

An Interview with Francine D. Blau

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2001 Carolyn Shaw Bell Award Co-recipient

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Q: Why did you go into industrial and labor relations and then off to economics?

I grew up in New York City and I wanted to go away to school. There wasn't a lot of money in the family. Cornell is part public and part private; the state colleges—agriculture, home economics, and industrial and labor relations (ILR)—have considerably lower tuition. I wasn't exactly sure what ILR was, but it sounded more interesting to me than the other two. I had also learned about Frances Perkins who was FDR's Secretary of Labor, and was one of the great women in American history. She became a role model for me in entering

this field.

I don't think I fully realized what overwhelmingly male fields ILR and economics were at that time. When I applied to ILR there was actually a quota on women; they would not accept more than 15 women out of a class of 100. The reason that we were given for it was that there was limited space in the dorms for women.

Q: Did you ever feel isolated in graduate school?

Yes I did. At Harvard, there were over 50 students in my year and only three or four women. One of the things that made it more difficult for me was a lack of consciousness

about the problem. The women's movement is often dated to 1963 when Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, but when I attended college and started grad school in the mid-to-late 1960s, I was almost entirely innocent of those ideas. The goal of many of my female classmates in college was what we used to call a Mrs. Degree—marriage. I wanted to have a career and that sometimes made me feel a bit different from my peers. I was not greatly aware of inequities women faced, or even any special difficulties. When I did hit problems or obstacles I tended to think, "that's the way it is" or even somehow that it was my fault. In her book, Betty Friedan talks about "the problem that has no name." She was actually refer-

ring to the emptiness a lot of women felt who had chosen to become housewives. I'm not using it in that sense, but I think it is an apt description of my situation. As I became familiar with the ideas of the women's movement, it was a great relief to have a label to put on the problems I was experiencing. They were a lack of role models and a lack of female peers, as well as occasionally overt discrimination.

Q: How did you get involved in the founding of CSWEP?

I lived in New Haven for a few years while working on my dissertation for Harvard. I got to know the women grad students at Yale. Many of us were active in URPE (the Union for Radical Political Economics). We started talking about the issues confronting women in the field of economics and sharing ideas with women in other cities. We developed the goal of founding a committee on the status of women. Some of us attended the 1971 AEA meetings and put signs out: "Women who want to talk about the status of women in the economics profession meet in such and such a room." We got this great turnout and drafted a resolution for the establishment of CSWEP. Carolyn Shaw Bell, who emerged as our natural leader, presented the resolution at the business meeting. The proposal was hotly debated but we had packed the meeting with our adherents. Some people spontaneously emerged as eloquent supporters, including Bob Eisner of Northwestern. The resolution passed. After it was over I walked over to Bob and said, "Can I shake your hand and thank you?" He said, "Oh, don't tell me, tell my daughter." In 1974 the AEA amended the rules, so there are no more surprises like this at the business meeting.

Q: I want to pull you back to the question of whether you think women's isolation in graduate schools is a thing of the past.

I am not aware of any graduate programs that have a substantial number of women. I believe this minority status can create difficulties for women, and it doesn't necessarily require that people discriminate against you. Women may face some feeling of isolation and not even realize it. I would advise women students to seek out each other and women faculty. I'd also like to say that I don't feel isolated anymore because, in addition to seeking out other women, I have developed very good friendships with my male colleagues. After a while you get used to your minority status and you don't really notice it.

Q: Getting back to CSWEP, you said that Carolyn emerged as the natural leader. How did you end up being co-opted,

selected...?

I am not sure. Perhaps it was because I was in something of a leadership role as one of the people who had come to the meetings to try and organize the committee. I was the only grad student on the CSWEP Board. It was a tremendous experience for me personally. I did have a mentor as an undergraduate, Robert Ferguson at the ILR School who had encouraged me to go to graduate school, and another professor, George Hildebrand, who was also very supportive. But at Harvard I really did not have a mentor. There were no women faculty when I was a student. Richard Freeman joined the faculty after I had begun work on my dissertation and became a member of my committee. He was and continues to be a great inspiration to me, but he wasn't exactly a mentor since I hadn't studied with him and I was not in residence at Harvard when I worked on my dissertation. So being involved in the organization of CSWEP and actually having the honor of being a member of the Board were absolutely stupendous for me, as well as getting to know these wonderful women who had far harder roads to hoe than I did. Front and center are Carolyn Shaw Bell and Barbara Reagan, former chairs, and Phyllis Wallace, an African-American woman who received her Ph.D. from Yale in the 1950s.

It's very important to me, to try to be a mentor to younger people. I thanked Carolyn recently in a letter for being such an inspiration to me. She wrote back that she really didn't remember doing anything special. I think that says it all about Carolyn—mentoring younger people was just "business as usual" for her. That would be my goal.

Q: What about personal life, family, and work? After many years at the University of Illinois you moved to Cornell. How difficult was it to move a two-career family?

What I like to say when people ask me about balancing personal life, family and work—is to paraphrase W.C. Fields—at least I think it was Fields. When he was older someone asked him how it felt and he replied, "Well, it beats the alternative." If you want children, having them is just a wonderful thing. Having my career is extremely important to me too. I feel really lucky that I was able to do both. There were costs, of course, but there were also enormous benefits. I was able to get tenure at a young enough age to have my two kids afterwards. That takes some of the stress off, but it takes off less than you would think because what the tenure process is in part is a socialization process. After getting tenure, you still have very high goals and standards for yourself and you have a lot of commitments to collaborators. I

had kind of an interesting, really lucky, two-career situation. My husband, Larry Kahn, likes to say (humorously) that it was good planning—we met when we were both assistant professors, so we didn't face the problem of locating two jobs in the same place. We were both hired at the University of Illinois at the same time, possibly for the same job. (Illinois was a large department and in those days—the 1970s—they were willing to make multiple offers for the same position.)

One of the things that we like about being married is being in the same place. We were very happy at Illinois and both got tenure there, so we would not have moved unless it was a good opportunity for both of us. When Cornell approached us, we found the offers professionally very attractive. It was also an opportunity for me to go back to my alma mater, back to the ILR school itself. And, I was offered a Chair named for Frances Perkins who inspired my initial entry into the field; that was very exciting. Our children were born and raised in Champaign-Urbana and were not eager to move. When we moved, one was going into eighth grade and the other into sophomore year of high school. (They are now 20 and 22.) But it turned out to be a wonderful experience for them too.

Q: How did you find researching topics related to women and so forth, starting with your dissertation?

The acceptability of researching topics related to women was not high at the time that I started. Some members of the profession just didn't think the topic was that interesting and there was a presumption that a woman could not objectively research this area. There's been an enormous advance in the amount of research on this topic and in the acceptability of research on this topic. A lot of that advance owes itself to the hard work of the women and men who've been doing the research, showing it to be very interesting, and showing that it can be objective. The question that sometimes still gets raised is whether it the best thing for a woman to go into, will it lead to problems? I have very strong feelings about this. The best thing for anyone, male or female, to go into is what interests them. If you do that, in a sense, you can't fail because you've marked out for yourself an interesting and rewarding line of work.

Q: Given that your award is with Marianne Ferber, say something about your experiences with collaborative research with each other and with others.

I've been really lucky in regard to collaborative research in finding co-authors that not only have a lot to contribute professionally, but are also close personal friends. Marianne Ferber is towards the head of that list, but I

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have to also mention my husband, Larry Kahn, and there are others who've been very important to me as well. Now some people think of collaboration as just a kind of pragmatic thing, "With a co-author you can be twice as productive." I think that's totally untrue. What goes up is the quality of the work. The quantity of the work might go up a little, but not as much as you might think. You're in it with somebody else, you're debating it, you're talking about it. Research can be a little lonely and collaborative work obviously is far less lonely. People tend to have different strengths and weaknesses. The whole tends to be better than the sum of the parts for that reason. Collaborative research also keeps me at it, keeps my nose to the grindstone. I might be willing to disappoint myself, but I'm sure as heck not going to disappoint a co-author.

Q: Do you think it is easier for women to be leaders in academia today? What advice would you give to young female economists in the profession?

I do think it is easier than it used to be for women both because there have been women who've gone before and there is now an increasing number of women. My advice can be summarized with a line from Shakespeare, "To thine own self be true." This relates to following your own interests, doing research on what really motivates you. Of course you should be aware of how your work is received, but, in my estimation, the really hard thing about being a female economist or may be just a person, is developing some level of comfort with yourself. Once you're comfortable with yourself it's surprising how much easier other challenges are.

Q: Are there any other experiences or lessons that you would like to relate to the readers of the CSWEP newsletter?

I'd like to add that with family there are conflicting commitments and there are ups and downs with balancing work and family, but they complement each other very well, and people don't always realize that. Your family gives you a dimension of your life outside of your work. You may get an article rejected by a journal, but your two-year-old is still going to run over to you as if you're the greatest person in the world. Or your two-year-old could throw a terrible tantrum, but you might get a letter of acceptance from a journal. So you have alternative sources of gratification that help to keep you balanced and give you a sense of perspective.
