



Swati Dhingra

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Advice to young women economists: learn to say no and protect your time

How are women making their mark in economics? To celebrate Women's History Month, Swati Dhingra shares her experiences, from India to British academia and the Bank of England. It took her a while to learn to say no and protect her time.

I studied economics because I didn't want to do science. In India, at the time when I grew up, you either became a doctor or an engineer. If you didn't do one of those two things, you were going to be married off. So, instead, I did economics, because it was still respectable enough that I could continue studying, as opposed to being massively pressurised to get married to somebody. When I went on to do a master's at the Delhi School of Economics, my mum's immediate reaction was: "You're driving yourself out of the marriage market" but I thought, "thank God for that", and eventually I ended up in the US, doing an economics PhD at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

I'm not from a poor family – but I grew up in a very lagging-behind region. There was a lot of real economic deprivation around me. And it wasn't until I started working during my master's programme with Jean Drèze, who actually lives with indigenous people (officially called scheduled tribes) in India and uses economics to better the life of people, that it sort of dawned on me how powerful a tool economics can be to do something good in society.

And, let me be really truthful, I didn't want to have a nine-to-five job.

Making an impact through research

I didn't want to be spending my entire life just making money for myself or other people, so I decided to go into academia, as opposed to taking up a private sector job. But it really wasn't until I moved to LSE, and particularly to the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP), that I realised that

academics don't have to just write academic papers. Some of my papers are really theoretical, maybe five people have read them. But at CEP, I was seeing people like Richard Layard, who has had a massive influence on public life. This was the reason I originally wanted to do a PhD, but it really wasn't until I came here, that I thought it was something that I could do.

Taking decisions that matter

The Bank of England is a very daunting place, and I remember being absolutely terrified the first time I was going to vote against the committee *[at her first vote on 22 September 2022, Dr Dhingra voted for interest rate to rise from 1.75 to 2 per cent. The rate rose to 2.25 per cent]*. It took a fair amount of courage to be able to do that. And I was amazed that I even managed to get my voice out when I read out my speaking note.

Taking decisions that matter to people's lives is the reason I want to do this job. I mean, there's no point in doing the job if you don't think you are adding value. Having done it over and over again makes the job easier with time.

I think the Bank of England job is tremendous in the sense that you see the repercussions of your actions very quickly. While in academia, you might have to wait years. But what's nice about academia is you have the time to really develop things much more carefully, so that it genuinely is very evidence based.

Women's work

When I came to CEP, I didn't think that my career would progress very well. But what helped was the support I got from people who were much more senior to me. There weren't many women around. It was the white men who were saying: "You've got to go out, step out, do something interesting, do something important." That sort of encouragement was absolutely critical. Otherwise, I would have never had the courage to do it. They weren't necessarily the biggest of things. They were just small things, like, you should get involved in some of the Brexit work we're doing or apply for a grant.

For a woman, there is also a trade-off between focusing on your research and advancing there, and taking on additional responsibilities. The **under-representation of women in economics** means there are fewer of us to do things like **this event** celebrating the work of women economists, so we get multiple invitations. But it also underlines how important it is to do us. I'm terrible at saying no to things, and there are many asks on your time. Frankly, I was doing it all the time at the expense of my own personal life and my own research career, and really, I should have learned to say no. But it wasn't until I got the bank job and was genuinely unable to speak in certain places at certain times that I learned to say no and try and protect my time.

Work on what you care about

If women can learn anything from my experience, it is that early on I did get too embedded in the whole “I must publish” mindset. I thought I must write papers about niche things, because they’re much more likely to get published. I didn’t really want to be writing some of those papers, but I did them because they were more likely to be published than anything else. But I wish I had written more about those topics that I would have cared about more and would have been happier discussing.

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- This blog is adapted from Dr Dhingra’s talk at the event [Women Economists: Shaping Policies, Shaping Lives](#) hosted by the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP). It is one of three blogs from the event. Read Camille Terrier on [how the confidence gap influences college applications](#) and Anna Raute on [family-friendly policies in Germany](#).
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