

# **International Women's Day**

## **Opening Remarks**

Presentation Theme:  
Macroeconomics from a Gender Perspective

by  
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For all of you who are already using gender analysis in economics and for all who are somewhat perplexed by the gendered surge in economics -- welcome!

Depuis toujours, les préjugés sexistes abondent dans le domaine des sciences, y compris les sciences humaines, et particulièrement dans la façon dont les problèmes sont présentés, conceptualisés et rationalisés. Concrètement, cela signifie que l'expérience des femmes a, en règle générale, été exclue des systèmes officiels de production des connaissances. Laissez-moi vous donner un exemple concret et amusant qui illustre fort bien cette affirmation :

Roberta Bondar tells engaging stories about life as the first female Canadian astronaut. She recently spoke in Ottawa and told us about the bathroom facilities in space. Think about it for a moment. I know it's a delicate subject, but it really drives home the point. Imagine the effect of gravity on the process of emptying one's bladder--now, imagine no gravity. Apparently NASA had invented a contraption to allow the astronauts to use the bathroom--A HOSE. It was relatively simple for men to use, but a hose may not have been the invention of choice had the device been designed by a woman, or even a man with both men and women in mind. The "hose method" of using the bathroom turned out to be so uncomfortable, that Dr. Bondar intentionally dehydrated herself to avoid having to use it too often!<sup>1</sup>

The preceding example--amusing as it is--still helps me to explain a couple of things. Obviously those developing the space shuttle never expected women to be astronauts during the lifetime of that prototype. Yet, even after Dr. Bondar was admitted to the "astronaut club," the bathroom technology was still assumed to be appropriate for her needs. **She** was expected to adapt to the technology, rather than the other way around. In my vision of the world--and I am sure IDRC employees here are breathing a sigh of relief--this is right off the scale in terms of making appropriate demands on ones' employees!

Il y aurait de nombreux autres exemples de cas où l'apport et les besoins des femmes, voire les femmes elles-mêmes sont sous-évaluées ou bien il n'en est pas tenu compte, et ce dans presque tous les domaines. Examinons donc cette question du point de vue de l'économique, le principal domaine d'intérêts de notre discussion d'aujourd'hui. D'ailleurs, les propos tenus par un économiste de l'environnement célèbre constituent selon moi l'exemple parfait de cette tendance. Vous avez certainement tous entendu parler de E.F. Schumacher. Voici ce qu'il a écrit au milieu des années 60 :

"Women on the whole, do not need an outside job, and the large-scale employment of women in offices or factories would be considered a sign of serious economic failure".<sup>2</sup>

To me, this statement shows an inability, even in such an enlightened thinker, to conceive of women as full economic and social actors, who have needs to fulfil and contributions to make outside of

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<sup>1</sup> Bondar, Roberta. Public presentation at the National Arts Centre, on 23 February 1998, Ottawa.

<sup>2</sup> E. F. Schumacher, **Buddhist Economics**, Social Policy, 1973, V4, N3, pp 27-30.

the home, as well as inside. The inability of existing systems to properly account for women's labour let alone to properly value and compensate for it, particularly in a developing country context, has provided the necessary impetus for creative and inspired new thinking. Feminists' exploration into women's ways of knowing have brought research omissions back into focus.

Bringing the point to economic analysis even more finely, one can look at the System of National Accounts, which has been criticized for its exclusion of non-market activity. It hardly needs to be emphasized that the productive efforts in society affecting the economy at the micro and macro levels include household non-market production, as well as market production. Yet, the assumptions hidden behind this economic tool developed for the purpose of collecting information guarantees that much of the work of poor men and women, and particularly the reproductive labour of women, goes unreported. This is perhaps the most telling example of how "objective" methods may actually produce and re-produce the invisibility of the contributions made by poor women and men to the economy. This argument is evocatively made by Marilyn Waring in the film *Who's Counting*, which some of you may have had a chance to see during this afternoon's film fest.

I am not trying to paint a picture of a grand conspiracy here, one which involves identifying and storming "Patriarch Headquarters."<sup>3</sup> I **AM** trying to provide you with concrete examples of where thoughtful and probably well-intentioned human beings, in the fields of science and technology, economics, and development, among other fields of study, have been affected by their assumptions in their work. These assumptions then played themselves out in their practical discoveries, policies and ways of thinking. It could be that good unbiased science places the researcher in the same critical plane as the research subject, rather than situating that person as a detached observer.<sup>4</sup> I think that gendered analysis tries to make visible this link between the observer and the observed and challenges the longheld assumption that there is no connection.

Les femmes et les hommes peuvent être victimes des mêmes obstacles conceptuels. Bon nombre des membres du personnel du CRDI ont peut-être entendu notre collègue Joachim Voss raconter qu'il avait vu au cours de son expérience sur le terrain des femmes aux Philippines travaillant dans leurs champs, bêche à la main, qui expliquaient aux conseillers agricoles que l'agriculteur de la famille c'était leur mari. Dans certaines régions de l'Afrique du Sud, des femmes des régions rurales vous diront qu'elles n'ont pas le droit d'être propriétaire d'une terre - ayant été conditionnées à croire que seuls les hommes pouvaient posséder des biens-fonds.

Closer to home, our own gendered practices may reinforce sex-roles and leave our value systems unexamined. For example, the undervaluation of women's reproductive work is exemplified in the influx of foreign domestic labour into Canada in 1991. In that year, the federal government through a special programme successfully encouraged more than 7,000 female foreign domestic

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<sup>3</sup> R. W. Connell, "The state, gender, and sexual politics," **Theory and Society**, Number XXIX, 1990, 517

<sup>4</sup> Harding, Sandra (ed.) *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*. Indiana University Press, USA, 1987, p. 9.

workers to enter Canada. Women domestic workers earn a minimum wage, and since they often live with their employers under the Live-In Caregiver program, they also remit to their employers weekly room and board deductions. This sub-minimum wage is an indicator of the status of caregiving in our society. So low was this status that even in a record year of unemployment Canadian men and women would not provide this service. Classic research confirms this analysis; people who care for animals in zoos are often better paid than people who provide care for human children.

As early as 1970, Esther Boserup was beginning to use her background in economics to address what she identified as gaps in economic thinking.<sup>5</sup> In recent years there has been momentum--largely generated by feminist scholars--toward using economic tools to draw attention to the omissions in mainstream economic discourse.<sup>6</sup> Since those early days there now exists a journal devoted entirely to feminist economics, as well as a thriving network, the International Association for Feminist Economists.

So why explore the link between gender and macroeconomics on International Women's Day?

L'approche féministe de l'économie traditionnelle, dont fait état la macro-économie fondée sur une optique masculine, vient à point nommé. La réforme économique que s'empressent d'apporter les pays socialistes et les récentes défaillances des marchés dans certains pays d'Asie ouvrent des débats à de nouvelles influences. Les économistes qui ne tiennent pas pour acquis le bien fondé des grandes prémisses qui sous-tendent leurs travaux apporteront peut-être un nouvel élan dans le domaine. Le fait que des organisations comme l'*International Association for Feminist Economics* existent et attirent des esprits brillants et bien intentionnés est une preuve de progrès en soi. En outre, il existe certainement d'après moi un lien entre le fait d'être sur le point de surmonter les obstacles conceptuels et le fait de réaliser des progrès en matière d'égalité. Une nouvelle optique scientifique tenant compte des deux sexes pourra relancer la notion selon laquelle le développement sur le plan économique peut promouvoir le développement sur le plan humain.

In conclusion, I would like to refer back to my opening comments. While I used Dr. Bondar's experience in space to make a lighthearted point, she is undoubtedly a pioneer in her own right. Just before I go, however, I would like to recognize some other pioneers on this front. Recently, Canadian and American hockey fans alike learned an important lesson with regard to assumptions about women. Now they know...a country should never send a man to do a women's job!

I look forward to hearing from our learned guests. And so with no further ado, I will now introduce to you the moderator for today's discussion, Rohinton Medhora.

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<sup>5</sup> Boserup, Esther, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1970.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *The Strategic Silence: Women and Economic Policy* (1994); *Out of the Margins: Feminist Perspectives on Economics* (1995); *Rethinking Restructuring: Gender and Change in Canada* (1996); an entire issue of a World Development Journal entitled *Gender Adjustment and Macroeconomics* (1995).

Dr. Medhora received his doctorate in economics in 1988 from the University of Toronto, where he also subsequently taught for a number of years. He is currently Senior Specialist in Economics in IDRC's Programs Branch, responsible for the *Trade, Employment and Competitiveness* Program. While his fields of expertise are monetary and trade policy, and international economic relations he is also responsible for managing a set of projects on the micro impacts of macroeconomic and adjustment policies.