Introduction

Feminist political economics (FPE) is one among several heterodox systems of economics that challenge the reigning orthodox neo-liberal economic model. That model focuses simply on the market economy with growth and accumulation as its primary goals.

FPE, in contrast, focuses on the provisioning of human needs and human well-being. It employs gender as a defining category and focuses on the actual lived experience of women, men and families and what it means to be a human person (InterPares, 2004:4).

FPE deconstructs and reframes basic neo-liberal assumptions and in the process refocuses economic theory and constructs alternatives. It uses a political economic approach, which is “the study of society as an integrated whole.” This approach identifies and analyzes “social relations as they relate to the economic system of production” (Drache 1978 as quoted in Bezanson and Luxton 2006, 12). A political economic approach contrasts with a simply economic approach which focuses on supply and demand of goods and services within a free market system.

A feminist political economic approach “reveals and clarifies how gender determines or influences the social and political relationships and structures of power and the differential economic effects that flow from these relationships and structures (Interpares, 2004, 4). While FPE has a particular focus on women, it does not exclude concerns about the whole of society or the environment. “Understanding gender divisions implies looking at both men and women from a feminist perspective and with a special emphasis on women’s subordination and the pursuit of gender equality” (Beneria, 2003, 161).

A Little History

Originally the word “economics,” from its Greek root, meant the management of the household, a particular concern and responsibility of women. At the beginning of modern economics in the 17th century, the focus of the purpose of economics shifted to the creation and distribution of “wealth.” With this shift the concepts of the “rational economic man” (sic) and “economic rationality” emerged as the norm for human behavior and the way to ensure the proper functioning of the market to establish the most efficient allocation of resources (Beneria, 2003, 68).

“Economic rationality”, presented as a basic economic truism in most introductory classes of economics, is the expectation that human beings behave in such ways as to pursue maximum gains. The business person seeks to maximize profits; the worker seeks the highest earnings possible; the investor desires

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1 Gender is an elastic term which includes several variables. For this analysis the term will refer to gender as the socially constructed roles and expectations shaping women’s and men’s lives.
the highest returns on investment and the consumer wants the best deal for the least amount of money (Beneria, 2003, 68).

The “rational economic man” is the personification of economic rationality. This mythic person is really an economic concept developed by the classical economists of the 19th century. The “rational economic man” is identified as a rational, self-interested, autonomous actor who desires wealth, avoids unnecessary labor and has the ability to make judgments towards those ends. According to this theory the pursuit of individual self-interest will produce the greatest possible economic benefits for the society as a whole through the power of the invisible hand of the market (Economics A-Z /Economist.com). The concept has both its critics and defenders, but it remains at the heart of neo-liberal economic theory (Nelson, 2005, 8-10 and 14-15).

A question to ask, however, is whether the concepts of “economic rationalism” and the “economic man” have developed the theory and practice of economic liberalization or whether the development of the practice and institutions of economic liberalization have promoted “economic rationalism” and the “economic man to legitimize their economic approach.”

**Deconstructing and Reframing**

The focus and purpose of feminist economics is social provisioning, or how societies organize to provide for the sustaining and flourishing of life (Nelson, 2005, 6; Power 2004, 6). The health of an economy is to be judged on its success or failure in providing adequate, sustainable livelihoods for its citizens.

The concept of social provisioning is also beginning to occur in current discussions on the failure of neo-liberalism’s brand of market fundamentalism, the belief “that market forces work best and to everyone’s benefit when government stands aside” (Brooks, 2005, 1). Under the current reign of neo-liberalism, the accumulation of wealth within and among countries (for neo-liberal economists the sign of a healthy economy) is diminishing the possibility of social provisioning for a growing number of people in poverty and in the middle classes. The poverty-wealth gap is increasing.

In FPE, the concepts of “rational economic man” and “economic rationalism” are replaced by a more complex mixture of behaviors. The neo-liberal concept of an individual motivated solely by self-interest excludes behaviors motivated by love, compassion, duty, altruism, the pursuit of art and beauty, equality and reciprocity in relationships, and care. In neo-liberalism, such selfless behavior is viewed as belonging to the non-market sector, such as the human family, the care of which has traditionally been assigned to women (Beneria, 2003, 68), and is not taken into account.

The inclusion of these behaviors in economic modeling in FPE produces, in the words of Nancy Folbre (1944), “imperfectly rational, somewhat economic persons or institutions” (as quoted in Beneria 2003, 68). Such imprecision, rather than serving as an effective critique of feminist economic modeling, simply reveals how shallow and unrealistic the assumption of “economic rationality” as the norm of human behavior is.

The growing wealth-poverty gap calls into question the assertion that an unfettered market economy driven by economic rationality is inherently efficient in increasing productivity and contributing to everyone’s benefit in society. Feminist economists pointing to this wealth-poverty gap, reframe the definition of poverty, refusing to see it as simply a shortfall in income and the lack of basic needs.

Poverty as a failure in social provisioning is a failure in some or all of the factors that contribute to adequate provisioning. The causes of poverty are embedded in the intersection of different inequalities in social relations, such as racism, gender, homophobia, religious and cultural discriminations. At its core poverty is powerlessness (Williams 2007, unpublished notes).
Poverty, then, must be viewed within an ethics/justice framework. There it appears as structural violence and a violation of human rights.

**Analytic Lens for a Feminist Political Economic Analysis**

The key feminist lenses for analyzing economic issues from household to global structures are the role of gender and the asymmetrical power relations and division of work/labor in both production and social reproduction which gender sets up.

**Gender**

Gender is a central analytic lens in a feminist political economic analysis. The meaning of the terms “gender” and “sex” differ. Sex is biologically based whereas gender is defined as the set of socially and culturally constructed roles and expectations for women and men in a given society. Gender roles are not fixed, but vary from society to society and can change over time as comparisons across cultures and generations illustrate. However, across cultures and generations one constant can be identified: women have primarily been responsible for the care and nurturing of the human family - the work of social reproduction -sometimes called the “care economy.”

Gender roles and expectations are created by and embedded in social institutions. They are found in the often implicit rules, customs, traditions, culture and practices that operate to achieve social and economic ends in a society. Analysts identify four levels of social institutions: state, market, community and household. In this topology, the household serves as the model of traditional gender relationships with its enshrined pattern of the male as head of the household, the female as homemaker, and the gender power dynamic that represents. These “familial norms and values are constantly drawn on to construct the terms on which women and men enter, and participate, in public life and in the marketplace” (Kabeer, 1994:61).

In a FPE, the gender lens also belies the concept that economics is gender neutral. Gender analysis exposes the gendered structure of the economy. On the level of macroeconomics (considering the economy as a whole), a gendered division of employment, gendered wage and salary scales, and gendered economic power and decision-making are evident. In the mesoeconomy (a loosely defined term that addresses the web issues that interface with the government and the economy), gendered laws, norms, rules, participation and access, incentives and decision-making govern economic activity and its rewards. While in the microeconomy (individual and institutional economic activity, including the household), gendered division of work, roles and responsibilities, access to resources and decision-making are at work. On all levels of the economy time use and leisure are gendered.

**Power Dynamics**

Gender is not a neutral term or reality. The sense of male superiority and entitlement is deeply embedded in cultural and social systems throughout the world and has set up the hierarchy of power between men and women. The unequal power dynamics between women and men intersects with, mirrors and reinforces other power dynamics embedded in institutions and relationships such as the unequal power relations among the races and ethnic groups, between the rich and the poor, the straight and the gay communities and between the countries of the North and the South. These power dynamics limit autonomy and agency – on the personal level for women and so-called minority groups, for people in poverty and for countries in the Global South -- creating systemic inequality across the social sectors, including the household. Because of the intersection of gender power dynamics with all other forms of power over, the struggle for women’s autonomy and agency cannot be separated from the larger context of class, race/ethnicity, sexual preference and geographic location. The work for
women’s empowerment demands engagement in the struggles against the sources of women’s oppression that extend beyond gender (Antrobus 2004, 68).

Given its rootedness in women’s experience, FPE does not embrace the concept of autonomy and individualism of the “economic man” as presented in neo-classic economics. Rather it takes a holistic approach with an emphasis on the social definitions of what it means to be a human person, rather than purely an economic actor. A person’s autonomy exists in the midst of reciprocal relationships. FPE understands the necessity of social cohesion to ensure the integrity and wholeness of communities, and of the larger societies of which communities are a part. Social cohesion includes social reciprocity and solidarity as expressed in structures and norms of mutual support and care and the extent and strength of social groupings. Without social cohesion, sustainable communities and sustainable societies supportive of the common good cannot flourish. (InterPares 2004, 5).

FPE advocates new modes of relationship based not on power over others, but on the mutual development of creative human energy arising from power within and power with others. In an FPE framework human rights, which articulate and guarantee equal relationships, are universally and indivisibly applied to women and men equally across all racial, ethnic, national, religious and sexual boundaries.

**Division of Labor**

Gender also dictates the division of work/labor in both the public sphere of production and the private sphere of the household. Whereas traditional economics tends to treat these two spheres as separate, FPE identifies them as integrally related with significant differential implications for women and men.

FPE identifies social reproduction, the work of nurturance of the human family and community, as an economic category as well as a work of care. The majority of people subsist by combining paid employment and unpaid domestic work to maintain themselves and their households. Production and consumption in combination generate the household’s livelihood. With a focus on the importance of the role of women in unpaid provisioning work, FPE emphasizes the significance of unpaid work to the functioning of a national economy (Luxton 2006, 37; Beneria 2003, 43).

Despite the value of care work to a national economy, it remains unaccounted for in a country’s GDP (Gross Domestic Product). Women’s work, paid and unpaid, is underestimated while women bear a larger burden of work time than men do. This inequality creates a level of economic vulnerability for women and diminishes their mobility and autonomy in designing their labor market strategies. Care work also limits women’s ability to participate on an equal footing with men in the marketplace, often forcing them into informal and flexible work patterns.

As women try to balance the demands of productive and social reproductive work, care work is often moved to the margins of their time creating a “crisis of care.” In response, they hire low-to-middle income women, often women of color, or immigrant women to perform the care work of their households, creating a different “crisis of care” in the families left behind by those women. Paid care work is characterized by low pay, lack of regulation and social safeguards such as social security and health care benefits.

Women encounter other obstacles in the labor market, including occupational segregation, gender-based discrimination, institutionalized pay scales that benefit men and inequality of opportunity. Most women lack access to resources and decision-making power. Work time regimes are not geared to the demands of child or elder care. Racial, ethnic and sexual discriminations are all exacerbated by gender.
Because FPE focuses on the provisioning of human needs and well-being, it analyzes not only economic policy but also social policy such as family policy, welfare policy, health policy and all other dimensions of human need and well-being. Environmental issues are also coming into the frame of FPE as earth is home not only to the human family but to the vast network of creatures that constitute our planetary ecology. The health of earth is vital to social reproduction, provisioning and well-being.

Lourdes Beneria has clearly articulated the critical work of feminist economics:

> On the one hand, it addresses the social construction and economic bases of women’s subordination, with important implications for our understanding of the factors generating the various forms of gender inequality and hierarchical power relations, and for policy and action. It also addresses questions of women’s interests and needs. On the other hand, it challenges some fundamental tenets and basic assumptions in the discipline of economics, either joining other critiques from different perspectives or representing unique feminist contributions. In this sense, feminist economics transcends the more explicit project by questioning the very nature of economic analysis and its objectives, and it performs an important critical role for the profession as a whole (2003, 47).

**Values Embedded in a Feminist Political Economy**

Throughout this paper, feminist values for gender equality and economic justice have been discussed, but not explicitly under the heading of values. It is important that these values be made explicit as they present a challenge to so much of our current thinking across many topics. They also directly confront the accusation that women are just in the struggle for equality for themselves.

The following list outlines these values:

- Human well-being is the foundational value; gender equality is central to human well-being;
- Human rights, especially economic and social rights;
- Women’s personal autonomy within relationships of reciprocity;
- Women’s moral and political agency;
- Recognition and valuation of women’s work of social reproduction—a value and an activity;
- Embracing differences and eliminating discrimination—racial, ethnic, sexual preferences, class/caste, religious and national origin;
- Ecological and environmental sustainability in the promotion of well-being and social reproduction;
- Social cohesion and solidarity across families, communities, regions and nation states;
- Global common good.

By focusing on all that is essential to human provisioning, FPE embraces and attempts to integrate all of these values into a coherent account of a just, productive, and sustainable global economy.

**Works Cited**


