

Women in Economics: Their Thought and Actions in the Past*

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1. Where are the women? The question of the sources

In the history of economic thought women are absent both as creators of knowledge and as topic of research (Agenjo-Calderón, 2021). This paper is about how to find them, in both cases.

The historiography on women in the history of thought (in general) faces the methodological problem of how to identify them,¹ and historians of economic thought, too, have dealt with the methodology to be adopted for the identification of women

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¹ See among others Kerber (1997) on women in intellectual history. In her words: "The usual hunting grounds for intellectual historians – sermons, lectures, pamphlets, treatises on law, history, philosophy – revealed little or nothing of women's thoughts" (1997, p. 17).

economists of the past. There is no volume of herstory of economics that fails to mention the problem of women's scarce visibility, from the "seeming non-existence of women economic thinkers" by Rostek (2021, p. 1), to the "invisible women economic writers" by Kuiper (2022, p. ix), to the aim of "making visible ... the contributions of women economists" by Chassonnery-Zaïgouche, Forget and Singleton (2022, p. 2), to the general and recurrent question: "Where are all the women?" by Reeves (2023, p. 1).

Considering that in the past an academic career was precluded to women for a long time, they usually did not publish academic books and did not write in scientific journals. For this reason, the specific nature of women's intellectual history requires specific research methods².

1.1 *Published sources*

The fact that women didn't publish academic writings is the first reason why it is difficult to use the traditional sources for reconstructing their thought. The second reason is that they often didn't sign their written works (as in the case of Mary Shelley, the anonymous author of *Frankenstein*) or used pen names pretending to be men (like the Brontë sisters).³ Their aim was to be taken seriously, and the aim of the publishers was to not discourage sales with a female signature. Another reason for anonymity is that many women worked in economic institutions in which reports were published unsigned, so it is hard to identify the authors.⁴

If this is the situation, how can we find their names and their ideas? One effective way is to search in writings by relatives, friends and colleagues: these sources are crucial testimonies for the reconstruction of the intellectual history of women, starting from the attribution of writings. Very good results have also been obtained by

² The need to discuss research methods in the history of economic thought to address the specificities of gender issues was highlighted by Weintraub (1993).

³ Their pen names were Currer (Charlotte), Ellis (Emily) e Acton (Anne) Bell.

⁴ Many cases are reported in essays collected in Madden and Dimand (2019).

looking at different, non-academic genres, like novels, pamphlets, travel reports, political speeches, poetry and women's magazines.

1.2 Unprinted sources

A well-known method of finding the women is by looking at unprinted sources, like diaries, letters, memories, family archives and private papers: their names, their lives, their ideas, even their theories can be found in private documents, theories that were not written elsewhere for the usual reasons.⁵ As we will see later, economic historians are excellent researchers in finding these alternative sources.

1.3 Networks

Another channel to discover the presence of women in history is to scrutinize networks, clubs and associations like philanthropic organizations, unions, women's associations, political groups, boards of newspapers and magazines (Dimand et al., 1995). Networks are important for two reasons: they are good sources for discovering new names, and they often acted as pressure groups that sought to have political influence, so a network approach to women's history reveals the names and the actions of women who wanted to make an impact on reality.

However, looking at official institutions is not enough: the rich tradition of Italian studies in the Institutional history of economics, which examined economic thought as manifested in universities, academies, economic associations, scientific journals, treatises and economic textbooks, Parliament, the daily newspapers and other formal institutions, did not reveal the presence of one single woman.⁶ The focus on institutions has "obvious negative implications for women since the use of their minds, and development of ideas, took

⁵ On the importance of archives in women's history see, among others, Sachs (2008).

⁶ We are referring to the Italian tradition of studies led by Augello and Guidi that spurred similar research in other countries. Their methodological motivations and line of research have recently been reconstructed in Augello, Guidi and Bientinesi (2019).

place outside these confines” (Smith, 2007, pp. 356-357). Women found themselves on the border between the formal and the informal sphere, between the public and the private domain, and overcoming these dichotomies is crucial to reveal women’s contributions (Laurenzi and Mosca, 2021). To examine the fabric of ideas and experiences exchanged beyond explicit relations, the concept of “constellation” has been proposed as more useful than that of “network”.⁷

2. Intellectual legacy and the canon

The neglect of women in intellectual history is also due to “the assumption that the worth of an idea or line of thinking is to be judged by its level of influence. Who influenced whom and how many (and how important) are central issues for intellectual historians” (Smith, 2007, p. 357). The problem of intellectual legacy is strongly felt in women’s studies (Fuster and Birulés, 2021), because very often women who have been neglected by historiography were in fact important in their time.

2.1 *Transmitting the legacy in the history of economic thought*

Historians of economic thought, too, have dealt with the difficulties of transmitting the names of women economists (Dimand et al., 1995), and recently they analysed the concept of intellectual legacy, raising the question of the meaning of the word “intellectual”: whether it not only refers to theories and concepts, or also to values, methods, and tools that are transmitted (Allison and Missemer, 2020).

Normally “it is the new generations who must decide whether they want this legacy” (Fuster and Birulés, 2021, p. 228), and the transmission of women’s names didn’t occur even from woman to woman, for the same reason as above: they thought they would be

⁷ The category of constellation has been proposed as a useful methodological tool for studying the circulation of ideas and practices in the history of women for the already mentioned project MUVAN. It was the subject of Fina Birulés’ presentation on “Notes sobre mètode, transmissió i xarxes de relacions desateses”, at the VI Congrés Català de Filosofia, Manresa, 15-17 June 2023. For a case study see Laurenzi (2017).

more respected if they cited the famous male economists, who were certainly better known than any women. Only very few women's names have been transmitted, and they are still well known in the history of economic thought: Joan Robinson, Rosa Luxemburg, Vera Lutz and Anna Schwartz.

2.2 *The canon*

The problem of transmission brings us to the question of how and when the canon of economic theory was formed. According to Kuiper (2022), in ancient Greek thought the term economics (formed by the Greek words *Oikos* and *Nomos*) referred to housekeeping: Xenophon and Aristotle talked about efficient household management, the division of labour between husband and wife, and women were a topic of study. In the Middle Ages educated women wrote religious and philosophical texts, then, in the mercantilist period, with the development of the market, women progressively left the public sphere, and the home became their territory. Here starts the doctrine of "separate spheres", according to which men's sphere was the public and women's was the private, even if this separation was more in the narrative than in reality (Becchio, 2024). The more the market became the dominant factor in the economic realm, the more domestic activities were associated with the non-economic realm, although they were clearly essential. Kuiper (2022) continues that in the Classical period the economists' attention to home disappeared: Adam Smith defined the economic realm as being outside home, as his interest was on production, market, competition, investment and all the non-domestic economic activities. Dimand (2001, p. 453) cites "Priscilla Wakefield's criticism of *The Wealth of Nations* for insufficient attention to the economic activity of women, not only in the sphere of household production ... but also outside the home in wage work and market activity."⁸ From that moment on political

⁸ On the contrary, Nerozzi (2020) thinks that Smith's vision on woman's role was not univocal.

economy followed the masculine domain and excluded women's issues. Thus, the perimeter of what is "economics" was defined outside home, and subsequently the canon was formed within this perimeter.⁹

3. Women "economists"

In order to include women in the canon, we need to expand the traditional boundaries of the history of economic thought, to encompass the themes that made women reflect and the issues related to the activities they performed.

Different strategies have been proposed to bring neglected contributions written by women into the history of knowledge. Rostek (2021, pp. 25-31) distinguished between two ways of including women. The first is the "lost gems approach", aimed at rediscovering unknown names, whose contributions fall within the perimeter of the already existing official science. She rightly says that by using this method, for the reasons already explained, the number of women's names remains limited, and their importance low. The second way is "epistemological criticism", the goal of which is to change the perimeter of the science developed by men, by rethinking the rules.

What then is the "economic thought" that one must look for in carrying out research on women in the history of ideas? In my view there are two possible approaches, one internalist, related to economic theory, the other externalist, related to economic "culture".

3.1 *Economic theory*

As already said, the women of the past did not publish academic books and did not write in scientific journals, because academic careers were reserved for men.¹⁰ For this reason, the latter had the

⁹ On the topic of women in the canon of economics see Dimand (2000).

¹⁰ The slow pace of opening universities to women, first as students and then as teach-

monopoly of the production of economic theory in the traditional sense.

In order to find economic theory elaborated by the women of the past, it is necessary not to focus exclusively on knowledge increments in the topics already included in the canon, but to look for innovations on other issues. Women wrote on economic decisions within the marriage, the economic dependence on the husband, childcare, education, wages for housework, job segregation, wage differences, consumption choices, production of wealth within the family, home management, business management, social and economic reforms, etc. (Kuiper, 2022). Therefore, research must go well beyond the confines of market analysis, to include economic reflections on other spheres, such as domestic, business, solidarity and so on. The topics dealt with by Feminist economics, a heterodox approach that emerged in the late 1970s, are very useful for studying the history of women's economic thought because, by expanding the theoretical research topics to female fields, they can give a pointer on the theoretical issues to search for in the women of the past.¹¹

3.2 *Economic culture*

When one looks for the economic thought of the women of the past, one does not necessarily have to search for theory. As women's purpose in writing was not academic, but practical, informative, aimed at transmitting knowledge, translating books, etc. hence, one must

ers, is common to all European countries, as can be seen from the special issue of *Oeconomia* edited by Mosca, Małecka and Agenjo Calderòn (2022).

¹¹ Jacobsen (2020) considers the topics taken from all the articles and book reviews published in the journal *Feminist economics* over 25 years. They are: Measuring the unmeasured economy, Intrahousehold allocation, bargaining and relationship, Family structure and social policy, Rejecting normativity, Feminist labour economics, Caring, Feminist approaches to development, Feminist environmental and ecological economics, Gender consumption and investment patterns, Feminist macroeconomics and economic growth, Feminist international trade and finance, Income distribution, Feminist public finance and regulation, Feminist activism, reactivism, and social change, Feminist economists and the economics profession.

broaden the criterion of looking solely for theoretical originality (Smith, 2007). In the historiography on women's economic thought, it is well known that if this methodological awareness is lacking, women of the past appear simply invisible or irrelevant (Rostek, 2022, pp. 4-5).

The category that this article proposes is that of economic "culture."¹² It is based on the conviction that, although most of the women could not be scholars in economics, nonetheless they had an economic culture that was transmitted to them by the media of their time: networks, correspondence, publications, etc. On the basis of their economic culture, they challenged the existing situation, proposed pioneering solutions and had an impact on reality.

The concept of economic culture was introduced by Barucci (2012), and it refers to the familiarity with economic principles and opinions on everyday economic problems; for him it represents the link between economic theory and economic policy. According to Barucci the policy makers' economic culture determines their choices of policy measures: for him the concept of economic culture is not a passive one, but implies awareness and activism, as it does for us.

The same concept was used by Augello and Guidi (2012, p. 2) as the ways in which economic "contents, method of analysis, representation of social sphere, and normative messages were disseminated." They used this concept for their Institutional history of economics, but although this category might have been suitable for finding women's contributions, they did not find them because, as said before, their research was limited to official institutions.

It was also employed by Phelps (2011) as a tool to explain differences in the economic performance of different countries. The concept of economic culture seems to be close to what Winch (2017) called intellectual history, that is to say the contextual approach to

¹² Although the concept of "economic culture" has some points of contact with that of "economic discourse", the latter seems less suitable for our purposes, as it focuses mainly on the rhetoric of economics. See McCloskey (1998).

the history of economic ideas, an approach particularly suited to restoring visibility to the women economists of the past who, thanks to their activism, impact, and innovativeness, deserve to be studied as creators of knowledge.¹³

4. Non-written primary sources

So far, we have talked about the women of the past who produced written sources, published or not. However, there were numerous women who left no written evidence, but whose concrete experience revealed their economic culture:¹⁴ they managed firms, worked in business, finance and banks, they set up schools, they were activists and reformers involved in the sphere of philanthropy, art and politics. The ideas of these even more invisible women engaged in activities and projects promoting a change in reality can only be reconstructed from one source: their innovative actions. Different strands of historiography focus on the way thoughts and actions are related, as in the intertwining of intellectual and cultural history.¹⁵ Intellectual history takes experiences as its primary source, for example in reconstructing the biographies of people for whom there is no written evidence regarding their life and culture.¹⁶ Thanks to the innovativeness and impact of their actions, the study of these women falls into the sphere of intellectual history, even if their ideas were not expressed in written words. As Herald (1904, p. 24) wrote: “All that is in the material world was first in the world of thought,” and as Dorschel (2010, p. 43) more recently writes: “Words are just one medium of ideas among others”.

¹³ The term “women’s culture” was also employed in the late 1970s by historians who “had devised a prism through which to view the diaries, letters, and organization records that had been freshly discovered and whose analytical potential was freshly appreciated” (Kerber, 1997, p. 170).

¹⁴ For example, the book edited by Madden and Dimand (2019, p. 1) covers “both thoughts and experiences of women contributing to economics”.

¹⁵ See among others Brett (2002) and Surkis (2014).

¹⁶ See Shore (2014) on the biographical contextualization of ideas and Richards (2017, p. 296) on the role of biography in intellectual history. On biography in the history of economic thought see Weintraub and Forget (2007).

This method is also in line with the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, in the interpretation of Ramsey, who “individuates beliefs by attending to their causes and effects” (MacBride, Marion, Frápolli, Edgington, Elliott, Lutz and Paris, 2023)¹⁷.

The outcomes of creativity are not only words: music, art, mathematics, architectures, technology, manufactures in general come from ideas without being words, and a practical innovation in the economic realm is certainly the result of an economic idea. Chassonery-Zaïgouche, Forget and Singleton (2022, p. 11) mentioned the challenge of discovering women’s unwritten sources, but they mainly refer to the “silences of work not completed – and completed work not preserved” of writers, more than to women’s innovative actions. Here we argue that this way of approaching the problem enables the economic thought of women to be reconstructed not merely based on their writings but also by considering how they acted: innovation in economic actions reveals their economic culture, in the sense explained above, even in absence of written texts.

4.1 Economic history

In the reconstruction and description of economic facts and activities, the discipline of Economic history is a case of its own. Historians of economic thought find it useful in contextualising the ideas of the economists of the past.¹⁸ In the case we are tackling here, its input is inestimable since it brings to light the overlooked sources that reveal the activity of women, such as tax rolls, estate returns, probate documentation, court records, insurance certificates and a whole range of private economic documents. This is in line with the approach of Humphries and Sarasúa (2012), designed to draw attention to the activity of women that conventional sources leave “off the record.”¹⁹

¹⁷ I thank Giovanni Tuzet for pointing me to this line of study.

¹⁸ On the relation between history of economic thought and economic history see, among others, Rosselli (2013), Poettinger and Tusset (2016), and the Symposium by Masini et al. (2023).

¹⁹ I thank Giuliana Freschi for suggesting this reference.

The research program we suggest consists in building on these sources to find out how the uncovered facts and experiences are connected to the thought of the women involved, thus linking economic history to intellectual history. Studies on the role played by culture in economic actions usually focus on the impact of culture on economic decisions²⁰ but our goal is quite the opposite: we want to delve into motivations by examining economic actions and circumstances, as Grube and Storr (2015) proposed.²¹

Many biographies of male entrepreneurs follow the line of reconstructing the economic motivations underlying the protagonist's business activity. The same approach can be adopted with the numerous women who were entrepreneurs, though their inspiration often differed, springing from the private, social, educational and cultural spheres. Also, the economic reforms introduced by Barucci's policy makers are used by historians as a way to trace their economic culture. It is of utmost importance to identify a clear, direct link between the protagonists' economic experiences and their motivations in order to bring to the fore their economic thought, as expressed in their groundbreaking actions. Poettinger and Tusset (2017, p. 10) had a valuable insight when they wrote: "In the area of economic culture, economic history and the history of economic thought appear to be complementary, which suggests that a promising new common research area can be established."

4.2 Women as topics of study

As we said, women are neglected not only as creators of thought, but also because economic theory has been elaborated without considering issues related to their activities. According to Bechio's (2020) reconstruction, from 1890 to World War I the realm of economic theory focusing on women's issues was Home economics, which dealt with household management and education. Then, in

²⁰ Grube and Storr (2015) review the literature on the topic.

²¹ In this sense, the neo-Weberian approaches to entrepreneurship give useful pointers.

the interwar period, the discipline of Household economics was developed, extending the economic analysis (based on rationality) to internal family decisions concerning the production of goods and services by family members, for their own consumption, using their own capital and their own domestic labour. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s Gary Becker founded the New home economics, a formalized theory which saw the (benevolent) head of the family as the one who maximizes the utility of the family.²² This theory raised many criticisms. Against it, Becchio (2020) continues, from the late 1970s Feminist economics has proposed an approach aimed at dismantling the previous one, and at changing the science developed by men. As said before, economic history plays an essential role in the research on women as topics of study, as it collects data in a feminist perspective in order to supply unbiased statistics on issues related to women's activities.

5. Examples from herstory of economics

Among the figures reconstructed in the herstories of economics, there are many examples of women discovered using the methodology illustrated above.

There are those who left published writings without using their names (or their full names). For example, we know from J.S. Mill's *Autobiography* (Mill, 1873) that his wife Harriet Taylor Mill had an important role in the writing of his *Principles of political economy*, as she was the author of an entire chapter (*On the probable futurity of the labouring classes*),²³ but the book is not explicitly co-authored. There are many other examples, like that of Flora Shaw, who regularly wrote an unsigned column about British colonial policy for the *Times*, without admitting for two years that she was a woman (Seiz,

²² From New home economics derives Gender economics, the current neoclassical approach to gender issues.

²³ See Gouverneur (2019, p. 75).

2019, p. 64), and that of Harriet Lathrop Dunham, who often signed her articles with her initials (Mosca, 2021).

In the large group of the women who worked in institutions where it was not customary for documents to be signed, we mention Almerina Ipsevich, who worked for ISCO, and whose reports are attributed to her thanks to the testimony of one of her colleagues (Corsi and Zacchia, 2019, p. 369), or the “several African women economists [who] have attained prominence, primarily in the public sector rather than in academia” (Flower and Dimand, 2019, p. 376).

In the herstories of economics there are plenty of women who wrote about economic issues in non-academic genres, such as novels, pamphlets, poems, diaries, etc. Rostek (2021) examined the economic thought of six novelists, including Jane Austen, who spoke a lot about economic topics in their books.²⁴ We also mention the case of Aurelia Josz, who published a book on her experience as founder of an agricultural school for girls (Becchio and Mosca, 2024), or the case of the travel commentaries written by Flora Tristan (Périver and Rogers, 2022), not to mention the many women journalists who published their articles outside academic journals, like the Norwegian Anna Bugge Wicksell (Johnson and Robson, 2022), the Italian Margherita Grassini Sarfatti (Poggi, 2024), or the French Mathilde Méliot (Sigot, 2022).

Archives, public and private, were essential in identifying, for example, Isabella De Mari Doria (Iodice, 2024), who left only handwritten account books and financial instructions to her agents; or the American emancipationist activists based in Italy (Harriet Lathrop Dunham, Alice Hallgarten Franchetti and Cora Slocomb di Brazzà) analysed in Laurenzi and Mosca (2021).

Many women’s names are identified through their network: Kuiper (2022) mentions the Bluestocking society, the Langham Place group, Mary Astell’s friends, the Sunday School Movement, the Fabian Women’s group and the Lowell Female Labor Reform Asso-

²⁴ The others are Sarah Chapone, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Mary Robinson, Priscilla Wakefield and Mary Ann Radcliffe.

ciation. Another example among many is the International Council of Women, with its national affiliations, like the National Council of Women of the United States and the National Council of Italian Women, among others.²⁵

As we have said, the women who mostly innovated through their actions, without writing, were entrepreneurs, businesswomen, philanthropists, school owners who only left traces through their activities. For example, Johnson (2017) finds the names of women philanthropists who promoted social change in America from 1870 to 1967, while Baijot and Le Chapelain (2022), and Licini (2024) discuss the reasons for the invisibility in the narrative on 19th century women investors and entrepreneurs active in European countries. Another example is the case of practical feminism, an early 20th century movement which worked to give women economic independence; by its very nature, it can only be understood by looking at what women did, not just at what they wrote (Willson, 2010, p. 32).

Finally, among many examples of important women economists whose names were not transmitted, let us mention Anna Maria van Schuurman, who wrote *The learned maid, or whether a maid may be a scholar* (1638), spoke twelve languages and was a recognized genius (Kuiper 2022, p. 19), and Émilie du Châtelet, author of *Discours sur le bonheur* (1779) who was a mathematician, physicist and intellectual of great fame, just to mention two of a large number (Kuiper, 2022, pp. 25-27).

6. Conclusions

For men's history of economic thought, the sources are books ranked in order on shelves close at hand. For the study of women's economic thought there is a great mess, as sources are scattered in the most diverse places, like archives, books of different genres, pamphlets, but also objects, businesses and experiences. All these sources

²⁵ On the history of the International Council of Women see Beyers (2005).

create a whole chaos that is difficult to untangle. This article tries to bring order to the methodology for the historical reconstruction of women's economic thought, first of all by putting forward the concept of economic culture as a tool to increase the recognition of the presence of women in history. The conceptual tools of both history of economic thought and economic history are used together in order to bring out their concrete actions. Then, and this is the central point, women's innovative experiences, along with their writings, are taken as a primary source for studying both their economic culture and the motivations related to their activities. Of course, all the research methods employed here can also be used for men, as complementary to the traditional ones, but in the case of women they often represent the only available way to discover their names and to reconstruct their economic ideas.

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