
Introduction

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Economic life involves more than buying and selling things. The economic lives of women and men around the world are diverse – in the kinds of activities they engage in, the motivations that prioritize their choices, and the institutional and cultural contexts that can both narrow or enrich their options. In fact, our economic lives, and therefore our economies, are something that we continuously create and recreate through our daily activities.

We purposefully chose ‘Gender and Economic Life’ for the title and theme of this research handbook to reflect the interdisciplinary nature and global scope of the topic. We conceptualize economic life as a process of provisioning for well-being. Many of the activities of our daily lives, both paid and unpaid, are part of the process of provisioning for ourselves and those close to us. As such, understanding the ways in which gender relates to economic life requires much more than an understanding of economic theory. The economy does not exist in a vacuum; the economy is embedded in society, so all factors shaping societal behavior shape the economy as well. To understand economic life, then, we must explore the sociocultural norms that shape agency, the political and institutional forces that shape individual opportunity, and the multifaceted linkages (and disconnects) between policy intent and what actually happens ‘on the ground’.

Feminist scholarship has long noted that gender is a human construction, one that is created and recreated through our daily lives and activities. Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) refer to this process as ‘doing gender’. The fact that gender is a human construction is often invisible to us as we unconsciously pursue our daily lives (Lorber, 1994, p. 13). Yet the identity of being a man or being a woman takes on different meanings in different historical periods and cultural contexts due to the agency of human actors. Feminists, therefore, are keenly aware that our economic life is one arena in which we produce and reproduce gender identities; at the same time, our gender identities shape the economy that we create (Figart et al., 2002). Who can own or inherit property, who is defined as a ‘breadwinner’ deserving a family wage, the relative social value ascribed to paid and unpaid labor, and the degree of flexibility in labor markets are all examples of aspects of economic life that have been influenced by and in turn have reproduced prevailing gender norms.

To foster this exploration, we are pleased to present original, cutting-edge work from a variety of academics, practitioners and activists around the globe. The book is divided into seven parts. Part I, Analytical Tools, presents a variety of lenses through which feminist analysis of economic life occurs. Feminist scholars are often asked what feminist analysis is and whether it is simply a matter of investigating women’s lives as compared to men’s. Gender as an organizing principle of economic life is more complex. We want to give readers an understanding of possible entry points for gender-based analysis and some key facets of such analysis. Thus, the six chapters in Part I comprise an investigation of economics as social provisioning and how this differs from the mainstream

2 *Handbook of research on gender and economic life*

definition of economics as the process of allocating scarce resources; the ways that feminist scholarship has evolved over time and the cutting edge of analytical focal points in this field; the cross-cutting influences of gender, race, and class; the complications of defining (and thus attaining) well-being; the integral role that caring plays in economic life; and how our conceptualizations of economic life influence the teaching and learning process.

Part II is titled Institutional Contexts for Provisioning. Our lives are constantly influenced by the institutions that surround us, and though formal institutions and rules are certainly significant, it is equally important to consider informal institutions. Informal institutions such as social norms and legislative norms operate outside of official channels, but play a major role in structuring ‘the rules of the game’ for economic life processes. In this part, four chapters illustrate the gendered impacts of both formal and informal institutions, detailing the varieties of capitalisms as they shape provisioning; the role of international development institutions; infrastructure and institutional development; and the ways that institutions can constrain women’s empowerment.

This leads us to Part III, Informal and Formal Work. The existence and quality of paid employment opportunities play a significant role in shaping our lives. While most policy-making is based on a narrow conceptualization of work that includes only waged production in the formal sector of the economy, women in most countries around the world are more likely to work in the informal sector. But – as the five chapters in this part show – employment inequalities take many forms, from occupational segregation and the glass ceiling to discrimination in hiring, promotions, and firing based on sex, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Part IV, Employment Policies, focuses on methods (successful or not) to address these gendered employment outcomes. Because employment policy generally targets the formal sector, and the majority of employment in the global North occurs within this sector, chapters in this part focus on the developed world. Four chapters discuss policies impacting low-wage mothers, work-schedule flexibility, work–family reconciliation, and work-family conflict.

We then shift focus to the macro economy, finance, and credit. In comparison with paid labor, the gender dimension of the macro economy has been less studied, but is particularly important to analyze given the recent global economic downturn and emphasis worldwide on restructuring macroeconomic policies to support recovery. The first chapter in Part V provides an excellent overview of the linkage of gender to the macro economy, both in the short run and the long run, and the current state of research in this area. The next three chapters delve more deeply into central bank policy, credit and self-employment, debt, and the housing/financial crisis.

Part VI takes us on a tour around the world, investigating key issues of human development, education, and health as we do so. We learn about ways to measure human development (and limitations therein) before analyzing various facets of human development. Two chapters center on education, focusing on girls’ schooling, the evolving way education has been integrated into the global development agenda, and the multiple ways educational inequality arises. The next two chapters provide a current, comprehensive overview of the health of the world’s women as well as an investigation into gendered hazards and health effects for ultra-poor women. Our discussion of human

development would be incomplete without the last chapter in this part, which delves into the crucial issue of food security.

Part VII concludes the book with an exploration of the gender dimension of contemporary 'hot topics' commonly seen in the news and addressed by popular culture. Examples from these four chapters include migration (documented and undocumented), environmental degradation and sustainability, peace, war, violence, and trafficking.

What unifies the diverse topics, perspectives, and methodologies of the 33 contributions to this volume is a commitment to using scholarship to advance economic well-being, especially for those who often struggle at the margins of our economy. Each author brings a unique perspective that contributes to our understanding. Weaving together the fabric of these different threads, the volume advances feminist scholarship on economic life.

REFERENCES

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