

In conversation with:

Devaki Jain

Pioneering Statistician.

Feminist Economist.

Legend.



Q: At a time when girls hardly received formal education, you fought tooth and nail and went all the way to Oxford. What was it like and what made you choose PPE? And what kind of lessons did you learn along the way?

A: That's a question that I haven't been able to figure out really because if I said that it was easy, it would not be truthful. I did my B.A. in 1953. My family was not very supportive of my education. However, I went on to do my B.A. and got three gold medals. Subsequently, I was stopped from doing post-graduation because the only college available in Bangalore for doing Ph. D was co-ed, and that was out of question. So I stayed at home for two years. But I was restless and I think my father could see I wanted to do something. He said I should get married. I insisted that I wanted to work, so he got me a job with one of his friends and like that, I spiraled out. I could have easily not got here. It all seems to have happened without any conscious thinking, planning or anything of that sort.

Q: Ma'am, you have worked extensively in the field of statistics and analysis. In Economics in general, there is a lot of focus on evidence based research for finding out the most appropriate policy intervention. But in spite of all of that, the people who are supposed to implement these policies don't do so. So how do we bridge that gap and make sure that action is actually taken?

A: Yes, that is a challenge. The fact that we haven't been able to clear the air of this is a failure but sometimes the implementation machinery of the government is clogged. I was on the planning commission in Karnataka for ten years. The implementation line which runs from the Taluk officer to numerous extension offices is full of bureaucratic controls. That's why a previous government stated that if you put power in the local people's hands and give the money directly to the Gram Panchayat, then this pipeline can be avoided. The gram panchayat can, in fact, change the system.

Q: The way our curriculum is structured, we are first taught principles of economics, which are called out by the feminist economics, and only later are we taught developmental issues like income inequality, sustainable development, etc. What's your take on that?

A: If you start with Feminist Economics, you won't pass any exams. Secondly, you can list for yourself what you think are the five ideas that feminist economics has put forward which is not there in orthodox economics. You will find that there are not too many. The core of feminist economics is heterodox economics, showing that economics should be inclusive of social norms, politics and doesn't allow itself to become too mathematically narrowed in its logic. Feminist economics would also say that economics should not be only about bread and income but also about justice, in which case, we are stratifying the inequality between the rich and the poor by saying that within that rich and poor, there are scheduled castes, LGBTs, mentally and physically challenged; all the various characteristics of the human population.

Q: There are certain pockets within India which firmly believe in the patriarchal line of thought, that men and women are unequal. When there are pockets like these that exist within our country, can equality uniformly be achieved?

A: These embedded attitudes are indeed difficult to budge. There are a lot of NGOs who try to nudge patriarchal attitudes. There are people who have transformed villages where there is child marriage. There are three Indias within India. There is Dalit India, there is the India which is traditionally bound and then there are you, the new India. All three are running together but it is the new India that is budging the old India out.

Q: This definitely exists in rural India, but a lot of it also boils over into the corporate sector very subtly. There is a sort of sexism and discrimination against women that exists within the sector. They put on a

facade of letting women in, but after a certain point they too have a glass ceiling. How do we ‘nudge’ our way into the sector, in such a case?

A: That’s true. It is indeed a big barrier. I have a counter argument about the glass ceiling- while what you are saying is true, it need not be our aspiration to go where men have gone. Shouldn’t the women’s movement be considering other ways of penetrating the glass ceiling? Women who are bright and want to enter the corporate sector are creating another culture of leadership and management which is a little more inclusive. Women in leadership often break stratification, the rigid boundaries of structures which show hierarchies of power. But it’s a teasing question in my mind. When people ask me how to break the glass ceiling, I tell them, “Don’t. Find another road.”

Q: What do you think are some of the qualities we should inculcate amongst ourselves from this point of time so that we can overcome the challenges that we will eventually face within the field of economics?

A: Thinking about your question I would say that you have it already in you to change the system. One thing to do is to look for a gendered aspect that you can handle within the technical jobs that will be assigned to you. There are women and men who have other jobs like engineers, who take trouble to go to a proximate slum and enable women and children there to access schools. There are so many ways in which our neighbourhood can be improved by our own social activism. And of course, if you’re in a structure, then you could be a person who mobilises the women in the structure to fight for their rights.

Q: When you have to have things like self-confidence and determination, you need to know what your true calling is in life. How did you know that economics was your calling?

A: I didn’t. In this aspect, my story is not a good story for you. Because I didn’t know; I did not want to be an economist. I wanted to be a dancer, and then I wanted to be brain surgeon. I landed into economics by sheer accident. Whatever I did happened in an unplanned fashion. But it led me to being a free person.

