

If you don't invest in your daughter then she will have a very limited opportunity in the economy: **Vibhuti Patel**

Prof. Vibhuti Patel is a distinguished academician, social thinker, researcher and speaker from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. She is known for her extensive research and expertise in the issues concerned with women. She has delivered talks on gender issues at several conferences in India and abroad. She is a post-doctoral fellow of London School of Economics and has authored many books, monographs, research papers, commentaries and reviews. Some of her works are included for policy-making as well.



She is on the editorial board of many learned journals. She has bagged many awards including the awards from the Mayor of Mumbai and The Times Foundation.

*Open Interview brings Prof. Patel's interview with **Lavanya Shanbhogue-Arvind** with the objective to understand the growth and development of feminist economics and how it is more relevant in the today's time. She is categorical about the necessity to consider the household labour of women and thus emphasizes that their contributions should not be excluded from GDP.*

- **Feminist economics has emerged as a key discipline in its own right. How did this domain emerge?**

Feminist economics as a discipline emerged in the 70s with the rise of the women's movement. The movement at that time was aimed at fighting various forms of subjugations and injustices meted out to women. The only way to bring about systemic changes was through studying those problems deeply and in this way 'women's studies' emerged as a discipline. This discipline has a clear-cut mandate to challenge the subordination of women and the patriarchal controls over women's sexuality, fertility, labour amongst other issues.

No doubt different voices of resistance came from several mainstream fields when there were changes in disciplines, emergence of insurgent sociologies, challenges to political sciences and mainstream economics whose foundation was based on the 'Rational Economic Man.' However, this new thinking was the result of post-colonialism and post-coloniality. It was in this context that gender economics or feminist economics came into existence. This challenged the male-centric worldview of economics as a discipline.

• **What are the different kinds of oppressions and patriarchies (in the plural) that play out to prevent women's participation in the economy?**

I would attribute/impute the prevention of women's full and sustained participation in the economy to what I would call the cocktail of religious fundamentalism and market fundamentalism. In developing countries, there is tremendous child labour. Within household, the labour of women and girl children needs consideration. They collect fuel, fodder, water, provide animal care, kitchen gardening, farming care and do other household chores. All these are considered as important functions in an agrarian or subsistence economies. However, the problem is that the work done by these women and girls is not accounted for in the national income, whether it is calculated by using income method or production method. Thus, *women's contributions are excluded from GDP.*

Moreover, institutions such as family, kinship networks, religion, media, etc. play a very important role in the social construction of gender relations. These institutions impose the domestic domain on women. They do not want women to participate in the market but contribute only to the household.

Apart from this, there is a market fundamentalism. These market fundamentalists also don't support social security and social protection for women because it is an economic burden on businesses that reduces profits. This cocktail of religious fundamentalism and market fundamentalism works against women's interests. Gender economists are trying to defy these forces by stating that both civil society and the state have to enable social security.

• **What can we do to combat this cocktail of fundamentalisms?**

The provision of social security in terms of income protection and expanding its scope by means of state-supported subsidized education, health measures, skill development, leadership development, etc. will change the situation for both women and children. This because the moment you enhance social security and expand the net of social protection, women's dependence on oppressive domestic forces and patriarchy declines. Thus social security is an alternative for both fundamentalisms.

- **What are some of the issues that gender economics raises?**

German anthropologist Maria Mies calls women as the “last colony.” The last quarter of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century saw the development of capitalism. As it is not possible to politically subjugate a nation-state owing to the global dictates on political behaviour, the only way to continue economic exploitation is through feminisation of workforce.

It is important to understand that economic behaviour is socially constructed as politics, customs, tradition, institutions all have a tremendous influence on the economic and market behaviour. The same subjugations in tradition will get replicated in the market as well. If you don't invest in your daughter or a girl child then obviously, she will have very limited opportunity in the economy. She will end up doing work in the informal sector which is a monotonous dead-end kind of job. This is because you have not imparted any kind of skill. Even when women do work, they would remain invisible. They end up engaging in unpaid family work.

- **Could you explain this with an example as to how exploitation through feminization of workforce is prevalent?**

Let us take an example of Surat, a garment and textile hub of Gujarat. The prosperity of the city rests on the unpaid labour of women. If you manage to get cheap and affordable *salwar kameez* materials there- remember that the small-scale industries are producing all that! These are all home-based productions. Here women work around the clock without minimum income or pension. They hardly take half-an-hour break for cooking and other household chores. There is little or no rest. In these kinds of home-based work, there are no possibilities of workers coming together to fight against the unjust system. Hence, wherever there is this type of home-based work, women are given employment

- **Is this unjust system a universal situation?**

Since 1985, we have been seeing that there has been international division of labour where most of the production units have been shifted to Asian countries. This is because Asian women whether they are influenced by Hinduism or Islamic ideology, have been socialised in an extremely disciplined manner. Even a young girl child will have basic skills like doing needle work or embroidery. She's not scared of scissors and knives because she has helped in the kitchen. However, women's work at home remains invisible even in many parts of the world.

- **So what are the other important issues or questions that the gender economists are concerned with?**

It is necessary to know that another very important issue in gender economics is the demography of gender. Gender economists study how various economic factors like sex ratio, maternal-mortality

checks, child mortality, life expectancy, etc. play an important role in determining the demographic indicators which are about the population, work participation, educational opportunities and also about the kind of career choices women make.

Thus, the gender economists or feminists ask straight questions about women's position in society. They ask: where are women in the pyramid of the economy? Are they at the bottom of the pyramid? Do they have any decision-making power? What is the workforce participation of women? In what way is economic development of the country linked to workforce participation of the women in different sectors? In which sector (of the economy) do women play a dominant role-- Is it the agrarian sector, service sector or industrial sector?

• **How does gender economics influence policy-making and in this connection, on what issues the gender economists are really concerned with?**

In fact, the questions that I shared of feminists, in true sense pushed governments and institutions to make better policies.

There are several ways in which gender economics influences policy. For instance, gender audits of budgets are highly important. This means that whatever gender related commitments the state is making has to be translated into financial commitments. Plus, it also raises the question as to how to bend the forces of markets in favour of women as markets are also socially constructed. Caste, class, race, religion, ethnicity, your location - whether you are in urban area or rural area, remote place or well connected through infrastructure - all play a significant role in the predicament of women in the economy. So, the feminist economists are concerned to ensure that the economic and social status of women become the agenda of annual audit.

Next, there is gender planning and policy-making. Gender economists have played a splendid role in bending the power structures to enable women to top leadership positions so that they can challenge patriarchy at that level. On the other hand, there are women who at the community level build pressure and demand more space for themselves within the economy.

Gender economists are also concerned with bottom-up approach, this means- Gender Responsive Participatory Budget making. It basically involves sitting with the community, identifying their needs and coming up with a micro-plan. It also involves capacity building of women elected representatives or people in governance structures.

Thus, policies that encourage more and more women in the government can change the economic behaviour and ultimately solve the economic problems of the region or the nation. It can also change the question of the creation of global solidarities. We can learn these from the best practices from around the world.

- **What is the international response to the women's movement?**

Seeing the challenges to mainstream economics by the women's movements around the world, organizations like the United Nations also got involved. The year 1975 was declared as the International Women's Year and 1975-1985 was declared as the United Nations Decade for Women. It also created UN Women and other institutional bodies like the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN INSTRAW) which provides gender related statistics, indicators of women's empowerment and gender disaggregated data.

Moreover, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) came out with Human Development Reports and owing to gender economists, this was later made gender sensitive and emerged as the Gender Development Index (GDI). Further, Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) was introduced. Questions of women's freedom, autonomy, justice, political participation in decision making, all these were quantified and the indicators were developed. All these were the incredible responses to women's movement.

- **Are there any global gender models or best practices that we can emulate here?**

Yes, there are many. Specifically, one can learn from Brazil's conditional cash transfer scheme or 'Food Security Portal' in several Latin American countries, or the way Africa addressed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) target and reduced maternal mortality and child mortality. Some African countries created 'soup kitchens' to reduce hunger in which women are mostly affected. These kinds of models from other countries maybe studied and used to empower the communities.

- **In the Indian context, are there any specific gender model/s that you wish to highlight?**

In India, we have economic experiments like Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). SEWA has pioneered the provision of insurance to poor women, supported by trade unions. There are other initiatives of SEWA where women are given skill development training and training for building cooperative societies. These sorts of initiatives, either replicating other global models or skilling our women and protecting them with social security and affirmative action will help greatly.

- **How does affirmative action (or reservations) help women?**

Reservation/ affirmative action brings the state in. Take the case of affirmative action for women headed households which are the poorest of the poor households that are managed by widows, single women, separated women, deserted women and women who have faced long-term migration of their men. When the state looks after their livelihood needs then these women will not be capitulated into vested interests such as trafficking. However, there are sectarian forces,

conservative forces, religious fundamentalists who oppose social security and social protection for women because they lose control on their women.

We must also focus on the strategic gender needs in terms of quotas for women in the workplace, in parliamentary houses, in male-dominated professions and educational institutions like engineering. For instance, in Maharashtra there is a 30% reservation for women in engineering. This was initially opposed by boys. Now, the scenario has changed completely. Now, thirty years down the line you have the highest percentage of women engineers in the state. These are the women who are managing the metro rail, monorail and local trains.



Note • All the answers/ opinions expressed in this interview/document are of the interviewee.



Shanbhogue-Arvind, Lavanya (2019 April, 15). If you don't invest in your daughter then she will have very limited opportunity in the economy. [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://openinterview.org/2019/04/15/vibhuti-patel-if-you-dont-invest-in-your-daughter-then-she-will-have-a-limited-opportunity-in-the-economy/>

Credits • Prof Patel's photo: *The Hindu* • Interview document design- *Santosh C Hulagabali, PhD*
• Technical assistance- *Sneha Rathod*

Interviewee • To know more about, visit <http://www.tiss.edu/view/g/employee/vibhuti-patel/>



Lavanya Shanbhogue-Arvind is a novelist, TEDx speaker and feminist research scholar from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. A gold medalist and best student awardee from the said institute. She is also the recipient of Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange Fellowship from RMIT University, Australia. She was an invited speaker at the Melbourne Writers Festival. Her writings on feminist themes have appeared in Griffith Review, Huffington Post, Hindu Business Line, Daily O, etc. Many of her write-ups have also appeared on blogs.

Email: [lavania.shan@gmail.com](mailto:lavana.shan@gmail.com)



For upcoming interviews, visit:
<https://openinterview.org/> or scan QR code →
For feedback: info@openinterview.org

