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“Economics is Not a Man’s Field”:

CSWEP and the First Gender Reckoning in Economics (1971-1991)

Cléo Chassonnery-Zaïgouche¹, Beatrice Cherrier², and John D. Singleton³

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Abstract

This paper is a history of the first gender reckoning in U.S. economics profession, which began in the early 1970s. Based on hitherto closed archives of the American Economic Association (AEA), we reconstruct the historical context that led to the establishment of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession (CSWEP) and unpack the committee’s successes and failures, the enthusiasm it generated, and the resistance it encountered. We first show that then (as now), the birth of CSWEP was tied to larger social concerns: the feminist and civil rights movements, growing public awareness of issues surrounding discrimination and inequality, and the shifting legal context that drew many scientific societies and institutions toward such a reckoning. The narrative then turns to how economists’ particular approach to understanding social phenomena influenced views within the profession regarding gender disparities. Economists both study and experience discrimination, which led economists to view the status of women in the profession through the lens of economic analysis. The final section reflects on changes during the 1980s that saw the normalization of gender topics in economics as well as the fragmentation among economists interested in furthering the status of women. In conclusion, we emphasize how the CSWEP’s activities contributed to the professionalization of economics at large.

Keywords: CSWEP, history of economics, women economists, feminist economics, gender economics

JEL Classification: A10, A13, A14, B20, B29, B50, B54

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Introduction

The 2019 annual meeting of the *Allied Social Sciences Association (ASSA)* was held in Atlanta and took place amidst national controversy over the treatment of women in American society provoked by the #metoo movement. A packed crowd filled the room to attend a session titled “How Can Economics Solve its Gender Problem” in the meeting held in Atlanta. Presenters and discussants in the session could rely on an ever-growing flow of recent research that documented the causes and consequences of gender differences in representation, status, and promotion in the economics profession, as well as rampant sexism. “Wielding Data, Women Force a Reckoning Over Bias in the Economics Field” reads one headline from the year before. The *New York Times* article summarizes a panel at the January 2018 ASSA meetings:

Paper after paper... showed a pattern of gender discrimination, beginning with barriers women face in choosing to study economics and extending through the life cycle of their careers, including securing job opportunities, writing research papers, gaining access to top publications and earning proper credit for published work.

40 years earlier, an ASSA meeting, also held in Atlanta, had nearly been moved, and was partly boycotted, after the mobilization of economists to protest the state of Georgia’s unwillingness to ratify the Equal Right amendment.⁴ Another headline from the 1970s, this one attached to a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, reads “Economists Say Universities’ Bias Against Women Exceeds Business’.” Reporting on the findings of a survey conducted by the American Economics Association’s (AEA) Committee for the Status of Women in Economics (CSWEP), the article notes that “only 4.69 per cent of the full-time faculties were women” in those departments producing

⁴ More than 1,000 economists signed a full-page ad in a local newspaper to register their protest. In 1972, the US Senate had approved an amendment to the United States Constitution designed to guarantee equal legal rights to divorce, property, employment, etc. for all American citizens regardless of sex: the Equal Right Amendment. of Ann Friedlaender, see Chassonnery-Zaïgouche, Cherrier, and Singleton “Is gender equality political? The AEA’s reaction to the Equal Rights Amendment debate in the 1970s,” blog post, *The Undercover Historian*, January 11, 2019. The Equal Rights Amendment was never ratified. In 2023, democratic members of Congress created the Congressional Caucus for the Equal Rights Amendment.

the majority of new economics PhDs. “You can discriminate against women [in economics] with a sense of security,” the AEA President is quoted.

Economics as a discipline changed profoundly over the forty years bookended by the above events and headlines. Some have been marked as intellectual “revolutions” in the development of the field: the forward march of economic imperialism to history, sociology, law, and politics; the emergence of behavioral economics; new classical macroeconomics (and the neo-Keynesian counter-revolution); the rise and wide application of natural experiments; the turn towards field experimentation, especially in development economics, and the consequent rise of. Other changes have been institutional in nature, such as the ascendancy of MIT as a department, the National Bureau of Economic Research as clearinghouse for frontier work, and the “Top 5” journals. Demand for economic expertise further saw economists’ influence over public policy and in courtrooms expand. The discipline also became more diverse, including in terms of gender: around 14% of full professors in top departments of economics were women as of 2017 -- a nearly threefold increase from the numbers of 1972 (Lundberg and Stearns 2019: 7).

In terms of diversity, economics is still an outlier within the social sciences and within academic disciplines, for it exhibits a “small pipeline” on the top of a “leaky one”: fewer women enter and stay in the economics profession, ever fewer makes it to the top.⁵ One idea that the discussions repeatedly toyed with, without making its consequences clear, is that economists tend to view the very idea of discrimination with greater skepticism than do other scientists. The recent conversations also neglected another important fact: that the discipline was experiencing not its first, but its *second* gender reckoning. Understanding how economists reflected on and approached gender issues in the profession in past decades is not only important for understanding the history of the discipline and the roots of economics’ exceptionalism; it may also reveal crucial insights for the current conversation on how and why hostility to women in the economics profession persist.

⁵ See Ceci *et al.* (2014) for a comparative analysis and Lundberg (2020) for a synthesis of works on the status of women in the economics profession.

In this paper, we approach this question through a distinctly historical lens. Importantly, the narrative that we present is built from hitherto closed archival sources – principally, the papers contained in the AEA holdings in the Economists’ Papers Archive at Duke University’s Rubenstein Library. Contained in these holdings are the records of CSWEP, consisting of written correspondence – such as letters between CSWEP committee members, with AEA various officials, and with members of the profession – as well as newsletters, unpublished drafts and manuscripts, conference proceedings and meeting minutes, and other historical artifacts. In this paper, we reconstruct the historical context of the establishment of CSWEP in 1972 and focuses on discussions in economics surrounding the Committee’s activities that emerged in service of that mission. The main thesis of the paper is that economists viewed discrimination and the status of minorities within economics are an economic problem, one that begets economic analysis and cures. This history allows for unpacking the successes and failures of the first gender reckoning in economics, the enthusiasm it generated, and the resistance it encountered from an institutional point of view. It equally shed light on the intellectual premises and developments, reliance on data and values, that first unified, and later, divided the profession.

The first gender reckoning in economics arose from the combination of activism within the profession with pressure applied from without. We first show that then (as now), the birth of CSWEP was tied to larger social concerns: the feminist and civil rights movements, growing public awareness of issues surrounding discrimination and inequality, and the shifting legal context that drew many scientific societies and institutions toward such a reckoning. As Margaret Rossiter has argued, the shift in the status of women in science that began at the turn of the 1970s was the result “a small number (50-100) of marginal individuals finding one another, forming organizations and electing leaders, starting and running grass-root campaigns, and raising funds for projects” (Rossiter, 2012, xvii). Within the economics profession, a rising generation of female economists was organizing for change, joined by the few women from earlier generation. Their efforts crystallized in the creation of a caucus and the passing of a set of resolutions, presented to AEA President John K Galbraith and President-elect Kenneth Arrow at the December 1971 annual

meeting. Before the qualifier “not exclusively” was slipped in the final version, the first sentence of the resolutions had read “Resolved that the American Economic Association declares that economics is not a man’s field.” The resolutions further provided for the creation of an ad-hoc “Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession.” CSWEP pursued initiatives similarly undertaken by other disciplines, such as the creation of a roster of women economists and an annual comprehensive survey of the profession, and supported reforms aimed at increasing transparency of the job market for new Ph.Ds.

The narrative then turns to how economists’ particular approach to understanding social phenomena influenced views within the profession regarding gender disparities. Economists both *study* and *experience* discrimination, which led economists to view the status of women in the profession through the lens of economic analysis. In this way, the status of women in economics was tied to emerging debates within labor economics. Arguments regarding CSWEP’s strategies were frequently filtered by competing perspectives on the structure and efficiency of labor markets. While methodological commitments to modelling choices subject to constraints, equilibrium reasoning, and market clearing were ascendant, economists’ views women’s status in the economy displayed a pluralism of perspectives in the 1970s. For economists persuaded by the well-functioning of markets, interventionist policies such as affirmative action and quotas would prove harmful to efficiency. At the same time, other economists sought to develop economic frameworks explicitly accounting for the role of information, where suboptimal outcomes, such as under-investment in human capital, may arise in equilibrium. Yet other economists developed institutionalist and radical theories of how the structures of labor markets disadvantaged minorities. Thus, from the outset, CSWEP’s mission was strongly linked to professional interest in and understanding of the status of women in the *economy*, research on which the Committee sought to support and foster.

The final section reflects on changes during the 1980s that saw the normalization of gender topics in economics as well as a fragmentation among economists interested in furthering the status of women. Ten years removed from its inception, CSWEP data indicated considerable

successes in raising the representation of women in economics and women were elected to prestigious AEA positions, including Alice Rivlin to President in 1986. Progress was markedly slower in terms of tenure promotion at the top academic institutions, however. In addition, a rising generation of economists was approaching questions about labor markets and households in which the role of women and gender differences were explicitly in focus. Among this group, including many active among CSWEP's membership, were those proposing a more radical re-orientation of economics away from neoclassical frameworks. Synthesis and polarization served to eventually fracture the women's movement in economics, however. On the one hand, courtrooms in the 1980s became battlegrounds for empirically measuring discrimination, which proved highly contested. At the same time, the rise of the perspective insisting on the choice of women as the main explanation of differences served to fully alienate radical perspectives on gender from the mainstream of economics – and, increasingly, from CSWEP. The impetus for the creation of the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE) in 1992 was not only the institutional issues encountered by women economists, but also the intellectual resistance to ways of investigating gender questions in economics. The CSWEP that emerged from the 1980s was clearly identified with the professional mainstream of the profession. The coalescing of a distinctly feminist analytical perspective on women in the economy at the beginning of the 1990s thus served to splinter the movement within the economics profession that had birthed CSWEP.

I. The Wider Gender Reckoning and the Economics Profession

The Social, Political, and Legal Shift in 1970s America

The Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which had been focused on racial equality, was broadened to include sexual equality in a last-minute amendment. Its adoption brought forth a stream of sex discrimination lawsuits. Though the 1964 Act excluded employees of public bodies, legal battles at more than 260 universities resulted in the establishment of compliance rules and eventually, to the Congress approval of the 1972 Equal Employment Opportunity Act. The 1972 Act allowed individuals to sue private and public employers, via the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, for employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or

national origin. This created a permanent threat of federal investigation to which universities responded by what Rossiter call “token voluntary measures” (Rossiter 2012, Chapter 2). First, anti-nepotism rules were repealed so that female research associates who were often wives of professors could be promoted. Second, a multitude of young female assistant professors was hired in those universities which, like MIT, were receiving substantial federal funds for operations.⁶ The (mandatory) establishment of affirmative action goals in universities also implied that job openings must be publicly circulated, that searches be monitored, and that data be collected on the gender and race of applicants. Formal quotas, “numerical hiring goals,” and preferential hires of women were also discussed all over but never become mandatory.

Professional societies were part of the movement. Beginning in 1969, the English Language Society, the American Historical Association, and the American Sociological Association established committees on the status of women in their respective disciplines.⁷ In 1971, the American Anthropological Association declared that “any department that was not hiring a proportionate number of women five years hence would be censured,” and in 1979, effectively asked that five departments be barred from participating in its conference. In 1980s, the share of female assistant professors in anthropology departments reached 50% (Rossiter, 2012, 27-8). Affirmative action information requirements led most of these societies to develop rosters, i.e. listings of female academics, during the 1970s. Counting women, setting up rosters, and lists of names helped to develop women networks, to push for the inclusion of women in conferences programs, and to identify female candidate to fill positions. Such efforts were coordinated by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which held a Ford Foundation-funded conference in 1974 and set up a bureau to help professional societies develop their own rosters of women. Many scientific societies also fought for the ratification of the Equal Right Amendment. The Act aimed to guarantee equal legal rights on divorce, property, employment, etc. for all American citizens regardless of sex. The deadline for state ratification was set in 1979, and, led by

⁶ On the history of gender discrimination at MIT, see Zernike (2023).

⁷ At the same time, they also established committees on minorities and on political discrimination (it was the case at the AEA). The intersectional element of the AEA gender reckoning is an important aspect that should be elaborated in further papers.

the National Organization for Women, some twenty-five professional societies staged boycotts, for instance by de-scheduling conferences planned in states that had not ratified the amendment, as the AEA would failed to do.

The “strategy of last resort”, as Rossiter called it, was to take universities to courts. Even though most of these cases were lost, they were well publicized, resulting in “public relations nightmares” for universities (Rossiter 2012, 34). Those trials forced universities to release data or to set up internal grievances systems. Although the much publicized lawsuit against the University of Pittsburg’s Medical School failed, both case of *Louise Lamphere v. Brown University*, involving its anthropology department and the 1980 *Rajender* case in chemistry resulted in major reforms of the recruitment and tenure processes.⁸ One major reason why AEA economists were willing to consider the status of women in the economics profession, therefore, was that most of them, as members of U.S. economic departments, were – socially and legally – forced to do so.

How the Gender Reckoning Came to the AEA

Against this changing social context of the early 1970s, there was a sense within the economics profession that representation of women in the field was low – perhaps even lower than the 20% of Ph.D dissertations written by women listed in the *American Economic Review (AER)* in 1920 (Forget 2011). Indeed, the first dataset gathered by CSWEP in 1971 would show that women accounted for just 12% of graduate students in economics and that most economic department employed merely one or two women or – as at eighteen of the top departments – no women at all. Moreover, many women hired by economics departments, such as Leontief’s long-term collaborator Anne Carter at Harvard, were generally temporary research associates, rarely

⁸ Sharon Johnson sued the University of Pittsburg after being denied tenure in 1973. Though the judge found that the university used discriminatory practices, Johnson, faced with the threat of having to pay her employer’s legal expenses but offered a one-year extension of access to laboratory facilities, chose to not appeal the case. [The preceding sentence is inchoherent and needs redrafting.] *Louise Lamphere v. Brown University* was a landmark class action case in which the university was charged with sex discrimination in 1975. Brown signed an historic consent decree before the trial and set up an Affirmative Action Monitoring Committee to review hiring, tenure, and promotion processes. In the *Rajender* case, the University of Minnesota was forced to grant tenure to chemist Shyamala Rajender, pay \$100,000 in damage fees, and present plans for internal reforms. Overall, very few trials were successful, though the support network fostered by NOW Legal defense fund helped further advocacy campaigns.

promoted, and occasionally hired at lower salary than men.⁹ At the graduate level, women were de facto located in separate institutions (e.g. Radcliffe College for Harvard) and some did not have equal access to libraries.

This status quo was both fostered and reinforced by beliefs among members of the profession that women had a taste or aptitude for “women’s subjects,” like humanities, and favored teaching over research.¹⁰ Casual sexism often accompanied such beliefs: Paul Samuelson, whose first edition of *Economics* included derogatory comments on women as well as a thorough treatment of gender and race discrimination in the labor market, told a *New York Time* journalist in 1970 that students at Sweet Briar [a women’s college in Virginia] “won’t be able” to do the extra credit questions of the new edition, “but honor students at Princeton will” (Backhouse and Cherrier 2019, 12).

This was the background for growing awareness and a convergence of rising demands from women economists for greater equality, especially those of the younger generations. At the end of “an incredibly tedious” business meeting at the 1970 meeting of the AEA, Indiana University health economist Collette Moser submitted a resolution that was supported by Hofstra University radical economist June Zaccone, Jean Rosenberg (affiliation unknown), and Yale graduate student Peggy Howard. The resolution called for the organization of a session “on the status of women in the American economy, including ... the treatment of women in economic analysis, and on the status of treatment of women in the AEA” at the next meeting.¹¹ John K. Galbraith, who had just been elected President, assured them that he had just thought of organizing such session anyway. Over subsequent months, Mary Bowden, an economist in an insurance company, and Marianne Ferber, then a lecturer at the University of Illinois, independently wrote to Galbraith and to James Tobin to urge that a session on women economists be organized. Ferber pointed out that many

⁹ Leontief offered a temporary position to Carter and to her husband in 1949. “Carter was shocked to find that although she was the prime object of the hiring decision, he offered her husband a higher salary. When she asked him why, Leontief said that he thought she would like it.” (Akhbar 2011, §5) The couple divorced in 1950.

¹⁰ Seymour Martin Lipset to Arrow, 02/12/1975, Kenneth Arrow papers, Box 68, Folder “Women – Hiring practices”.

¹¹ In a reminiscence piece, first CSWEP chair Carolyn Shaw Bell (1998, 193) credited “the young women studying economics at Yale who didn’t accept the usual answers”, including Howard as well as Francine Blau, then a Harvard graduate student living in New Haven, and Heidi Hartmann, the latter being part of various student organization and the New Haven Women’s Liberation group.

other professional associations had already taken such a step and Bowden suggested setting up a survey of the position of women economists and their remuneration.¹² The organization and chair of the session would fall to University of Maryland economist Barbara Bergmann, who had just joined the “Committee W” of the American Association of University Professors and was working on a “salary evaluation kit” to identify discrimination in academia.¹³

But it was at the 1971 summer camp of the Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) that women economists’ discontent catalyzed. Jennifer Cohen (2019) documents how women economists applied feminist theory to the management of URPE itself, which largely relied on unpaid and uncredited intellectual and clerical work done by young female graduate students.¹⁴ They were often in romantic relationships with male URPE members and, during the summer camp, forty-five of the women agreed that they were assuming most of the administrative work within the organization and were not recognized as professionals. Their intellectual and reproductive labor was downplayed, Cohen explained: there was no childcare available, the women shared just three toilets for all of them, and the URPE steering committee and journal editorial boards contained no women. A remark from a male economist that some interpreted as implying that “women were only qualified to speak on women's issues” sparked a walk out at the business meeting. The women organized a caucus, making a series of demands that were accepted.¹⁵

¹² Mary V. Bowden to John Kenneth Galbraith, January 28, 1971. Galbraith to Bowden, February 16, 1971. Marianne Ferber to James Tobin, February 8, 1971, John Kenneth Galbraith papers, series 4, box 500. The AEA session on “What Economic Equality for Women Requires” was chaired by Barbara Bergmann, who Galbraith referred to as “the young lady” (she was 44 at the time) with contributions by Harriet Fellner (Columbia) and Charlotte Phelps (Temple) and Paul Samuelson, Glenn Cain, Nancy Gordon, Juanita Kreps, and Steven H. Sandell as discussants.

¹³ Created in 1923 but discontinued in 1928 “when the problems of women faculty seemed solved” (Rossiter, 2012 ref), Committee W was ‘reactivated’ by sociologist Alice Rossi in 1970, and first campaigned against anti-nepotism rules. At the time, Bergmann was embroiled in a very long discrimination case concerning her own tenure and salary. She soon became member of, and advised several affirmative action bodies, including the Women Equity’s Action League. On Bergmann’s life and work more generally, see Small (2022).

¹⁴ These included Patricia Quick (PhD Harvard 1974), Laurie Nisonoff (Mphil Yale, 1972), Heidi Hartmann (PhD Yale, 1974), Francine Blau (PhD Harvard, 1975), Lourdes Benarìa (PhD Columbia, 1975), most of who became active CSWEP participants.

¹⁵ “The Male Problem at URPE” by Grace Horowitz, Lourdes Surkin (Benarìa), Heidi Cochran (Hartmann), Paddy Quick, Laurie Nisonoff, and Peggy Howard. URPE Newsletter, 3(3), October 1971. Nisonoff was an active member of the temporary committee in charge of selecting the members of the first CSWEP board in the first months of 1972.

During the December 1971 AEA meeting, it was a caucus, including Moser and Bergmann, that joined these radical women: the group elected Wellesley's Carolyn Shaw Bell (Ph.D. LSE, 1949) as chair. This caucus, officially organized within the AEA, entrusted her with the task of presenting a set of resolutions to Galbraith as well as to President-Elect Kenneth Arrow at the Business Meeting the next day. A proposed resolution began, "Resolved that the American Economic Association declares that economics is not a man's field." It was amended to read "not exclusively man's field" before it was approved in a vote. In an effort to "adopt a positive program to eliminate sex discrimination among economists," the resolutions established an *ad-hoc* "Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession" whose first task would be to gather data and produce a report on the status of women in the profession. The resolutions also commanded that no discrimination in recruitment, salary or promotion be allowed by university departments, that a roster of women economists be established, that women be nominated for editorial boards at economics journals, and that the AEA set up child-care arrangements during annual conferences (AEA minutes, *AER* 1972).

Crucially, many of the inaugural board members belonged to the larger networks described above, so they knew which measures to implement, how to advocate for them, and how to develop a network of female economists within the AEA. Chairwoman Bell exhibited strong leadership, organizational acumen, and "cool manners and speech."¹⁶ She initiated the "FEM," a network of dozens of Wellesley graduate students, whom she had persuaded to pursue a graduate education, mentored, and helped to find positions in academia, business, and government (Ladd 2014; Fraumeni 2005). Martha Blaxall (PhD 1971, Tuft) was elected secretary of the CSWEP. Working at the Office of Management and Budget, she was instrumental in forming a women's group there and establishing liaison with similar groups, including the National Organization for Women. Other board members included Francine Blau, one of the "New Haven Six" (see ft.6). Phyllis Wallace, one of the first African American woman to get a PhD in economics from Yale in

¹⁶ Moser to Temporary committee, CSWEP Papers, box 98, file 13. In 1973, Bell became a member of the US Labor Department Committee on Women.

1948, was, at that time, working for a major think tank on the famous AT&T discrimination case (1973-1976). As the chief expert, she tapped Bergmann, Orley Ashenfelter and Ronald Oaxaca, among others, as expert witnesses (Wallace 1976). The settlement benefitted 15,000 women and minority employees. A former director of technical studies at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, she had worked for the CIA and was very well-connected in Washington D.C. Wallace was one of the first African American women to get tenure at MIT in 1975. Another member of the early CSWEP, famed theorist Kenneth Boulding could draw on the experience of his wife Elise, who chaired the women's committee of the American Sociological Association, whose documents served as a blueprint for CSWEP's early actions.

The first board was set up to represent all regions and types of public and private employment. It thus also included Barbara Reagan (PhD Harvard, 1952), who was based at the Southern Methodist University, on the executive committee of Women for Change, and handling cases of discrimination in courts, and Myra Strober (PhD MIT, 1969), who had recently moved to Stanford after an unsuccessful fight to get tenure at Berkeley. In 1974, she would establish the Stanford's Center for Research on Women, one of the first research centers in women studies, thanks to another Ford Foundation grant. Board member Collette Moser (PhD, U of Wisconsin) was then based at Michigan State University, as was other board member Walter Adams (PhD 1947, Yale), who had just been appointed president of the American Association of University Professors. Not a board member but nevertheless the brain and energy behind the creation and maintenance of the roster was Betsy Munzer, who did much of the underlying work for several committees in the 1970s. She too was supported and praised by Ford Foundation's program director, economist Mariam Chamberlain (PhD Harvard 1950). Chamberlain was instrumental in getting the Ford Foundation to grant around \$5 million in seed money to dozens of studies and projects on the status of women in the US (Rossiter 1998, 251). In 1972, the Ford Foundation funded the establishment of the Center for Women Policy Studies at Wellesley and offered two grants to cover CSWEP's expenses between 1972 and 1974.¹⁷

¹⁷ Chamberlain offered the organizations she worked with not only financial support, but also advice, training, networking, etc. In 1978, she became a CSWEP board member.

The CSWEP board included the AEA president *ex officio*. That Galbraith and Arrow turned out to be the first two presidents, then in charge of outgoing correspondence and the programs of AEA annual conference, contributed to the early success of the endeavor. Both supported the establishment of the committee and the development of a survey, and though they did not always know how to interact with other board members, they spent considerable energy fighting the opposition these initiatives encountered within the AEA.¹⁸ In 1974, 2 years after its creation, CSWEP was turned into a standing committee “in recognition of the fact the problems addressed by CSWEP require long-run efforts” (1975 CSWEP annual report).

Debating Strategies for Action

An upshot of the AEA’s delayed response to the legal and social pressures that stirred other scientific societies to action was that CSWEP was able to model its initiatives on those already undertaken by other disciplines. Rossiter (2012) remarks that linked by a network of newsletters, “a new medium of the 1970s” (p.xviii), women’s groups created a “cascade of useful written products: rosters, inventories, bibliographies, reports, and lists of women” (p.14), and this is exactly what CSWEP did.

¹⁸ Howard’s account of the 1970 AEA business meeting reads “I began a sentence to the effect that his program ignored two of the three issues; Galbraith cut me off in mid-sentence, to assure us that he was entirely on outside [“our side”??], that his program was everything we wanted only better. He asked us to write him in the next two or three days with suggestions of speakers and rushed off without waiting to hear our replies.” Howard recalled the encounter with Galbraith in the URPE’s communication titled “Women demand AEA Session” (John Kenneth Galbraith papers, series 4, box 500). The text was enclosed to a letter from Rendigs Felt to Galbraith with the mention that “the enclosed article from the newsletter of the Union for Radical Political Economics might amuse you” (Letter from Felt to Galbraith, March 19, 1971). Several members of the caucus were worried that the CSWEP would become his “vest pocket enterprise.” Arrow was later accused by Anne Carter of making disparaging remarks on her work during seminars, *but he was willing to make the best use of any list of names [unclear]*. Against most of the Harvard department of economics, in particular Abba Lerner, Arrow supported hiring “numerical targets”: “I cannot help thinking that this [progress being made toward ending discrimination against women] is in fact a result of organized affirmative action efforts, including the setting of numerical goals ... I believe that some kind of interference with the ordinary processes is justified as a transitional measure to overcome the discrimination,” he wrote (Arrow to Lerner, March 17, 1975, Kenneth Arrow Papers, box 68, folder “Women - Hiring practices”).

CSWEP's first task was seeking information, both on the supply and the demand for women economists. It thus mailed questionnaires to departments of economics across 2,000 US colleges and universities, the results of which were published in the May 1973 issue of the AER. The cover and follow-up letters were signed by Galbraith and later Arrow as well as Bell and made it clear that compliance with AEA guidelines required that the survey be answered. In the first six months, still, only 22% of questionnaires were returned, mostly from small universities. In addition, some departments openly took issue with being asked to disclose information. University of Rochester chair, Richard Rossett, replied to one of Bell's reminders that "[his] failure to respond to [her] letter was not an oversight." Rather, it had been decided in a faculty meeting not to respond. In later exchanges, Rossett explained that "it is not true, that the low representation of women in the economics profession ought to be redressed" and asserted that CSWEP was "engaged in harassment rather than in the mere gathering of information." In implementing this first initiative, the CSWEP was perceived as "political", a recurrent accusation. How to balance science with activism would be at the center of the recurrent debates on and within CSWEP.¹⁹

To facilitate information requests from many department chairs and recruiting committees, CSWEP also immediately began to set up a roster. One of the first lists of women economists by field was circulated by Bell to help Arrow raise the number of female chairpersons, speakers, and discussants for the 1972 AEA conference that he had to organize as AEA president elect. The 1971 meeting in New Orleans, which was organized by Galbraith, had included only nine women across the more than 30 sessions sponsored or co-sponsored by the AEA. As the modal session typically included a chair and three presenters and discussants each, women comprised roughly 5% of the active participants in the conference. Arrow explained to Bell that he simply did not know which qualified women to contact and, in a matter of days, Bell provided him with 300

¹⁹ Rumors circulated that some Michigan (male) economists had proposed boycotting Rochester job market candidates in response, to which Rochester responded by publicly urging to repeal the whole resolution on the status of women. Adams to Arrow, 02/20/1973; Arrow to Adams, 02/14/1973; Rossett to Bell, 01/26/1973, CSWEP Papers, box 987, file 4.

names, 150 of whom expressed interest in presenting a paper.²⁰ By 1975, declared by the United Nations “International Women’s Year,” the roster had expanded to include 1,800 women, of which 12% were in government and 8% in business (CSWEP 1975).²¹ In running what soon became an annual survey until the late 1980s and expanding their roster, CSWEP economists hoped to “widen the market for all economists” (CSWEP 1973) and by 1975 they rejoiced that the roster and the survey had “contributed to improve the operation of the market for economists, has increased the effective supply of women economists” (CSWEP 1975).

An important target for reform was the job market for economists. In response to the early brainstorm launched by the CSWEP, several respondents emphasized the existence of an “old boy’s network.” Martha Blaxall, for instance, wrote that

we could also demand that all job openings be “posted” in some way and circulated to prospective candidates. The hiring requirements should be clearly stated in objective terminology. It seems to me that if this kind of approach is followed, it becomes harder to fall back on the “old boy” network, or at least to fill jobs without any other candidates applying. It also becomes harder to claim that “unqualified” women did not apply if you have objective standards.²²

The AEA resolutions voted in 1971 in fact required appointing “a committee to recommend to the next annual meeting a code of procedures including among other reforms an open listing of all employment opportunities” (AEA 1971, 474). Galbraith first contemplated making CSWEP a joint committee to another “hiring committee” before settling on a distinct one with Bell as a member. He initially asked Wisconsin economics chairman Lee Hansen to chair this second committee on

²⁰ Bell wrote multiple letters to Arrow about the low representation of women on the program in 1971 (CSWEP papers, box 987, file 1). She later sent a substantial list of names (Bell to Arrow, 07/27/1972, CSWEP papers, box 989, file 6). See also Bell (1998, 193).

²¹ All material taken from the annual CSWEP reports are identified as (CSWEP, year of activity, page in version published in the *AER* the following year). All reports are available here: <https://www.aeaweb.org/about-aea/committees/cswep/survey/annual-reports>

²² Blaxall to Committee, 1972, CSWEP Papers, box 989, file 1.

hiring practices, but labor economist Ray Marshall was finally appointed.²³ Because Marshall had a distinct agenda – he wanted to pursue a longitudinal study of the labor market for economists — and framing of the issue — he attributed the need to rethink hiring practices not to possible sex discrimination but to an unfavorable academic job market – tensions soon erupted with CSWEP. In the interim, Reagan had written guidelines on employment practices and procedures and, as mentioned above, launched her own survey, just as the newly founded Minority committee produced its own survey too. CSWEP members expressed discontent at the lack of coordination between committees and the lack of consideration for its guidelines in the actions launched by the committee on hiring practices. Of its own accord, CSWEP began to circulate job openings in its newsletter.

Marshall’s final report and series of recommendations, coauthored with Kathleen Brook, barely mentioned the gender reckoning that had sparked AEA’s efforts to revise hiring practices. It explained that it was a response to the “apparent growing scarcity of academic jobs for economists during the early 1970s.” It surveyed the existing organization of the “market for economists.” The United States Employment Service operated job placement facilities at the AEA annual meeting, but it was far from comprehensive. Other channels were the publication of submitted job vacancies by the AEA, the existence of a free clearinghouse called the “National Registry for Economists” and of commercial placement agencies, the widespread use of blind letters, the importance of informal networks – job openings among the 43 (soon 65) top PhD-granting departments assembled in the Chairmen’s Group were gathered and circulated among department chairs. They noted that many other professional societies, from the American Mathematical Society to the American Political Science Association and the American Psychological Association, curated quarterly to monthly job listings, often as a way to comply with the new affirmative action guidelines. They recommended that AEA members “have a professional obligation to list their openings with the association,” a listing to be published six times a year. The annual meeting was to be preceded by one day for hiring transactions. The only reference to

²³ “I am very anxious to have someone who combines a good sense of indignation with a good sense of the realities of a department chairman,” Galbraith wrote Hansen (Galbraith to Hansen, 05/19/1972, CSWEP Papers, box 936, folder “Hiring practices”).

CSWEP's guidelines was the statement that employers do not "ask questions of women not asked of men" (509). The implementation of such information system largely relied on Betsy Munze's efforts to coordinate the information needs of various committees into the "Universal Questionnaire" sent to every department.²⁴

Other CSWEP initiatives included mailing department and board chairs about the lack of women faculty, writing to challenge sexism in textbooks or providing childcare in conference.²⁵ Some initiatives adopted by a large number of associations triggered heated debates within the AEA, such as the proposal – introduced twice by then CSWEP chair Ann Friedlaender – to boycott Atlanta (located in a state which had not ratified the ERA) as a site for the 1979 AEA conference. The American Psychological Association and the American Political Science Association, among others, had already done so. Friedlaender insisted that "support of the passage of the ERA is not a fundamentally political action," AEA president Tjalling Koopmans recognized that "meeting in Atlanta might discourage attendance by younger women," and many other economists wrote to support the motion. Yet, other AEA board members feared that the boycott was "political" and reflected the kind of "partisan attitude" banned by the association's charter. Twice, the motion was voted down. In the end, the CSWEP coordinated a press ad signed by more than 1300 AEA participants pressing Georgians to ratify the ERA. Whether gender equality initiatives were political or not long divided the AEA.

²⁴ Her work went uncredited until complaints from Bell and a letter in which Ford's Chamberlain told AEA president Walter Heller how "impressed" she was with Munze's contribution convinced Marshall to pen an acknowledgment letter (CSWEP papers, box 987, file 5).

²⁵ In one instance in 1973, Chamberlain, Peggy Musgrave and others wrote to Roger Miller to complain that his otherwise "progressive" textbook included "locker room" discourse: one case study was *Playboy* magazine and the depreciation of its photo equipment; another was the supply and demand of prostitutes in Italy. One usual task that CSWEP refused to deal with was setting up child-care. Bell answered advice request by AEA administrators by noting that "true, women bear children. Men also have something to do with it. The status of men in the economics profession surely is as relevant to provisions for childcare as the status of women," so that AEA, not CSWEP, should be in charge (CSWEP papers, box 998, file 4, for Miller; box 989, file 3 for childcare). But after more than a decade of inaction from the AEA, Shelly Lundberg recalled, Shulamit Kahn began a cooperative childcare sharing service, coordinated through the CSWEP newsletter. The system evolved into the professional service that the AEA now administers.

Overall, faced with social and legal pressures to prove that enough attention was given to the status of women in academia, the AEA largely responded like other societies: it set up a committee and a roster, surveyed the status of its women members, and supported efforts to reform hiring practices. At the same time, as the discussions detailed above suggest, economics exhibited a notable contrast from other fields in its approach to the gender reckoning: Economists explicitly approached these issues with the analytical framework and tools of the economics discipline. As Brook and Marshall (1974, 488) explained in the opening paragraph of the report of the Committee on Hiring Practices, the problems to be solved represented “imperfections in the labor market for economists.” But economists were not merely participants and actors in such markets, they studied them. In fact, the AEA had recognized this trait by adding to CSWEP’s missions “an explicit charge... to further the theoretical and applied research related to the status of women in general This research dimension is one that CSWEP feels is vital for professional associations to undertake to help build a solid foundation for policy prescriptions” (CSWEP 1976, 510).

II. Being the Subject and the Observer

Women’s economic lives as a Worthy Object of Study

At the turn of the 1970s, the status of women was not just becoming a relevant social issue, it was (re)emerging as a relevant *economic* topic. A telling illustration of this trend was the inclusion of a chapter on “The Economic Role of Women” in the 1973 report to the President prepared by the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA). During the associated hearings organized by the Joint Economic Committee, CEA member Marina Whitman emphasized the “novelty” of the questions and explained that “the economics profession has been slow in developing expertise on the special problems of women” (JEC 1973, 33). The topic was quickly becoming fashionable in economics. A striking feature of conferences and sessions on women in the economy organized from the mid-1970s onward was how many CSWEP-related economists participated. Moreover, the status of women within the profession was frequently taken as a case study in the debates surrounding discrimination and occupational segregation in the economy as a whole.

Most of CSWEP's inaugural board members were applied microeconomists by training. Some were labor economists already specialized in "women's" topics. From writing on consumer choice in the 1950s, Bell eventually came to focus on women, marriage, and the minimum wage. In 1974, she published a book that was "an attempt to explain... how economics deals with women". Blau graduated from Harvard in 1975 as a labor economist specializing in "'Women's' Place' in the Labor Market," to go with the title of her 1972 *AER* paper. Strober had been working on topics related to childcare and wage discrimination against women and, by the mid-1970s, she was applying her framework to women economists' career aspirations, education, and training (Strober 1975).

Others were turning their attention to labor topics possibly under the influence of CSWEP-related debates. Though she had campaigned against discriminatory practices since her college years, Bergmann was initially specialized in regional science, in particular highway development. It was only in the 1970s that she turned to microsimulation and labor issues. Trained as an agricultural economist, Reagan was likewise developing an interest in sex discrimination in universities and her paper on the supply curve for women economists would be published in the *AER (Papers and Proceedings)* in 1975. With board member Blaxall, she organized a conference on occupational segregation, of which a special issue turned into a book, *Women and the Workplace: The Implications of Occupational Segregation* (1976) came out. Part of this research was directly sponsored by CSWEP.

The work on the women in the economy and in economics built on theoretical and empirical tools that were evolving rapidly. Several approaches coexisted. In 1971, Becker's *The Economics of Discrimination* had just been republished with an enthusiasm that contrasted with the resistance the book had encountered fifteen years earlier.²⁶ The gist of Becker's work was to model some employers as rational maximizers with a taste for discrimination. That is, they used

²⁶ Milton Friedman had to put considerable pressure on Chicago University Press for them to publish his former student's Ph.D. dissertation in 1957 (Fleury 2012).

“non-monetary considerations in deciding whether to hire, work with, or buy from an individual or group” (Becker 1971, 11). Those employers, he contended, were disadvantaged, as their taste acted as a tariff in a trade model. Discrimination was thus an inefficient behavior that would be pushed out of competitive markets in equilibrium.²⁷ The notion of an efficient labor market where maximizing employers hire rational employees who invest in human capital and tradeoff work and leisure did not convince everyone, however. Many economists were concerned with modeling the consequences of imperfect information on labor supply and demand, including Arrow. In a paper given at Princeton the same year he was AEA President, Arrow suggested a theory of statistical discrimination.²⁸ The underlying idea was that employers use gender as a proxy for unobservable characteristics: beliefs on average characteristics of groups then translate into discrimination against individual members. At the same time, Arrow was refining his screening theory, in which preferences were endogenous to dynamic interactions that may create self-selection, human capital underinvestment, segregation, and self-fulfilling prophecies. In 1971 too, Bergmann had formalized the crowding hypothesis in relation to racial discrimination; a framework she would later apply to gender occupational segregation. Her model was considered a contribution to the neoclassical analysis of the labor market (Bergmann 1971; Small 2022). Many institutional, Marxist and radical theorists altogether rejected the competitive theory of the labor market and developed labor-market segmentation and dual markets theories.

In the 1970s, none of these approaches were settled, and the neoclassical perspective was not dominant: labor economists could borrow ideas from Becker, Arrow, Bergmann, and other contributors and combine them with a variety of institutional perspectives and empirical evidence on the wage gap and on the composition, income, and occupation of American households. One consequence was that they systematically applied their professional toolbox to discuss the

²⁷ Becker’s models also include stable discrimination by co-workers and consumers.

²⁸ Arrow’s work on discrimination stems from a RAND Corporation project later presented at the Princeton Conference, whose proceedings were published in 1973 (Ashenfelter and Rees 1973). According to Arrow (1976, 235), the term statistical discrimination was coined by Edmund Phelps, who published separately his “Statistical Theory of Racism and Sexism” in the *AER* in 1972. The idea of statistical discrimination was a well-known argument in the British debates on women’s wages from the interwar period, but Phelps was the first to offer a formalized theory. On the history of the economics of discrimination, see Chassonnery-Zaïgouche (2024).

economic relevance of the initiatives the CSWEP purported to import from other professional societies. The low status of women in economics was not merely a drama personally experienced. It was also an excellent case study – a battleground for labor economists – or Rorschach test to reveal views of how efficiently labor markets worked.

Applying Theories of Discrimination

If the CSWEP resolutions voted by the AEA and associated initiatives were not unique to economics, they were nonetheless systematically discussed in economic terms from the outset. CSWEP reports, for one, routinely framed their organizational efforts as attempts to study and fix the “supply and demand for women economists.” The 1973 inaugural report opened, not with survey results, but with a lengthy introduction drafted by Boulding. Its purpose, the first heading showed, was to frame, “Role Prejudice as an Economic Problem.” “It is well recognized among economists that arbitrary discrimination in the labor market creates a general economic loss,” the first sentence read. Boulding then proposed that discrimination should be considered as part of a larger process of “role learning and role acceptance,” and went on to rationalize CSWEP’s proposals to solve the “betterment production function” issue: “what are the inputs which produce this output, and particularly, what are those inputs that can be most easily expanded and that have the highest marginal productivity? ... Four broad classes of inputs may be named: information, persuasion, rewards and punishments,” he wrote (CSWEP 1973, 1049). Likewise, Brook and Marshall’s report on hiring practices were applied economics: it detailed statistics about jobs opening and hires, but also segmented the job market for economists into markets for good and for average academic economists and the “nonacademic submarket,” discussed “equilibrating adjustments” in quantities – Harvard and Yale had announced 25% cuts to incoming graduate classes – and wages, as well as mobility between academic, government and industry US and foreign markets.²⁹

²⁹ In the early 1970s, the “PhD glut” that succeeded the massive enrollment of the 1960s was a major cause of economic anxiety within academia. See “Suddenly Ph.D.’s Are ‘A Glut on The Market’”, *New York Times*, Jan. 4, 1970 and Rossiter (2012, 299, note 1).

But discussions surrounding the inaugural CSWEP report also provided opportunities for AEA economists to go beyond Econ 101 principles and see where the fault lines lay. In organizing the December 1973 AEA session where the report was to be discussed, Bell explicitly sought the confrontation of different perspectives – and received confrontation as soon as she asked Milton Friedman to participate that August. Although Friedman declined (he was not attending the meeting), he outlined his disagreement with the report in a lengthy reply. Friedman took particular exception to the statement that “every economics department shall actively encourage qualified women graduate students without regard to age, marital or family status.” “I have no doubt that there has been discrimination against women,” he wrote, but “I never believed in reverse discrimination whether for women or for Jews or for blacks... It is relevant to take into account the age of men or women, the marital or family status of men or women, and the sex of potential applicants insofar as that affects the likely yield from the investment in their training,” he explained. Prohibiting the use of criteria such as gender and race in investment decisions was inefficient if they contributed to correctly predicting returns, Friedman reflected, actively endorsing a type of statistical discrimination.³⁰ He reprised the argument in a follow up letter:

[T]here is no alternative to letting the market decide – with market defined in the very broadest sense to include the market in ideas, in tastes, in values, in beliefs as well as the market in strict physical goods – other than to let the preferences or values or tastes or beliefs of some people dominate the preferences or values or tastes or beliefs of other people... If we cannot in all conscience rely on the dictates of economic efficiency, as I have broadened the definition of it, to allocate human beings, what can we rely on?³¹

³⁰ Even if groups differ in average characteristics, making gender or race a proxy for average differences in productivity, is individual discrimination as one cannot identify where the individual affiliated to the group is situated in the distribution of these characteristics within a group. This statement is a rare occurrence of an explicit endorsement of criteria such as gender to decide to invest. On Friedman’s thoughts on minorities, and especially discrimination against Jews, see Vallois and Chassonnery-Zaïgouche (2021).

³¹ Friedman to Bell, August 1, 1973. Milton Friedman Papers, box 20, folder 20.

In her rejoinder, Bell, like Friedman, drew on general economic principles to defend the CSWEP report, but applied a contrasting reasoning. While Bell agreed that “free market lessens the opportunities for discrimination inasmuch as competition gives paramount recognition to economic efficiency,” she contended that this reasoning only applied to goods, not to human beings. One characteristic of the latter, she emphasized, was how their preferences were shaped by social norms, leading them to be “brainwashed”: “beginning in the cradle. children... learn over and over again that what is appropriate and relevant for boys is not necessarily appropriate and relevant for girls.” These societal norms biased market forces, in that they influenced both supply and the demand of labor, she explained. “Until we have a society where little girls are not only able to become dentists and surveyors and readily as little boys but are expected to become dentists and surveyors as readily as little boys we cannot in all conscience rely on the dictates of economic efficiency to allocate human beings,” she concluded. Bell also called attention to the lack of information on students’ true ability to “contribute most to the field.” She mixed reasoning borrowed from emerging imperfect information models with what she drew from the empirical economic and sociological literature on earning differentials and social norms.³² In addition, her argument that narrowly modeling women’s choice as between work and leisure in fact neglected unpaid household work or treated them as caregivers who don’t exercise any independent choice. Finally, she applied her framework to how economists themselves made academic decisions: there was nothing “in [Friedman’s] statement, in the discipline per se or in the existence of scarce resources, to identify those recipients who will, in fact, contribute most to the field.” Instead, she argued, the recipients of investment were selected by those “controlling the awards who learned certain cultural patterns, including beliefs about sex roles.”³³

In the end, comments on the CSWEP inaugural report were offered by University of Chicago’s George Stigler, by Elizabeth Clayton, a Soviet economy and comparative systems specialist (who was the first woman to be hired, granted tenured, and appointed chair of the

³² She would soon summarize these insights in an article published in *Newsweek* in 1977: “Let’s Get Rid of the Family,” in which she challenged the notion that the typical US family was built around a breadwinning father and a stay-at-home mother.

³³ Bell to Friedman, September 13, and October 25, 1973. Milton Friedman Papers, box 20, folder 20.

department of economics at the University of Missouri), and by radical labor economist David Gordon, then at the New School. The participants drew upon analytical frameworks to assess the analysis and solutions offered by the CSWEP. While all three acknowledged the existence of some discrimination against women economists, Stigler opposed any “active” policy by the AEA to promote women. “Justice, if I may be so bold, is not a goal of a scientific society,” he contended. The AEA’s goal was scientific advancement, and that could only be gained through “open competition,” not through “dictating” best employment practices to universities. Like Friedman, Stigler interpreted diminishing discrimination against Jewish academics as a sign that open competition, not affirmative action, was the solution.³⁴

On the other hand, Elizabeth Clayton found that CSWEP had not gone far enough, viz. recommending “preferential hiring” for “equally qualified” women. “Employers complain that women are less able academically, less recommended, less motivated. Women counter that they are discriminated against academically, less well recommended for reasons of sex bias, and less motivated because of paucity of opportunities... these are empirical questions,” she explained, adding that the “motivation” argument had a “cultural ring.” She also argued that, faced with preferential hiring, men would adapt their expectations and consider re-training.

Gordon, for his part, prepared a long statement that emphasized the inadequacy of the framework CSWEP members operated in, aka “orthodox economics.” “Talk[s] about imperfections and the advantages of providing a more efficient information system” was, he explained, an illustration of this orthodoxy. A year afterwards, during a discussion of the “numerical targets” at Harvard, Arrow indeed defended the measure in informational terms “Numerical goals, when not interpreted as strict quotas, are an information economical device. They serve to measure progress toward ending discrimination, both to the outside world, and what I regard as even more important, to the decision makers themselves,” Arrow wrote.³⁵

³⁴ “Remarks on the CSWEP ‘tract’” by George Stigler. “In defense of preferential hiring” by Elizabeth Clayton. “Discussion of the report of the CSWEP” by David M. Gordon. CSWEP Papers, Box 995, File 3.

³⁵ Arrow defended numerical targets as “a transitional measure to over...discrimination,” not a permanent one. Arrow to Lerner, 03/17/1975, Kenneth Arrow Papers, box 68, folder “Women – Hiring practices”.

To Gordon, modeling information asymmetries was not a realistic way to confront the conflicts and power relations that characterized discrimination against women: “I am a political economist and I believe that it is impossible to separate political from economic questions. We shall not easily find a celestial harmony of interests. The interests of many women, who have been kept out of the profession, are in conflict with the interests of many men, who have power in the profession,” he contended, adding that the committee had failed to bring power into its analysis or Sam Bowles and Herbert Gintis’s work on the “meritocratic myth.” He then proceeded to lay out an alternative framework considering the “structures of jobs,” some resulting from a mix of technological change, power, unions, etc. He applied his dual labor market theory to the market for economists: “there are a small number of positions which are regulated by the principles of the structured, internal academic labor market. Apprenticeships lead directly to tenured positions with the ultimate kind of job security. But there are many other positions which are rooted in what we would call secondary labor market mechanisms. And those numbers of positions are growing, I think, as the universities face their own fiscal crises,” he wrote. Drawing on the CSWEP survey, he noted that women comprised only 2% of professors but 68% of special lecturers.

Finally, Gordon drew attention to the normative dimension of the measures discussed by CSWEP. In his exchange with Bell, Friedman had emphasized that market solution was to be preferred to preferential hiring not just because of efficiency, but also because the alternative would reflect a sort of tyranny of the majority. The 1975 Harvard discussions around numerical targets between Arrow, Abba Lerner, and sociologists Martin Lipset and Rose Laub Coser likewise relied on fairness arguments: “From the point of view of historic justice, such reverse discrimination is justified. But to carry it out is clearly unfair to specific individuals, and will result in changing the definition of excellence of competency used in academe,” Lipset wrote, closely echoing Lerner’s opposition. Gordon faulted the report for eschewing explicit discussion of quotas and referred to two recent articles by philosophers Thomas Nagel and Judith Jarvis Thomson in

which they questioned the meritocratic ideal.³⁶ The session's primary objective and result was to produce a "lively debate" while fostering interest for empirical analyses.

A Women Economists' Approach to Labor Issues?

CSWEP had discussed sponsoring research as one of its activities at its very first meeting, held in May of 1972 in Cambridge, MA. There, Kenneth Boulding had suggested, for example, that the Committee foster work on the "grants economy in which most American housewives operate, in contrast to the economics of the exchange economy." Galbraith similarly suggested a study on the implications of increasing labor market participation by women for the economy. Other potential topics discussed were more introspective to the profession: Strober suggested a survey of recent female PhDs in economics to understand "their job search procedures, their criteria for job selection, and their range of job offers." One output of such a survey might be a test of "Galbraith's hypothesis" that nearly half of women graduate students in economics "set marriage as their goal," thus subordinating their career to "homemaking obligations." As a result, women who enter graduate studies in economics "disappear into the woodwork." On this conjecture, Reagan disagreed, with Blau also relating it was contradicted by the women graduate students she knew.³⁷

A visible product of this interest in developing research on women in the economy and in the profession, CSWEP organized a research conference on occupational segregation with funding from the Carnegie Foundation. Co-organized by the Center for Research on Women in Higher Education and the Professions, the conference was held at Wellesley in 1975 under the leadership of Blaxall and Reagan. In addition to celebrating the International Women's Year, the conference was policy-orientated and the CSWEP board made it clear in its annual report that the purpose was to develop research to understand the consequence of female economists specializing in

³⁶ Nagel's "Equal Treatment and Compensatory Discrimination" and Jarvis Thomson's "Preferential Hiring" were both published in the 1974 summer issue of *Philosophy & Public Affairs*. While Nagel was not advocating for quotas, he argued that "although preferential policies are not required by justice, they are not seriously unjust either – because the system from which they depart is already unjust for reasons having nothing to do with racial or sexual discrimination" (Nagel 1973, 348). Jarvis Thomson's article was a defense of preferential hiring when candidates are equally qualified.

³⁷ Report of the first meeting of the CSWEP May 29, 1972. CSWEP papers, box 987, file 1.

some fields rather than others: “clearly women’s economic status in macro is of critical importance to women economists, as well as to the nation. An improvement in women’s economic status cannot be realized without a diminution of occupational segregation and a better understanding of the forces behind it. Even within our profession of economics some fields of specialization are deemed more appropriate for men and others for women. Sexism in occupational segregation is pervasive down to micro levels,” the report read (CSWEP 1976, 511).

The conference, whose contributions illustrate a pluralistic and interdisciplinary focus, brought together most of the protagonists of CSWEP’s formation. In their introduction, Blaxall and Reagan (1976, 1-2) challenged the idea that “women... are occupationally segregated by sex because... [of] lower investment in human capital”. “Such explanations, focusing on real or imagined deficiencies of women, often also assume competitive models of labor markets,” they remarked. They also referred to monopsony allowing “employers to implement their distaste for hiring women” and mentioned ongoing work on estimating the difference in pay’s residual. In their survey paper, Blau and Jusenius (1976) distinguished between three types of “neoclassical approaches” to occupational segregation: the overcrowding approach of Bergmann, the human capital approach represented by Mincer and Polachek, and monopsony theories and proceeded to outline the benefits and limitations of all these models. Isabel Sawhill, who had joined the CSWEP board in 1975, surveyed data on the rise of women-headed households and transfer policies and relied on microsimulation and experiments to study how participation in the labor market might lift women out of poverty. Another paper by Marianne Ferber and Helen M. Lowry interpreted differential unemployment rates as the result of making women a “new reserve army.” Arrow commented that rational adaptation by women also lead to rational adaptation by firms, arguing that beyond statistical discrimination, there existed other types of “plain” discrimination which could not be explained by economists. In his comments, David Gordon discussed Marxist approaches in line with the contribution of Ferber and Lowry and Heidi Hartmann, pointing to his own work on labor-market segmentation (Edwards, Reich, & Gordon 1975). Strober offered

conclusions and she and Reagan wrote an appendix on sex differences in economists' fields of specialization.³⁸

The diversity of papers highlights that, despite coming from various backgrounds, the economists associated with CSWEP at its outset shared a common vision of science as empirical, drawing on interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks as well as quantitative and qualitative evidence. The interdisciplinarity is evidenced by the participation of sociologist Elise Boulding and psychologist Judith Long Laws in the conference as well as in the choice of publication venue. The papers were published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, one of the first women studies journal established a year before. Bergmann, Sawhill and Strober all joined its advisory board, and the first issue featured review essays on “new scholarship” on women in various sciences, including economics.³⁹

CSWEP economists were also united in their belief that grounding their demands on the findings of an annual survey was a mark of objectivity, as they reminded skeptical AEA officials. Upon publication of CSWEP's inaugural report, for instance, *AER* managing editor Georges Borts complained that the first section of the report was “politically inflammatory.” He contended that explaining the low status of women in economics by discrimination “reveals a methodological bias against scientific explanation... alternative explanations are not allowed, and no statistical test could in principle be designed to determine the empirical limitations of the original statement,” he wrote. Borts thus asked that this section be deleted from the published version. Bell categorically refused. She pointed out that the report did not state that role prejudice was the only determinant of occupation, that the CSWEP committee had been built after a stringent selection process, and that Arrow and Galbraith had already vetted the manuscript. Most

³⁸ Female and male intensive fields had already been quantified by Strober (1975). Using AEA and CSWEP data to build a matched sample, Reagan & Strober (1976) used questionnaire information on aspirations to test a model of field choice, in which decision to enter a specific field depended on previous choices from high to graduate school. They concluded that “while in the female regressions having more math in high school was likely to lead to specialization in relatively less female – intensive fields, the opposite is the case in the male regressions” (Reagan & Strober 1976, 315).

³⁹ The “economics” essay, written by Jane Roberts Chapman (1975), mentioned CSWEP and heavily relied on its members' work, especially Strober's.

importantly, she argued that “we have already run into quite a few hornets’ nests with the simple (and I think politically neutral, at least it used to be) act of asking for statistical data.”⁴⁰

Speaking for Women in the Economy

CSWEP-sponsored research elicited debate within the Committee that reveals important tensions that accompanied the connection between the status of women economists and the status of the research on women in the economy. At the June meeting in 1973, the Committee decided to approach the *Journal of Economic Literature (JEL)* about publishing a review article. Given their prominence and role in synthesizing recent developments and identifying directions for future research within subfields of economics, *JEL* review articles, typically authored by a leading senior figure in the area, were important for assigning scientific credit within the profession. Bell wrote to *JEL* editor Perlman suggesting that CSWEP “sponsor” a “survey of the literature on women in the economy and on the economic status of women.” Sponsorship of the article by CSWEP would include review by the Committee. Perlman agreed to the proposal. In commissioning the review, to be limited to 12,000 words and to appear in 1975, Perlman wrote to Bell that “it is my understanding that you will undertake to advise me on the selection of the author (authors).” Indeed, Bell had three authors for the article in mind already: Committee members Blau, Strober, and Moser.

The proposal quickly stirred serious misgivings by the review’s prospective authors. Strober and Blau both wrote to Bell with their concerns. The issues raised regarded the nature of CSWEP’s sponsorship: after all, who would be identified as the article’s authors, the Committee or those who wrote it? As Blau wrote to Bell, “from the point of view of the authors, it would be difficult for individuals to undertake such a major effort without retaining control over the content of their efforts and receiving amply credit (or blame!) for the results... the authors should have the final say and take the final responsibility” for the review’s content. Strober similarly expressed that the

⁴⁰ Borts to Bell, 07/23/1973, Bell to Borts, 08/06/1973, CSWEP papers, box 988, folder “Guidelines.”

article should be published based on its quality instead of on the basis of its “political endorsement” by the Committee.⁴¹

Carrying sponsorship by CSWEP also raised a related, but distinct concern. In Blau’s view, the nature of the sponsorship had implications for CSWEP’s mandate that had not been fully examined: the *JEL* review article would link the Committee’s institutional authority within the profession with the scientific output in one particular subarea of economics. Furthermore, any contribution of the article to furthering an association of women in the economics profession with work on “women’s issues” would not have been altogether welcome; the practice of hiring women economists just to teach such classes was identified as a barrier to professional advancement by the Committee at its inaugural meeting. Blau thus wrote to Bell that “It does not appear advisable to me for us [as a Committee] to take a position on the intellectual issues the article would explore.” “I see little benefit to the committee in formulating and espousing a ‘party line’ on women in the economy,” Blau explained.

Bell had additional misgivings, as she explained to the committee: “as a Committee, we have come perilously close to doing what we have deplored on the part of the Establishment, i.e. reserving to an “in group” in the profession, (ourselves), the kudos, plum, or whatever of having an article in the *JEL*... Worse, this article would be “the” article, for were it not for the Committee it would never have been published,” she wrote. Thus, not only did the internal selection of authors risk a presumption that the Committee should be the professional authority regarding women in the economy – “that interest and expertness in this field existed only within the Committee membership” – Bell realized that the arrangement wreaked of insider dealing. The arrangement was thus contrary in spirit to, for instance, the transparency reforms that CSWEP sought for the job market for economists. Bell therefore wrote to Perlman to formally withdraw the proposed arrangement. It would be better that any review article on women in the economy to appear in the journal not acknowledge CSWEP’s initiative, Bell argued.

⁴¹ CSWEP Archives, box 989, file 6.

The episode highlights an important tension arising from CSWEP's position within the profession at that point: Committee members' status as scientists was tied to the status of their work, both of which were marginalized. In this regard, CSWEP sponsorship could prove sometimes a blessing, sometimes a curse. As Reagan and Bell had noted in the early days of the reckoning:

two things are vitally important: First, that every committee member have the support of the institution she or he is connected with. Second, that she (the women especially) have either the respect of the profession or sufficient zeal and self-confidence to carry through difficulties. Ken [Arrow] thought that enthusiasm (especially for younger women) would substitute for professional reputation; I would add that being the only one right can be a lonely situation, no matter what the self-confidence is based on.

Enthusiasm, reputation, zeal and self-confidence would prove especially necessary for CSWEP members to carry their activities into the 1980s, at a moment more women began to be hired and tenured, yet, paradoxically, the political tide turned against women's fight for equality and the scientific consensus on which their demands were based appeared to fizzle.

III. "The Center Will Not Hold": The Normalization of Gender Issues at the AEA

CSWEP's Mitigated Successes and Normalization

More than a decade after CSWEP first began documenting the status of women in economics and pushing for changes, it recorded some considerable successes. By 1983, 30% of the undergraduate students majoring in economics, compared to 15% in 1974; while in 1983 21% of graduate students were women, compared to 12% in 1974 (CSWEP 1983, 457). "The percentage of all PhD economists who are women has risen steadily, from less than 6% in 1973 to more than 11% in 1989. This compares with an increase from 4 percent of graduate faculty in 1974 to 8 percent of

graduate faculty in 1989,” the 1991 report notes (CSWEP 1991, 612). Around the mid-1980s, the percentage of women Ph.D.s was already 16% among the Chairman’s Group, a collection of institutions which produced two thirds of new doctorates in economics (CSWEP 1984, 448). Former CSWEP chair Elizabeth Bailey was elected Vice President of the AEA in 1983 and a woman economist was elected as President for the first time in 1986: Alice Rivlin. She was also the first woman economist to be awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 1983.⁴² The same year, she completed her first term as director of the Congressional Budget Office and the annual report from CSWEP noted her “exemplary performance as an employer of economists”: 35% of the CBO professional staff was female (CSWEP 1983, 460).

Yet the overall picture remained unsatisfactory to CSWEP members because the rise in women’s representation was selective and qualitatively bounded. The CSWEP’s 10-years anniversary annual report of 1981 reported that “the evidence yields a bleak picture... the number of women in the top professional ranks has not increased... there are only 19 women economists at the 43 of the 65 major PhD granting universities that reported in 1980-1981 (CSWEP 1981, 432). That year in the Chairman’s Group, no women received tenure (CSWEP 1985, 453). While there was a rise in female students, it was lower than for law students, and the feminization of economics departments was slower than in industry (CSWEP 1991). In 1991, only 3 out of 148 full-professors and 15 of all 232 economists at tier-1 departments (Chicago, Harvard, MIT, Princeton, Stanford, Yale) were women (CSWEP 1991, 611). Women were simply not getting tenure in prestigious department.

One institution that drew a lot of attention was the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), which had been thoroughly reshaped under Martin Feldstein’s leadership. Feldstein had previously received letters from CSWEP as chair of Harvard’s department of economics and as head of the Council of Economic Advisers, where he recruited an all-male staff at odds with the usual advanced feminization of the institution. In November 1984, CSWEP current and former

⁴² Rivlin was the second economist overall to be awarded a MacArthur grant. Heidi Hartmann received one in 1994 and Nancy Folbre in 1998.

chairs Bergmann, Bailey and Friedlaender co-signed a long letter to Feldstein, largely reprinted in the 1984 annual report, regarding gender representation at the Bureau. “Currently only 6 of the 170 Bureau research associates are women... yet the Bureau conducts research in a number of fields of applied economics in which women economists are active ... most research associates/fellows appear to be either former students of directors or senior research associates of that group or junior faculty at a few leading universities. Apparently, no attempt is made to publicize these positions or to allow outsiders to apply” (CSWEP 1984, 449-451). The letter further noted that none of the 57 officers and directors of the NBER was a woman and that recent sponsored research on family had been conducted by 10 men. An earlier draft of the letter emphasized fears that NBER nominations would become responsible for holding women economists back in the field:

the Bureau operates a tiered structure of activities in which a small number of “insiders” receive tremendous benefits from overlapping membership in a variety of permanent and temporary research groups. Women economists are almost entirely excluded from this group of “insiders.” Since the group of research associates/fellows is by invitation only and provides no opportunity for outsiders to apply, this exclusion of women from Bureau activities would be likely to apply even in cases when women economists were the best in their fields.⁴³

Feldstein responded that he had tried to hire some women (including Rivlin), but that they were already overburdened with other commitments and that he had recently purchased the CSWEP roster.

Explanations for missing women in top departments also shifted in that decade. The problem wasn't that the supply of qualified women anymore, but the lack of qualified women *in the most prestigious fields*, a long-entertained hypothesis that was resuscitated by 1985 AEA

⁴³ CSWEP papers, box 929, folder “CSWEP file”.

president Charles Kindleberger. The problem would be that women were too concentrated in labor economics in a way that interfered with their employment possibilities.⁴⁴ Another issue was that some approaches acquired a political undertone. In the context of the preparation of the December 1984 AEA meetings' program, Kindleberger noted that two of the submissions he received were interesting but "sound feminist." In her answer to his "unbelievable letter," Bergmann insisted that "despite the fact that they may have a feminist ring to them, their authors no doubt intended them to be treated by you on the same system as you treat other submissions you receive."⁴⁵ She concluded by noting that "a great deal of work from the opposite perspective regularly appears on the program," thus revealing that the scholarship in labor economics, in particular on women in the economy and thus in economics was becoming more polarized than in the 1970s.

Transformation and Polarization in Labor Economics

The 1980s witnessed both a normalization of research on gender as well as a polarization that nurtured the debates regarding CSWEP's legitimacy. First, the interdisciplinary and institutional bent displayed by applied labor economists, in particular those associated with CSWEP during the early 1970s, had lessened. This general trend was also seen in the structure of the first labor economics handbook published in that period (Ashenfelter & Layard 1986), as well as at AEA sessions and conferences sponsored by CSWEP itself. At the theoretical, empirical, and policy levels, there was a "Mincerization" of the field of labor economics (Rosen 1992, Teixeira 2021). This expression refers to the development of the "modern" labor economics, founded on the application of price theory to labor and developed at Chicago and Columbia around Jacob Mincer and Gary Becker (Kaufmann 2010). A pattern of "segregated pluralism" emerged at the organizational level; papers on gender issues using standard microeconomics were increasingly

⁴⁴ Kindleberger to Nancy Gordon, July 6, 1987. CSWEP papers, box 999, folder "CSWEP Correspondence, 1987". Bergmann to Schultze, February 1984. CSWEP papers, box 999, folder "CSWEP Correspondence, 1983-1985." In the same letter, Kindleberger pointed that those women just elected AEA vice president came from prestigious fields yet owed their seats to "reverse discrimination."

⁴⁵ Bergmann to CSWEP members, November 16 1983. Bergmann to Kindleberger, November 14, 1983. CSWEP papers, box 999, folder "CSWEP Correspondence, 1983-1985".

included in the AEA program, while more radical perspectives on gender were relegated to distinctly URPE-sponsored ASSA sessions.⁴⁶

These trends are reflected by the kinds of conference that were organized during the 1980s. Despite agreement on a line-up – from Bergmann to Becker, Fuchs to Madden, Wallace to Sowell – discussions between Bailey and Feldstein about a NBER conference on gender and policy hit a dead-end.⁴⁷ Framed as an example of the Bureau’s commitment to positive (as opposed to normative) analysis, Feldstein felt that proposed topics like “Pros and Cons of Affirmative Action” [...] really wouldn’t be suitable.”⁴⁸ Instead, CSWEP finally managed to organized a conference on “Gender in the Workplace” at the Brookings Institution in November 1984. It was organized by Clair (Vickery) Brown and Joseph Pechman and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The goal was to bring “together economists with a broad range of viewpoints” and to explore a wide range of subjects, from consumption choices to child support, occupational segregation, the analysis of internal labor markets, the effect of unions on the pay gap, “de-skilled” and “de-classed” jobs, and subcontracting (Brown & Pechman 1987, 1). But in contrast with the prior conference organized by the CSWEP and published in *Signs*, all participants were economists.

Still, the debates were still largely devoted to the institutional aspects of the labor markets, in a way that did not reflect the “modern,” Columbia-Chicago approach to labor economics then becoming dominant (Teixeira 2007). The latter was encapsulated in a symposium organized by Edward S. Lazear on “Women in the Labor Market” that was published in the newly founded *Journal of Economic Perspectives* in 1989. The contributions featured James P. Smith and Michael Ward on the dramatic “progress” of women on labor market, an empirical analysis of why affirmative action does not work for women by Johnathan Leonard, and an analysis of women’s well-being by Victor Fuchs. The latter article insisted that women’s positions mostly resulted from their individual choices. “Some segregation [in the labor market] is probably attributable to

⁴⁶ Tiago Mata (forthcoming) uses “segregated pluralism” to describe the history of the relationship between URPE and the AEA, especially at ASSA meetings.

⁴⁷ In those years by contrast, the NBER was a hothouse for the development of family economics (see Le Tollec 2020).

⁴⁸ Feldstein to Bailey, March 3, 1982. Fuchs to Bailey, September 22, 1982. CSWEP papers, box 929, folder “CSWEP file”.

prejudice by other workers and customers, but the most powerful forces are rooted in biology and culture,” he added (Fuchs 1989, 28). The policy gist of these models was that active intervention (whether quotas or affirmative actions) would risk distorting markets without solving the imbalances. Better to rely on the strong market incentives for employers to establish efficient reward structures.⁴⁹

Another group of economists strived to integrate imperfect information into this human capital-based framework, through signaling, screening and filtering behaviors. This required modeling how agents form expectations and make associated choices as well as the kind of feedback effects that Bell had suggested a decade before. Lundberg and Startz (1983), showed that in a labor market equilibrium with statistical discrimination and endogenous human capital investment, government intervention to prohibit discriminatory treatment can be efficient. Rothschild & Stiglitz (1982) offered similar approaches to wage setting and job placement within firms using a competitive model with imperfect information. Models of efficiency wages were also developed at that time. This “new information paradigm” applied to the labor market provided “markedly different policy stances from those wedded to the old [competitive] paradigm,” Stiglitz (2002, 485) later reminisced, while not joining radical criticism of market theory. Empirically, though, disentangling the respective influence of discrimination and choices still proved extremely difficult, as Blau and Ferber (1987, 317) noted. Measuring discrimination typically meant interpreting a regression residual controlling for various observed worker and firm characteristics. It was already understood in the 1970s, however, that both imperfect information on the demand-side (discrimination) and supply-side (women’s choices) explanations could be consistent with the differentials observed. Yet the idea that the unexplained residual cannot be causally attributed to discrimination was gaining traction, a consequence of the rise of “new household” economics, a term coined in the 1970s (Le Tollec 2020). A core idea was that “revealed” occupational segregation were determined primarily by women’s choices.

⁴⁹ The only dissenting voice in the issue was Bergmann (1989), who argued that the market for women’s labor needed to be fixed. She was also the only female contributor to the special issue. Lazear was the founding editor of the *Journal of Labor Economics*, which began publishing in 1983 with an all-male editorial board.

Thus, the battlefield shifted from the labor market to the household, as illustrated by the 1981 publication of Becker's *Treatise on Family* in 1981, published in the NBER Book collection, and Bergmann's article on "The Economic Risks of Being a Housewife." And it was both representations of the labor market and of the family that those economists who were increasingly calling themselves "feminists" sought to interrogate. As put by Julie Nelson in an article circulated in 1986, "several women economists, including Marianne A. Ferber and Isabel Sawhill, have identified and criticized androcentric distortions in economic explanations of household production of and the labor market... A less male-centered perspective requires not only that one take into account the agency of the non-adult-male members of the household, but also... that one abandons to some extent the independent-choice-subject-to-resource-constraints basic model of neoclassical theory."⁵⁰ The term feminism appeared for the first time in an URPE-ASSA session's title in 1983.⁵¹ At least five URPE sessions on women and minorities and intersectionality were proposed for the following annual conferences, illustrating how the different brands of labor and family economics – "neoclassical" and "feminist" – were institutionalized in largely separate spaces. This segregated pluralism was also visible in the JEL codes dynamics. Becchio (2020, 133) explains that the 1988-1989 revision of the JEL codes introduced "household economics" (D1, now "Household Behavior and Family Economics"), "new home economics" (D13, now "Household Production and Intrahousehold Allocation") and "gender (neoclassical) economics" (J16, later relabeled "Economics of Gender and Non-Labor Discrimination"). A JEL code for "feminist economics" was introduced a decade later within the heterodox approaches. The growing polarization between feminist scholars and "human capitalists" was not restricted to academia; it was equally visible in courtrooms and in policy.⁵²

A great deal of empirical research was fueled by courts' need to adjudicate wage discrimination cases (Chassonnery-Zaïgouche 2020). From the 350 employment discrimination

⁵⁰ "Gender and Economic Theory," Julie Nelson, February 1987. CSWEP papers, box 999, folder "Correspondence 1987."

⁵¹ The term of course had a much longer history, but for a long time, it was not used within economics, even by economist who would self-identified as feminist and later be part of feminist economics.

⁵² "Human capitalists" is the term used by Ray Marshall & Beth Paulin in their testimony on occupational segregation before the US Commission on Civil Rights in 1982.

cases filled in 1970, the number had soared to 9,000 in 1983 (Berrey, Nelson & Nielsen 2017, 41). Debates surrounding “comparable worth” policies relied on the input of empirical economists on occupational segregation, are illustrative of the emerging fault lines. These policies aimed to adjust wages within firms using job evaluation scoring methods and gained a policy momentum beginning with the Carter administration. Based on the observation that occupational hierarchies resulted lower average wages in more feminized job categories within a firm, women and civil rights organizations claimed that ensuring that two workers doing the same labor were paid the same (equal pay for equal work) was not enough: Equal pay should also be provide for jobs of comparable worth for men and women.⁵³ “Worth” was quantified in term of skills, requirements, level of responsibility, etc.⁵⁴ In the early 1980s, the scholarly and political tide had turned. The backlash against affirmative action had begun in 1978 when the Supreme Court upheld affirmative action but outlawed rigid racial quotas in university admissions. Though Ronald Reagan’s stance toward feminists’ demands was initially unclear, by the mid-1980s systematic opposition to equal pay and comparable worth had organized. The 1983 ruling in which Federal District Judge Jack Tanner had found the state of Washington guilty of systematic and purposeful wage discrimination against women was overturned by the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. Before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1982, economist June O’Neill, among others, had testified against the principle of comparable worth. By 1985, all the Federal agencies, from the U.S. Civil Commission on Civil Rights to the EEOC, had condemned the principle of comparable worth. In a 1989 piece, titled “Conservative Feminism”, Judge Posner (1989, p.202) summarized the dominant economists’ voice in policy: “Comparable worth is the equilibrium, and disequilibrium is self-correcting provided there are not artificial barriers to entry.”

In the interim, economic arguments emphasizing the rhetoric of choice became more prominent (Rodgers 2003). Economist June O’Neill, who has testify for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, had also found herself confronting Barbara Bergmann during a 1983 hearing before

⁵³ In 1984, 80 per cent of women in the work force were concentrated in 20 of the Labor Department’s 427 job categories (Goodman 1984).

⁵⁴ See Treiman and Hartmann (1981) and Hartmann (1985). For a history of the controversy, see Chassonnery-Zaigouche (2023).

the Joint Economic Committee.⁵⁵ Designed to “explore the changing role of women in the workforce,” the Census Bureau report on which the hearing was based emphasized both the dramatic increase in women’s labor participation, and the fact that gender pay gap and occupational segregation has barely changed since the 1960s. Bergmann attacked the report’s agnosticism towards discrimination as a potential cause of differentials and argued in favor of the development of Federal programs to enforce equal opportunities, and subsidized child support. O’Neill acknowledged that discrimination existed but argued that it was not a major factor in the determination of labor participation and wages compared with family arrangements and social norms. Some characteristics were difficult to measure. “The two of us have different reasons explaining how women got there,” O’Neill concluded. “I tend to think that it has to do more with the choices women make ourselves, and Barbara Bergmann thinks it has more to do with the choices employers make for them.” (JEC 1983, p.69). O’Neil’s view was the dominant view among economists.

CSWEP’s Fragmentation and Stasis?

The polarization of theoretical, empirical, and legal debates weighed on CSWEP’s activities. Specifically, the divisions as well as institutionalization of separate stream of research within labor and household economics splintered the intellectual perspective that had helped promote (and was reinforced by) CSWEP at its outset. While generally emphasizing the role of discrimination and social norms for explaining the status of women in the economy, “feminists” were not a homogeneous group. Criticisms of the competitive model as well as advocacy for types of interventions varied greatly. Former CSWEP member Cecilia Conrad (2019) describes a “spectrum” that ran from neoclassical economists to radical feminist economics, defined by the degree of reliance on standard microeconomics and policy advocacy – from quotas to mentoring. CSWEP included several board members that became central to feminist economics: Ferber (1977-1979), Shackelford (1981-1982), Benaría (1984-1986), and Bergmann, who was chair from 1983-1984.

⁵⁵ O’Neill and Bergmann had already both testified during the hearings related to the 1973 CEA report on the economics of sex discrimination in employment, the former as a coauthor of the report, the latter as an expert.

But the Committee likewise welcomed economists in the Columbia-Chicago tradition, among whom included O’Neill (1988-1991) and Joan Haworth (1981-1986, later chair). Though the effects of the dominant labor paradigm on the profession at large might have been a non-interventionist, “*de gustibus non est disputandum*” stance, the human capital framework *per se* needn’t lead women economists to endorse inaction: Policies to ensure that women were allowed to pursue human capital investment if they chose to do so, that they had equal access to career information, and that women were given the same ability to self-promote as men economists were considered key. Throughout the 1980s, maintaining and updating the roster of women economists consumed most of CSWEP’s financial resources and it was Haworth who, for most of the decade, coordinated this time-consuming activity.

CSWEP members thus included economists with a diverse array of theoretical, methodological, and gender-related commitments during the 1980s. In addition to burgeoning reconfigurations within labor economics, a number of applied economists joined the board, including Shelly Lundberg and Shulamit Khan as well as experimental economist Elisabeth Hoffman. However, not all of the CSWEP’s membership was labor or even applied economists, as shown in our analysis of the 1986 Roster.⁵⁶

Figure 1: Roster by top 10 fields, academic

Field	Total	Share
Labor	143	21.4%
Public	53	7.9
Theory	49	7.3
Industrial	48	7.2
Development	43	6.4

⁵⁶ The 1986 roster includes 1,053 individual Ph.D women economists, their name, rank and institution, Ph.D granting institution, a description of their research, and (unknown) field codes. To identify “fields,” we find the word that appears most frequently in the research descriptions of everyone who belongs to a given field (ignoring unhelpful words, like “economics”). The data have been retrieved from two floppy disks we found in the archives. We did not find the data for any other years in the 1980s.

Monetary	41	6.1
Policy	38	5.7
Trade	36	5.4
Health	33	4.9
Econometrics	26	3.9

Figure 2: Roster by top 10 fields, non-academic

Field	Total	Share
Labor	58	16.5%
Public	53	10.3
Monetary	29	8.3
Health	26	7.4
Policy	26	7.4
Industrial	22	6.3
Trade	22	6.3
International	19	5.4
Development	18	5.1
Econometrics	16	4.6

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate that, while labor economists were the most represented field overall, considerably many CSWEP members inside and outside academia worked in public economics, industrial organization, and monetary economics. Among those in academia, theory occupies the third largest field, while health is represented among those working at non-academic institutions.

One common features with earlier period, CSWEP increasingly relied on empirical analysis to support its proposals and activities. For instance, concerned with the possibility that women economists may face a glass ceiling and wage discrimination at the full professor level, the CSWEP

board thus decided to participate in a larger project led by Columbia sociologist Sue Berryman on the career status of women in several disciplines. The goal was to understand why women choose to pursue a Ph.D in economics and the dynamics underlying new Ph.D economists' entry into different employment sectors and their trajectories (CSWEP 1986, CSWEP 1987). The 1990 CSWEP report proposed to compare actual data on promotion with the result of a model simulating the promotion process in academia, then compared the finding with a recent empirical paper drafted by Van Kolpin and Larry Singell (CSWEP 1991, 610). Shulamit Kahn further compiled data from the National Science Foundation survey of Earned Doctorates to show that feminization proceeded more slowly in academia than in business and industry and that men in tenure-track jobs were more likely to achieve tenure after seven years than women (CSWEP 1993, 510).⁵⁷ Another animating concern of the period was with possible gender biases in refereeing (as well as in selection of papers for the AEA annual meeting). Like promotion, this was approached through empirical work. Linda Edwards and Marianne Ferber initially voiced this concern in the Fall 1985 CSWEP *Newsletter*, pointing to research by psychologists, and data taken from thirty-eight economics journals (CSWEP 1986, 403). Isabel Sawhill introduced the issue to the AEA Executive Committee and then-*AER* editor Orley Ashenfelter proposed an experiment evaluating double and single-blind refereeing at the journal. The project was carried by Rebecca Blank (1991), who found no gender bias (CSWEP 1987, 521). Double-blind was nevertheless implemented on a wider scale.

By the mid-1980s, though, it appeared that evidence-based initiatives were the principal way forward for CSWEP, although the maintenance of the roster and exerting pressure on departments or organizations, like the NBER, remained important activities. Of course, the many initiatives undertaken during the previous decade were still actively pursued, no matter the analytical framework of the women in charge. But the polarization – segregated pluralism at best – of analytical perspectives on the labor market and the family represented within that generation of CSWEP members compromised much of the economic consensus on which the prior generation could rely to decide which actions to pursue and how to market them to the AEA and the

⁵⁷ At around the same time, the AEA having never acted on its promise to develop childcare service for ASSA meetings, Kahn also started a cooperative childcare sharing service, coordinated through the CSWEP newsletter.

profession at large. As key initiatives, such as the roster, would become less important in the 1990s, and on-going disagreement on what the content of CSWEP-sponsored events (session, conference, mentorship, training) should be, stasis loomed larger.

The polarization eventually resulted in institutional redevelopment: at the AEA 1990 meeting, those women, many associated with CSWEP, who felt they were not offered any space to discuss feminist work, were drawn to a session organized by Diana Strassman: “Can Feminism find a Home in Economics?”⁵⁸ This session developed into an online mailing list (a Listserv, a newly available tool of the 1980s), then a survey and a newsletter, and in early 1992, the formal creation of the International Association for Feminist Economics (Aerni and Nelson 1995; Conrad 2019, 121-125; Becchio 2020, 133-134; Gomez Betancourt and Orozco Espinel 2022). A first conference was organized, Shackleford was elected first president, and Strassman created an associated journal, *Feminist Economics*. The impetus for the organization, thus, was not only the institutional issues encountered by women economists, but the intellectual resistance to new ways of investigating gender questions within mainstream economics. As the most contentious aspect of women’s research on gender-related issues moved out of CSWEP, what remained had, by the early 1990s, become more mainstream and moderate (in that it reflected the views of labor markets held by economists at large) as well as less central: at the AEA as well as in the larger American society, the status of women no longer commanded the same priority.

IV. Conclusion

Three tentative lessons can be drawn from this history of the first gender reckoning in economics. First, CSWEP was established to document and remedy the low status of women in the economics profession. Yet, its clearer achievement seems to be the professionalization of the profession at large, through campaigns for reform of hiring practices such as mandatory and open job listings, the provision of childcare, refereeing guidelines, and development of mentorship programs. This

⁵⁸ Chaired by Robert Pollak, the session includes contributions from Paula England, Claudia Goldin, Diana Strassman, and Nancy Folbre. Discussants were Rebecca Blank and Paulette Olson.

is in line with what Rossiter (2012) argues was the influence of women committees on most science (see also Jacobsen 2005). The battles presently fought, for instance the campaign against interviewing in hotel rooms led by graduate students or against sexual harassment, is to be located within this tradition of raising professional standards.

Second, gender issues in economics have always been argued with the theoretical and empirical tools of economic analysis. Theories of discrimination and broader perspectives on the labor market, and the changing dominant ideas in the field were central to understand how most of the debates on CSWEP and within the profession played out. The shift in prestige of empirical work, descriptive as well as geared toward the identification of causal relationships, was also integral to the on-going – second – gender reckoning in economics. It seems that the reliance on empirical methods had been stronger when little consensus existed on the economic underpinnings of women’s issues, but it might be that long-term progress is difficult to sustain without a consensus on an analytical framework.

Our paper hardly ventures in the 1990s and 2000s, when CSWEP annual surveys reveal stalling graduation, hires and tenures of women economists and growing wage gaps. We believe the shifts documented that took place in the 1980s allow some speculation on the next period. As CSWEP became more accepted and embedded in the institutional structure of the AEA, its mission became less central and was gradually marginalized. This marginalization might have been a consequence of changes within the field of labor economics, such that polarization prevented new actions from being taken. It might also have been a product of perceived successes in raising the representation of women in economics, which may have encouraged the view that “enough had been done.” Obviously, it had not.

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