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# Care in Feminist Economics

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## 《Abstract》

This article reviews the literature in the field of care in terms of the concept and methodology. This is an area that has been under theorised in mainstream economics, but that has received considerable attention over the last few decades by feminist economics. The provisioning of caring service is a social as well as an economic issue and it is increasingly difficult even for conventional economics to consider caring activities. The integration of caring situation into economic thinking poses the task and the challenge of conceptualizing a situation of human interaction quite different from the typical exchange situation. In this article, the impact of caring on economics theorizing is addressed.

## Key words

Agency, care, caring motivation, choice theory, constitutive act, structure, relative autonomy of family

## 1. Introduction

The provisioning of caring service is a “social as well as an economic issue” (Jochimsen 2003 : 231). It has long left the original realm of their provisioning and are performed in all realms of the economy—in the

individually private sector (family), in the civil society, in the public sector and an increasingly fraction in the market. This position of care in economy is summarized in the time use study by Nancy Folbre and Julie Nelson:

“In 1900, about 4 percent of all workers were employed in professional care services. By 1998, about one-fifth of the paid labor force was engaged in a professional care industry.” (Folbre and Nelson 2000 : 126)

The future of social and caring work has tremendous implications for human well-being. While such work may have been thought of as intellectually uninteresting because it was “naturally” abundant in supply, the profound changes taking place in gender norms sharply call into question the wisdom of continuing to neglect this area of study.

Now, it has become clear from the wide literature on care that it is difficult to talk about care without touching on a wide number of topics important to feminist economics. It requires us to think about what we mean by care activities, such as domestic labour, unpaid labour, reproductive labour, volunteer labour, contingent labour, pay inequality, comparable worth, as well as methodological consideration, such as the ‘neutrality’ of science, hierarchical dualisms, human being, human interaction. In addition, care labour is affected by social norms and public policies such as diverse and changing family situations, government redistribution policies, family policies.

In considering care labour feminist economics have criticised the mainstream understanding. In particular, the concerns raised by feminist economists veer away from selfishly maximising homo economicus in the ideallized hypothetical market. To economists who take into the

view that social, familial, and sexual behavior has always been a matter of choice and exchange, the movement of care work into market may be merely a rearrangement of activities in response to income and relative price changes (as much of Cary Becker's vision of economics). The problem here is the lack of a qualitative change, leading to such new arrangement of choice.

This article reviews the literature in the field of care in terms of the impact of caring on economics. More specifically, we observe how feminists have critiqued, extensively and justifiably, the mainstream's untenable assumptions regarding human nature<sup>1)</sup> as presupposed by their deductive methodology. The economics literature has gradually moved from a mainstream reductionist view of the provision of care, to one that, with feminist criticisms and contributions, moves towards a real world.

We observe, however, the tensions that arise between the critique feminist put forward, based on a particular conception of the social world, and the possibility to engage with mainstream economic. Much of the feminist economics literature still works within a deductive framework of analysis (England and Folbre 2003 : 62) geared towards only quantitative predicting<sup>2)</sup>.

In other words, feminist economists have introduced realism in the discipline but they have not yet systematically rejected the mainstream deductive methodology. Instead, there have been attempts to integrate

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1) These are the assumptions that economic agents have perfect foresight, live forever, are rational utility maximisers and so on and so forth.

2) Note that claims to Marxist, Keynesian, New Institutional and Feminist Economics can be found both in orthodox and heterodox economics, where the difference lies essentially in the methodology chosen. Typically, the former adopt deductive methods and seek to make quantitative predictions, while the latter emphasise qualitative explanations in terms of underlying mechanisms (influences).

new features that aim at being more representative of reality, working on ‘improving’ neo classical cost-benefit analyses, game theory, bargaining models, new institutionalism and new household economics<sup>3</sup>). This particular trend is visible in the way in which care labour is being theorised. Suzanne Helburn (1999 : 43) observes that the “scope and quality of empirical work by economists on child care is limited by a preference for econometric techniques”. In this point, furthermore, Jane Humphries and Jill Rubery said refer to equal opportunity:

“Can an equal opportunities perspective be used to query the language and calculus of traditional economic cost-benefit analysis? And can an alternative calculus be put in its place?” (Humphries and Rubery 1995)

## 2. New Household Economics and Care

The application of rigorous neo-classical microeconomic foundations

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3) The international association for feminist economics (IAFFE) was established in 1992 and since then has gathered members who divided largely into two groups in terms of the methodological point of view. The first group comprises feminist neo-classical economists, who apply the feminist perspective to an existing economic theory or to improve neo-classical theory by removing its male bias. The second group consists of feminist political economists, who rejects neo-classical economics and undertake its feminist reconstruction to find an alternative. The second group, moreover, divides into two subgroups. The first of them seeks to construct a feminist political economy but is influenced by neo-classical institutional models or traditional institutional theory. The second addresses the problem in more general methodological terms than does the feminist representation. In other words, it pursues the construction of a new and gender sensitive political economy by posing the problem of what methodology most convincingly accounts for the relationship between structure and agency. The point is whether the methodology might be able to change the framework of neo-classical economics to construct an alternative. (See also Hara 2004)

to the behaviour of households was first advanced by Becker (1957, 1964) and Mincer (1962, 1974)<sup>4</sup>. The cornerstone of New household economics is its conceptualisation of household activity as the joint welfare maximisation of its members through the production of goods (objects of utility) by some amalgamation of household labour, technology and accrued assets (Becker 1965, 1976).

Becker (1985) has written on the sexual division of labour within the family and the allocation on time between alternatives as follows:

“Increasing returns from specialized human capital is a powerful force creating a division of labor in the allocation of time and investment capital between married men and married women. Moreover, since child care and housework are more effort intensive of market work than married men working the same number of hours. Hence, married women have lower hourly earnings than married men with the same market human capital, and they economize on the effort expended on market by seeking less demanding jobs.” (Becker 1985)

In this model, intra-household bargaining outcomes are dependent on both maximising production of the objects of utility as well as on maximising the joint welfare of household members. The allocation of labour is treated akin to the allocation of other household resources. On the basis of productivity-related comparative advantage, labour is apportioned into different uses, such as market oriented activities, domestic production and leisure, so as to equalise marginal returns to each unit of labour.

The supply of female labour is assumed to be a function of the wages

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4) This field is often referred to as the economics of the family (Schultz, 1974 : Cigno, 1991) or household economics (Hagenaars and Wunderink-van Veen, 1990).

of both married men and women (Mincer, 1962). Based on the principle of comparative advantage, married women chose between remunerative work and leisure, as well as house-work (See Cain, 1966 ; Mincer and Polachek, 1974 ; Humphries 1995b). This model does away with intra-household differences (i.e. is unable to account for any skew between collective household decisions and the maximisation of the individual utilities of its members) by assuming that the family is a single harmonious unit with consistent preferences, those of a dictatorial but altruistic (and male) household head (Bergman 1995).

Ott (1995) assumes that there are three types of family transaction that generate a surplus:

- as a production company, a family has members which can exploit comparative advantages by specializing in market and work at home in conjunction with intra-family trade.
- as a consumer cooperative, the family allows the joint use of the indivisible goods and achieves decreasing costs through economies of scale.
- as an insurance coalition, the family produces security through the exchange of mutual promises for aid<sup>5)</sup>.

The neo-classical model has unequivocal ramifications on the

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5) Notburga Ott (1995) analyses the division of work within the family by using a bargaining model and seek to improve Becker's model from a feminist perspective. Otto demonstrates that Becker's traditional view of household production and the narrow framework within which the above potential profits realized, claiming instead that they require long-term contracts within the family. Because the willingness to agree to such contracts depends on individual welfare, the distribution of the total household production affects the behaviour of family members. Similarly, Åsa Rosén (1993) proves the existence of a stable discriminatory equilibrium in the job market that leads to inefficient outcomes in the long run. Although these interpretation draw attention to neo-classical conclusion that are biased against women, they are rooted in the standard assumption of rationality and self-interest and are hence subject to the same rational conceptual critique advanced against New Household Economics models.

dynamics of intra-household relations. For one, the model asserts that targeting resources to vulnerable members in a household will have no greater effect other than increasing the overall level of income of the household (presumably because the benevolent head diverts resources from targeted individuals to untargeted individuals in order to re-establish the overall household welfare equilibrium). Second, the question of individual ownership and property rights within the household are of little consequence to the joint welfare of household members as the altruistic head of the family redistributes all resources. Finally, the New Household Economics model is rooted in the concept of economic efficiency, implying that there are metric measures of intra-household well-being and that all human needs can be satisfied by market based exchange.

The study and interpretation of caring as the result of preferential choices in the New household economics model (e.g. Becker 1976, 1981 ; Gustafsson 1997) leads to two different concepts of caring based on two different sets of assumptions.

Maren Jochimsen (2003) summarised:

- a concept of caring between equally capable adults characterized by interdependent utility functions (economic altruism) of caregiver and care receiver;
- a concept of parental care for children which assumes that the (dependent) care receiver figures as a durable consumption or production good within the set of commodities which render utility to the caregiver. (Jochimsen 2003 : 232)

The problem here is that the focus in New household economics is on



fully capable autonomous agents. In both cases, potentially underlying asymmetries and dependencies do not come into the theoretical picture. In the absence of a concept of asymmetry, autonomy and equality of caregiver and care receiver are presupposed.

Furthermore, the model of the unified household can be critiqued on different levels. Most critics are of the opinion that the neoclassical model at best describes the *status quo* in a society where gendered roles are predetermined (Humphries and Rubery 1984). The criterion of Pareto optimality has been faulted by feminists for incorrectly implying that the notion of well-being can be captured by quantitative indices and that all values are commensurable. These assumptions reduce the significance of non-market activities that traditionally constitute women's work in deference to market based transactions.

Also central to neo-classical theory is the gendered and androcentric nature of *homo economicus*, existing outside the boundaries of social and cultural influences (Barker 1999 ; 571). Feminists have long suspected that the economists' conception of human agency characterised by the dichotomous assumptions of altruism within the household and self-interest in the market place, have been motivated by masculine self-interest (Folbre and Hartmann 1988 and Strassman 1993). Women's choice to work at home or in poorly remunerated employment seems to stem from rational calculations influenced by biological incapacities (Cohen 1982). Under these assumptions, the process of gender stereotyping is overlooked and the benefits of sexual division of labour accruing to men are not acknowledged (Bergmann, 1995 and Blau and Ferber 1992). In sharp contrast, feminists have long asserted that the division of labour cannot be grounded in biological differences, indicating that such specialisations are social rather than natural.

Finally, issues such as power and control receive scant attention in neoclassical theory. Where power is discussed, its exercise by the head of the household (rational economic agent) is deemed as altruistic, leaving no room for exploring the potential of 'women's empowerment' in such an account.

An alternative view of the household was proposed, suggesting that power and not benevolence characterised the intra-family decision-making process. This approach, which applies the bargaining model to decision-making situations, casts the problems of resource allocation within the household in a game-theoretic context. A comparison of the bargaining approach with New household economics models is undertaken by Robert Pollak (1985) who locates the analysis of the family in the sphere of New institutional economics. This approach highlights the system of values, norms and preferences that underpin the organisation of intra-household structures.

In contrast to the New household economics models, the transactions-cost approach does away with the concept of joint preference ordering and postulates that the process of bargaining determines how the gains from cooperation are distributed within the family ( Sen 1982). This approach models intra-household allocations on the assets and earning potential of individual members as well as on the collective income of the household as a unit. It uses the term contract as a metaphor to analyse the evolution of nonmarket institutions and long-term relationships and more crucially, in the study of the social organisation of care (Ben-Porath 1982 ; Folbre and Weisskopf 1998 ; England and Folbre 2003). Scholars argue that the model of the distributional struggle between the various players in a household should be extended to explain the ways in which specific contractual arrangements reflect

and reproduce the differences in the relative power of men and women (England and Folbre 2003).

Although the bargaining approach to intrahousehold decision-making problems is more versatile than traditional neoclassical applications, it is still largely based on traditional assumptions.

Successful econometric analysis requires a closed and controlled social world. It is the structured nature of the social world that explains, *ex posteriori*, the failures of formal modeling in economics (Barker 2003). In effect, econometric prediction assumes that all conditions are invariant and that social abstractions are immutable, static phenomenon. It is intuitively apparent that this is an incorrect premise of the nature of the social reality. Indisputably, the social world is open, reflecting the concepts of human choice, intentionality, purpose and creativity (Lawson 1997, 1999).

### **3. Feminist Economics and Care**

In mainstream economics (New household economics), the use of theoretical basis for the evaluation of caring activities are still widely dispersed. Feminist approaches will challenge the standard mainstream assumption of *homo economicus* in dispassionate pursuit of self interest in terms of human agency and human relation (Ferber and Nelson 1993).

#### **3.1 *Feminist neo-classical economics***

Feminist economists endeavour to change economic theory. Gustafsson (1997) has presented the following three versions of the feminist approach. The first rejects neo-classical theory and argues that there is a need for alternative feminist economics (see also, Hara 2004).

The second version maintains the feminist perspective is applied to an existing economic theory, different policy implication will be drawn. The third argues that feminist economics will improve neo-classical theory by removing its male bias and may thus reveal mechanisms by which the overall efficiency of the economy can be increased.

The first version disagrees with the neo-classical economics in terms of methodological framework. This view stems to large extent from heterodox theories such as Marxian economics and Institutional economics. The second and third are known feminist neoclassical economics (Gustafsson 1997 : 50), which is essentially based on the neoclassical economics' framework and in particular on methodological individualism and the efficiency. Gustafsson endorses the second view and seeks to go one step further by putting forward the third view: namely that the male bias in economics may conceal important economic mechanisms, and this may give rise to policy recommendation which are less economically efficient. Sometimes a more equal distribution of income among the members of society can be equally efficient, but there is often a trade-off between efficiency and equality. Analysis of feminist goals can then be framed in terms of this trade-off between efficiency and equality (Hara 2004)

Feminist neo-classical economics unites within itself the following two characteristics. First, it seeks to improve neo-classical economics by using tools of such as neo-classical economic method. For example, Gustafsson assumes that neo-classical economics is the best theory with which to analyze changes in prices and incomes, while it contrary cannot be used for long-term prediction. According to Gustafsson, using the tools of neo-classical economics with gender awareness may yield arguments for reforms that produce a society which is at the same time

more economically efficient and closer to the feminist vision. It seems that feminist neo-classical economics is theoretically based on the neo-classical economics and is politically (as policy-making) applies the feminist perspective to an existing economic theory. For example, the work of Ott (1992) demonstrates that even if the division of work based on comparative advantage is efficient in the short-term (as Becker (1981) postulated), in the long run it is a sub optimal solution as it implies decreased bargaining power and access to extra-household opportunities for the partner specializing in household work. Although these interpretation draw attention to neo-classical conclusions that are biased against women, they are rooted in the standard assumptions of rationality and self-interest and are hence subject to the same rational conceptual critique against New Household Economics models. Also in terms of the study and interpretation of caring, feminist neoclassical economics attempts to understand the provision of caring within the traditional analytical framework( methodological individualism) of economic science.

### ***3.2 Feminist political economy***

The Feminist political economy is, moreover, divided into two sub-groups. The first of them seeks to construct a feminist political economy but is influenced by New (neoclassical) institutional models such as the transaction cost approach and the game theory. The second addresses the problem in more general methodological terms than does the feminist representation. In other words, it pursues the construction of “a new and gender-sensitive political economy” (Humphries 1998, p. 224) by posing the problem of what methodology most convincingly accounts for “the relationship between structure and agency” (ibid).

The point is whether the methodology might be able to change the framework of neoclassical economics to construct an alternative.

I refer here to Abel and Nelson (1990), England and Folbre (2003), and Folbre and Weisskopf (1998), as a typical example of the former group of feminist political economy and Humphries (1998), Humphries and Rubery (1984), and Himmelweit (1995, 2002b, 2003) as latter. Former is, of course, engaged in constructing a feminist political economy by applying the feminist approach, but does so very much under the influence of analytical marxism and the New institutionalist schools.

### *Caring motivation*

Paula England and Nancy Folbre (2003) provide a useful review of the various definitions for care that have been advance. Emily Abel and Margaret Nelson (1990 : 4) argue “care giving is an activity encompassing both instrumental tasks and affective relations”. Motivations from which caring activities may spring include welfare as well as moral considerations such as affection, a sense of responsibility or obligation, intrinsic enjoyment, expectations of long-term reciprocity, a well-defined and contracted-for reward, fear of punishment stemming from coercion-ranged from the most caring to the least caring( Folbre and Weisskopf 1998 : 178). Jochimsen (2003) calls these concepts “*two-fold* concepts of caring because they distinguishes two dimensions of caring and assume that two ingredients are needed for the effective provision of a caring service: the provision of an instrumental caring service (*instrumental dimension*) and a caring motivation (*communicative dimension*)” (Jochimsen 2003 : 234).

“Two-fold concepts” of caring is beyond the Beckerian production of household commodities. Because it take the concept beyond the house-

hold and the family, the neighborhood and the working place. "Caring work can apply to both men and women, the market and the family, production and reproduction" (Folbre 1995 : 76) Jochimsen assumed that focusing on the importance and role of the caring motivation or making it the defining characteristic of caring activities may run the risk of individualizing and privatizing caring as well as sentimentalizing. (Jochimsen 2003) Susan Himmelweit (1996) has argued that the dualistic treatment of motivation versus activity might presuppose too much of the neoclassical economist's emphasis on choice behavior.

*Caring as a constitutive act*

"Susan Himmelweit (1996) criticizes the motivation/activity dualism as a familiar approach to neo-classical economics in terms of methodological individualism. The problem here is what is an appropriate methodology to analyse a human behaviour, that of men and women, in existing society. Himmelweit proposes caring as a constitutive act and assumes that not caring is not conceived as an option, since caring itself structures people's lives of many care receivers hinge on their caregivers. Especially in caring situation in which the care receiver is existentially dependent on the caregiver, "not caring is not usually an operational alternative" (Himmelwet 1996 : 9) Caring behavior is ultimately to be considered a social matter as well, and may reflect a sense of identity involving the recognition of other people's goals and the mutual interdependencies involved" (Jochimsen 2003 : 235).

*The relative autonomy of the family*

Humphries and Rubery (1984) has examined the main approaches to the analysis of the family system from the methodological point of view,

using the criterion of its consistency. They show that across the whole spectrum of theoretical approaches, from neoclassical to Marxist and feminist, broadly similar methodologies for analyzing the relationship between the spheres of production and reproduction have been employed. (ibid., p.331) According to Humphries and Rubery, the existing literature applies two opposing but equally inappropriate approaches to analysis of the family system : approaches which they call *absolute autonomy* and *reductionist/functionalist*. In the former approach, the family system is taken as 'given' and independent of the production system, which must adapt to and operate within its constraints. In the latter approach, the family system is an integral and adaptable part of the broader production system and is essentially a dependent variable within the economic system. Humphries and Rubery take *relative autonomus* approach as the appropriate one with which to analyse the relationship between the spheres of production and reproduction.

I find it interesting that this approach's credence is paradoxically assumed on the basis of the failure of existing studies "to apply their *absolute autonomy or reductionist/functionalist* approaches consistently or plausibly" (ibid., p.332) Humphries and Rubery maintain that the '*ad hoc adjustment*' of existing works leads to swings between one methodology and another in order to make sense of empirical realities. The questioning here is which approach does justice to the role of the family system plays in shaping the structure and development of the economic system.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

The article has considered some methodological issues fo central



importance to the study of the care and the relationship between the market and the family, examining for the purpose of the issues concerning New household economics, Feminist neoclassical economics and two streams of Feminist political economy. It has followed Humphries in emphasizing that the relationship between the family system and the market system must be analyzed using the relative autonomous approach both historically and dynamically. The family system and the provisioning of care are not autonomously determined, as under patriarchy, nor does it respond smoothly, predictably or accommodatingly to the market. From the feminist standpoint tradition, patriarchal theory has often combined men's oppression of women with a historically specific form of economic organization to explain gender division. Furthermore, the relative openness of structural analysis may prove attractive to feminists disillusioned with the restriction of neoclassical economics. Humphries writes :

“Economists’ methodology has long been criticized for its naive failure to problematise the relationship between structure and agency. But it would be equally naive to see these failings as amenable to some marginal readjustment of economic theory. To respond to these feminist criticisms would involve major changes in the practice of economics. It is a useful lesson for those who would construct a new and gender-sensitive political economy” (Humphries 1998, p.224)

It is important, I believe, that the meaning of the persistency of the family system should be analyzed by using the relative autonomous approach. The family, as an institution, has been shaped by the aspiration of people for personalized nonmarket methods of distribution and social interaction. Theory of value and distribution must take account

of the structure and organization of the family as well as those to the labour market. The major economic paradigms, however, mainly Neoclassical Economics, neglect the family system and the provisioning of care in their construction of a theory of distribution.

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