

An Interview with Marianne A. Ferber

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Interviewed by Barbara M. Fraumeni, Chief Economist, Bureau of Economic Analysis

Q: Why did you go into economics?

The reason I chose this field is a rather odd story. I was born in the German speaking part of Czechoslovakia, which was ceded to Hitler in 1938. My parents had been farsighted and were able to get Canadian visa for us and nine other families because that country admitted farmers quota free, and most of my family were farmers. So, 39 of us arrived in Canada that November. My sister, Wilma is two years older than I am, and also brighter and less practical went right on to high school. Although, like the rest of us, she did not know English she graduated the following spring and went to MacMaster University in Hamilton. I was then 15 and three years short of graduating high school. I worked on the farm for a year, then in the city stuffing advertising into envelopes to earn money so that I could also go back to high school. When I went to see the principal in a nearby town, he wasn't sure which year I should enter and suggested that I get advice at MacMaster. The registrar there asked whether I was Wilma's sister or cousin and whether I had as much schooling in Europe as she did. When I told him that I had one year less he thought for a minute and said, "We'll try the experiment, What would you like to major in?" That sounded better than going back to high school, so, I asked for a catalog as a stall and looked for a subject no one had taken before, so that I would start out even. The field I came across was economics. When I came home and my parents asked "Economics? What's that?" I responded that I would tell them as soon as I found out. I thought at the time that I would probably switch, but it turned out I really liked economics from the beginning.

Q: Why did you decide to pursue a graduate degree?

In my junior year, a graduate student from the University of Chicago who had come to McMaster to teach for a year, suggested that I should go on to graduate school and I decided that I might as well give it a try. When I asked where I should go, he said "there are only two places in economics, Harvard and Chicago." So I applied there, and also asked for financial assistance, which I urgently needed. Both offered me tuition scholarships, but I had found

out that Harvard wasn't fully coeducational and decided to go to Chicago. I was always happy I did that because I met Bob Ferber there.

Q: Did you feel isolated in graduate school?

I began graduate school in 1944. This was during World War II, so the department was small and the proportion of women was larger than before, or for a long time afterward. By 1945 GIs started coming back; but I was one of the small minority of advanced graduate students and they looked up to all of us. So there were no problems with the students. Also, during my second year I worked as a research assistant in the Cowles Commission (later Cowles Foundation), which provided a very congenial environment.

That is not, however, the whole story; there were unpleasant incidents, some more serious than others. One day, when I told a new student that I was majoring in international trade and money and banking, he said, "That's a weird assortment for a woman". At the end of the first year I was awarded a fellowship. The next day one of my professors congratulated me, but went on to tell me that he had voted against giving me the fellowship. When I asked why he said, "I don't see why we should spend our scarce funds on a woman who will just go on to get married and have babies." Parenthetically, every time I was tempted to chuck my dissertation, which happened frequently, I said to myself, "I'm not going to prove him right!" Another faculty member said in a letter of recommendation that I was the best woman student he ever had. The department head told me, presumably because he thought I would be pleased, but I was furious. It made me realize that, as two sociologists later wrote, that the problem for women in academia was not so much that they're at the bottom but that they're outside the system. Considerably later, at the first big "women's conference," a fellow alumnus from Chicago said, "Of course we discriminated against women; they only drop out afterwards." In fact, the proportion of women Ph.D.s who dropped out was only marginally different from the proportion of men, but he remained unconvinced.

Most serious was the problem with my

dissertation. A young faculty member I knew agreed to serve on my committee, but the department appointed three people I had not even met and who had no interest in my topic. I never received any advice, the chair didn't answer letters, and the committee took about a year to read each draft of the dissertation. Looking back now, I should have complained, but at that time I was too timid to do that. So I did not finish till 1954, eight years after I had completed all my course work and had left Chicago to marry Bob Ferber in New York. In 1948 we moved to Champaign-Urbana where Bob had accepted a position at the University of Illinois U-C. As luck would have it, in 1954, just when I finished my dissertation and our second child entered nursery school, there was a serious teacher shortage, so the University offered me a job as a visiting lecturer, first a semester at a time, then a year at a time. This went on for 15 years. It was definitely not my choice, although I enjoyed teaching, and I was very pleased when they finally made me an assistant professor with tenure. Even then, however, I was assigned only undergraduate courses.

Q: What about personal life, family, and work?

Throughout the time I struggled with my dissertation as well as later I had the unstinting support of my husband. In my view that is crucial. If you have a partner who does not accept the fact that your career is as important as his you need to either get rid of him or give up on a real career. I would have chosen the former. Happily, I also found that my children never resented that I did not devote all my time to them, perhaps because I was around a good deal since I could do much of my work at home. They loved going to nursery school, had many friends, and enjoyed each other's company. I used to be both amused and pleased when I drove the car pool to nursery school and heard the children brag about their mothers' accomplishments, whether as students or faculty.

Q: You have been described as a mentor and a role model particularly for women. How do you view your role as a mentor?

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I was, for a good many years Director of Undergraduate Studies, which afforded me the opportunity to do a lot of advising. While much of it was routine, I enjoyed helping some students with difficult problems. Because I was very rarely given the opportunity to teach graduate courses, my contact with graduate students other than my teaching assistants was with a few who sought me out personally. In time, however, I also met young women at professional meetings and was most pleased that they began to seek my advice with their research. I consider that one of the most rewarding aspects of having become a “senior scholar.” I should add that, oddly enough, not publishing until I was almost 50 years old has made me a useful role model for a substantial number of women. It helped them realize that one can have a respectable career even after getting a late start.

Q: Do you think your accomplishments have made it easier for women coming after you?

There is some evidence that the presence of women faculty is helpful. Some time ago, Helen Berg and I found that graduate students who had come to know some faculty member well were significantly more likely to complete their Ph.D. We also learned that women students were far less likely than men students to get to know male faculty members well. Simi-

larly, having women colleagues, especially if they have similar interests, is a great advantage. It made all the difference to me when Fran Blau joined the faculty here! So, the growing number of women in academia has been an improvement, but we are still far from a level playing field in economics. As I see it, a woman still has to walk on water to be really successful, while a lot of mediocre men do very well.

Q: What advice would you give to young female economists in the profession?

I think you should think carefully what your priorities and goals are. If you are intent on moving all the way up in the hierarchy, you probably have to “play the game” and conform to current standards - whatever they are. If, on the other hand, you want to do what you think is really worthwhile because that gives you most satisfaction, then don’t worry too much about this sort of thing. For instance, people will tell you that you will never get a position at a research university, let alone become a full professor, if you work on women’s issues or if you are too outspoken. Admittedly, that will make it harder, but I got much further than I expected to and that was certainly not because of my contributions to mathematical modeling or because I ever refused to say what was on my mind. Regrettably, that may however be harder now that universities hire increasingly more people for non-tenure track positions.

Q: How did you get involved in the founding of IAFPE?

I became one of the founding members of the International Association for Feminist Economics in part because several friends urged me to get involved, but that was certainly not the only reason. In spite of my continued allegiance to CSWEP - I served on its board for a couple of terms - I found an organization that is further to the left and explicitly international very appealing. In addition, I think that IAFPE has been very useful because it made CSWEP look as moderate as it really is.

As for my involvement in feminist economics, like many other major turns in my life, it came about by happenstance. One day I received a call from Julie Nelson, a young woman I did not know. She asked me if I would chair a session on feminist economic theory. I told her that I did not know anything about it, but she persuaded me that a chair didn’t need to know much, so I agreed. As it turned out, the session was amazingly well attended and afterwards a friend of Julie’s who worked for a major publisher asked us whether we would be interested in editing a book on this subject. Julie agreed to develop a proposal and persuaded me to work with her. As it turned out, it was the University of Chicago Press that eventually published *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics* in 1993 and is about to publish a second volume on the tenth anniversary.