

Where Are the Women?

BY JESSIE ROMERO

Women earned 34 percent of economics Ph.D.s in 2011, according to the National Science Foundation's Survey of Earned Doctorates. That might sound like a lot, but it's much lower than the 46 percent of all doctorate degrees earned by women, and the smallest share among any of the social sciences. Women earned 72 percent of all psychology Ph.D.s, for example, and 61 percent of sociology Ph.D.s.

The gender gap in economics gets larger at each stage of the profession, a phenomenon described as the "leaky pipeline." In 2012, women were 28 percent of assistant professors, the first rung on the academic ladder; 22 percent of associate professors with tenure; and less than 12 percent of full professors, according to the 2012 annual report of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession (CSWEP), a committee of the American Economic Association.

In part, this might reflect the long lag between earning a Ph.D. and attaining the rank of full professor; if more women are entering the field today than 20 years ago, more women might be full professors in the future. But the share of new female Ph.D. students is actually lower than it was in 1997, when CSWEP first began collecting data — which means women's share of economics faculty could actually shrink.

Donna Ginther of the University of Kansas and Shulamit Kahn of Boston University also found leaks in the pipeline. In several studies, they have shown that women are less likely than men to progress at every stage of an academic career, beginning with landing a tenure-track job and culminating in promotion to full professor. Furthermore, women are less likely to be promoted in economics than in other social sciences, and even than in more traditionally male fields such as engineering and the physical sciences.

In part, the disparity between men and women could be due to different choices, such as having children or focusing more on teaching than on research. Women also tend to publish fewer articles, which can affect the likelihood of getting tenure. To the extent that such factors are the cause, mentoring programs or more family-friendly policies could help to close the gender gap.

But even after controlling for education, ability, productivity, and family choices, Ginther and Kahn found that a gap of about 16 percentage points persists in the likelihood of promotion to full professor in economics — a much larger gap than in other disciplines.

The problem begins at the undergraduate level: Women are less likely than men to major in economics, or even to take an introductory economics course. Proposed explanations have included a lack of female role models in the

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classroom or the emphasis on math, but empirical studies have not supported them.

"It's something systemic to the field," says economist Claudia Goldin of Harvard University. That something might be the way economics is taught. "It's like we're the marketing department at Kimberly-Clark, and we suddenly discovered that we haven't translated the diapers package into Spanish, but Hispanics have the highest birthrate. We're teaching economics the same way we did when women didn't matter. But now women do matter. So how do we translate economics into 'girlish'?"

More research is needed to answer that question, but some have suggested using discussion groups in class or making textbooks less abstract. For example, Susan Feigenbaum, Sharon Levin, and Anne Winkler of the University of Missouri at St. Louis developed an introductory microeconomics class that used stories about real-world decisions, such as having a child or going to college, to illustrate economic concepts like opportunity cost and human capital investment. They found that women and minorities were less likely to drop the class and more likely to major in economics than students in a more traditional course.

These efforts beg an important question: Does it actually matter how many female economists there are? Yes, says Susan Athey of Stanford University. "You just don't get the best allocation of human capital" when one category of people is excluded. "Losing out on a chunk of the population is wasteful." (In 2007, Athey was the first woman to receive the John Bates Clark medal, given to the American economist under 40 who has made the greatest contribution to the field.) In addition, a survey by Ann Mari May and Mary McGarvey of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Robert Whaples of Wake Forest University found that male and female economists have significantly different opinions on public policy questions such as the minimum wage, labor regulations, and health insurance. As the authors concluded, "Gender diversity in policymaking circles may be an important aspect in broadening the menu of public policy choices."

Although gender parity is some distance off, women do reach the top echelon of the profession. Goldin is president of the American Economic Association this year, and two more women have received the John Bates Clark medal since Athey in 2007. "My view is a young woman going into economics... will face some bumps along the road having to do with being a woman, but they're not going to be career defining," Athey says. "They'll be obstacles that can be overcome." **EF**