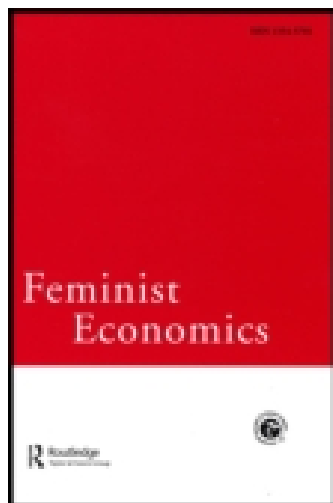


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TELLING PALESTINIAN WOMEN'S ECONOMIC STORIES

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ABSTRACT

How can theoretical criticisms to economics introduced by feminist economists be addressed empirically? Feminist scholars outside economics have spent considerable time debating appropriate methods and have often argued that interactive, situated research is more appropriate for answering feminist concerns. By telling the stories of three Palestinian women, I provide examples where qualitative research can enhance and even challenge quantitative research. I argue that our understanding of concepts such as power, individualism and preference formation will be enhanced by the use of qualitative methods and that feminist economists should be among those questioning the narrow definition of acceptable evidence articulated by mainstream economists.

KEYWORDS

Qualitative methods, modeling assumptions, Palestinian women, power, situated research

INTRODUCTION

In 1991 I went to the Occupied Palestinian Territories to conduct a household survey in the Bethlehem area. I had been to the region twice as a political activist before returning in 1991 to carry out my dissertation research. Many of the research questions I pursued were motivated by my earlier visits to the region. In particular I was interested in education, migration and employment patterns among Palestinian men and women. Initially my reason for collecting my own data was that the Israeli statistics were unreliable and existing data bases did not provide me with answers to the research questions I wanted to explore. I therefore carried out a household survey of 262 households in the Bethlehem region.

Upon returning to the United States to analyze my data I became frustrated because my lived experience in the community was of limited value in writing a dissertation in economics. Having lived with a Palestinian family, made friends and political alliances in the region and also having

visited more than half the households included in my survey, I had far more information than appeared on my survey forms. This intimate, rich knowledge about the people I was studying made it difficult for me to model their behavior and economic outcomes merely with a set of mathematical equations. Time helped create some “distance” between me and my data, but I still had trouble applying minimalist neoclassical theories to explain the types of economic constraints facing various groups of Palestinians and the rich diversity of economic outcomes I observed. The survey data could tell only a very limited story, leaving out much important information. Influenced by this awareness and by my discussions with feminist scholars working in other disciplines,¹ I began to look into the issue of methods.

Feminist scholars outside economics have spent considerable time discussing the importance of methods, the consequences of gathering data in a particular way, as well as lengthy and often agonizing discussions over the power dynamics inherent in research and the best ways to avoid some of the worst power traps.² A detailed review of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper. My purpose here is to illustrate through my research with Palestinian women in Bethlehem why a more involved discussion of methods needs to be made within economics.³

The discourse in economics looks very different from that in other social sciences and the humanities. While scholars in other disciplines, particularly feminist scholars, have been traveling an arduous road on which epistemological and methodological concerns are addressed, economists, particularly “mainstream” academics in the United States, do not often engage in such discussions. Instead, most discussions within economics about appropriate research techniques have surrounded issues of robust statistical results, econometric specifications, etc. Given that economics generally defines itself as the most rigorous and scientific of the social sciences, it is the least amenable to expanding the range of acceptable research methods. Currently acceptable methods in economics are largely limited to those deemed quantitative.

Quantitative research consists of statistical analysis of survey data, based mainly on measurable or quantifiable variables. An underlying assumption in economics is that quantitative analysis is the only way of knowing and that qualitative methods are anecdotal and biased. While considerable qualitative work may go into the development of a data set which economists analyze, this is usually not done by the economists and we rarely address this issue when analyzing our data.⁴

Feminist economists have begun to ask epistemological questions concerning the “science” of economics. Some important critiques by feminist economists are challenging the claim of positivism, pointing out the multitude of ways in which women are excluded within economics and how assumptions built into economic models privilege men’s experience over women’s.⁵

Other compelling arguments feminist economists have advanced involve challenging the basic assumptions underlying neoclassical economic models. For example, Paula England (1993) outlines three assumptions which tend to go unchallenged: the endogeneity of preferences, selfishness in the market and altruism in the family, and the issue of utility comparisons. Janet Seiz (1992) also critiques three assumptions of the neoclassical model: rationality, individualism and power.

Feminist economists have also begun employing a variety of creative techniques to begin writing women back into economics.⁶ Still it would be helpful to formalize how it is that we as feminist economists gather evidence and why it is that some forms of evidence are not acceptable to economists.⁷ My own experience in Palestine is illustrative of how fieldwork and in particular lived experience and interviews can alter the research experience and answer different types of questions than are answered by quantitative or statistical analysis.

Günseli Berik (1996), points out that "As an economist I was neither trained in fieldwork methods nor encouraged to use them" (p. 57). My experience was quite similar. While I went to the field to collect quantitative information about the socio-economic conditions facing Palestinians, I found my experiences were influencing my interpretations of my data. In addition, I found myself frustrated with the story I was able to tell when relying only on quantitative data. I eventually returned to the field to carry out in-depth interviews with some of the women I had encountered during my fieldwork. The richness and diversity of these women's experiences had sometimes appeared flat and uninspiring on the questionnaire sheets. Through interviews I was able to formalize some of the nonquantifiable knowledge I had gained in the field, which had previously been scattered and intangible. I describe below my experiences with both conventional econometric data analysis and my exploratory efforts to conduct alternative analysis based on participant observation and interviews.

SCENARIO 1 – INTERPRETING STATISTICS

When I began my research, I was interested in the determinants of education and subsequent labor force participation for Palestinian men and women. My quantitative data included variables such as sex, refugee status, age, years of formal education, average years of siblings' schooling, marital status, number of children and labor force participation for household members. I modeled schooling as a parental decision which in turn determined labor force participation. Not surprisingly, women with low education levels were less likely to be labor force participants and thus had less access to income. A more interesting result was one of the distributional outcomes. While refugee women had made substantial gains in education which then led to higher labor force participation, nonrefugee women

lagged behind in their educational attainments and subsequently in their access to well-paying jobs (Jennifer Olmsted 1996).

While these data proved quite useful in revealing statistical relationships and trends, in particular unequal economic outcomes across groups, I had difficulty addressing the challenges raised by Seiz (1992) and England (1993), namely utility maximization, the exogeneity of preferences, individual versus family choice, and power. Were the persons included in my household survey satisfied with their education and employment outcomes? Had their families influenced or dictated their decisions or had these been individual choices? Were there specific cultural or institutional structures which were encouraging or discouraging particular economic outcomes for women? Many of these issues were difficult to quantify and were more easily addressed by the qualitative data I collected.

SCENARIO 2 – TELLING WOMEN’S STORIES

By interacting with the people I studied, asking them about their lives and trying to get a better understanding of what factors led to their current economic conditions, I gained the following additional data. Instead of a series of observations, my data points became actual people.

Nabiha⁸

Nabiha, a young woman from a working-class, refugee family, explained to me how at 14 she had agreed to marry a man she barely knew and had had two children in quick succession. She told me that she wished she had stayed in school and not married so young. She felt that without much education she was unable to participate in the paid labor force, although she wanted to have access to her own income. At 18 Nabiha was secretly exploring the options of birth control, because she realized that if she kept having babies, she would continue to be trapped in her role as a mother and housewife. Despite her lack of formal education and sheltered life, Nabiha was aware of her lack of power and understood, and could articulate clearly, her most pressing concerns about her life. Nabiha was not a powerless victim, but a woman who was actively attempting to make the best of her situation, although clearly certain institutional and cultural constraints, not easily accounted for in standard neoclassical models, had limited her choices.

Sabah

Sabah, a village dweller, had also married young, just after high school, although her brothers had all continued on to college. Family pressure led her to agree to a marriage she did not really want. Her husband refused to

allow her to continue her studies after the marriage, although that had been the agreement before the marriage. After a number of months, Sabah left her husband and, despite great resistance from both her family and the community, obtained a divorce. Faced with the inevitability of her divorce, her parents agreed to send her to a European university where she received a scholarship. After completing her undergraduate education, Sabah then stayed on to get a master's degree. Her challenging of her husband and parents had successfully changed her life course. Yet Sabah's struggles were far from over. When I met her she was unemployed and living at home, back under the control of her domineering father.

Jameela

Jameela, another young woman from a working-class, refugee background, was simultaneously studying for her bachelor's degree and working when I met her. Jameela's parents had been fairly supportive of their daughters' education, encouraging them to study and work, and not to marry young. Because of financial problems though, Jameela's parents originally suggested that she pursue a two-year diploma rather than trying to finish a four-year college degree. Ignoring her family's recommendation, Jameela managed to complete a bachelor's degree, with the help of her fiancé, as well as a number of scholarships. She then began working, despite being married and raising two small children at the same time. Although she was from a poor family in a refugee camp, Jameela had accomplished many of her dreams. She obtained day care for her young children so that she could continue her education and work after marrying and while raising her children. She challenged her parents in two ways, first by pursuing a bachelor's degree instead of being satisfied with a two-year diploma and second by marrying quite young, to a man she loved, despite the apprehensions of her parents. Unlike the parents of Nabiha and Sabah, Jameela's parents had actively discouraged her early marriage, but Jameela had married anyway.

ANALYSIS

First, I will address how my story in Scenario 1 differs from that in Scenario 2. Second, I will pose the question: how can I even separate the story being told in Scenario 1 from the story I told in Scenario 2?

From my quantitative data I was not able to learn that although Nabiha and Sabah had started on similar paths in life, their current economic and social positions were quite different. By contrast, Sabah and Jameela, who ended up with similar education and labor force participation outcomes, had reached their situations in very different ways. In all cases family pressure had been a factor in determining their education, marriage and employment outcomes.

Both Nabiha and Sabah dropped out of school and married early. In Nabiha's case it was only after she had been married a few years and had two children that she realized how economically dependent she was and how limited her options were. Sabah, on the other hand, was able to extract herself from her unhappy marriage and continue with her goals. An important difference between the two women was that Sabah was two years older and had finished high school before she married, which had given her not only more sense of her individual needs and the importance of education, but also more leverage. Because she had a high school diploma, it was easier for Sabah to continue her education. For Nabiha, ending her marriage to continue her education was less of an option than for Sabah, not only because she had children while very young, but also because she left school after the 8th grade.

The final outcomes then were not the only information worth examining. The timing of life events and the process by which certain outcomes occurred were also critical. Identifying such turning points can have important policy implications concerning the provision of schools and the role of the state in providing cheap, accessible education, age of consent laws, etc.

Another insight gained from the qualitative analysis concerned the link between the women's and their siblings' education. Statistically there appeared to be a connection between the two, although, as can be seen in Sabah's case, that connection might be misleading. While Sabah's brothers had been allowed to pursue post-high school educations automatically, Sabah had been denied that option initially by her parents. It was only through Sabah's will-power and personal struggle, as well as institutional support provided in the form of a scholarship, that she obtained the education she did. In this case interviewing Sabah revealed information which led to the reinterpretation of the quantitative results.

One outcome of the qualitative research is the realization that institutions and the services they provide are important to economic outcomes.⁹ Both Jameela and Sabah benefited from scholarships. For Sabah the availability of a scholarship helped to counter family resistance, while for Jameela, even with a supportive family, a scholarship assisted in her attainment of her educational goals. This fact not only emphasizes the importance of institutional support for women's educational attainment, but also provides a good example of how quantitative and qualitative analysis can be used together. Based on the insights from the qualitative observations, a quantitative test could be constructed, to see how sensitive women's education is to the availability of scholarships. Comparisons could also be made between costs and male and female educational achievement. So while qualitative results can help interpret quantitative outcomes, they can also be helpful in determining which quantitative results are likely to be the most useful.

The differences in the three women's experiences illustrate the diversity of social and gender role expectations, even within a particular society and

community. While Jameela is closest to fitting the neoclassical model of individual choice, it is important to note that even her decisions were shaped by institutional and social elements.

Family relationships and their link to the market economy are more powerfully understood when contextualized historically and culturally. With the knowledge from my interviews I was able to challenge a number of assumptions of the neoclassical model, including utility maximization, exogenous preferences and individual choice. Nabiha, for instance, clearly experienced shifting preferences for education and labor market work, although she was unable to act on these shifting preferences because of her earlier actions. Sabah was denied her individual desire to pursue education, and thus was unable to maximize her own utility in the short run, but eventually overcame her family's imposition of their will.

Important themes in all these women's lives are power relations and control of their own lives. While in the neoclassical model there is little discussion of power relations¹⁰ and in the Marxist model power struggles are defined primarily as occurring in the labor market, feminist economics has been concerned with issues of power, both in the family and the labor market. And yet we have few tools for defining and measuring power. Proxy variables such as access to education and income are used to measure women's power, but do not adequately explain power dynamics which may have important economic and policy outcomes. Interviewing and observing are ways of becoming better acquainted with power issues which are often difficult to quantify.

Learning about these women's experiences allowed me to gain both a better understanding of power issues, and to move my own thinking beyond some of the binary categories set up in economics. Living in the Palestinian community, I gained insights concerning the problems of using such binary terms as selfish and altruistic, traditional and modern, choice and dependency, individual and family decisions and even the categories quantitative and qualitative.

As an example, Nabiha's economic position, with its severely constrained set of choices, had clearly been shaped by the actions of her parents and later her husband and in-laws. Yet to categorize various actors' behavior as "selfish" or "traditional" was to oversimplify a rather complex process and set of social constraints and assumptions. Nabiha's family had few economic resources and particular expectations about gender roles, expectations which did not take into account the shifting economic and social conditions which were occurring around them.

Another important question is how useful is it to separate quantitative and qualitative information? As someone who lived among Palestinians before I began my survey work there, I must admit that my research, the questions I decided to ask, the community I did my research in, were from the beginning shaped by my qualitative experiences, but it was only after I

left the field and began to struggle with the contradiction of my own field experience and the way methodology is defined in economics that this point became more apparent.

CONCLUSION

My training in economics led me to collect quantifiable, primarily numerical data for my dissertation. Yet, upon returning from the field, I found that I could not separate my lived (or qualitative) experience from my quantitative data. The mathematical models which I had at my disposal and the statistical evidence which was to provide the language in which I communicated my results sometimes obscured the complexity and inter-relatedness of the processes and outcomes I experienced and observed. As a feminist economist, I was concerned not only with outcomes, which I could show with statistical evidence, but with processes, which were more difficult to address with statistics. Statistical outcomes I discovered, were often the result of different processes, as in the case of Sabah and Jameela and Sabah and her brothers. By entering (and then leaving) the field these realizations became more apparent.

Through the stories of three Palestinian women, I was better able to identify a number of questions that require extensive further discussion. These include the issue of how we gather evidence and what is considered acceptable evidence within economics. Two related questions are why discussions of methods have remained limited and how training for economists might be altered if a larger array of methods were accepted in economics. My experiences, as well as those of Nabiha, Sabah and Jameela, help show why feminist economists should be asking these questions.

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presented at the 1995 International Association for Feminist Economics meetings in Tours, France.

NOTES

- ¹ In particular, Diane Wolf and Suad Joseph, as well as members of the Gender and Global Issues reading group I was involved in at the University of California, Davis encouraged me to explore these questions.
- ² See Kathleen Driscoll and Joan McFarland (1989), Toby Epstein Jayaratne and Abigail Stewart (1991), Mary Maynard (1994), Connie Miller and Corinna Treitel (1991), Daphne Patai (1991), Judith Stacey (1991) and Diane Wolf (1996).
- ³ In a longer, on-going research project I am exploring in more depth the questions of alternative methods and how to analyze interview data.
- ⁴ See Martha MacDonald (1995) for further discussion on this point.
- ⁵ See Marianne Ferber and Julie Nelson (1993) and Diana Strassmann and Livia Polanyi (1995) for discussions on how economics is socially constructed. Julie Nelson (1993a) and (1993b) and Diana Strassmann (1996) address the question of science in economics.
- ⁶ A complete review of feminist research which incorporates multiple or alternative methods in economics is beyond the scope of this paper. The work I am familiar with includes that of Eudine Barriteau (1995), Lourdes Benería and Martha Roldan (1987), Günseli Berik (1996), Lynn Bolles (1991), Lisa Catanzarite and Myra Strober (1993), Simel Esim (1996), Naila Kabeer (1995), Marlene Kim (1993), Bill Maurer (1991), Jennifer Olmsted (1996), Michèle Pujol (1995), Sarah Radcliffe (1991), Martha Roldan (1995), Myra Strober (1987, 1995), Myra Strober, Suzanne Gerlach-Downie and Kenneth Yeager (1995) and Frances Wooley (1995).
- ⁷ Another important question is what are some of the power issues inherent in the methods we do use? Patai (1991) and Stacey (1991) discuss the power imbalance between the researched and researchers. See also Wolf (1996).
- ⁸ These are not my interviewees' real names. When I asked Nabiha what name she wished me to use for her, she said that she wanted a name which meant knowledge. The other two are Palestinian women's names mean 'Morning' and 'Beauty' respectively.
- ⁹ Feminist institutional economists have argued for more attention to research on institutions. See Janice Peterson and Doug Brown (1994) for extensive discussion of these issues.
- ¹⁰ With the exception of the game-theory models.

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