

What contribution does feminist economics make to the understanding of gender equality?

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Economics is a key aspect of our society. However orthodox economics, which claims to be gender-neutral, is seen to negatively affect women, exacerbate gender inequality and undervalue the contribution many women make to the economy at all levels. This has led to the emergence of the body of thought known as feminist economics. Feminist economists argue that orthodox economists ignore the differing inputs that men and women make to the economy due to their focus on the productive economy and markets (Sweetman 2008). Feminist economic has made a significant contribution to understandings of gender equality in many different ways, the majority of which is centred around its emphasis on the recognition of women's unpaid work, and women's time-burden (often referred to as the double/triple-shift). Its contribution to understandings of gender equality has been instrumental in the context of Western countries and countries in the Global South. This paper will begin by exploring some of the contributions feminist economics has made to understandings of gender equality, including recognition of women's role in economic development, the feminisation of labour, and the double-shift¹. It will then focus on the feminist economics contribution to understandings of gender equality within the context of globalisation and development. It will highlight the role feminist economics has played with regards to statistical gender indicators, before providing a feminist economic analysis of the informal economy found in many developing countries.

Essentially, feminist economists criticise orthodox economics for solely focusing on equality of opportunities. Feminist economics states that it is important to consider equality of outcomes alongside equality of opportunities, due to the fact that "systemic inequality in outcomes contributes to unequal power and, as a result, unequal opportunities" and vice versa (Berik et.al. 2009:5). Equality of outcomes needs consideration because a focus solely on opportunities ignores the gendered dynamics of many economic systems such as labour markets. So policies that ignore the possibility that outcomes can vary, end up perpetuating gender inequalities (Berik et.al. 2009).

Considerable feminist economics thought is based around the way in which gendered divisions of labour tend to confine women to domestic duties or reproductive work and men to productive or paid work. This gendered division of labour is shaped by both natural difference and social norms and institutions (Sweetman 2008). Therefore, reproductive work (such as care work), be it unpaid or paid, is seen as a feminine role. Furthermore, this type of and is undervalued in many societies. Feminist economists argue that domestic and care work contribute significantly to the economy. Feminist economics refers to unpaid work as social reproduction,

¹ This paper recognises that there are many other aspects of feminist economics and that feminist economics has made many more contributions to the understanding of gender equality than covered here, due to limitations this paper is unable to cover them all. Examples include: the work of Connell (1998) on Masculinities and Globalization, the emerging plethora of studies focusing on the recent global economic crisis, theories on care work in the West, analyses of wage differences between women and men.

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because society and the economy would not function if this work was not carried out. Diane Elson provides a useful analysis of this relationship between productive and reproductive work, and their interdependence:

“The ability of money to mobilize labour power for ‘productive work’ depends on the operation of some non-monetary set of social relations to mobilize labour power for ‘reproductive work.’ These non-monetary social relations are subordinate to money in the sense that they cannot function and sustain themselves without an input of money; and they are reshaped in response to the power of money. Nevertheless, neither can the monetary economy sustain itself without an input of unpaid labour, an input shaped by the structures of gender relations.” (Elson 1994:40)

In addition to their reproductive role, it is increasingly common for women to undertake paid work; yet feminist economists argue that due to the universal perception of the ‘male-breadwinner’, the contribution women make to their households is perceived by many to be relatively insignificant. This “perpetuates inequality between women and men, because it fundamentally weakens women’s bargaining power in marriage and the family” (Sweetman 2008:1). Furthermore, this minimises women’s position within the labour force as their wage is not perceived a necessity for the family, this encourages employers to keep down women’s wages (Berik et.al. 2009). Additionally, the paid roles available to women are typically within the guise of reproductive work, in particular care and domestic work, and these roles are eminently undervalued and poorly paid (Himmelweit 2007). This recognition of the way in which certain roles are highly feminised and underpaid has significantly contributed to understandings of gender equality with regards to work and the gendered divisions of labour.

Feminist economists point out that families are becoming increasingly dependent on women’s wages and this has led to what has become known as the feminisation of labour. This phenomenon is noted by feminist economics as the process whereby women have rapidly entered the workforce, both in developed and developing countries. It also makes reference to the fact that heavy industries which typically employed men are gradually declining while there has been a huge increase in light industries, particularly assembly line factories, which prefer to employ women. Feminist economics argues that this is linked to the perception that women have certain ‘natural’ qualities that enable them to effectively carry-out certain jobs (Elson & Pearson 1981). Feminist economists note that reproductive work tends to be repetitive and so requires considerable patience. Thus, women’s ‘natural’ ability is in fact something they learn through the reproductive roles they are assigned to as young girls (Sweetman 2008). The assumption that assembly line type work comes ‘naturally’ to women allows factories to keep wages low, as there is no perceived skill needed. Nevertheless, this feminisation of labour is increasing the number of women providing the main wage, sometimes the only wage, for many families. Furthermore, there has been an increase over the last few decades in the number of women-headed households, which rely solely on women’s wages (Chant 2011;1997). Moreover, this apparent feminisation of labour is causing many men to feel

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threatened and to lose their image as 'real men,' which can lead "to increased violence against women and children within the home" (Sweetman 2008:2).

While more and more women are undertaking paid work, there is little evidence that men are doing anything to alleviate women's reproductive duties. This results in women being burdened with what has come to be called the 'double-shift' of productive and reproductive work. Feminist economics brings this idea of the 'double-shift' to the forefront of development, arguing that the ignorance of this in orthodox economics policies causes gender inequality to be perpetuated (Sweetman 2008). Other thinkers such as Moser (1987) and Kumar (2010) note that the naturalisation of women's reproductive role in the household, results in women being expected to participate in community work, such as organising or monitoring access to services and resources. This then adds to their time-burden to form the 'triple-shift'. This can be exacerbated by many gender-neutral policies that encourage community participation, such as community forestry, which expect women to play a major part (Baker 2006). A lack of recognition of women's unpaid work leads to a common perception that women have more time than men to contribute to community work. The awareness of the 'double/triple-shift' has also a push by feminist economics to advocate for recognition of time-use in measures of development, poverty, and inequality, in particular in the drafting of statistical gender indicators.

Based on the need to value women's reproductive work and to consider factors such as time-use and social capital, feminist economists such as Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000) developed the capabilities approach to highlight the way in which development should be seen as a multidimensional process that includes changes in well-being as well as income. "The capability approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society" (Robeyns 2005:94). Central to this approach are: functionings– "the various things a person may value doing or being," (Sen 1999:75) such as being educated, healthy able to work etc.; capability– "the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value" (Sen 1999:87); and agency– "the ability to pursue goals that one values and has reason to value" (Alkire & Deneulin 2009:31). The capabilities approach therefore argues for equality of outcomes through expanding capabilities (Berik et.al. 2009), emphasising the need to consider social capital alongside economic capital.

Specifically within the context of globalisation and the Global South, Feminist Economists have criticised orthodox economic theorists and institutions, such as the World Bank, who claim to be gender-neutral, for being gender-blind (Elson 2009). Arguing that "most mainstream theories frame globalization as gender-neutral ..., [they] pay little attention to gender and underrepresent the experiences of diverse women in specific societal contexts, especially those in the developing world" (Chow 2003:444). By ignoring gender, orthodox studies of globalisation are ignorant of women's rights as human rights and have a poor understanding of the multiplicity of gender

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inequality (Chow 2003). To combat this approach, feminist economists have introduced transformative studies on globalisation that centre on gender and look at globalisation with a gendered lens. The neoliberal macroeconomic restructuring policies such as Structural Adjustment Policies² implemented by the International Monetary Fund during the 1980s were criticised for being extremely gender-blind, the austerity measures that they encouraged meant that the gap in social services had to be provided elsewhere, and it was often women who took up the slack, adding to their time-burden. Yet women's role here was ignored by the large economic institutions who continued to encourage austerity measures, thus hindering development and advancements towards gender equality. Therefore, orthodox economics ignores the ways in which "globalization shapes gender relations and people's lives materially, politically, socially and culturally at all levels and treat[s] its differential effects on women and men as similar" (Chow 2003:44).

Other feminist economic analyses of globalisation include, the idea that orthodox economics gender-'neutral' development and economic policies can themselves be affected and hindered by gender inequalities; critiques of the World Bank's 2007 'Gender Action Plan' that referred to gender equality as smart economics; and an analysis of global supply chains, in particular care chains. However, due to limitations, this essay is unable to discuss all these issues.

Feminist economics has contributed greatly to the measurement of gender equality through statistical gender indicators (SGIs), highlighting the difference between a gender indicator and a gender-sensitive indicator. Namely, that a gender indicator merely "provides factual information about the status of women" (Beck 1999:7), while a gender-sensitive indicator provides "direct evidence of the status of women, relative to some agreed normative standard or explicit reference group [commonly men]" (Johnstone 1985:233)³. So feminist economics argues that SGIs need to be truly gender-sensitive if issues around gender equality are to be taken seriously in development policies, because what gets measured gets addressed (Moser 2007). Therefore, feminist economics highlights the need for SGIs to measure factors that contribute to gender inequalities and are relevant to women's lives (e.g. reproductive rights, time-use, violence), considering both equality in opportunities and outcomes. Many SGIs were constructed around feminist economic theories of capabilities so as to incorporate more of a holistic, well-being approach. The most prominent SGIs, introduced by the UNDP, are the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM)⁴. However, while these indicators are influenced by

² These policies influenced free-market reforms, privatisation, trade liberalisation, deregulation, and a reduced role of the state which led to a reduction in social service provision

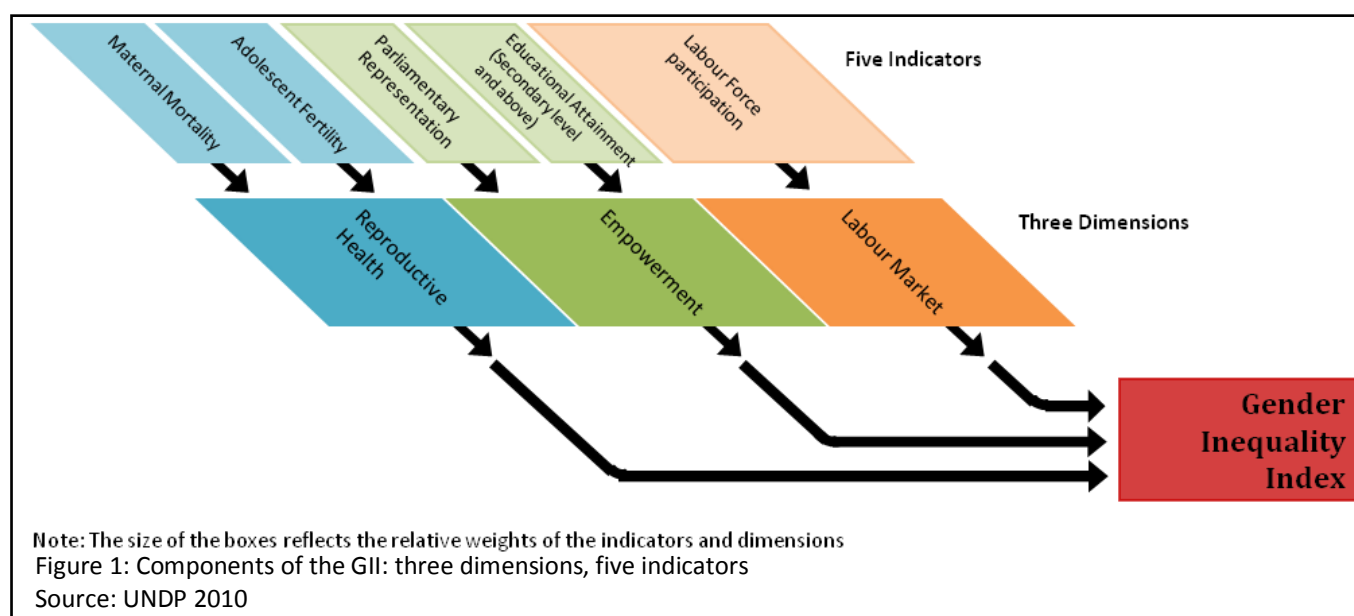
³ For example, a gender indicator would be: 25% of women are illiterate compared to 35% of women 3 years ago; whereas a gender-sensitive indicator would be: 25% of women are illiterate compared to 5% of men, compared with 35% and 10% respectively 3 years ago.

⁴ The GDI is ranked alongside the Human Development Index and measures gender disparities in longevity (life expectancy at birth); knowledge (literacy and enrolment rates); and standard of living (estimate GDP per capita). The GEM considers the share of parliamentary

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capabilities, they are criticised by feminist economists for being gender-blind and not sufficiently considering the needs of women. For example, the GDI measures income but does not account for intra-household consumption and allocation dynamics, or the fact that for women an increase in income may be the result of an increased burden (Chant 2008). Furthermore, by measuring income, the GDI is also criticised because it means that low-income countries scores badly regardless of true gender equality⁵. The GEM on the other hand is seen by feminist economists as a biased indicator that is more relevant to developed countries where factors like political representation are more pressing issues. Both these indicators have been criticised for ignoring important issues such as the informal sector where many women work, gender-based violence and the 'double-shift.'

feminist economics critiques of the GDI and GEM influenced the UNDP to introduce a new SGI in the 2010 Human Development Report, the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which measures maternal mortality, adolescent fertility, parliamentary representation, educational attainment (secondary and above), and labour force participation, illustrated in Figure 1.



As opposed to the GDI, the measures in the GII are not based on income and so low-income countries can still do well regardless of their GDP per capita, so several countries, including China and Rwanda, are ranked significantly higher on the GII than the GDI, while for others, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the opposite has occurred. This shows how measuring income blurs gender equality. Thus the GII can be thought to be more gender-sensitive. Furthermore, the UNDP notes that the dimensions and indicators in the GII are complementary to each other and thus it recognises that "overlapping disadvantages are an important aspect of gender inequality" (UNDP 2010:90).

seats occupied by women; the proportion of legislators, senior officials and managers who are women; the female share of professional and technical jobs; and the ratio of estimated female to male earned income.

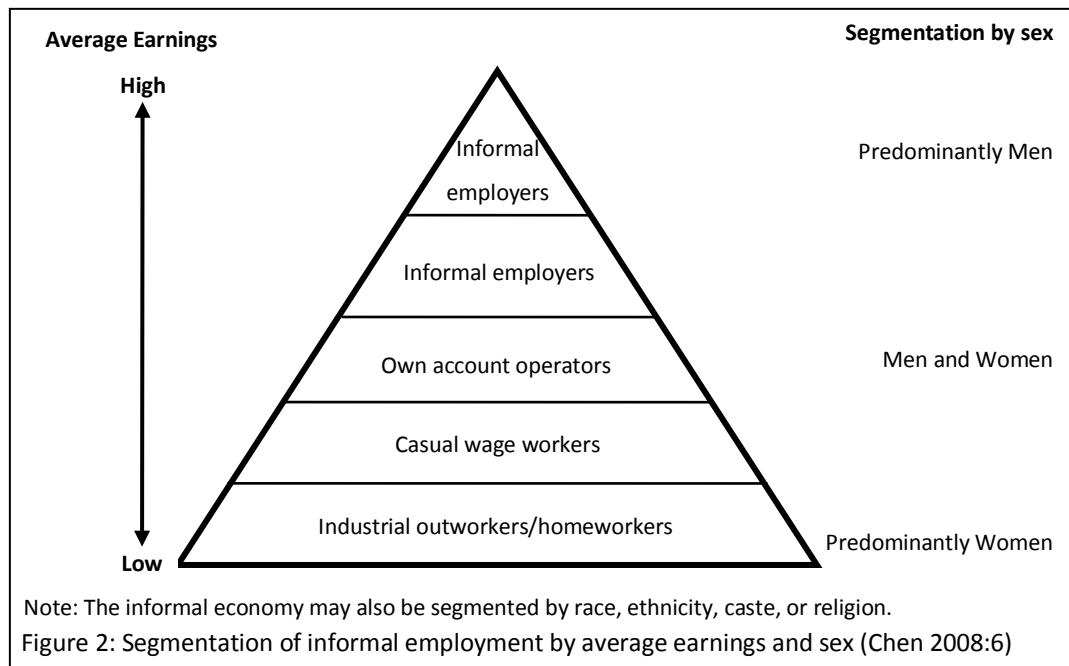
⁵ E.g. Rwanda is one of the few countries with over 50% of women in parliamentary seats, however due to its low GDP it is ranked lower than a country like Qatar that has a high GDP but no women in parliament (UNDP 2010)

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However, the GII is not without its flaws, and while it is more gender-sensitive than the GDI and GEM, many feminist economists argue that it has not gone far enough. While it has included reproductive health, the indicator of adolescent fertility can be seen to be a hetero-normative Western idea, which fails to indicate who counts as an adolescent. Furthermore in certain countries, if an adolescent mother is not married the birth will not be recorded due to the taboo of sex before marriage, regardless of how she falls pregnant. This therefore does not do enough to promote further the understanding of women's rights. Additionally, the GII does not consider time-use and women's time-burden, which is imperative to recognise when looking at gender equality, or pressing issues such as violence against women, ownership of assets, and decision-making, though the UNDP (2010) notes that these issues are significant but were not possible to include in the GII due to data constraints. However, the UNDP does not explain why the GII overlooks other pressing gender issues such as the gendered aspects of housing (see Kumar 2010) or women's participation in the informal economy, the importance of which this essay will now go on to highlight from a feminist economics perspective.

As noted above, the feminisation of labour relates to an increase in both the number of women taking up paid employment, the number of industries with 'feminine' jobs. While the latter has occurred largely in the formal sector, the former has been very prominent in the informal sector, especially in developing countries. More women are entering into informal employment⁶ for various reasons. Work within the informal sector includes self-employment, waged employment in informal jobs, home-based worker, and sub-contracted production, amongst others (Chen 2008; Drechsler et.al. 2008). This sector has now become "a larger source of employment for women than for men in the developing world" (Chen 2008:6). As seen in Figure 2, which also shows how the feminisation of labour in the informal sector has occurred in jobs that are lower paid than those of men (see Costa & Sliva 2008).

⁶ "Informal employment refers to jobs or activities in the production and commercialisation of legal goods and services that are un-regulated by or hidden from the State, most importantly for tax, social security and labour law purposes" (Drechsler et.al. 2008:8),



The gender-‘neutral’ neoliberal economic restructuring of the 1980s influenced deregulation of many formal labour markets in the Global South which contributed to the expansion of the informal sector and thus informal employment (Whitson 2007;Kabeer 2008). This resulted in it being less favourable for women to work in the formal sector where they had limited rights and could not balance their time effectively (Chen et.al. 2005). Therefore, the best source of employment for many women became the informal sector as most of the work consists of being home-based work and being self-employed, enabling women to work in their own time. This flexibility allows women to participate in paid employment, so helping to alleviate poverty in their households, while still being able to carry out domestic ‘duties’. Many poor households depend on women’s participation in paid employment and issues surrounding female-headship intensifies the need for women to enter into informal employment. However, while this flexibility allows women to perform the double/triple-shift more effectively, it does not alleviate women’s time-burden, which in itself adds to gender inequality.

However, the feminisation of labour in the informal sector, its flexibility, and the low-paid jobs available in it has enhanced the gendered division of labour within the household. Furthermore, it has caused girls education to be neglected in urban areas due to women’s lower perceived earnings (Chen 2008). In addition to this, gender relations within the household remain unequal as women’s financial contributions to the household are limited, which prevents them from having decision-making powers over the distribution of resources within the household.

It is also necessary to consider the affects working in the informal sector has on men and how this can negatively affect women. The existence of the informal sector is fairly unstable and those working in it are susceptible to joblessness at any time. This vulnerability can have an adverse effect on men who place themselves in the socially

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constructed role as 'breadwinner'. Thus a loss of job and a reduction in earnings for men is often perceived as a personal failure, which can seriously affect gender relations within the household (Heintz 2008).

The informal sector, and the highly gendered nature of it, is often overlooked by many SGIs, making them blind to the fact that while women may not be seen to be working in official statistics, many of them do work. This results in policies that use SGIs as a guideline ignoring many women's paid work commitments, which leads them to add extra burden on women, for example through policies that encourage greater female participation in the community or the household. This illustrates the importance of applying a gendered lens to development and globalisation, as it brings to light certain issues that affect gender inequality that would otherwise be overlooked.

Feminist economics makes a great contribution to the understanding of gender equality. This essay has shown this with regards to the work of feminist economists in the context of globalisation and development. Feminist economics has been instrumental in its analysis and recognition of the contribution women make to society and the economy, an issue that was otherwise overlooked. It has played a fundamental role in drafting many SGIs, which allows gender-sensitive issues to be addressed. However, in practice, the theories of feminist economics have not been truly applied to SGIs. SGIs still fail to account for time-use which is a very important issue with most feminist economists. Furthermore, many issues such as informal employment (elaborated above) and gender-based violence are yet to be adopted by SGIs and so are still a long way from being formally addressed by many policies and institutions, particularly those from an orthodox perspective. The example of informal employment illustrated the way in which feminist economists apply a gendered lens to analyse issues in development and globalisation. The context of feminist economics examined in this essay however is merely a fraction of the work done by many feminist economists in contributing to understandings of gender equality. Within globalisation and development alone this essay could have illustrated this through examining global masculinities, global care-chains, macro- and micro-economics, and so on. Future analysis could consider the contribution feminist economics has made to understanding the role of gender in the 2008 Global Economic Crisis. Nonetheless, in light of the information provided one can conclude that feminist economics has made great contributions to the understanding of gender equality, yet there is still a way to go between theory and practice.

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