



3 Questions with Michèle Tertilt

Publication Date
January 6, 2017

Related People
[Michèle Tertilt](#)

Related Links
[Families in Macroeconomics
Does Female Empowerment
Promote Economic
Development?](#)

Share This ↗



Family Inequality/Markets network member Michèle Tertilt is a Professor of Economics at the University of Mannheim. She is currently a Managing Editor at the Review of Economic Studies and an Associate Editor of the Journal of Development Economics. She is also a Research Affiliate at BREAD and the European Development Research Network (EUDN) and a Research Fellow at CEPR. Her research concentrates on macroeconomics with a special focus on development and Intra-family Interactions.

Describe your area of study and how it relates to current policy discussions surrounding Inequality.

I would say my research focuses largely on integrating family economics into macroeconomics. That might sound a little bit unusual, but I think there are a lot of important issues on the family level, especially in developing countries – like polygyny, different family structures, and interactions between husbands and wives that are worth studying. And I think these issues actually matter on the aggregate level. They matter for some development questions, but possibly even for business cycles. Such as, does domestic violence increase during recessions?

Now how does all this relate to Inequality? In my specific research, I am interested in cross-country Inequality as well as gender Inequality. For example in my 2005 JPE paper I analyzed to what extent the institution of polygyny contributes to poverty within Sub-Saharan Africa. I showed that allowing men to marry multiple wives may be one reason for continuing low underdevelopment within highly polygynous countries.

I am also very interested in gender Inequality. Obviously gender is only one very specific angle of Inequality and there are many other important ones – such as income and education Inequality. But I think we should start thinking about measuring Inequality not just at the household level, but also dig deeper and try to understand income Inequality within households. For example in a given rich household, it could be that the woman is relatively poor.

What areas in the study of inequality are most in need of new research?

Let me connect this to the first question. I think we need more research understanding inequality between men and women. Of course differences in the labor market have been extensively studied. For example, there is a large literature on the gender wage gap, and the labor force participation gap between men and women. But again, what is less studied and what needs more research is the inequality in the household specifically. As in, who consumes how much within the family. Most of the data sets we use do not even collect data that way. We just know how much is being consumed at the household level. Maybe a few goods are assignable, like clothing. You know, men's clothing, female clothing, that's most likely consumed by men and women respectively. But it is hard to extrapolate from clothing to a more general allocation of consumption. I think we need to start by collecting data a little bit differently. Adding questions to household surveys about consumption and income of individual family members. This would be needed to assess inequality in the household. I think that's a very interesting and important area for future research.

What advice do you have for emerging scholars in your field?

Be ambitious. Go for the big questions. Also don't be discouraged, just keep plowing ahead. And if in doubt, i.e., if you are not sure where to start, or what a good research question is, handbook chapters are very useful for that. For example, I just wrote a chapter, joint with Matthias Doepke, for the "Handbook of Macroeconomics" that just came out. The handbook conference had actually been hosted here by the Becker-Friedman Institute last year. In our chapter we are looking exactly at the importance of gender inequality and family dynamics for macro and point to many fruitful avenues for future research. This is just one example but I think handbook chapters in general are great starting points to figure out where are the low-hanging fruits, what are the open questions, where to get started, to get a good overview of the literature, etc.