

## ECONOMICS

# Economics Is a Dismal Science for Women



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By Noah Smith

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British physicist Matt Taylor, who was involved with the Rosetta comet landing, recently found himself in the middle of a controversy about sexism and bad taste, after he was interviewed wearing a tacky shirt featuring pin-up girls toting guns. In true Internet fashion, the incident was labeled ShirtStorm, and it sparked a debate about sexism in the sciences. Taylor has since apologized, issued a series of mea culpas, and showed as much contrition as one person could for a sartorial offense. Some of his female colleagues even came to his defense.

But all of this raises a question: Why is it that the sciences look like a feminist nirvana compared with the economics profession, which seems to have a built-in bias that prevents women from advancing?

Consider this 2011 blog post by George Mason University economist Robin Hanson. Hanson writes that “gentle, silent rape” of a woman by a man causes less harm than a wife cuckolding her husband:

I [am puzzled] over why our law punishes rape far more than cuckoldry...[M]ost men would rather be raped than cuckolded...Imagine a woman was drugged into unconsciousness and then gently raped, so that she suffered no noticeable physical harm nor any memory of the event, and the rapist tried to keep the event secret...Now compare the two cases, cuckoldry and gentle silent rape.

There was no outcry whatsoever over these remarks, nor any retraction that I could find.

Or consider this similar post from 2013 by University of Rochester economist Steve Landsburg:

Let's suppose that you, or I, or someone we love, or someone we care about from afar, is raped while unconscious in a way that causes no direct physical harm — no injury, no pregnancy, no disease transmission...Ought the law discourage such acts of rape? Should they be illegal?

The blog post sparked protests at Landsburg's university, but silence from the economics profession itself. Landsburg later apologized, stating that some readers "got the impression that I was endorsing rape, while my intent was to say exactly the opposite." Although it's good that he apologized, Landsburg has made other sexist remarks on his blog. In 2012, he seemed to call pro-contraception activist Sandra Fluke a "prostitute," and defended Rush Limbaugh's demand that Fluke post a sex tape for the world to view.

In physics, a shirt depicting scantily clad women is a big deal, but in economics, everyone just sort of expects these things.

These aren't just anecdotes. There is quantitative evidence showing that economics is uniquely biased against women. According to a new paper by economists Donna Ginther and Shulamit Kahn and psychologists Stephen Ceci and Wendy Williams, sexism in econ is much more severe than in the sciences.

The authors investigate many kinds of gender bias. One thing they do is compare academic productivity (publications) to outcomes (promotion and tenure), and examine whether gender makes a difference. They find that once you control for productivity, men and women have the same outcomes in most academic fields -- other than economics.

Does that mean that there is no sexism in those fields? Of course not! Gender may decide who gets published in the first place. In fact, there is some evidence for this.

But the analysis allows the researchers to compare *relative* sexism in promotion and tenure across different fields. And what they find is that economics is much more sexist. They write:

Economics is an outlier, with a persistent sex gap in promotion that cannot be readily explained by productivity differences.

In fact, a number of other studies by Ginther and Kahn have found similar results. What this means is that the average female economist -- unlike the average female physicist or mathematician -- is likely to have a better publication record than her male peers.

Now, maybe the sexism in the econ profession simply happens at a different stage -- maybe

economics journals are more willing than physics or math journals to publish female-authored papers, but then less willing to give female researchers credit for those publications. But that seems highly unlikely, especially given the corroborating evidence. The authors also find evidence of gender bias in economists' salaries -- the only field in which the gap was statistically significant after controlling for productivity.

So the quantitative evidence is solid -- econ has a sexism problem.

If you don't believe my anecdotes or the research papers, just go ask economists themselves. Basically, everyone knows this is real (see the following Richmond Fed paper). The American Economic Association even has a committee dedicated to addressing the issue.

Or just observe the pattern of unabashed sexism by economists in the public sphere. It was Larry Summers -- an economist, not a biologist -- who got up in front of the Harvard faculty and other academics in 2005 and suggested that women's scientific abilities might be genetically inferior to men's at the high end of the distribution (an argument that Ginther and Kahn's paper actually addresses).

Many, many male economists are, of course, not sexist. But sexist ideas and prejudices find a refuge in econ that they don't find elsewhere in academia.

Why? Frankly, I don't know the reason. It could be because of economics' historical identification with conservative politics. Some economists still explicitly believe that when it comes to economics, the "facts have a well-known conservative bias" -- as my old macroeconomics teacher once wrote on his blog. This widespread notion has attracted many smart young conservatives to the profession, and they may have brought their social conservatism with them. That general attitude of social conservatism may have acted as a kind of barrier, which no longer exists in other parts of academia, limiting opportunities for women in economics.

Alternatively, it could be because econ has always prided itself on bravely accepting truths that an emotional public doesn't want to believe. One of the first stories you usually hear in an introductory economics course is how rent control -- a policy designed to help the poor -- actually hurts the people it was intended to aid. One public image of economists has always been of Milton Friedman telling some hippie kid why communism just doesn't work. Economists with outdated sexist ideas may simply tell themselves that sexism is another one of those cases -- that only bold, rational, hard-nosed economists are willing to embrace the hard "truth" that women just don't make very good professors.

Of course, as the research by Ginther et al. shows, the data say otherwise. Female economists are out-publishing their more numerous male peers, and not getting the credit they deserve. But to a

certain type of economist, data has never carried as much weight as theory. And in this case, “theory” may simply be a euphemism for outmoded sexist prejudice.

In any case, whatever the reason, it’s time for economics to acknowledge that it has a sexism problem and to fix it. The American Economic Association, and other powers that be within the profession, need to start working to make the field more welcoming to women.

(Updates 18th paragraph of column published Nov. 21 to indicate that the American Economic Association has a committee devoted to reducing sexism in the profession.)

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