

POLITICS

Wielding Data, Women Force a Reckoning Over Bias in the Economics Field

By JIM TANKERSLEY and NOAM SCHEIBER JAN. 10, 2018

PHILADELPHIA — It is not difficult to find an all-male panel at the annual January mega-gathering of American economists. They are as common as PowerPoint presentations and pie charts. One such panel this year met to sleepily critique President Trump’s economic policies, but it was overshadowed by another panel, two ballrooms away, that jolted a profession that prides itself on cool rationality.

That panel on Friday was stocked with women, each of whom presented new research that revealed a systemic bias in economics and presaged a move by the field’s leaders to promise to address some of those issues.

Paper after paper presented at the American Economic Association panel showed a pattern of gender discrimination, beginning with barriers women face in choosing to study economics and extending through the life cycle of their careers, including securing job opportunities, writing research papers, gaining access to top publications and earning proper credit for published work.

Economics departments have gradually increased their share of female faculty members over the past 20 years. But only one in five tenure-track economics

professors is a woman, according to the American Economic Association's Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession.

In many parts of the profession, gender progress stagnated over the last decade. About one in three new economics doctoral students was a woman in 2016, and fewer than one in three assistant professors were women. In both of those cases, the share of women was essentially unchanged from 2006.

The focus on gender bias in economics began simmering in August, when Alice Wu, an economist from the University of California, Berkeley, detailed in a research paper how the website Economics Job Market Rumors, a much-read, anonymous job-rumor forum and message board for economists, had become a hotbed of harassment, with female economists frequently described in often sexual and crude terms.

But the barriers women face in this long male-dominated field extend well beyond online harassment. Women must be significantly clearer writers than men to have their work accepted to major economic journals, according to a paper, titled "Publishing While Female," that Erin Hengel, a University of Liverpool economist, reported at the conference. They must also wait longer to have their papers published in journals.

The bias creeps into the most popular introductory economics textbooks, which refer to men four times as often as they do women. Ninety percent of the economists cited in those textbooks are men, Betsey Stevenson, a University of Michigan economist, told the panel on gender issues in economics, based on a paper she is about to complete. When women are mentioned in textbook examples, they are more likely to be shopping or cleaning than running a company or making public policy.

The reckoning in economics comes amid a larger national examination of bias and abuse toward women in the work force, across industries including entertainment, manufacturing and journalism. But the existence of bias in the field of economics is rattling a profession that, at its core, functions through objective interpretation and extrapolation of data, statistics and evidence.

Leaders of the American Economic Association announced on Friday night

that they would begin to address bias concerns more seriously, by setting up an alternative to the online jobs site and drafting a code of conduct for economists. But many economists said that those steps were late, and that they left much work to be done to ensure fairness for women in the field, where the rate of entry for women lags that of math, engineering and other hard sciences.

“The time had come for the organization to make a more proactive statement,” said Peter L. Rousseau, the chairman of the economics department at Vanderbilt University and the association’s secretary-treasurer. He cast the decision as responding to evidence in a way that was natural for the profession. “Economists, I think, are just very objective in their view of the world,” he said.

In interviews during and after the conference, prominent women in economics described how their profession throws barriers in their professional paths, and they criticized the male-dominated leadership in the field for moving slowly to tear those barriers down.

“I don’t think it’s because we don’t know what is implicit bias. We know,” said Rhonda Sharpe, the president of the National Economics Association, which was founded to promote the professional development of minorities in the field. “It’s whether we stand up and call it out, and usually we don’t.”

The annual conference brings together several economics groups, the largest among them the American Economics Association. Before this year’s conference, two economists — Heidi Hartmann, the president of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, and Michael Reich, a labor economist at Berkeley — circulated a petition calling on the association’s leaders to establish their own job market website where comments would be moderated and sexist postings blocked. The petition was eventually signed by more than 1,000 economists, and, on Friday, the association agreed to start its own job site.

“I see this as a big deal,” Abigail Wozniak, an economist at Notre Dame who was active in advocating a new job market site, said by email. “I think the reaction of the A.E.A. was driven in part by a recognition that economics can become more inclusive on a number of dimensions.”

Janet Currie, chairwoman of Princeton’s economics department, and Claudia

Goldin, an economist at Harvard, pointed to a recent study that found that women get significantly less credit than men when they co-write papers with them, as reflected in the way the paper affects their chances of receiving tenure.

When the co-author is a man, “people don’t say anything about it, it’s just normal,” Ms. Currie said. “When it’s a woman, it’s: ‘Oh, everything she wrote is with co-authors. How do we know she’s any good?’”

She said the behavior, detailed in a paper by Heather Sarsons of Harvard, was related to a more widespread phenomenon. “There are lots of examples of when a woman says something, no one pays attention,” Ms. Currie said. “A man says the same thing, everyone says it’s great. It happens a lot.”

Sarah A. Jacobson, an environmental economist at Williams College, recounted an experience during graduate school that she said was indicative: A well-respected female economist delivering a talk at her department was repeatedly interrupted by male economists when trying to answer questions from the audience.

“In the middle of the seminar, a male economist I respect turned around — they’re in the audience — and they were explaining the answer for her, on her behalf,” Ms. Jacobson said.

“You see it all the time,” she added. “You occasionally see it if a male is presenting. You see it pretty often if a woman is presenting.”

Kate Bahn, an economist at the Center for American Progress, said that when she was in graduate school, she was told she was not invited to a regular poker game with her male cohorts, because it included “locker-room talk.” She also noticed that her specialties, labor and gender economics, were viewed as more associated with women, and thus less rigorous.

“What there really needs to be is a broader cultural change,” she said.

Ms. Hengel, the University of Liverpool economist, used readability tests to conclude that papers written by female economists are on average up to 6 percent better-written than those of men, and that those by women languish in peer review a half-year longer than those of men.

She became interested in the topic as a graduate student, she said, when watching a male friend teach a course and noticing the difference in how students reacted to him compared with how they reacted to her.

“When you’re teaching something, when you really nail an explanation, the front row just lights up,” she said. But she watched her friend’s class light up, “even though he wasn’t nailing it.”

Ms. Sharpe, of the N.E.A., said the bias against African-American women, who continue to make up a tiny slice of the economics profession, was especially pronounced. Ms. Sharpe’s data show that only 52 black women earned economics doctorates between 2006 and 2015, a slight increase from the 46 who earned them in the previous decade.

“All of this conversation about misogyny with women is not having a conversation about black women,” she said. “I think of us as the incredible invisible woman.”

Ms. Stevenson’s analysis of the seven leading introductory economics textbooks found that female economists were all but invisible. More than 90 percent of real-world business leaders mentioned in the books were men. Three in five fictional characters whom the authors invented to illustrate a concept were men.

Only 6 percent of the policymakers referred to in the textbooks were women. One woman accounted for more than half of those references: Janet L. Yellen, the chairwoman of the Federal Reserve, who is about to be replaced by a man.

Jim Tankersley reported from Philadelphia and Noam Scheiber from Chicago.

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