

# THE ECONOMIC EMERGENCE OF WOMEN: BERGMANN'S SIX COMMITMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

I suggest in this essay that Barbara Bergmann's approach to the economics of women is characterized by six striking dimensions, or what I call "commitments," namely: (1) a willingness to incorporate values into her analysis openly; (2) a commitment to applied economics – economic analysis that supports policy change that will improve women's and children's lives; (3) a commitment to empirical economics, i.e. to data collection and data-based analysis; (4) a commitment to communication with the public; (5) a commitment to the truth even if it challenges convenient orthodoxy; (6) a commitment to focus on how change can occur – to be positive not defeatist. A review of these six commitments, I demonstrate, reveals that they are held together by the first one, her willingness to incorporate values into her scholarly work openly.

## KEYWORDS

Public policy, pay equity, child care, affirmative action, poverty, welfare reform

## INTRODUCTION

This review essay explores Barbara Bergmann's scholarly contribution to the economic emergence of women. Not only is *The Economic Emergence of Women* the title of her first book-length treatment of women and economics, it is also the theme of much of her work in economics. While Bergmann has also contributed importantly to the areas of macroeconomics, race discrimination, and poverty – areas that certainly affect women – this essay focuses on that part of the Bergmann *oeuvre* that specifically and directly addresses women's status. And, as Bergmann notes, since much of women's status is affected by their responsibility for the care of children, this essay addresses her work on child care and improving the status of poor children, many of whom live with their mothers alone. Much of Bergmann's work on women and children is policy-oriented, i.e. it is specifically designed to

explore, develop, and support public policies that would help to enhance women's economic status and independence and raise the standard of living of their families.

Barbara Bergmann's approach to the economics of women is characterized by six striking dimensions, which I label commitments. These are first summarized briefly and then further elaborated below.

1. A willingness to incorporate values into her analysis openly. Whereas much economics begins with the tacit but unexplored value of maintaining the status quo and uses economic analysis to explain or justify it, Bergmann frequently begins with her deeply held commitments to equal opportunity for women, the reordering of sex roles, and adequate support of children, then uses economic analysis and argument to discuss how to achieve a society that better incorporates these values. Most importantly, Bergmann is clearly "for" the economic emergence of women, strongly supporting women's right to work outside the home in decently paying jobs that offer some challenge and potential for advancement. As early as 1973, Bergmann wrote in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*: "It is difficult to imagine a 'women's liberation' that did not include greater participation and success for women in the economy" (Bergmann 1973a: 158).

2. A commitment to applied economics – economic analysis that supports policy change that will improve women's and children's lives. Bergmann has written scholarly articles on a host of important policy issues: discrimination, pay equity, affirmative action, child care, poverty, welfare reform, and housework, and then also presented it in forums such as Congressional hearings, newspaper columns, and television appearances, where it is likely to have more of an impact on policy.

3. A commitment to empirical economics, i.e. to data collection and data-based analysis. Unlike most economists, Bergmann collects data herself, mobilizes her students to collect and analyze data from a variety of sources, including employers and business owners, and dares to use less than totally adequate data in order to derive at least ballpark estimates that move discussions of policy initiatives forward. She is committed to getting information that will bolster her arguments from other disciplines such as sociology and anthropology as well as economics. She believes economic theory should be able to help us to understand the real world, with all its anomalies.

4. A commitment to communication with the public. *The Economic Emergence of Women*, *In Defense of Affirmative Action*, and *Saving our Children from Poverty* are three full-length books accessible to an educated lay audience, designed to help them understand economic issues and to build political support for specific policy approaches. Bergmann has made efforts to advance change in public policies through organizing as well as public education. For example, she convened the Economists' Group for Policy Issues, which prepared report cards on the presidential candidates in the 1992

elections and supported and disseminated the Help for Working Parents Plan, a proposal for reform of the welfare system.<sup>1</sup>

5. A commitment to the truth even if it challenges convenient orthodoxy. Bergmann has argued that many middle-class women are *not* driven to work by financial need, that women's work for pay does contribute to increasing divorce, that pay equity wage increases for women could not come totally or even mostly out of profits and would likely result in men's wages growing more slowly, that affirmative action *is* about numeric goals that are like quotas, that it would cost *more* not less money than presently allotted to raise children above poverty, that tax rates in the United States are low and should be raised, and so on. As much as ten years ago, Bergmann challenged liberals and feminists to defend affirmative action from attack and to develop bold, effective policies to eliminate poverty. More clearly than many, she foresaw the attacks on these policies and understood that progressives were, through negligence, leaving them open to attack.

6. A commitment to focus on how change can occur – to be positive not defeatist. Bergmann's message is never pessimistic, but always upbeat. She believes academics and intellectuals have a moral responsibility to move beyond critique of what is and point to what could be; solutions to contribute actively to achieving a better future, and to give those who are oppressed hope of being able to share in that future.

A review of these six commitments suggests that they are held together overall by the first one, her willingness to incorporate values into her scholarly work openly. Furthermore, the content of those values regarding women dictates the content and the nature of her work on women. In seeking to advance women's status through her scholarly work, she necessarily does work that is reality-based and relevant to public policy and strives to communicate her results to the public in an effort to build support for policy changes. She does not believe you can convince the public by misleading them with half-truths or convenient falsehoods, but always attempts to provide positive alternatives to the status quo and to convey the message that change is both possible and desirable.

## A COMMITMENT TO EXPLICIT VALUES

Early in *The Economic Emergence of Women*, just after introducing the subject of the "breakup of the sex-role caste system" that occurred with women's increased labor force participation, Bergmann writes:

The new conditions require new habits, policies, and institutions. Our most urgent priority is to complete the task of driving sex discrimination and race discrimination from the workplace. . . . A second necessity is to find and implement a way of helping single parents to

live decently. . . . A third priority is the promotion of new and more flexible work schedules and new facilities for child care.

(Bergmann 1986: 4–5)

Bergmann has focused on these priorities not only since 1986, when this book was published, but much earlier, ever since she first began to write about women and economics. Through her work on affirmative action and pay equity, poverty and welfare reform, and her growing body of work on children and child care, she has pursued these three areas consistently.

Bergmann's approach is in stark contrast to much of the neoclassical *oeuvre* on women's lives. Not only do such economists as Gary Becker not explicitly discuss their own values (following the common tactic in economics of accepting a distinction between fact and value), their work implicitly supports the status quo. Many feminist economists would, as Bergmann implicitly suggests, argue explicitly that fact and value cannot be separated, but rather that one's values critically affect which questions one asks, which facts one chooses to consider, and how one chooses to interpret them (Francine Blau 1981; Julie Nelson 1996).

#### COMMITMENT TO APPLIED ECONOMICS FOR POLICY CHANGE

A recent search for Bergmann's work in the files of the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) uncovered more than twenty-five articles and chapters in books, a few with co-authors, on policy topics ranging from inflation and macroeconomic policy to race discrimination, sex discrimination, the economics of both women's liberation and housewifery, sex equity in retirement benefits, comparable worth, child poverty, child care, child support, welfare reform, family policy, and family income support, plus the three books referenced above, dating from 1971 through 1997. Further, Bergmann several times testified before Congressional committees (Bergmann 1972; 1973; 1979; 1982e; 1983). IWPR does not hold a similar number of publications from any other academic economist. Bergmann's work is singularly useful to a policy think-tank such as IWPR that focuses on women's issues.

As already noted, Bergmann's concerns have been notably consistent during these years. In her 1973 testimony before the Joint Economic Committee, "A Policy Agenda for Women's Economic Problems," she identified two areas of focus for a "vigorous program to improve the economic position of women": "ending discrimination in employment and improving arrangements for the financial support and physical care of children." In this testimony she identified the rapidly growing share of families with children headed by women alone and their higher incidence of poverty, and correctly predicted that the problem of children living in families where

they had no access to men's incomes would grow. She urged more rigorous child support enforcement as a way to ensure that men's resources would continue to flow to children even when the relationship between the parents has been dissolved. She suggested both a system of guaranteed child support assurance with the government picking up the tab for a father unable to pay or delinquent for other causes and where the payments to the mother would not decline when she earned income, as was the case with Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the federal welfare program then in effect. The IRS was to be used as the enforcement mechanism. At the same time, Bergmann asserted that it was unfair to require men to provide 100 percent of children's financial support; instead, she argued that mothers, too, are responsible for earning money to support their children. In this same testimony she also pointed out that hiring goals without numerical targets are pointless and ineffectual.

Bergmann is one of the few scholars of this subject to directly connect poor women's scant prospects for self-support with the discrimination against them in the labor market:

If most single parents were white men, good jobs would be open to them, and almost all of them would already be self-supporting and above the poverty line. In actuality, of course, most of them are women and many of them are black or Hispanic, so that they suffer race and sex discrimination in employment.

(Bergmann 1988: 92)

### A COMMITMENT TO EMPIRICAL ECONOMICS

Bergmann believes that the discipline of economics should be reorganized around empirical studies, that too much of what passes for current economic wisdom is based on assumptions that go unchallenged by any input about real phenomena (Bergmann, 1982c). As mentioned earlier, more than most economists, she collects primary data, frequently using students to conduct surveys. One student investigated the gender of department managers by surveying a supermarket chain that had been under a consent decree to increase its representation of women as department managers. When the student found that they had not done so, Bergmann attempted to encourage an attorney to reopen the case, but so far that attempt has been unsuccessful. Bergmann herself collected data on the French child care system from various government agencies and painstakingly attempted to determine how much is spent in the U.S. in support of children for comparison purposes.

## A COMMITMENT TO COMMUNICATION WITH THE PUBLIC

In a 1988 article in *Dissent* entitled “A Workable Family Policy,” Bergmann challenged as backward looking the “old-fashioned liberal” idea that women ought to stay home with their children and that poor women should be supported more generously to enable them to do so. She saw this as out of step with the majority of U.S. families in which the mothers work outside the home to help support their families and correctly predicted that providing public support for poor mothers at home would become increasingly unacceptable. (The federal Family Support Act of 1989 reformed welfare to increase employment for mothers of children older than 3 years via the JOBS program, and, in August of 1996, the federal entitlement to income assistance to poor women and their children ended and was replaced by a time-limited system that sets explicit work requirements.) At the same time, Bergmann also challenged the right’s view of employment as a cure-all for welfare; instead she argued that the employed mother’s earnings alone would not support these families in decency and that to accomplish this goal their earnings would have to be supplemented by free child care, child support from absent fathers, and cash supplements when unemployed. Nevertheless, welfare payments as such would have been reduced, if her recommendations had been adopted, as more mothers would have been enabled to work.

Bergmann described her ideal program this way in 1988:

A policy package that promised government-sponsored child care, lower welfare budgets, greater independence of single mothers, and lowered poverty levels should be saleable to the American people. Politically, such a program presents a realistic and constructive contrast to the right-wing obsessions with abortion and school prayer.

(Bergmann 1988: 93)

Bergmann’s 1996 book, *Saving our Children from Poverty: What the United States Can Learn from France*, is her attempt to sell that program to the public, opinion-makers, and political leaders, using the data she collected in France as proof of positive outcomes in a country somewhat less rich than the U.S. For all its boldness in terms of expenditures needed and in the institution of a new federal program of child care provision, Bergmann’s approach is pragmatic:

We cannot create, through government policy or moral suasion or religious revival, a society in which single mothers and their children will not need some help. We are unlikely to move anytime soon to a situation where all or almost all children are born to married couples, where almost all marriages last until death, and where all children have parents who earn enough to support them adequately. Such an

alternative is closed to us, at least as the expected outcome of any series of actions by the government . . . we must choose from the alternatives that are available to us.

(Bergmann 1996b: 151)

The Help for Working Parents plan (Bergmann and Hartmann 1995a) has been criticized as being too pragmatic, as accepting the low-wage labor market as given and simply supplementing working parents' resulting low incomes with tax dollars (Linda Gordon 1995; Gwendolyn Mink 1995). Bergmann and Hartmann (who co-authored the plan presented in *Feminist Economics*) admit as much, but argue (1995b) that it is not possible to do everything at once, that reforming the low-wage labor market is worthwhile, but is likely to be a long-range project. Such a plan would eventually help many women and men, with and without children, poor and not poor, but policies targeted at poor children and their parents are needed to make an immediate difference in these people's lives.

The general strategic approach of making a choice from among practical alternatives also informs *In Defense of Affirmative Action*. After establishing that sufficient discrimination exists to warrant using remedies, Bergmann shows that affirmative action is a practical, effective remedy that does exactly what it aims to do – open up existing opportunities to women and minorities. She addresses potential objections directly, meeting the issues of numerical goals and/or quotas head on. Her example of President Clinton imposing a quota on his Cabinet selections, such that he constrained his search of an appropriate attorney-general to females, illustrates that this approach does work, and that without it, the desired change would not be likely to occur. Bergmann also offers another telling illustration:

In some parts of the world, when a pie is to be shared by family members, the men and boys are served first. After they have eaten their fill, the women and girls get whatever is left, if anything. . . . In the West, we abolished the tradition of male privilege in the portioning out of food and other goods and services within the family long ago. Male privilege has just begun to be challenged in employment, however; . . . white males have been and continue to be served as much pie as they want. . . . Drawing up goals for an affirmative action plan is the equivalent of saying that we want to end the tradition of giving white males as much pie as they want at the expense of all other groups.

(Bergmann 1996a: 83)

Bergmann has learned effective ways to communicate with the public and is taking her messages about affirmative action and child poverty to a broad audience through television and radio as well as the print media.<sup>2</sup> Selling potential policies to the public is essential to their being enacted.

A COMMITMENT TO THE TRUTH EVEN IF IT  
CHALLENGES CONVENIENT ORTHODOXY

Bergmann is not afraid to tell us that women's liberation has some negative consequences, but does not advocate turning back. Rather she advocates activist public policies that will ameliorate the worst effects:

The entry of large numbers of women into the work force, the high incidence of divorce and out-of-wedlock births will not be reversed in the near future. These movements have been part of a movement toward greater independence for women . . . [b]ut they have had negative consequences as well.

(Bergmann 1988: 88)

Some see as an appropriate response a return to the traditional family structure, but this would mean a step backward for women. Rather, new patterns and institutions are needed to cope with the social and economic problems which are resulting.

(Bergmann nda: 1)

And even more forcefully:

The social institutions which in the past served to channel resources to children from their fathers are unlikely to be revived in their old forms, nor should we wish them to be. These institutions kept women in a grossly inferior status, and ruined many lives by preserving marriages which should have been dissolved. The problem is that we have not yet put into place institutions which serve some of the positive purposes of the old institutions, and which are felt to be just and adequate.

(Bergmann ndb: 23)

Bergmann strongly defends women's right to raise children without men and deplores the past arrangement in which women who wanted children and a comfortable lifestyle could only attain both through marriage. At the same time, however, she well understands the comforts that a good marriage, and especially an egalitarian partnership, makes possible. Bergmann has always acknowledged the work and sacrifice that go into rearing children, as well as maintaining good family relations and a comfortable home. She believes that these tasks must be equalized between women and men and generally opposes policies that will reinforce traditional gender roles (such as wages for housework). In *Dollars and Sense* (1998), Bergmann argues that popular family-friendly policies, especially generous ones, may undermine women's equality by encouraging them to devote more time to homemaking and less to market work.

While Bergmann defends the rising divorce and illegitimacy rates as signs of women's liberation, and does so in the face of considerable opposition,



she also occasionally falls in with some popular beliefs, only to change her mind with convincing evidence.

The welfare system . . . underwrites sexual and reproductive irresponsibility by relieving both women and men of providing out of their earnings for the children they create.

(Bergmann 1986: 4)

In this text Bergmann seems to agree with the conservative notion that the U.S. welfare system has contributed to the problems it attempts to solve. Recently, a group of liberal researchers specializing in poverty and welfare issued a statement marshaling evidence against the widely believed claim that the former welfare system contributed to higher fertility among recipients (see Mark Rank 1989; Sharon Parrot, and Robert Greenstein 1995). In speaking about welfare now, Bergmann frequently asserts poor women's right to have children and argues both for encouraging single mothers to work to support their children and for greater societal and collective responsibility for poor children through subsidized child care and health care.

#### A COMMITMENT TO FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE AND TO SHOW HOW CHANGE CAN OCCUR

Bergmann's rhetoric skillfully turns what some might view as negatives into positives. Admitting that middle-class women don't *need* to work for the money, she nevertheless strongly defends their right to work not only to use their education and lead a fuller life, but also to achieve greater equality with men. If women's working contributes to divorce, that's okay because it's important to be able to get out of a bad marriage. If pay equity and affirmative action succeed in raising women's wages faster than men's, and even if they cause some inflation, that's okay because that's a major way the gap will close. If men's wages stagnate or even fall that also may not be so bad, because the economic rent men have been receiving does need to be whittled away and it would help to equalize power between women and men within the family. And finally, while Bergmann agrees it is not likely today that the United States will enact expensive new programs to raise children out of poverty, she believes that public policy will swing back in that direction and we should be ready with a bold proposal.

#### CONCLUSION

Bergmann's six commitments have influenced the development of feminist economics – especially its policy-oriented applications – decidedly for the better, and will undoubtedly continue to do so. Many economists have followed her lead in studying sex segregation in the labor market (Blau 1977),

overcrowding (Julie Whittaker 1997), pay equity (Deborah Figart and June Lapidus 1995), and affirmative action (Jonathan Leonard 1989, 1990). Others have amplified upon her treatment of child support (Irwin Garfinkle 1992), child care issues (Nancy Folbre 1994), the standard of living of single parents (Trudi Renwick 1991), and the need to modify measures of poverty (Lois Shaw forthcoming).

One criticism of Bergmann's approach is to say that its focus on specific goals tends to ignore or leave out other developments that may impinge upon the attainment of the goals she seeks (Gordon 1995; Mink 1995). Especially from today's vantage point, when wages are falling for many workers even in the face of strong economic growth, many economists point to the central role labor market restructuring is playing in shaping workers' opportunities.

For example, if women and minorities begin to get an equal share of the good jobs just as the number of those jobs is declining because the labor market is being transformed (women get ticket to ride as gravy train leaves station) and inequality is growing among men (with the top getting more but many others losing) then affirmative action alone will not ensure a decent life for women and minorities. Something more than affirmative action will be needed. If the conditions of economic insecurity that the poor have always faced move up the economic ladder because of restructuring, programs aimed at the poor alone, and particularly poor single mothers, will not garner the support they need to be successful because they leave out the lower middle class who may also increasingly suffer from economic insecurity. Under these conditions, making assistance available involves considerably more expense, but is also more necessary.

Although some see Bergmann's goals as too narrow, others recognize that they are broad and far-reaching. Her proposed policy solutions – affirmative action, pay equity, guaranteed child support, subsidized child care and health care – go so far beyond the status quo that is justified in so much of modern-day economics, her work seems truly revolutionary, and especially so for women.

If other feminist economists would emulate Barbara Bergmann, and bring the same level of commitment to using their training in economics to advance women's status and increase women's opportunities, the progress of women would be much enhanced.

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### Note about sources

My review of Barbara Bergmann's work on women is informed not only by having read her publications over the years, and having reread many of them on this occasion, but also by many years of working together in Washington on a variety of policy issues, by our attendance together at many meetings and conferences, and by many, many discussions about the state of women and the state of the women's movement. Where no specific publication is cited, the source is my personal knowledge from these shared activities.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The author of this review essay co-chairs the group with Bergmann. It is on-going.  
<sup>2</sup> In 1982, Bergmann authored a series of columns for *The New York Times Sunday Business* section on a variety of economic topics, including those discussed here (1982a, 1982b, 1982d, 1982c). She has also written for the *Nation* (1995a, 1995b) and several other newspapers and magazines.

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