (16%, JEL code O). The total group of respondents, where some chose more than one code, reflects similar patterns with nearly half choosing Labor (46%) and a quarter choosing Economic development (25%). Considering the total number of JEL codes identified by respondents rather than the number of researchers who responded, Labor and Economic Development are still the more dominant. However, the next two dominant categories, explicitly associated with heterodox economics, were Political Economy and Comparative Economic Systems (11%) and History of Economic Thought, Methodology, and Heterodox Approaches (10%).

When asked 'Do you identify yourself as a heterodox economist?', an overwhelming majority (88%) of these feminist economists answered yes. Of those who answered no, some are 'by choice', since they actually use mainstream methods and perspectives in their research activities, but there are those who are non-heterodox 'by constraint', because although they are interested in heterodox approaches, they do not follow that perspective since it reduces the opportunities to be hired from a number of universities. The gap between the JEL code choices and self-identification as heterodox, indicates the existence of a distinction

respondents make between their 'identity' as researchers and the way the research output (JEL codes included papers) is defined.

Beyond one's personal experience, we asked, 'How much do you agree with the statement 'Feminist economics is a heterodox economics' approach (1 fully; 5 not at all)'. Overall, 70% of the feminist economist respondents agreed or fully agreed with this statement, and as many as 19% did not or not at all agree. Underlying this large majority there appear generational differences, where senior scholars are significantly more likely to agree with this statement (81%) compared to mid-career (67%) and young scholars (58%). This does not seem to be driven by a generation decline in the relevance of heterodoxy among the younger generation as nearly 90% of them identify as heterodox. Those who think that feminist economics does not fall under the umbrella of heterodox economics state that is because they consider feminist economics as a 'type' of economics on its own. A definition provided by one respondent who, in our opinion, well describes the point of view of many respondents, was:

In my experience, FE [Feminist Economics] has always been a broad church, and has included people working from many different methodological and theoretical perspectives, but all in some way challenging the orthodoxy. I think it is still that way today. Perhaps we should say that FE is a pluralist discipline/institution if we want to be more accurate (ref. Id. 8).

About half of the senior and mid-career feminist economists, but only a third of young scholars, agreed with the statement 'Do you think that feminist economics was more heterodox in the 1990s than now?'. When asked to explain the reason for their answer, several lines of delineation are revealed between heterodox and Feminist Economics. Among those who agreed with the statement, several highlighted the shift away from

'philosophy, ethics, history, methodology, and theory' towards 'empirical and micro-founded focused on testing for the determinants of gender differentials'.² Others pointed to a move away from Marxist perspectives within Feminist Economics.

Among those who did not agree that Feminist Economics (FE) is less heterodox today, one common theme was the view of FE as a 'broad umbrella' or 'pluralist' field implying that FE was never 'purely' heterodox. As one of the senior respondents stated: "A number of the founders of IAFPE were neoclassical in their economics" (ref. Id. 9). Several respondents claimed that FE is even more heterodox today by being "enriched by the contributions of women from the South and LGBTQ" (ref. Id. 54). Finally, both those who agree and disagree with the statement, referred to the relationship with the mainstream in general and specifically the emergence of gender economics. On the one hand, pointing out that FE may seem less heterodox today because the mainstream has adopted/co-opted parts of the FE message, mainly in terms of the empirical analyses of gender inequalities in economics and society. On the other hand, as mentioned by one of the respondents, the emergence of gender economics has led to, also within Feminist Economics, an "exploration of empirical questions (that) generally does not have to be based in theoretical frameworks" (ref. Id. 40).

Finally, we asked respondents whether they agree with the five fundamental points of Feminist Economics identified by Marilyn Power (2004). There is full agreement among the respondents that these five points are still today, after exactly 20 years, essential in identifying their own research activities. Sixty-eight per cent of these feminist economists stated that they *incorporate women's unpaid and caring labour into their analyses*, and they *conduct intersectional analyses*; 63% do not hesitate to assert the importance of *ethical judgements* and the *centrality of development processes, and relations of power within those processes*; and, 58% go beyond economic growth and *consider human well-being to*

measure economic success. However, most of the respondents reported that they have had problems implementing these five principles in their research activities mainly due to: the lack of data; the lack of funds available to carry out intersectional and interdisciplinary studies or to collect qualitative data; and, also because there is not as much academic interest in these issues and therefore it becomes difficult to publish their analyses in the highly ranked mainstream economic journals.

When asked about barriers, although there are those who identify being a woman in the academia as the main factor of discrimination rather than being a feminist economist, most feminist economists have indicated that academic marginalisation is the main barrier that they have faced, and are facing, in their careers. The tendency to make Feminist Economics a narrow niche of analysis rather than a perspective to inform and be integrated with all economic analyses, combined with the tendency to undervalue, or downplay analyses that do not prioritize mathematical or econometric methodologies means that, as expressed by one respondent, feminist economists are not “considered for mainstream networks, like funding, mentoring, conferences and journals. Similarly, heterodox networks are too male-dominated, so as a feminist economist, I feel I have limited options for getting funding and other facilities to conduct my research” (ref. Id. 38). Furthermore, as stated by one respondent, “the focus on power and on ethics, if presented explicitly, is treated as ‘interdisciplinary’ and not economics in most economics departments” (ref. Id. 20), so it is difficult for many to teach economics courses from a feminist perspective even in so-called heterodox university departments. And again, quoting the words of a respondent: “This is a sign of the inability to exercise power and influence even among the heterodox economists in their departments, even in a field such as feminist economists that is vibrant and dynamic and visibly gaining in importance” (ref. Id. 20). In most cases, the antidote to academic marginalisation is identified by our respondents with being part of research networks and

strengthening bonds with other feminist economists or in some cases with not using the label 'feminist' in order to be taken 'more seriously'.

We fully agree with those who identified networks of feminist economists as an essential resource to support research and teaching activities. It was thanks to the international network, IAFFE, that we got to know each other and began to collaborate in research and academic life, supporting each other and working together by connecting our different interests and areas of research.

FEMINIST ECONOMISTS AND HETERODOXY TODAY: OUR EXPERIENCE

Moving from the general to the particular, we now focus on our personal experiences. As mentioned before, we met and started to collaborate with each other in research, teaching, and academic activism thanks to IAFFE and in particular, IAFFE's Young Scholars Committee. The latter was created from the grassroots (us) to have an informal, inclusive and friendly space for sharing ideas and experiences among the younger and less experienced, and to create, together, resources and support systems within the feminist economics community. It is precisely the informality of the working group, the breadth of areas to explore, and actions to take that fostered our sense of inclusion and belonging. However, we have different interests, different histories and it is the diversity of our histories that we think is useful to share to better define the paths that have led us to identify ourselves as feminist economists and our relationship with economics and heterodox economists today.

If we had to describe ourselves in 2 lines, this is who we are: