

GENDER *and the* DISMAL SCIENCE



National Archives

Eleanor Lansing Dulles, 1958. In the 1920s, while revising her Ph.D. dissertation, male economists suggested they could do more with her research than she could and that she should turn over her notes. She refused to do so.

By Ann Mari May

THE AMERICAN ECONOMIC ASSOCIATION (AEA), and indeed the public at large, is slowly awakening to a problem in the discipline of economics. According to *The New York Times*, “The economics profession is facing a mounting crisis of sexual harassment, discrimination and bullying that women in the field say has pushed many of them to the sidelines—or out of the field entirely.”

As writers for *The Economist* put it, “Something is broken within the market for economists, and the profession has moved only belatedly and partially to address it. A lack of inclusivity is not simply a problem in itself, but a contributor to other troubles within the field.”

Although women have made significant progress in certain STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics)

fields, evidence suggests that there has been little progress in bringing women into economics since 2000. As of 2018, among the social sciences women earn over 60% of doctoral degrees in psychology, anthropology and sociology. In economics, only 32% of doctorates are awarded to women.

Not only are there few women receiving doctorates in economics, studies show underrepresentation of women at all levels of the academic hierarchy. In economics departments with doctoral programs, 28.4% of assistant professors were women, 25.8% of associate professors were women and a startlingly low 14.3% of full professors were women as of 2018.

As disappointing as the numbers are for women generally in the discipline of economics, the representation of women of color is simply inadequate and unacceptable. Amanda Bayer and Cecilia Rouse

indicate that only 11 minority women (African American, Hispanic and Native American) earned doctorates in economics in 2014. While about 30% of the US population is identified as Black or Hispanic, only 6.3% of tenured and tenure-track faculty in economics are identified as such.

Economists have only recently become aware of the lack of women in economics. Yet the position of privilege of most white men in economics is reflected in countless examples in the early years of the 20th century. While some were at least somewhat sensitive to the challenges that this might present, many others were not.

In the first issue of the *American Economic Review* (AER) published in 1911, Davis R. Dewey, then editor, acknowledged that he was in part prompted to allow a woman author the space for a published reply to a negative review because he was aware that there was a suspicion



Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander at her Ph.D. graduation in June 1921. She was one of three Black women to obtain a doctorate by that time, the first Black woman to obtain a doctorate in economics and the first Black woman to get a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania.



Caroline F. Ware, 1941. Ware kept her maiden name upon marrying economist Gardner Means and was not allowed to fulfill her contract for summer teaching at the University of Wyoming in 1935 when it was discovered that she was married.

that he was attempting to silence her “on the ground that she was a woman.”

In the 1920s, Eleanor Lansing Dulles was pursuing a doctorate from Radcliffe College. While revising her dissertation in Paris, she was visited by economists Robert Murray Haig and James Harvey Rogers of Columbia University. In their conversation, reported by Dulles in her memoir, Haig and Rogers suggested that they could do more with her research notes than she could and that she should turn over her notes so they could “carry on your work as part of our comprehensive project.” Dulles refused.

Anne P. Carter reminisced over her experiences entering the profession in 1945. She remembers that the chair of her department at Harvard University, H. H. Burbank, welcomed her with the statement, “We get a lot of little girls who come here with good grades, but they don’t

last.” Although he apologized for his comments a few days later, Carter cites many instances of unequal treatment—such as when she was recruited by Wassily Leontief to join his Harvard Economic Research Project only to learn that her “trailing spouse,” who was kindly allowed to join as well to make her move possible, was being paid \$1,000 more a year than was she. When confronted, Leontief remarked, “I thought you’d like it.”

Despite the rather long history of gender imbalance, unequal treatment and lack of equal access, the AEA did not adopt principles disavowing sex discrimination in the profession until 1971. At that time, they established a committee to collect information on the number of women in economics in colleges and universities in the United States and make recommendations for affirmative action to address the lack of women in the field. Prompted by grassroots

efforts of the Women’s Caucus, a series of resolutions were brought to an all-male AEA Executive Committee. According to Myra Strober, the opening statement which began, “Resolved that the American Economic Association declares that economics is not a man’s field,” was amended to insert “not exclusively.” The resolutions offered were adopted, and the Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession (CSWEP) was established. Despite the committee’s continued existence, the gender problem remains.

Women’s Employment After the Doctorate

When Leahmae Brown graduated with a doctorate in economics from the University of Illinois in 1937, the US economy was struggling. She had spent most of her



President Herbert Hoover signed into law The Economy Act of 1932, which contained a controversial “married persons clause” that remained in place until June 1937. The act adversely affected women in government jobs throughout much of the Great Depression.

student years in higher education while the economy was in a depression, which may explain why her father talked her out of her first calling of chemistry. He believed she would not be able to find a job in that field.

When Brown took a job as a secretary in a law office, her parents were perhaps satisfied, but she was not. At the urging of the lawyers that she worked for, who saw her as a bright and talented young woman, she entered college. She went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in economics from the University of Kansas in 1933, a master’s degree from Tufts University in 1935 and a doctorate in economics from the University of Illinois in 1937.

After graduation, Brown became involved in research at Princeton University, where she met and married Charles F. McCoy in 1939. She went on to have four children and decided to apply for a teaching position at the University of Arizona in the 1950s. Despite her academic credentials and early experience, the department of economics “wouldn’t have her,” according to a former colleague. In his words, the head of the department “absolutely refused to have anything to do with her.” McCoy instead took a part-time teaching job in the marketing department.

Things eventually changed when the economics department launched a

doctoral program in 1957 and realized that “no one in the department was qualified to teach in it.” McCoy was then hired. One might imagine that her career was much improved—and in some ways it was.

She earned teaching awards and by all accounts was a popular professor with her students. It took 16 years for her to be promoted to full professor. She remained the only woman in the economics department during her years at the University of Arizona and, according to her daughter, her office was “always in the darkest, deepest corner, and she knew it was because she was a woman.” Summing up her experience as a female faculty member, her daughter remarked, “They treated her like dirt.”

The context for women of color was full of unique challenges. In the spring of 1921, at the age of 23, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander earned her doctorate in economics—one of three Black women to obtain a doctorate by that time, the first Black woman to obtain a doctorate in economics and the first Black woman to get a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania. Unlike her male colleagues and despite her outstanding accomplishments, Alexander found it difficult to find employment after completing her degree. In her own words, “I did all my graduate work in economics and insurance. I couldn’t get work anywhere.” As a result, she decided to go to law school.

To Work or to Wed

When McCoy approached the chair of the department she hoped to join, it was, of course, a man. In 1948, the AEA published a list of 175 department chairs titled “Chairmen or Heads of Departments of Economics, Deans of Schools of Business, and Directors of Business Research Bureaus and Institutions in Selected Colleges and Universities.” This extensive list shows that of the 175 institutions listing chairs of economics departments, only six reported having women chairs

in economics. In other words, only 3% of those listed were women, and 97% were men. The six institutions with women department chairs in economics were all women’s colleges. Although Viva B. Boothe was listed as director of the Bureau of Business Research at Ohio State University, no women chairs were found at Ivy League schools, state universities or smaller co-educational colleges. This reality reflected the lack of women faculty outside women’s colleges and the gendered nature of the labor market for scholars at institutions of higher learning.

Several subsequent studies have shown the benefits of having women managers in academic settings on women’s earnings and the number of women entering graduate school, but in the early years of the profession, the doors to faculty employment were closed for most women, and one means of closing the door was through the “marriage bar.”

Most often, those few women who did secure positions in research universities were disproportionately single and not married. Many universities and colleges had what historians refer to as marriage bars, which prevented married women from being hired or, if already employed, called for their firing once they married or their marriage was discovered. Such was the case for Caroline F. Ware, who kept her maiden name upon marrying economist Gardner Means and was not allowed to fulfill her contract for summer teaching at the University of Wyoming in 1935 when it was discovered that she was married. When national attention was brought to the incident, the university reported that the rule was to “spread employment.” Unsurprisingly, Ware pointed out that the university was an educational institution and “not a work-relief organization.”

Like other universities, the University of Wyoming had provisions prohibiting the appointment of married women as instructors and calling for the dismissal of female teachers who marry. According to Claudia Goldin, marriage bars arose in teaching and clerical work in the late 1800s

AEA Women Members, 1886–1948

Decades	Total number of women	All doctorates		Economics doctorates	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent
1886–1899	92	8	9	1	1
1900–1909	38	12	32	7	18
1910–1919	114	23	20	16	14
1920–1929	161	59	37	42	26
1930–1939	123	43	35	26	21
1940–1948	508	139	27	108	21

Source: Data on AEA memberships are taken from the membership lists found in the *Publications of the American Economic Association*, *Handbook of the American Economic Association*, supplements to *Economic Studies*, *Bulletin of the American Economic Association*, and *American Economic Review*. The source used to identify doctoral degrees for women members is ProQuest.

Women Persisters with Doctorates in Economics

Decade	Number of doctorates in economics	Total number of individual women members	Percent women members with economics PhD
1900–1909	7	38	18
1910–1919	18	61	30
1920–1929	48	103	47
1930–1939	73	155	47
1940–1948	69	135	51

Source: Data on AEA memberships are taken from the membership lists found in the *Publications of the American Economic Association*, *Handbook of the American Economic Association*, supplements to *Economic Studies*, *Bulletin of the American Economic Association*, and *American Economic Review*. The source used to identify doctoral degrees for women members is ProQuest.

and remained for the first two decades of the 20th century.

When formal marriage bar policies were not in place, informal practices effectively prevented women from being hired in higher education. In Goldin’s view, women who graduated between 1900 and 1920 were required to choose “family or career.”

During the 1920s, women began to openly challenge views on marriage and career. Barbara Solomon notes that educated women started to consider another choice—marriage *and* career. These changing views were reflected in alumni surveys, such as the one conducted by the

Radcliffe College Alumnae Association on the 50th anniversary of the college. In this survey, 73% of respondents thought that women could successfully combine marriage and a career. Changing views were also evident in national surveys like one conducted by *Fortune* magazine in 1936, which showed that three-fifths of women hoped to marry within one or two years of graduation and two-fifths expressed the desire to work after marriage. Finally, changing views about marriage and career were apparent in the public pronouncements of educational leaders such as Ada Comstock, president of Radcliffe College,

who proclaimed in 1929 that, “We have come to see, I believe, that marriage is essentially far more compatible with continuation of a woman’s career than has been assumed.”

The challenging of existing norms about marriage and career for women was, however, dealt a blow when unemployment rose sharply and the notion of work as a gender-based privilege emerged again during the Great Depression. The implementation of marriage bars rose sharply in the 1930s, even finding their way into legislation.

The Economy Act of 1932, signed into law by President Herbert Hoover, contained a famous provision (Section 213) known as the “married persons clause,” indicating that whenever personnel reductions took place in the Executive Branch of the government, “married persons were to be the first discharged if their spouse was also a government employee.” Controversial from its inception, the married persons clause remained in place until June 1937. Despite the gender-neutral language, the administration of the act was certainly not gender neutral.

The act adversely affected women in government jobs throughout much of the Great Depression, and it was a model for state legislation in many instances. In the end, differing cultural norms related to marriage—reflected in law or practice—were only one reflection of the economy that made the notion of a “free market” ring hollow for women—even those trained in the catechism of the free market. \$

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