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Why Women's Voices Are Scarce in Economics

By Justin Wolfers

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For decades, the number of women studying economics seemed to be increasing, easing the persistent scarcity of professional female economists in the United States. But that progress has stalled.

New data indicates that the share of women studying the subject in America's universities has flatlined and the pool of prospective female economists may even be shrinking.

That pattern would be disturbing in any academic field but because economics has an outsize influence on public policy, it means that many important debates are likely to be dominated by men's voices for years to come.

At virtually every level of training and every professional rank within economics, women are a minority. And women are less likely than men to progress at each successive step along the career path, so this imbalance is more lopsided at senior levels. This situation has been called a "leaky pipeline" but as long as increasing numbers of women entered that pipeline, the number of female economists kept rising.

A new report from a committee of the American Economics Association provides a sobering picture, however. It shows that since the turn of the century, there has been no increase in the share of women entering the pipeline to become professional economists.

Among first-year doctoral students studying economics, the share was 32 percent in 2017 — barely changed from 33 percent in 2000, according to the report. The imbalance is so great that in six of the "top twenty" economics

programs, fewer than one-fifth of the incoming doctoral students were women.

This decline in the share of women at relatively early stages of the economics career path is already beginning to reshape the field at more senior levels.

For instance, the report, which was published by the American Economic Association's Committee for the Status of Women in the Economics Profession, shows that about six years after the share of women *starting* doctoral programs began to shrink, the share of women *completing* Ph.D.'s also began to decline. And seven years after that, the share of women among tenured associate professors of economics stopped rising.

The share of female full professors of economics has continued to increase — it is now 14 percent in those departments with doctoral programs — at least in part because greater numbers of women *entered* economics in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. The end of that influx around the year 2000 can be expected to lead to a plateau in full professor ranks down the road.

These figures were compiled by Margaret Levenstein, an economist at the University of Michigan.

My own analysis of data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey substantiates the trends identified by Dr. Levenstein and shows some of them arising even earlier in the educational pipeline. (While I also serve on the Committee for the Status of Women in the Economics Profession, I played no role in her report.)

The share of undergraduate women who major in economics peaked in the mid-to-late 1990s, I have found, and it has drifted downward since. In 2016, only 35 percent of economics majors were women — about the same as in the early 1980s — although women earn a majority of all undergraduate degrees.

A host of careful studies has found systematic barriers to women after they become professional economists. The list of problems is daunting. Women in the field often are held to higher standards in written work and aren't given credit for papers written with men. Student teaching evaluations tend to be biased against women, while journalistic discussions of economic research

often relegate women to a secondary role.

On top of that, seemingly gender-neutral parental leave policies have exacerbated gender inequities because men sometimes use their leaves to further their careers while women spend their time giving birth, nursing and recovering. In addition, a popular online discussion forum has been found all too often to sexualize or trivialize women and their work. And another study has found economics to be an “outlier” among academic fields because of “a persistent sex gap in promotion that cannot readily be explained by productivity differences.”

The result is that women's voices are underrepresented.

Janet Yellen is the only woman to have served as Federal Reserve chairman — and even Ms. Yellen had previously failed to win tenure at Harvard. There has never been a female Treasury secretary. Only three women have been chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, and none served under a Republican president. Women are outnumbered among full professors at so-called top twenty economics departments by a ratio of six to one. The University of Chicago has one female full professor of economics; Northwestern has none.

These studies have forced introspection upon many economists, making it difficult to believe that the field is really a meritocracy. They have forced urgent conversations in faculty lounges and conference hallways in parallel to the broader national conversation about gender and power.

In this time of reckoning, the American Economic Association has issued a statement condemning misogyny, and in a recent report it acknowledged that “unacceptable behavior has been allowed to continue through tacit toleration.” The association has recently drafted a code of conduct for the profession.

The scarcity of women economists has already had important consequences.

Consider the stark differences of opinion revealed in a 2014 survey of professional economists. Fully 63 percent of women said income in the United States should be distributed more equally, compared with only 45 percent of men. Female economists were 13 percentage points less likely to say that the

United States government is too large; 18 percentage points less likely to say the United States has excessive government regulation; 20 percentage points more likely to say employers should be required to provide workers with health insurance, and 16 percentage points more likely to say current policies excessively favor economic growth over environmental quality.

Perhaps most telling was the question on pay: Only 14 percent of female economists said the gender wage gap is largely explained by differences in education and voluntary occupational choices while 54 percent of male economists agreed with that notion.

Other researchers have found that women economists are more likely than men to sign petitions that call for a more active government role in the economy.

Women economists tend to focus on different topics than men. While men dominate macroeconomics, women are more visible among those studying labor markets, health and education. The only majority-female economics conference I've ever attended was on the economics of children, a field focused on schooling, family structure and child well-being. If there were more female economists, more attention would surely be paid to these issues.

The most striking statistics of all come from a survey taken over 20 years ago, in which 98 percent of women economists agreed with the proposition that "there is a 'good-old-boy' network in the economics profession." A smaller majority of men agreed. Without more women in the field, that kind of network is likely to persist.

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