



# Women's Empowerment and Economic Development: A Feminist Critique of Storytelling Practices in "Randomista" Economics

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# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF STORYTELLING PRACTICES IN "RANDOMISTA" ECONOMICS

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*Naila Kabeer*

## ABSTRACT

The 2019 Nobel Prize in economics was awarded to three scholars on the grounds that their pioneering use of randomized control trials (RCTs) was innovative methodologically and contributed to development policy and the emergence of a new development economics. Using a critical feminist lens, this article challenges that conclusion by interrogating the storytelling practices deployed by "randomista" economists through a critical reading of a widely cited essay by Esther Duflo, one of the 2019 Nobel recipients, on the relationship between women's empowerment and economic development. The paper argues that the limitations of randomista economics have given rise to a particular way of thinking characterized by piecemeal analysis, ad hoc resort to theory, indifference to history and context, and methodological fundamentalism. It concludes that the randomista argument that broad-based economic development alone – without focused attention to women's rights – will lead to gender equality has not been borne out by recent data.

## KEYWORDS

Empowerment, economic development, development

JEL Code: O

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Despite claims of impartiality, Duflo's interpretations of evidence and the language she uses indicate that the randomista method and narrative is not objective or impartial.
- The randomistas' treatment of preferences as random and idiosyncratic ignores what feminists have long espoused: that the formation of preferences derives from entrenched social constructions.

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- The randomistas' claims to methodological superiority result in a discounting or dismissal of findings from nonexperimental studies in favor of experimental studies that report the same findings.
- Duflo's main argument discussed in this paper is that while gender equality is desirable in its own right, it is better achieved through gender-neutral policies because gender-affirmative policies "distort" the allocative process and lead to efficiency costs.
- Yet, these so-called distortions stem from historical structures that have curtailed women's productive potential and protected male privilege.
- In other words, patriarchal discrimination introduces structural costs that are unlikely to be visible when the focus is on individual economic actors.

## INTRODUCTION

The 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics was awarded to Professors Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, and Michael Kremer on the grounds that their pioneering use of randomized control trials (RCTs) in the assessment of development interventions was providing reliable answers to the question of "what works" in the fight against global poverty. The Nobel Committee was thus recognizing not only an innovative methodology but also its contribution to development policy and to the emergence of a "new development economics."

At the heart of impact-assessment methodologies is the attempt to compare the immediate and longer-term changes associated with an intervention with what would have happened in its absence. Nonexperimental approaches do this by randomly selecting a "treatment" group from those participating in an intervention and a "control" group from a similar population and comparing how the two groups fare "with" and "without" the intervention.

The problem with this approach is that it is carried out retrospectively, that is, after participants have joined a given intervention. While observed differences between the two groups likely to influence program outcomes can be controlled for, this cannot be done for unobserved differences stemming from selection biases associated, for instance, with the location of an intervention or with the specific characteristics of those who select to participate in an intervention.

RCTs seek to overcome this problem by identifying a sample of the population considered eligible for an intervention, randomly assigning them to treatment and control groups *prior* to the intervention, and then measuring how they fare over time. Provided the randomization procedure is properly carried out, proponents of this methodology claim that selection bias is "entirely removed" (Duflo, Glennerster, and Kremer 2008: 3901), that observed and unobserved characteristics are identically distributed

between treatment and control groups, and that any evidence of impact can therefore be “cleanly” attributed to the intervention.

The claims to greater rigor by advocates of RCTs have been taken seriously and the methodology widely adopted by major international agencies. There is general agreement that its influence has helped to raise standards of rigor in development evaluations. It has also encouraged development economists to shift from their previous reliance on econometric modeling using large international databases to greater efforts to collect their own firsthand field data (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2019).

However, RCTs have not been universally acclaimed and the award of the Nobel Prize to its leading proponents has revived ongoing concerns about the limitations of this approach.<sup>1</sup> These encompass a range of methodological, practical, ethical, and political issues, but in this paper, I will be training a critical feminist lens on how theory and method in “randomista” economics<sup>2</sup> give rise to a certain style of “storytelling” and comparing it with the very different storytelling practices that feminist economists have sought to promote.

Feminist economics has carved out a distinctive territory within the larger field of economics (Folbre 1994; Kabeer 1994; Strassmann and Polanyi 1995; Berik 1997; Benería 2003; Ferber and Nelson 2003; Power 2004; Balakrishnan, Heintz, and Elson 2016). It is characterized by interdisciplinarity and methodological pluralism, attention to the history and context of social phenomena, a focus on persons-in-relations rather than isolated individuals, and on their location within the intersecting structures of constraint that govern the domains of production and reproduction. It seeks to be objective, but not neutral: its overall goal is the democratization of the relations of everyday life and the promotion of gender justice as a central core of a socially just society. This goal underpins the ethics of feminist research.

Development studies, the field in which I work, is also characterized by a broad, though frequently contested, vision of “progress” and by openness to interdisciplinarity and methodological pluralism. These features have been incorporated over time in some branches of development economics. The rise of randomista economics, I would argue, has been associated with a move in the opposite direction.

The objective of this article is to interrogate some of the storytelling practices deployed by randomista economists through a critical reading of a widely cited essay by Esther Duflo on the relationship between women’s empowerment and economic development.<sup>3</sup> I focus here on Duflo as a leading exponent of randomista economics and as someone who has written on a topic that is of particular interest to feminists working in development.<sup>4</sup> And I have chosen to focus on a review essay because it provides the opportunity to scrutinize the kinds of evidence that are

privileged (or dismissed) by the author, how these are woven together to tell a story, and the message she is seeking to communicate through her story telling. To set the stage for the rest of the paper, I will briefly touch on some of the criticisms leveled at randomista economics, which have a particular bearing on issues I want to raise.

## PROBLEMS OF THEORY AND METHOD IN RANDOMISTA ECONOMICS

Randomista economics is criticized for having “too little theory” (Mookherjee 2005). Its proponents claim, with some justification, that too much of development policy has been driven by high-level ideological debates and abstract generalizations, “big questions” and “sweeping answers,” and that much of this theory is excessively limiting (Banerjee 2005; Banerjee and Duflo 2011). There has been insufficient attention to what works on the ground: “Ideology, ignorance and inertia” explain why so much of past development effort has failed (Banerjee and Duflo 2011: 16).

In contrast to this tendency, randomista economists describe themselves modestly as the “plumbers” of development (Duflo 2017), interested in solving real-life problems through the rigorous assessment of field-level experiments from a position of scientific objectivity. Rather than seeking guidance from theory, with its “safety net of a bounded set of assumptions” (Duflo 2017: 3), they use experiments to ask new questions and leave themselves open to surprising answers (Banerjee 2005). Experimental findings are considered to speak for themselves: “We must shift away from these big endless debates. Evaluation is rigorous. There is no room for interpretation. Either it works or it doesn't. If not, one simply has to try something else” (Duflo in a 2010 interview, cited in Labrousse 2016: 289).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, most randomistas eschew abstract theories and unfounded generalizations in favor of setting up experiments in the real world, watching carefully what happens and then “tinkering” as needed (Duflo 2017: 3).

Randomista economics is also criticized for its micro-reductionism (Labrousse 2016; Stevano 2020): its proponents generally think and work at the micro-level. The macroeconomy is reduced to its micro-economic parts: “macroeconomic models are constructed like a Meccano . . . based on microeconomic building blocks [. . .]. In each case, basic elements are microeconomic elements” (Duflo 2009: 73–4; cited in Labrousse 2016: 287). As a result, they tend to explain larger phenomena in terms of individual motivations and behavior and seek to generalize their insights by simply multiplying or scaling up experiments:

A single experiment does not provide a final answer on whether a program would universally ‘work’ or not. But we can conduct a series of experiments, differing in either the kind of location in which they are conducted, or the exact intervention being tested (or both). (Banerjee and Duflo 2011: 26)

As Angus Deaton and Nancy Cartwright (2018a) observe, few research traditions have been so ardently defended on the grounds of being theory and assumption free. However, the usefulness of the empirical insights generated by randomista economics is limited by its failure to theorize change: “*causal* conclusions require *causal* assumptions about how *causality* might work or fail to work or work in unexpected ways” (Deaton and Cartwright 2018b: 86. Authors’ italics). It lacks a coherent set of propositions regarding agents and cognitive processes or how these agents might interact with larger structural and historical phenomena – both critical for understanding processes of change in their social and historical settings (Labrousse 2016). Instead, its proponents draw, on a somewhat ad hoc basis, on rational choice theory (incentives) and behavioral psychology (nudges) to provide post hoc rationalizations of their findings.

Such micro-level explanations have little value if they are not located within the larger picture of which they are a part (Stevano 2020). Simply scaling up RCTs or replicating them across different contexts in order to accumulate a body of knowledge about how interventions work does not compensate for the absence of this larger picture. Generalizations from scaling up experimental efforts are unwarranted because they ignore the macro, political economy, and general equilibrium effects associated with expanding scale: “The whole is usually more than a sum of the parts” (Bardhan 2005: 4334). Generalizations on the basis of replications are equally unwarranted because, as we note below, they rarely take account of specificities of history or context (Shaffer 2011).

The preoccupation with the micro is not merely the result of the methodological individualism of randomista economics. It is also imposed by the nature of RCTs. As Christopher B. Barrett and Michael R. Carter point out, RCTs are best equipped to investigate a “non-random” subset of the full range of policy options that might be considered important for development progress. This subset is made up of “tunnel-type” interventions: small-scale interventions characterized by short, linear, mono-causal, and event-proof causal chains – single causes leading to single short-term effects (Bernard, Delarue, and Naudet 2012; Labrousse 2016). Excluded from randomista economics are macroeconomic policies and any large-scale intervention that cannot be replicated in large numbers.

Finally, critics have pointed out how “randomista” claims to methodological superiority have been associated with the wholesale dismissal of nonexperimental ways of seeking to understand development

processes, ranging from cross-country growth regressions to qualitative case studies (Banerjee 2007): RCTs tend to delegitimize “other ways of knowing” (Barrett and Carter 2010: 527). As a result, the marginalization of theory has gone hand in hand with the marginalization of other forms of knowledge, whether in existing studies or collected along with the trials, that might have helped to identify possible confounding influences on outcomes (these have been ruled out by the randomization process) and to interpret causal processes (since these are attributed to the intervention; Shaffer 2011; Deaton and Cartwright 2018a).

As Florent Bédécarrats, Isabelle Guérin, and François Roubaud have pointed out: “This virtually ritual denigration effectively wipes clean the memory banks of past knowledge” (2019: 755). One result of this practice is that RCTs frequently rehash conclusions from past nonexperimental studies, which they have dismissed as not sufficiently rigorous, and present them as new or more reliable discoveries generated by their experiments. The other result is that it places severe limits on what is considered as admissible evidence about how development interventions work, reducing our ability to understand development challenges except in terms of the micro-level realities that RCTs are able to study.

#### DEBATING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: IS THERE A ROLE FOR GENDER-AFFIRMATIVE POLICIES?

In this article, I will be arguing that these limitations of randomista economics have given rise to a particular way of thinking and telling stories about the world that is characterized by piecemeal analysis, ad hoc resort to theory, indifference to history, and context and methodological fundamentalism. I will illustrate my argument through a close reading of a review essay by Duflo in which she addresses the debate about whether economic development “causes” women’s empowerment or women’s empowerment “causes” development. The essay discusses various pathways through which economic development might lead to women’s empowerment (variously equated with increased work opportunities, reduced time burdens, improvements in health and education, and women’s rights). It then turns to some of the ways that women’s empowerment might lead to development progress, including through the greater benevolence attributed to women’s preferences within the family and community and productivity gains from strengthening women’s economic rights.

Within this debate, Duflo positions herself as an “honest broker,” impartially weighing the evidence put forward to support the claims and counterclaims in this debate and offering in their place a “more balanced, somewhat more pessimistic picture of the potential for women’s

empowerment and economic development to mutually reinforce each other than that offered by the more strident voices on either side of the debate” (2012: 1053).

However, despite her own claim to impartiality, I will be arguing that Duflo’s interpretation of the evidence she considers, the weight she gives to different findings, and the language in which she discusses her views aligns her more closely with those who argue that broad development processes provide the optimal route to women’s empowerment than with those who argue that policies for women’s empowerment will promote development. I will discuss three narrative threads that run through the essay and are woven together in support of this position.

- The first thread is largely supportive of evidence suggesting that broad development policies and processes can lead to progress on gender equality – even in the absence of gender-affirmative action.
- The second thread challenges instrumental forms of advocacy for gender-affirmative policies that are grounded in the claim that women’s preferences are more conducive to development than those of men.
- The third thread allows that there is an intrinsic case for gender-affirmative policy on equity grounds, but that it has to be set against its developmental costs: the empowerment of women, as she puts it, is not a “free lunch.”

Following that, I will discuss how she uses and interprets evidence in each of these narrative threads to support the position she takes. In each case, I will consider how the same evidence might be assessed and reinterpreted and the story retold from the vantage point of a feminist economist.

Let me begin with two general observations. First, and in keeping with short shrift given to theory within randomista economics, Duflo makes no attempt to theorize the power relations that might have given rise to the concept of women’s empowerment, which is what the essay is supposed to be about. This leads to certain inconsistencies in her use of the term. She defines women’s empowerment in terms of their access to different constituents of development (health, education, earning opportunities, rights, and political participation), but her analysis oscillates between this broad notion of gender equality and a more individualistic focus on women’s voice, agency, preferences, and so on. The two concepts are not the same. The concepts of economic development and growth are also used interchangeably, depending on the evidence she is drawing on.

Second, her arguments are often difficult to follow because of the piecemeal character of her narrative, which plucks empirical examples seemingly at random from widely differing geographical contexts and very different moments in history. This partly reflects the indifference to historical and contextual specificity commented on earlier. It also reflects



the fact that, despite the large and growing field of research into different aspects of the relationship at the center of her essay, research that uses sophisticated cross-country and national regressions along with qualitative case studies at different levels of analysis, her discussion is conducted almost exclusively on the basis of findings of micro-level studies that meet experimental criteria, either controlled or natural experiments.<sup>6</sup> I have not attempted to discuss all her arguments or follow the order in which they are presented, but I have drawn primarily on the literature that she cites in order to make some obvious connections that she does not make, to locate some of the micro-level evidence presented within the larger picture, and to point to some of the contradictions and inconsistencies in her analysis. Contrary to her assertion, the evidence does not speak for itself, regardless of how rigorous the evaluation: interpretation matters.

### CAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CAUSE WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT? THE RANDOMISTA STORY

The evidence cited by Duflo to support the argument that broad development processes can promote women's empowerment is very explicitly framed to challenge claims that empowerment requires gender-affirmative policies. As she says: "All these examples show that gender-blind policies that improve the economic welfare of households can improve gender equality" (2012: 1058). The examples in question touched on various aspects of development processes: market opportunities, technological change, and social policies.

She gives a great deal of prominence to Claudia Goldin's work on how various aspects of economic development led to the initially gradual, and then more rapid, increase in women's increased labor force participation in the United States between 1880 and 2000 (Goldin and Katz 2002; Goldin 2006). These included the introduction of the pill that allowed women to delay age of marriage, the spread of domestic technologies that reduced the burden of housework, rising levels of education and aspirations, and, very importantly, changes in the composition of occupational structure and the rise of service-sector jobs that offered women with education a respectable employment option. These changes combined to bring about what Goldin termed "a quiet revolution" that transformed family, women's work, and education in the US.

Duflo draws on this work to suggest that economic development has led to an equivalent rise in female labor force participation through the rise of factory jobs for women in China and Mexico and the rise of outsourced service jobs to India. These in turn have led to improvements in women's well-being. She expands on this with examples from China and India.

In the Chinese context, she cites Nancy Qian (2008) who documents the gender-differentiated impact of policy reforms that led to the increased

profitability of cash-crop production in different regions of China. Women gained paid work in regions suitable for tea production for which they were the preferred labor force, while in regions suitable for orchards, it was men who gained new paid opportunities. Qian found that women's increased income, holding men's income constant, improved survival rates for girls and the education of all children, but that men's increased income, holding women's income constant, worsened survival rates for girls and decreased educational attainment for girls, while having no effect on boys' educational attainment. Duflo comments that these impacts of women's access to economic opportunities are striking in a context where cultural preferences and the one child-policy are believed to be strong determinants of son preference.

Her evidence for India draws on two studies. The first, by Kaivan Munshi and Mark Rosenzweig (2006), shows that economic liberalization in the 1990s and the growth of software industries in Mumbai led to expansion in employment opportunities for men and women with English language skills and a rapid increase in English-based education for boys and girls. Noteworthy was that among lower caste households that had traditionally relied on caste networks to find jobs for male family members, a more rapid increase in English education was found among girls who had not traditionally participated in the market and could not rely on caste networks to find jobs. As Duflo concludes:

Girls can be educated in English and therefore be in a better position to take advantage of marketplace opportunities as they arise. A quiet revolution is happening even if households are not fully aware of the consequences of their individual choices (2012: 1058).

The other study is an RCT study (Jensen 2010), which found that active efforts by Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) centers in Delhi to disseminate information about the availability of BPO jobs in the city in randomly selected villages within commuting distance led to a substantial increase in women's employment in the "treated" village compared to control villages – as well as an increase in girls' education in these villages.

A second pathway through which broad development processes have promoted gender equality is by releasing households from the "grip of poverty": this reduces the household's need to make life or death choices, which are frequently resolved at the expense of women's well-being. To support this argument, she cites studies from South Asia, which suggest that the excess female mortality observed among children in this context does not reflect everyday forms of discrimination in food or healthcare. For instance, she notes that an RCT set in Rajasthan (Banerjee et al. 2010) found very little difference in immunization rates for boys and girls.

Instead, she argues, excess female mortality reflects a response to “extreme circumstances.” She notes a study from a poor neighborhood in Delhi that found that parents spent less on girls when they fell ill than on boys, so that girls were twice as likely to die of diarrhea than boys (Khanna et al. 2003). She also notes evidence from rural India that the experience of drought in the early years of life reduced the chances of survival of baby girls to a greater extent than baby boys, particularly among households who had no assets to sell (Rose 1999). This suggests that broad policies for poverty reduction and the provision of insurance against risk to poor households would reduce gender inequality without needing to target women in policy efforts.

A third possible pathway through which development processes can increase gender equality is via the expansion of healthcare. Here, Duflo cites a study by Seema Jayachandran and Adrian Lleras-Muney (2009) who set out to explain why an extremely dramatic decline of 70 percent in maternal mortality in Sri Lanka between 1946 and 1953, the product of broad improvements in health policy, was followed by an increase in girls’ education over this period of time. While the timing of the mortality decline varied by district, the overall decline meant the likelihood of women dying in childbirth went from 1.8 maternal deaths per 100 live births to 0.5 deaths in just seven years – leading to an increase in female life expectancy at age 15 by 4.1 percent. The study found that each additional year in life expectancy led to an increase in years of education of girls, relative to boys, of 0.11 a year. Drawing on a unified model of household decision making, the authors suggested that as parents became aware of the decline in maternal mortality in their district and the accompanying increase in daughters’ life expectancy, it became rational for them to increase investment in daughters’ education as well as that of sons, given returns to education were similar. Here, broad health policies directly reduced maternal mortality and indirectly promoted girls’ education.

Duflo ends this broad narrative thread with the caveat that, for all its positive impact on gender equality, economic growth has not been sufficient to overcome all forms of gender discrimination. While she touches on persisting inequalities in the labor market and politics, her main focus here is on the skewed sex ratios at birth in a number of Asian countries, most prominently China and India. These are all countries that have experienced rapid rates of economic growth, but where the increasing practice of female-selective abortion has allowed parents to ensure that births were skewed in favor of boys. She explains this outcome in terms of an economic calculus on the part of parents weighing the high costs of the dowry necessary to marry off daughters with the possibility as well as the declining costs of female-selective abortion, thanks to the legalization

of abortion and the expanded availability of ultrasound scanning and abortion technologies.

### CAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROMOTE WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: A FEMINIST REINTERPRETATION

Few feminist economists will have problems agreeing with the overall proposition that broad development processes can promote progress on gender equality. They are likely to have more problems with the very restricted and selective nature of the evidence mobilized by Duflo to tell this story and with her interpretation of the evidence.

First of all, there is a striking contrast between the methodological approach taken in Goldin's (2006) study of the US female labor force participation, a work referenced a number of times in Duflo's essay, and the methodological approach of the studies Duflo herself cites as evidence of similar processes at work in developing country contexts. Goldin's study is one of the few cited in the essay that does not take an experimental approach. It is based on historical time series data on female labor force participation, and related series on full-time work and hours of work, between 1890 and 2004 in the US. It is differentiated by age, marital status, and race, and it is combined with a rich historical analysis that brings together the wider literature on women's work at different stages of the period covered.

By contrast, Duflo's claims of similar processes in today's middle- and low-income countries rests on a very narrow empirical basis. The study by Munshi and Rosenzweig (2006), for instance, which discussed the impact of IT-related jobs on girls' education is based on a 2001 survey, using a stratified random sample and carried out in a single area of Mumbai, of the parents of 4,900 students who had entered school at first grade in the previous twenty years. The study by Robert T. Jensen (2010) is based on eighty treatment and eighty control villages randomly selected within commuting distance of Delhi in which there had been no previous attempt to recruit for the BPO sector and examines the impacts of the efforts of eight recruitment agents over three years.

These are both interesting studies, but the claim that they constitute evidence that a "quiet revolution" is happening in India is completely at odds with the larger story. There is very little evidence of a rise in service-sector jobs for women in India, despite its strong rates of economic growth. On the contrary, high rates of growth have been accompanied by a steady decline in rural women's labor force participation while female participation rates in urban areas have remained almost flat for several decades (Neff, Sen, and King 2012; Kapsos, Silberman, and Bourmpoula 2014). Women may aspire to service-sector jobs of the kind that feature in the two studies, but these jobs have failed to materialize, leading to

high rates of unemployment and economic inactivity among the educated women who would aspire to these jobs (Das and Desai 2003; Klasen and Pieters 2013; see also Kabeer, Deshpande, and Asaad 2020).

The tendency to make sweeping macro-level generalizations on the basis of small-scale, micro-level evidence can also be found in Duflo's claim, cited earlier, that similar rates of immunization between boys and girls in Rajasthan reported by an RCT she coauthored was evidence of the absence of everyday gender discrimination in India. In fact, a study by Daniel J. Corsi et al. (2009), using three nationally representative surveys from India between 1992 and 2006, found girls received significantly lower immunization coverage than boys at the national level, that gender inequities in coverage varied considerably by state, and that Rajasthan and Haryana were the only two states in which immunization coverage favored girls. Contrary to Duflo's assertion, everyday gender discrimination persists in health-seeking behavior in much of India and continues to contribute to excess female mortality among children. Gender-neutral forms of health insurance of the kind she suggests are unlikely to remedy this.

It is also difficult to reconcile Duflo's contention that excess female mortality is primarily a crisis-coping mechanism among households in the grip of poverty with her subsequent explanation that increasingly adverse sex ratios at birth reflect a rational decision on the part of parents weighing the rising cost of dowry against the declining costs of female-selective abortion. There is no reference here to the idea of a "quiet revolution" in women's economic opportunities put forward earlier. Instead, Duflo maintains that even if women entered the labor market in larger numbers, there would be very little chance that they could earn enough to "make it worthwhile to let a girl live in the face of such a low cost for abortion" (2012: 1061).

Moreover, this explanation is at odds with Duflo's earlier discussion of the positive impacts on the survival and education of girls relative to boys reported in China, impacts that led Qian to conclude: "The policy recommendation from these results is clear. One way to reduce excess female mortality and to increase overall education investment in children is to increase the relative earnings of adult women" (2008: 1281).

Furthermore, Duflo's discussion of these life-threatening forms of gender discrimination fails to recognize that they have deep historical roots in both China and India and took the form of female infanticide as well as the malign neglect of daughters. The new medical technologies now allow for prenatal discrimination so that families are able to manipulate the sex ratio at birth. In the Indian context, these discriminatory practices were historically confined to higher caste, propertied families, particularly in the northwestern states rather than the lower castes; in other words, a "prosperity" effect rather than a crisis-coping response. These practices

are now spreading to the landless castes and to India's southern states. To discuss the issue of "missing daughters" in these countries as if it were a contemporary problem that was the result of parents using new technologies to exercise rational choice ignores its historically entrenched nature. It would be more plausible to recognize that discrimination against girls in everyday health-seeking behavior, which is frequently exacerbated in times of crisis, is a manifestation of the same cultural norms that lead parents to engage in female-selective abortion and previously led them to engage in female infanticide.

Finally, while Seema Jayachandran and Adriana Lleras-Muney (2009) provide very persuasive arguments linking broad health policies to the increased education of girls, their causal explanation could be interrogated further. They are talking about a brief period of Sri Lanka's history when it became independent (1948) and embarked on one of the most universal social programs in the region. Along with the state's health initiatives, it also abolished fees for government schools and introduced local languages as the medium of instruction. At a time when the wider policy environment was undergoing such major changes, it seems somewhat far-fetched to explain the rise in girls' education following the decline in maternal mortality in terms of a unified model of household decision making that allows a mere three-year lag between mortality declines, the updating of parental beliefs about girls' life expectancy, and their decision to increase investment in their daughters' education. An alternative explanation, based on a bargaining model, would allow for gender differences in preferences within households. In this scenario, the survival of mothers would mean that they were actually present when households made decisions about children's education. If they had more gender-egalitarian attitudes toward children's education than fathers (a possibility I discuss below), this would explain the results without necessarily resorting to unrealistic assumptions about how rapidly parents adjusted to the perceived increase in daughters' life expectancy. The authors consider this possibility but dismiss it on the grounds of a "back-of-the envelope" calculation that it explained less than half of the increase in daughters' education. However, a multi-causal approach, which allows for the possibility that the relationship between the decline in maternal mortality and the rise in girls' education may have operated through more than one causal pathway, would probably provide a more realistic account of this historical phenomenon.<sup>7</sup>

#### CAN WOMEN'S BENEVOLENT PREFERENCES "CAUSE" ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT? A RANDOMISTA STORY

Duflo's discussion of the claim that women's empowerment "causes" economic development focuses on the evidence on which the claim is based, much of it from micro-level studies that found that women used

resources at their disposal in ways that improved the well-being of their families. She questions the generalizability of this claim: “the fact that women have different preferences does not mean that those preferences are *always* benevolent, that they *always* favour ‘good things,’ favourable to development” (2012: 1074; my italics).<sup>8</sup>

It is not clear that any social scientist has ever argued that women’s preferences were *always* benevolent and favor good things but there is a strong body of evidence that has built up over the years across disciplines (economics, sociology, and anthropology), using a plurality of methods, which finds that women’s access to a range of valued resources, including education, employment, land, cash transfers, and credit, is very often associated with increased investments in family welfare, including children’s health and education. As Matthias Doepke and Michèle Tertilt (2011) conclude in their review of quantitative studies on this topic:

Even though each individual study has certain shortcomings . . . the fact that a variety of studies using different data sources and empirical methodologies arrive at essentially the same conclusions strongly suggests that these findings are robust features of the data. (2011: 12)

Duflo is aware of this evidence – “an association between education of mothers and outcomes of their children has been found over and over again” (2012: 1066) – but dismisses most of it on the grounds that the studies concerned did not follow experimental procedures. As a result, the observed correlation between women’s access to resources and investments in children’s well-being could simply reflect unobserved variables. For instance, there could be a correlation between wives’ education and earnings and the unobserved characteristics of the men they marry: better educated or richer women might marry men who care more about their children: “if he is progressive enough to allow his wife to seek employment, then this same progressive attitude may make him treat his children better” (2012: 1065).

Duflo therefore turns to the work of researchers who have used experimental approaches that are likely to reduce or eliminate selection bias, to explore this question. Interestingly, the studies she cites, which come from a variety of different contexts,<sup>9</sup> generally reaffirm the findings of nonexperimental studies: resources in the hands of women were generally more likely to be invested in family well-being. For instance, her own study, coauthored with Christopher Udry and set in Cote D’Ivoire, found that in the years when rainfall fluctuations meant the production of women’s crops was higher, the household spent a larger share of its budget on food and on private goods for women (Duflo and Udry 2004). But, years when the production of male crops was high were associated with an increased share of household budgets on alcohol, tobacco, and male private goods.



Undeterred by this, Duflo offers examples of yet other studies that appear to offer evidence of benevolent male preferences. Lucia Breierova and Esther Duflo (2004) examine the longer-term impact of the increase in education associated with a massive school construction program in Indonesia in the 1970s. They find that female education mattered more than male education in delaying age of marriage and reducing fertility rates, but the effects of gender differences in education on child mortality were not significant. Ignoring the findings for age of marriage and fertility rates, although both would be considered “good things for development,” Duflo focuses on the findings on child mortality to conclude that while parents’ education was clearly important, “it is not clear that girls’ education is much more critical than boys’ education” (2012: 1066).

A similar study by Shin-Yi Chou et al. (2010) examines the impact of the expansion of compulsory junior secondary education in Taiwan in the 1960s on the longer-term relationship between parental education and children’s health, as measured by birthweight, neonatal mortality, post-neonatal mortality, and infant mortality. It reports that both maternal and paternal education has a favorable impact on child health, but the impact of maternal education is more consistent than paternal for all four indicators in different specifications of the model.

The authors themselves caution that close correlation between maternal and paternal education made it difficult to separate out their relative impacts. Duflo offers a slightly different interpretation, claiming that the study found strong and positive effects of both maternal and paternal education, and that one effect was not significantly greater than the other: “The automatic presumption that female education is more important than male education for child mortality and for other children outcomes may need to be revised: it seems that both matter” (2012: 1066).

The third study Duflo cites examines the impact of the expansion of the Old Age Pension scheme in South Africa on children’s education (Edmonds 2006). According to her, it found that adolescent children were more likely to be in school when they lived in a household with a male recipient of the pension than a female recipient: “In this case it is when men receive the pension that they make the decision favourable to well-being and development” (Duflo 2012: 1074). In fact, a closer reading of the findings suggests a somewhat less straightforward interpretation. Among households with elderly members not yet eligible for pensions, children’s education, both boys and girls, was found to be higher in households with an elderly woman than with an elderly man, with girls’ education level generally higher than that of the boys. The actual receipt of a pension by elderly men brought boys’ education to the levels enjoyed by boys in households with nearly eligible women; it had no impact on girls’ education. Meanwhile, the actual receipt of a pension by elderly women had no significant impact on education level. At the same time, households



with both men and women pension recipients reported an increase in education of both boys and girls.

FEMALE ALTRUISM AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:  
A FEMINIST INTERPRETATION<sup>10</sup>

There are a number of problems with the analysis presented by Duflo on this theme. First of all, there is the question of how data is selected and interpreted. Her dismissal of findings from nonexperimental studies in favor of experimental studies that reported the same findings is indicative of the tendency of randomista economists to "effectively wipe clean the memory banks of past knowledge," as noted earlier, and to present old findings as new ones.

However, a much greater problem with Duflo's analysis is that, in common with many neoclassical economists, she treats preferences as random and idiosyncratic: studies providing evidence of female altruism can therefore be countered by evidence of male altruism. But as feminists have argued, the systematic nature of the association between women's access to resources and children's welfare widely documented by the literature suggests a structural, rather than a purely individual, element to the formation of preferences. It is not the preferences of "women" per se that drive these empirical associations, but women in specific familial relations, most often mothers and sometimes grandmothers. This finding attests to pervasiveness of "ideologies of maternal altruism," social constructions of motherhood that assign special responsibility for children to mothers, as one aspect of the gendered structures of constraint noted earlier (Whitehead 1981).

At the same time, and the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive, in contexts where women are cut off to a greater extent than men from access to resources and relationships beyond the household, women's long-term interests may be bound up to a greater extent than men's with the long-term interests of their families, suggesting a self-interested dimension to their apparently altruistic behavior (Whitehead 1981). Indeed, one reason to question any essentialist notion of "maternal altruism" as an explanation for mothers' behavior is the fact that their investment in children is often gender biased rather than egalitarian. This is most marked in regions such as the northwestern states of India, which are characterized by strong son preference and where women's status within the household and their security in old age depend on producing sons, ensuring their survival, and winning their loyalty (Cain, Khanam, and Nahar 1979). In such contexts, women's access to education may reduce overall child mortality, but it can raise mortality rates for their daughters (Das Gupta 1987).

Clearly the possibility that men's access to resources also contributes to children's welfare cannot be ruled out, but it may be that their contributions are better captured through overall household income, given their breadwinning roles, their contributions to joint forms of household consumption (Whitehead and Kabeer 2001), or, as Doepke and Tertilt (2011) report on the basis of their review of the literature, to household savings. Equally, we cannot rule out the possibility that women's access to resources can lead to the deterioration in children's welfare. For instance, mothers in low-income households who must take up wage employment in order to earn a living often keep their older daughters back from school to look after younger siblings, take their young children to work with them in the field or roadside, or simply leave them at home unattended. However, these diverse findings cannot be reconciled through debates about whether men are more altruistic than women. They must be grounded in explanations that take account of variations in gender roles and responsibilities in different contexts, the identities and interests these generate, and how these might be influenced by class and other aspects of household position.

### **The “costs” of gender-affirmative action: A randomista account**

On the basis of the evidence discussed in her essay, Duflo concludes that while empowering women can indeed have positive social impacts, “the usual depiction of women as *always* making the best decisions for long-term development is somewhat exaggerated” (2012: 1053; my italics). She allows that there is still an argument for gender-affirmative policies on the grounds of gender equity, which she describes as a “very desirable goal in and of itself” (2012: 1076). But she warns that such policies will have to continue for a very long time to achieve their goal and that even if they result in “some collateral benefits” for women, these may not be sufficient to compensate for the “costs of the distortion associated with such redistribution” (2012: 1076). She advises that “this measure of realism needs to temper the positions of policy makers on both sides of the development/empowerment debate” (2012: 1076).

Three bodies of evidence are cited to demonstrate the costs of the distortions introduced by gender-affirmative policies. The first, discussed above, relates to the “misplaced” assumptions about benevolent female preferences and its impact on household welfare – evidence that Duflo seeks to challenge.

The second body of evidence discusses the use of gender quotas to promote women's participation in elected office. Duflo reports on a study by Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo (2004), which examined the impact of quotas for women in local government in the Indian context on budgetary decisions. They found that women-led local councils in West

Bengal and Rajasthan invested more in public goods closely aligned to concerns that women had raised: drinking water and roads in West Bengal and drinking water in Rajasthan. They invested less in public goods that were more closely linked to concerns that men had raised: education in West Bengal and roads in Rajasthan. Duflo comments that while this reform was clearly good for women, since their preferences were being taken into account, it was less clear that this represented an improved development outcome: “in order to answer this question, one would need to decide whether water was more important than schools or roads” (2012: 1074). Research had found water wells to be clean in West Bengal so demand for drinking water did not reflect concerns about health. Instead its main benefit was to reduce the time spent by teenage girls responsible for collecting water, so it was likely to have been a matter of “convenience,” but “how one values this convenience, versus educating children or better roads, is not something that economists are well placed to evaluate” (2012: 1075).

The final strand of evidence Duflo draws on to demonstrate the distortions often associated with gender-affirmative policies relates to evidence on the economic inefficiencies associated with such policies: access to microcredit loans were found to increase profits for male but not female entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka (Karlan and Zinman 2011); transfers in cash and kind to microentrepreneurs in Sri Lanka led to a significant increase in the profits of male entrepreneurs but had no effect on female enterprise (De Mel, McKenzie, and Woodruff 2009); a similar experiment in Ghana led to positive returns to male enterprise but only those women who started out with larger businesses reported positive returns (Fafchamps et al. 2011).

In light of such evidence, Duflo argues that “policymakers often are too quick to conclude that [an] allocation of resources toward women, rather than men, would *always* be efficiency enhancing” (2012: 1075; my italics). She points out that any position that a woman gets through a quota is a position that a man does not get, and any measure that seeks to bring girls into school, such as special scholarships and latrines, will be at the direct expense of boys. “Thus, policies that explicitly favour women need to be justified, not just in terms of being necessary to bring about gender equality, but in terms of gender equality itself being desirable and worth the cost it implies” (Duflo 2012: 1063).

### **The costs of gender-affirmative action: A feminist reinterpretation**

In terms of the evidence marshaled by Duflo to demonstrate the developmental costs of gender-affirmative action, I have already suggested that, contrary to her assertion, the evidence suggesting the positive impact of women’s access to valued resources on critical aspects of children’s

well-being is fairly robust. The weakness of her counter examples merely proves the point.

I would also argue that her discussion about the impact of political quotas for women appears to miss the point. Advocacy for these policies is largely based on arguments about the quality of democracy: a political system that fails to ensure that representatives from half of its population are not systematically excluded from elected office offers a very flawed model of democracy. Feminists have fought hard in many countries for women's right to vote; they are now fighting for ways to elect women into public office. Political quotas are one example of these efforts. A number of RCTs that examine the impact of political quotas for women in local government, research to which Duflo has contributed, find that women's presence in local government not only made a difference to the allocation of expenditure on local public goods – “women leaders do seem to better represent the needs of women” (2012: 1071) – but it also reduced male biases against women leaders, increased parental and girls' own educational aspirations, and led to a reduction in the gender gap in education. These are some of the results that feminists hope for when they seek to break down the barriers to women's participation in different domains, including the political. When such barriers appear resistant to “normal” development processes, gender-affirmative policies are an attempt to circumvent, and hopefully erode, these barriers.

It is, therefore, strange that Duflo chooses to question quotas on the basis of their “efficiency costs,” and that she discusses these costs in terms of gender differences in public-expenditure allocations. Such questions do not appear to have been raised when all-male elected bodies make allocative decisions. While it is increasingly recognized that such bodies generally overlook women's interests, which is one reason why quotas were introduced, I have not come across any studies that questioned whether men should be elected to office on the basis of their budgetary allocation decisions. It is also strange that she interprets women's allocation of budgets to drinking water provision in terms of its “convenience.” Surely the developmental question in this case would be to ask how the time saved by teenage girls was used: to increase attendance at school, to engage in income generation, to look after young children, or simply frittered away?

Duflo is on more solid ground when she asks whether targeting livelihood resources, such as microfinance, training, transfers, and so on, to women is the most efficient use of these resources. Certainly, the evaluation literature, both experimental and otherwise, is replete with examples of efforts that show greater productivity or income returns when such resources are directed to men than to women (Kabeer 2018). When we consider the multiple and overlapping constraints that curtail women's ability to earn a livelihood and make the most of their opportunities, constraints embedded in the larger patriarchal structures that prevail in

different contexts, relaxing just one or two of these constraints at the level of individuals is clearly not going to be sufficient to “level the playing field.”

But the solution does not lie in simply accepting the status quo and focusing attention on men on the grounds that the economic returns will be larger. If Duflo and other randomista economists accept the premise that talent and ability are randomly distributed among men and women rather than the monopoly of men, then the distortions that she is talking about relate to the historical structures that have curtailed women's productive potential and protected male privilege. Gender discrimination introduces structural costs that are not visible when the focus is on individual economic actors.

Duflo is also right that changing these structures will take a long time, but such change is unlikely to ever happen if efforts are restricted to the micro-level, time-bound “tunnel-type” interventions that make up most RCTs. Inclusive growth policies, progressive gender-equality legislation, and broad-based, contextually informed, and gender-aware policies and programs that evolve over time on the basis of lessons learned have a much greater chance of succeeding.

#### CONCLUSION: WHOSE STRIDENT VOICES?

Duflo (2012) explains that her motivation in writing this essay was to mediate between the “strident voices” that made up the debate about women's empowerment and economic development. It is not immediately clear whom these strident voices belong to since much of the essay is taken up in presenting evidence by researchers who have not necessarily made these claims. However, we can find some examples of voices in the essay that explicitly argue one or other of these positions. I would like to conclude this article by considering how her discussion of these voices fit into her overall narrative – and what a feminist response might be.

The most explicit argument in favor of the position that broad-based development can be relied on to promote gender equality is attributed to Doepke and Tertilt (2009), who carried out a study to explain why the legal recognition of women's economic rights preceded by several decades their acquisition of political rights in both the US and Europe. The study is largely theoretical and revolves around the argument that, with technological progress and the rising importance of education, men were likely to be more willing to surrender economic rights to women to ensure that their children were better educated. Duflo considers that the paper provides a convincing theoretical argument that economic growth can lead to progress on women's rights and highlights the authors' conclusion:

Doepke and Tertilt explicitly conclude that institutions such as the World Bank that are interested in women’s rights would be well inspired to focus on programs favorable to economic development (such as education policy), rather than push for direct legislative changes for women’s rights. (2012: 1060)

However, even if we found their theoretical argument plausible, despite the dearth of empirical evidence to back them up, there is no reason to believe that the processes that occurred in the US and Europe in the nineteenth century will unfold in similar ways in the contemporary developing world. Indeed, as data collected by the World Economic Forum suggests, while considerable progress has been made in decreasing the gender gap in health and education across the developing world, economic growth has not been accompanied by progress on gender equality in either the economic or the political domains.

The voices quoted in her essay as explicitly arguing in favor of gender-affirmative action as a route to development are Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, and James Wolfensohn, the former President of the World Bank. Annan is cited as claiming that gender equality was a prerequisite to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals while Wolfensohn is cited as describing girls’ education as a catalyst for all dimensions of development. However, as feminists working in the field of development know very well, such rhetoric on the part of international bodies has long been part of their “performance” of gender equality, a costless way of signaling their progressive credentials. Feminists suggest that we need to “follow the money” to find out whether this rhetoric translates into action.<sup>11</sup>

This is not easy, but an illustrative example can be found in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2020). This document reports on the OECD – Development Assistance Committee’s attempt to “follow” how much of its bilateral development finance focuses on gender equality. It reported that for the year 2016–17, 62 percent of its bilateral allocable aid (72.2 billion USD) had no focus on gender equality; 34 percent had gender equality as a secondary objective (40.2 billion USD); and just 4 percent (4.6 billion USD) reported gender equality as a primary objective. Money for women’s empowerment, and empowerment in the economy in particular, is “still a drop in the ocean” (OECD 2016).

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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT  
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NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See the symposium published on this topic in the aftermath of the Nobel award in the special issue of *World Development* on Development and Poverty Alleviation, Vol. 127 (forthcoming). See also Sanjay Reddy (2019).
- <sup>2</sup> I use the term “randomista” economics as a shorthand for that branch of development economics that has evolved almost entirely through reliance on RCTs.
- <sup>3</sup> According to Google Scholar, it is her third most widely cited single-authored essay (accessed February 2020).
- <sup>4</sup> See Agnès Labrousse (2016) for an incisive critique of Duflo’s work from an institutional economic perspective.
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.lejdd.fr/Economie/Actualite/Intellectuelle-de-terrain-166936>.
- <sup>6</sup> A natural experiment is an empirical approach in which variations in the exposure of individuals or groups to conditions of interest to the researcher are determined by nature or some other factor outside the control of the researchers and the researched. Natural experiments are lower down the methodological hierarchy in randomista economics but nevertheless “count” as free from selection bias (Duflo, Kremer, and Glennerster 2008).
- <sup>7</sup> For instance, the abolition of school fees could mean that the increase in girls’ education partly operated through a release of the “grip of poverty” and strengthened the household rationale or maternal arguments (or both) for gender egalitarian education for children. Equally, the increased probability of maternal survival itself would raise the expected value of mothers’ contribution to the household economy and could increase her bargaining power.
- <sup>8</sup> I have italicized Duflo’s use of the adverb “always” here and elsewhere in this essay to draw attention to her tendency to use it to describe the claims that she is taking issue with. In reality, it is very rare in the social sciences for researchers to claim that any finding “always” applies.
- <sup>9</sup> They include a study from the UK (Lundberg, Pollack, and Wales 1997); Cote D’Ivoire (Duflo and Udry 2004); Morocco (Benhassine et al. 2011); and South Africa (Duflo 2003).
- <sup>10</sup> This discussion draws on Naila Kabeer (2016).
- <sup>11</sup> The burgeoning feminist literature on gender budgeting reflects this principle. See also Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID 2008), which attempts to track funding for women’s rights.

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## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

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