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# **Feminist Economics and the Social and Solidarity Economy**

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### *Abstract*

Feminist economics is a wide-ranging field of scholarship that aims to challenge the gender biased frameworks of economic theories, and create knowledge for a more just, sustainable world while bringing broader transdisciplinary visions into the picture. While it shares many common ideas and values with the SSE and offers key insights that can further the goals of the SSE, there has not been significant engagement between the two approaches. In this entry, I highlight key analytical insights from feminist economics that have relevance for the SSE and trace out the connections.

*Keywords:* feminist economics; gender analysis; gender inequalities; care; social provisioning; social reproduction

## Introduction

The struggle for a more equitable, democratic and sustainable economic system has resulted in a plurality of efforts to reimagine and transform the socio-economy that is encapsulated within the term ‘social and solidarity economy’ (SSE). While once relegated to the fringe, there is growing interest in the SSE as a viable alternative within development policy circles (Utting 2015). Yet this interest in the SSE has been largely gender blind, as outcomes of gender equality in SSE are assumed rather than analyzed (Verschurr, Guérin, and Hillenkamp 2021). There is also the issue of the SSE’s ongoing productivist bias, which sidelines crucial aspects of the economy, such as women’s unpaid work in social reproduction (Laville 2021), including women’s self-organization through collective SSE entities to secure decent livelihoods (notably in Africa, Asia and Latin America). Adding to this disconnect is the fact that gender and development policy has not yet engaged significantly with the SSE. Dominant neoliberal gender policy frameworks have focused on integrating women into the existing capitalist system, rather than fostering alternatives along SSE lines. Feminists critical of these policy frameworks often view all possible paths to SSE as foreclosed, either already coopted by neoliberalism or too fragile to succeed (Bergeron and Healy 2015). This entry aims to bring SSE and feminism into a more robust conversation with each other by introducing some key analytical insights from feminist economics (FE) and tracing out connections to SSE. It begins by briefly introducing the field, then turns to the FE revision of economics, paying particular attention to FE’s social provisioning approach and the centrality of social reproduction within it.

### 1. What is feminist economics? A brief introduction

Feminist economics is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship that exists to challenge the biased and incomplete accounts of economic life found in dominant economic theories, particularly those of the neoclassical, free-market school of thought. Feminist challenges to economics date back to at least the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, but the foundation for FE as it exists today can be traced to the 1970s and 1980s, when the growing feminist movement in the USA and Europe gave rise to critiques of the received ideas about women and gender in economics. FE research at that time focused on women’s labor force participation, the gender wage gap, and the failure to account for household production and women’s unpaid domestic labor. By the 1990s, this work coalesced into a distinct sub-field of the discipline, with its own journal, organized under the banner of “Feminist Economics.” It also expanded its critique of the male bias of mainstream economics on a number of fronts. In addition to tackling neoclassical economics’ failures to address discrimination in the market or adequately account for and value activities outside of the market, such as unpaid domestic labor, FE has shown that troubling gender assumptions operate at virtually all levels of economic thought and practice. Take, for instance, the representative agent of neoclassical economics, an abstract *homo economicus* defined as a self-sufficient and self-interested rational economic agent. FE analysis has shown that this supposedly universal figure reflects a White, western, masculine ideal of detachment, individualism, and rationality. It also pushes to the margins human motivations associated with devalued feminine characteristics and that rest on obligation, altruism, connection, solidarity, and care. In contrast, FE views people as relational subjects with

multiple motivations, and for whom gender, race, class, sexuality, power, social norms and other factors are at play in the economic processes in which they are involved (Nelson and Ferber 1993). In addition, FE scholarship has critiqued the mainstream's false standard of objectivity and scientific detachment, which is propped up by its use of abstract, mathematical models. Over the past decades, FE has continued to critique and reformulate economics, tackling issues at the core of the mainstream's foundational assumptions as well as addressing questions in particular subfields such as development, household economics, macroeconomics, political economy, labor market discrimination, and more.

## **2.FE and the social provisioning approach**

Currently, the field of FE is wide ranging, and the entry-points and perspectives of FE are diverse. Still, beyond the obvious shared project of making gender a central category of analysis, there is a methodological convergence of a wide range of FE's various strands around the social provisioning approach (SPA) (Power 2004). The SPA redefines economics as the study of provisioning for human life rather than the study of choices in markets. It recognizes that provisioning includes activities that lie both within and outside of markets, including paid work, unpaid labor, community networks, cooperation (and SSE), the natural world, and the public sector. It views women's unpaid domestic labor and care work as an essential, if heretofore neglected, part of the economic system. It further analyzes how economic processes and outcomes are shaped by gender and other identities. The SPA acknowledges motivations such as care and cooperation in addition to those of self-interest. It rejects the idea that our current mode of provisioning reflects the "natural" workings of the market, for which there is no alternative, and instead, views economic organization as the outcome of power dynamics and struggle. Finally, the SPA embraces ethics as a part of economic analysis, as economics should be in the service of not just analyzing, but improving human well-being. The same commitments to ethics, justice, caring and cooperative motivations, and social provisioning for well-being are where SSE, in its diverse perspectives and pluralistic strategies, tends to engage (see the entry "Contemporary understandings of the social and solidarity economy"). Consequently, what follows will focus on key themes that emerge from the SPA framework.

## **3.FE and the evaluation of economic success**

How FE evaluates economic success around social provisioning for well-being distinguishes it from the dominant economic approach. Mainstream neoclassical economics evaluates the economy in terms of market efficiency, profitability, and growth of GDP per capita, measured in terms of market-produced goods. FE finds these goals to be narrow, insufficient and misleading, since other types of output and outcome can be, and are, achieved or obtained. The emphasis on GDP growth to measure economic success rests on the assumption that all economic activity is "priced" and takes place in markets, leaving out the enormous amount of production and resource use that takes place in households, communities, and the natural world outside of markets. The emphasis placed on market efficiency is also troubling. Some strands of FE have made an "efficiency case" for pursuing gender equality through the

removal of obstacles to women's participation in labor and financial markets, and these ideas have been taken up enthusiastically in institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. But those employing the SPA are more skeptical of this "business case" for pursuing gender equality. Subordinating the goals of gender equality to efficiency enhancement does little to challenge the structural inequalities of the economy that have contributed to the immiseration of so many in the first place. Further, this approach fails to challenge the mainstream idea that an underlying logic, in which we cannot interfere, guides the economy even when current economic approaches are not working for most of us. This "logic we must obey" approach of the dominant neoclassical school, and the neoliberal policies that it informs, fails to present the economy as it is: something that humans create through struggle, in which ethical commitments are always present (Bergeron and Healy 2015).

In this respect, FE joins other non-mainstream economists and many working in the SSE to reject strict market criteria and focus on outcomes related to achieving broad-based human well-being. Such efforts focus on reframing economic success outside of per capita GDP through alternative measures and indicators. One such alternative indicator, adopted by some in FE, is the Genuine Progress Indicator. This was developed by ecological economists, and combines economic, social and environmental aspects to provide a more robust measure of sustainable well-being. Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, which defines the success of the socio-economy in terms of enhancing human agency to allow people to better lead lives that they value, has been particularly influential in FE. Using this approach, the goals of improving women's access to economic opportunities and knowledge, increasing voice and ability to make decisions, living secure lives, having control over income, and other freedoms are viewed as ends to strive for in and of themselves, not solely for their effects on the income of women, or the efficiency and growth of the economy at large (Sen 1999). A rich literature in FE has drawn upon and extended these insights. Naila Kabeer (2021) for instance, has variously drawn upon the capabilities approach in her work, shifting the focus to empowerment - defined in terms of challenging the constraints that oppress people - to make the role of power in structuring human agency more explicit. These insights have been incorporated into gender-aware measures of well-being such as the Gender Equality Index, which accounts for a range of gender inequalities related to labor rights, participation and earnings, reproductive and maternal health, gender-based violence, political participation and leadership, literacy, and other factors that impact the development of women's capabilities. All those elements are to be found as underlying concepts and intrinsic values of the SSE.

#### **4. Conceptualizing and addressing gender inequalities**

FE has provided a corrective to both dominant neoclassical economics as well as to a variety of heterodox economic theories of inequality. These theories focus only on market-related factors such as labor market earnings and financial assets which, while important, do not tell the whole story. A rich literature in FE has documented the inequalities that occur in the sphere of the household and family life that are left out of the mainstream theories, including the myriad ways that rights, voice, work, resources and leisure are unequally distributed in households, as well as the lack of autonomy that many women experience in patriarchal contexts (Folbre 2020). It has

also examined the ways that gender relations can shift as access to resources inside and outside of the household changes, with implications for how inequalities play out in both market and household (Agarwal 1997). Further, there is attention to structural and institutional factors, for which FE offers an intersectional framework that can explain the complexities and interactions of gender, race, class, caste, sexuality, and coloniality (Brewer, Conrad and King 2002, Ruwampura 2008).

Liberal feminism has long connected the fight for equality with women's integration into the labor market as workers or entrepreneurs. Some strands of FE have adopted a similar position, viewing the household as the primary site of women's oppression and extolling the liberatory effects of participation in labor or credit markets to provide women with their own income. But more critical perspectives have shown that the results of integration into the market have had mixed effects. While women gaining access to their own income has, in many cases, increased their bargaining power at home in ways that challenge patriarchy (including supporting their ability to live autonomous lives outside of patriarchal household structures), it also heightens exploitation and gender inequality in some contexts (Benería, Berik and Floro 2015). While feminist efforts to foster equal opportunity have led to successes for some groups of women, labor markets remain segregated by race, caste, sexuality, class, and gender in ways that make low paid and precarious work the only option for many poor women. Further, fostering women's success "inside" the existing system contributes to multiple crises including those related to climate, energy, water, underemployment, and more, that threaten the well-being of all individuals (Matthaei 2009). With regard to the argument that microcredit is a "magic bullet" to resolving poverty and liberating women from patriarchal confines, many strands of FE have been highly critical. They point to the increased commercialization of microfinance and the huge profits gained by drawing women into global debt relations. They also point to the precarities associated with the informal sector activities that these loans support. In many cases, recipients' overall workload of paid and unpaid labor increased to nearly breaking point. It is also not clear that inequalities in households are reduced as women's income increases. While in some cases additional income can improve women's status and decrease their workload at home, in other cases, women earners may end up doing more domestic labor as their incomes rise and they may face increased incidence of domestic violence (Barker, Bergeron and Feiner 2021).

Women's integration into paid work and financial circuits that are more in line with SSE principles of democratic participation and cooperation can, however, foster alternatives to the mechanisms of gendered exploitation that drive more neoliberal contexts. Hossein (2018) discusses the important role of women-led cooperative financial institutions in both empowering women and provisioning for well-being within African diaspora communities. The work of SSE organizations such as the Self-Employed Women's Association in India, which operates through women-run cooperatives and unions, has helped secure the livelihoods of many hundreds of thousands of women through training that leads to increased wages and fighting for enhanced social protections from the state (see entry "Gender equality and empowerment and SSE"). Domestic workers' cooperatives and unions have provided poor, racialized and immigrant women with the ability to improve their working conditions and pay in this line of work (Eşim 2021). These initiatives – especially at the local and community level – are but a handful of examples of how SSE can offer an

alternative to capitalist 'business as usual' to reduce gender inequality and foster women's empowerment. But, as Verschuur, Guérin and Hillenkamp (2021) argue, additional attention to a key concept in FE – the gendered organization of social reproduction – by the SSE could further strengthen the development of more equitable alternatives. It is thus a discussion of social reproduction that we now turn to.

## 5. Care and social reproduction

One of the major contributions of FE has been to highlight the essential contribution that unpaid domestic labor and care work makes to social provisioning. This labor has been ignored and devalued in mainstream economics because of gender divisions and hierarchies that privilege the historically masculine sphere of production, and the market over activities in the feminine sphere of reproduction and maintenance of life. While men do engage in these activities, the disproportionate share of household care, domestic labor, and unpaid farming work is done by women (and young girls). FE has also brought attention to the essential but often undeclared and low-paid care work done largely by poor, racialized, and immigrant women. As an aside, one can critically note that the SSE is barely starting to make inroads into this sector with more equitable alternatives such as mutuals or collective self-managed initiatives. The neglect of these activities has many negative effects. At the level of ontology, J.K. Gibson-Graham highlights that it obscures the diverse economic processes and motivations that make up the socio-economy in ways that constrain our ability to imagine and build on existing alternative values and practices (Gibson-Graham 1996). At the level of macroeconomic policy, the absence of unpaid and undocumented domestic and care work in official statistics such as GDP presents a false picture of the economy. There are also deeply flawed macroeconomic policy initiatives that, by failing to take this important work into account, have resulted in a significant increase in women's labor burdens and depletion of care. At the level of the labor market, workplaces organized around the masculine ideal of an unencumbered worker result in a double burden of unpaid household work and wage labor for those with care responsibilities (Barker, Bergeron and Feiner 2021). The ongoing failure to recognize and support this work at all levels has created a depletion of and crisis of care.

In addition to highlighting the value of previously ignored household labor, more critical strands of FE scholarship have also challenged the mainstream economics presentation of market and household as completely separate spheres. A rich literature on *social reproduction* (SR) has been debating and tracing out the crucial interrelationships between capitalism and care work since the 1970s. SR is a term that refers to the crucial role that activities and processes of sustaining and reproducing life play in the development of capitalism. The understanding of SR has evolved since the term was first coined by feminist scholars examining the relationship between gender oppression, housework, and the reproduction of the labor force. It has expanded to include an analysis of all activities – market and non-market, encompassing a diversity of economic sites and practices – that are engaged in the reproduction of life. For instance, as thinking around these issues developed, attention to the ways that complexities of race, class and global circuits were implicated in SR extended the analysis to include the paid labor of social reproduction (such as paid domestic work).

Other theoretical developments have emphasized the ways that increasingly informalized and fragmented systems of labor have turned many households into sites where paid work and SR occur simultaneously, and the distinctions between them are blurred. Still, others have pointed to the ways that the disappearance of natural commons around the world has intensified SR labor for those who once relied upon these commons for much of their sustenance and well-being. Central to the FE analysis of SR is the contradictory relationship between capitalist accumulation and provisioning for well-being. The unlimited search for profits has increased exploitation in ways that has made it more difficult for the majority of people to meet their SR needs, destabilizing the very processes of maintenance and reproduction of life on which capitalism relies.

These debates about and insights from SR are summarized and extended to SSE in an important volume by Verschurr, Guérin, and Hillenkamp (2021). They argue that reframing our understanding of work to include SR can greatly enhance the transformative potential of the SSE. As people around the world address the crises of SR that they face – along with the gender, race, class, colonial and other power relations that structure these crises - the current organization of the economy is being rejected, and people are searching for SSE alternatives. For instance, social movements have created community-based programs for providing SR outside of capitalist logics. In fact, there is a long history of racialized and otherwise marginalized communities mobilizing to provide collective care and mutual aid. This represents not only a survival strategy, but one of political resistance and social transformation. Verschurr, Guérin, and Hillenkamp (2021) examine a range of emerging women-led SSE SR alternatives that offer a more equitable form of social provisioning characterized by solidarity relations. These include: collective efforts for providing childcare, education, food, and other goods; sharing knowledge and resources; a variety of articulations with the state to support SSE SR activities and processes; organizing paid SR workers to reduce exploitative practices; and mobilizing community workers engaged in SR to demand recognition and rights. Examples offered in the book include the development of community centers in Argentina, people's canteens in West Africa, the Women's Self Employment Association in India, and more. Throughout, the authors highlight the importance of recognizing and valuing women's SR activities in SSE practices, as well as the potential of SSE for addressing the crisis of SR that so many poor people are experiencing around the world.

## **6. Conclusion**

This entry offered a brief introduction to some key contributions of FE to an alternative understanding of the economy outside of the mainstream. While acknowledging that the field of FE is wide-ranging and, at times, hard to pin down, the entry identified a few central elements of FE scholarship that could expand thinking about the scope and nature of SSE activities. While, for many years, SSE has been somewhat gender blind in its approach, it is heartening to see an emerging literature bringing an explicit FE analysis to understanding SSE activities and processes. Continued engagement between FE and SSE is crucial to understanding the conditions under which inclusive, gender-equitable SSE processes can foster democratic participation, cooperative governance and social provisioning for the well-being of all people and the planet.

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