

Economics and the arts: A virtuous example of gender equality

Report on Gender Equality in Cultural Economics

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Several studies have highlighted gender differences in researchers' career progression in economics. While the percentage doctorates granted to women in economics in the US has sharply increased during the last few decades of the 1900s (Ginther and Kahn, 2004), this positive trend has considerably slowed down in the last decade: 35.2% of doctorates were awarded to women in 2007 and only 31.0% in 2017 (Lundberg, 2017). The share of female tenured faculty holding a full professorship was only 13.1% that same year, up from 8.1% in 2007. The latter increase reflects a lagged increase due to earlier gains in the women's share of graduates.

Data reported by Giraneza Birekeraho and Maniga (2018) reflect a similar situation in Europe. Looking at the top 20 European economic departments in 2017 the average percentage of female PhD students is 35.13%, below the average for all fields of study. And female full professors represented only 12.87% of full professors on average.

These and similar statistics have led to a reckoning in the profession, now reflected by the focus of AEA and other economic association on topics related to the gender gap, empowering of women, etc. A recent survey by the AEA has made headlines. With the Economist summarizing how many women feel, stating "many of those who do work in the profession say they are treated unfairly and that their talents are not fully realised."

While female economists are a minority in many subfields of economics, a large number of women work on topics within the broad subject of cultural economics and the economics of the arts. Evidence of this are statistics on the share of female members to the Association for Cultural Economics International (ACEI) as well as data on the participation of female faculty to international conferences and workshops.

One such example is the workshop series on Applied Cultural Economics, whose most recent edition took place in Copenhagen from the 5th to the 7th of September 2019. The Ninth European Workshop on Applied Cultural Economics (EWACE) was organized jointly by the University of Southern Denmark and Copenhagen Business School. EWACE 2019 proved to be a remarkably gender equal workshop with perfectly balanced scientific and local organizing committees. This year almost 40% of the 43 accepted speakers are female and 60% of the presented papers have at least one female researcher among the authors. These numbers are not unusual as female participation in EWACE workshops has been strikingly equal also in past editions of the workshop (51% in 2017 and 46% in 2015), and it is equally high in cultural economics more in general. For example, the Association for Cultural Economics International (ACEI) has currently four out of nine women on the Executive Board, a female secretary-treasurer and there have been two female among the last three elected presidents.

EWACE provided the perfect platform to introduce the topic and stimulate discussion among participants: Who is better qualified to identify good virtuous practices than those women who succeeded and their male peers? Whereas a number of existing activities focuses on identifying gender specific barriers in the profession, comments from participants to EWACE helped us to narrow down good practices in raising the share of women among academics taking inspiration from the exemplary case of cultural economics and we are confident that the gathered insights will contribute to the debate among researchers in the broader field of economics.

Discussions with participants of the workshop have been fruitful and resulted in many interesting comments. Wide agreement exists that our small subfield presents a friendly environment and none has shared examples of discrimination or harassment at events in the field even though several colleagues report such incidents when attending conferences in other areas. The very size of our field was advanced by several participants as a possible reason, in that it affords little anonymity, which may result in a friendlier climate where rudeness and worse are not tolerated. Another factor that was proposed is that the international community of cultural economists is particularly important to its members because many are alone in their topic at their home departments.

Two other ideas came up that speak more directly to the high share of women in the field. One is that there may be self-selection by women into Cultural Economics due to passion for the field. It was pointed out for example that we know women to attend theaters more frequently than men, though the causes are not well understood. The other is complementary: That an initial build-up of a critical mass of women has eased the path for more to enter the field. An example was given from France [department?], where a successful woman has built a strong female-dominated research group.

While not all of this may be transferable as a recipe for greater gender equality in other fields, several points may help. Among them is to welcome change by supporting young researchers and PhD students, among whom the gender balance is likely to be more favorable. This in turn may lead to a critical mass effect as more senior women lead the way for newcomers. Another is to create friendly and close-knit communities that can enhance reputational risk for bad actors. It should be acknowledged that a tension exists between these two aims in that close-knit communities can also run the risk of being unwelcoming of new members who, at the same time, are vital to the advancement of any field of scholarship. But it is possible for a community to be both welcoming and close, factors that we hope will further the goal of gender equality while providing many additional benefits.

References

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