Economics for Equality
Glasgow School for Business and Society

“The purpose of studying economics is not to acquire a set of ready-made answers to economic questions, but to learn how to avoid being deceived by economists.”

Joan Robinson (1903-1983)

How do I sign up?
To discuss how we can deliver Economics for Equality in your organisation contact:

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WiSE
Women in Scotland’s Economy

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The promotion of gender equality is not simply a matter of economic justice, but is required by law. Our short courses are designed to assist organisations in meeting their statutory obligations, but also to improve upon a more effective business performance.

Why should I take this course?

Economics and the ‘economy’ play an important role in everyone’s lives. If you switch on the news, particularly since the global economic crisis, you will be aware of the importance of economics in determining how people’s lives play out; job losses, benefit reform, inflation, the death of industries and the birth of new ones all depend on ‘the economy’. The economy is seen as something that happens in factors such as banks, governments, or a whole host of other ‘organs’ to explain to the ‘laypeople’ why certain policies are adopted or why certain decisions are made.

As an example, in the wake of the recent economic crisis, the coalition government in Westminster used ‘austerity’ as a justification for decisions on government spending that have had a devastating effect on people all over Scotland. Evidence shows that women have borne the brunt of these decisions in their role as workers in the public sector, as users of the public services that have been reduced and as recipients of benefits that have been cut. Economists are making decisions that affect our lives almost everywhere, in local government, in the banks that we borrow from or where we invest our money and in the companies that we work for. However, the economic language that they are talking is only one dialect in the language of economics; the mainstream one. There are other ways of approaching economics and defining ‘the economy’.

One of these approaches is that you might not have heard of is ‘feminist economics’. Feminist economics offers an approach to economics and ‘the economy’ that has the goal of ending inequality between men and women. In doing so, feminist economics draws attention to the bias of mainstream economics, a bias that often results in more emphasis on certain factors such as the effects of the ‘austerity’ cuts in public spending. Mainstream economists use language which is often difficult for those of us in the real world to engage with. This results in a situation where only economists know what other economists are talking about. Given that economics as an academic discipline is male dominated, it follows that economists will understand the world as men see it and will practice economics accordingly. It is little wonder then, that mainstream ways of doing economics and conceiving ‘the economy’ are likely to be beneficial men

more than any other group in society. Economics is an academic discipline that has more power than most to affect our everyday lives; it’s too important therefore to leave it to a privileged few.

Feminist economics – why gender matters

For the most part, mainstream academic economics doesn’t consider ‘gender’. That is to say that economists model their world on human beings that are sexless, and that all economic behaviour certain and predictable. To make human behaviour predictable in the economists’ model, certain assumptions have to be made. First of all, people are rational. Rationality, for the economist, means carefully measuring the costs and benefits of every action before deciding how to act. Secondly, people are autonomous, for the economist, means not having to consider anyone else when making your rational decisions. Thirdly, people are essentially self-interested and for the economist, this means only ever being concerned with your own individual needs and wants. As mentioned above, the rational, autonomous, self-interested economic actor has no gender. However, it is well documented that gender really does matter with respect to economic decisions.

Men and women often have different life experiences, preferences and access to economic resources and much of this can be explained by the way we understand ‘gender’. Gender is more than the biological differences between men and women, it concerns the different roles that men and women play in society and the different social and cultural expectations that we have of men and women. It’s also how we stereotype men and women and, sometimes, the limits of their behaviour. Gender, as in social expectations and norms, has a key role to play in the decisions that people make, for example, who, where and when people undertake paid work or how individuals spend their income. Models of economic behaviour that try to predict how people will behave but do not recognise that people’s behaviour is influenced by their gender are likely to be inaccurate. Similarly, gender-blind economic models are particularly ineffective at explaining why there are economic inequalities between men and women. Using the assumptions mentioned earlier (rationality, autonomy and self-interested behaviour) mainstream economics comes to the conclusion that gender inequality is the outcome of ‘free choice’.

Essentially, the choices of individual women are under the fact that women are over-represented as low paid and part time workers and are under-represented at the highest levels of professional occupations (even when they dominate the workforce). Feminist economics believes that gender and the set of structural constraints associated with gender is key to understanding economic inequalities between men and women. Therefore, if this inequality is to be addressed, gender must be incorporated into economics and economic policy. Feminist economics offers an approach that challenges the mainstream and the inequalities that the mainstream economics framework reinforces: Feminist economics is economics for equality. This course will introduce you to the feminist critique of mainstream economics and expand on what is meant by ‘gender’ and its impact on economic inequalities.

Defining the economy: who works and who doesn’t

The United Nations System of National Accounts (UNSNA) represents ‘the rules’ of accounting for national governments. It is this system that governments use to calculate Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that a measure that is often used to indicate the ‘health’ of the national economy and, by implication, the wellbeing of its citizens. The inadequacy of GDP as an indicator of wellbeing is well documented; many other factors determine the ‘happiness’ of individuals that do not depend directly on the economy; relationships with others, good health, access to education etc. all impact on our wellbeing and are not captured within GDP. From a feminist economics perspective, the UNSNA is also another representation of how mainstream economic thinking undermines gender equality. In economics, there are ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ activities are used interchangeably, they all imply an exchange of work for wages and are thus counted as productive (i.e. contribute to GDP). Work that is done without pay, mostly performed by women, is ‘unproductive’ (i.e. is not counted in GDP). Many of the activities that are done by women without pay, could be done in the market for money, let’s take laundry as an example. If you pay a launderette to wash your clothes, money changes hands, and that become productive activity. If you do it yourself at home, no money is exchanged and the activity is, from the UNSNA’s point of view, unproductive.

But the outcome of the activity is the same: clean clothes. Since increasing GDP is a clear policy goal of most national governments, activity where no money is exchanged becomes more important than activity where no money is involved and work done without pay is invisible; irrelevant to the economy. To reiterate, work with pay is ‘productive’ and work without pay is ‘unproductive’. Which kind of work would people most like to be associated with? No-one wants to do unproductive work, do they? The point is, the unpaid work done by women all over the world is extremely productive, crucial to the survival and reproduction of humanity and, rather than being something that happens away from ‘the economy’, is an equal part of the economy. Equal and absolutely essential to the functioning of those factories and call-centres and corridors of power.

The economy is in your living room... and your kitchen! In ignoring this activity, mainstream economic thinking is not just inaccurate but, again, poses a threat to women’s economic status. Paid work is still the most important means by which people establish a claim to a share of the national resources. If you are not, from a mainstream perspective, ‘working’ then you place this claim in jeopardy. Hence, women who have worked all their lives in an unpaid capacity do not have adequate pensions in old age in a system based on in-work contributions. Classifying unpaid work as unproductive is neither accurate, nor fair on the people who work without wages.

What will the course cover?

This course can be tailored to the needs of your organization and can include an introduction to all or some of the following:

• Definitions of gender, economics and the economy;
• The feminist critique of mainstream economics with respect to national accounting and the value of unpaid labour;
• How we understand work, labour and economic activity;
• How we move beyond narrow economic definitions to arrive at a more inclusive definition of ‘the economy’;
• Designing policy with a gender perspective – an exploration of a wide variety of policy areas with respect to women’s position in the economy;
• Current developments in legislation with a focus on gender issues;
• The concept of Gender Budget Analysis and how it can be used in public spending.

How will the course be delivered?

This course is designed and delivered by academics from the WISE Research Centre, who are experienced teachers and researchers in the area of economics and gender equality. Other members of the WISE team will contribute depending on the focus of the course, which depends on your organisational requirements. It can be delivered over 3 or 4 evenings or in a series of one day events, weekend delivery is also possible. We are able to deliver the course on Glasgow Caledonian University Campus or at a venue of your choosing across Scotland. The course is generally delivered using a blended learning approach with some use of online learning technology, although this can also be adapted to the needs of your organisation.

Do I need any qualifications?

You do not need any qualifications to undertake the Economics for Equality course.

What people say about Economics for Equality

We regularly carry out feedback after our courses are delivered and here’s what previous attendees have said about it:

“This course has definitely improved my confidence in my ability to participate in discussions about feminist economics and to talk around the issues of gender budgeting and the impact on policy.”

“Really enjoyed the learning. Thought we covered some very big concepts in an easy and accessible way.”

“I greatly enjoyed the style, content and delivery of the learning experience. I feel better equipped to make a case for gender aware service provision.”