

Ethics in Social Science Research

Reflections from a student of Economics

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If poverty and nutrition are issues also of social justice and the commitment that a democratic state makes to its citizens (namely, ridding the country of hunger and malnutrition and also of ensuring food security) then the discipline of economics needs to pose its problem differently.

The association of certain concepts with certain kinds of values and endowments creates dilemmas for the way we pose our research questions, and much more for the way in which such research is funded and/or prioritized over other research questions.

The practice of the discipline of Economics in which I am trained and which still forms a backdrop to much of my research, has over the years made me raise a number of critical but, as yet, unanswered questions. These questions have arisen and increased in direct proportion to my research into and engagement with, particularly, gender-based enquiries. Whether all of them can be construed as ‘ethical’ in nature is debatable; nevertheless, a substantial portion of these questions, seem to me to be fundamentally questioning the assumptions of the discipline itself, the manner in which questions for research are posed, the way in which field-work is conducted and finally the manner in which solutions (whether policy-based or discipline-based) are offered.

What follows is based on my research – hence to that extent it is selective and biased. I give below, in no particular order, the nature of queries that have struck me as ethically challenging the way economics and economists have conducted themselves and their research. I hope to elaborate on these points during the presentation.

1. Economists’ engagement with issues of poverty and nutrition has substantively been the bases for policies formulated over the years to address these problems. The fact is that poverty and the poor, as well as malnutrition as a major problem continue to plague large sections of the population, has contributed very little to the way in which the discipline itself is taught or practised. On the contrary, increasingly, macroeconomic concerns are couched in terms such as maintaining, for example, fiscal balance, monetary stabilization, etc., as if these have no relevance to poverty and the nutritional status of the population. Worse, economists have managed to relegate poverty, nutrition and livelihoods to the ‘social sector’ category that they have conveniently created; this in turn has taken a life of its own and today stands apart from ‘macroeconomics’. The ethical question arising from this, in my opinion, is the following: if poverty and nutrition are issues also of social justice and the commitment that a democratic state makes to its citizens (namely, ridding the country of hunger and malnutrition and also of ensuring food security) then the discipline of economics needs to pose its problem differently. Hunger, poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy – these need to be center-staged, and the economy needs to prioritize resources for addressing these issues within a finite period. It is not just unethical but morally reprehensible that a major segment of the population of the country continues to live in sub-human conditions while the practitioners of the discipline and their counterparts in decision-making bodies continue not only maintain that

poverty has declined according to their (questionable) definition, but, worse, also look upon the 'social sector' as unproductive investment and therefore a drain of resources.

2. Some of the crucial contributions of Women's Studies' research to our understanding of the functioning of our economy also foreground the critical importance of gender to macroeconomic concerns, methods and strategies. In my opinion, the ethical dimension that Women's Studies' research has brought about lies in the, very often, adverse implications to women and children in particular, of the manner in which economics is currently understood and practiced. Further, more than any other segment of the population, women and children find themselves regarded largely as 'targets/recipients' of the 'social sector' category mentioned above. The measurement of the economic contribution of this segment as well as the fact that gender is not just a social construct but also an economic one remains highly contentious.
3. The concept of gender division of labour, which among other things has highlighted the assignment to women in particular the tasks of daily and generational reproduction, has, to put it mildly, revolutionized the concept of 'work', forced researchers, policy makers and data collecting agencies to rethink the categories of 'productive' and 'unproductive' work, and take cognizance of the multiple and simultaneous nature of much of women's work particularly in rural areas. The significance of the recognition of the multiplicity and simultaneity of much of women's work lies in the fact that it provides to a large extent an explanation of how rural households persist in the face of their impoverishment and diminishing agricultural income. The discipline of economics however glosses over these facts; very little attempt has been made to engage methodologically with how such ground realities can be meaningfully captured on an economy-wide basis; much less work has been done to re-examine the assumptions and methods that inform the national data gathering agencies, such as the Census, NSS, ASI, etc. The result has been a continued silence on crucial aspects of people's lives and livelihoods simply because 'data' do not exist. What however exist are anecdotes, micro-level studies, reports prepared for funding agencies on specific aspects, etc., - but no comprehensive account that will transform the way the economy is understood, re-organized and re-structured. For the state it becomes convenient to deny and/or play down the adverse implications of its policies while at the same time translating these problems into 'schemes' or 'projects' aimed at empowering vulnerable sections of society.
4. A considerable body of research has brought out the ways in which women's gendered identity has been central to the national and international drive towards cheaper labour but higher productivity and profits over the last few decades. In the process this body of research has also highlighted the strategies through which governments, transnational corporations and even trade unions have managed to continually erode potential and existing entitlements for women workers [Pearson, 2004: 607]. The case studies of the units in EPZs are a good example of this combined onslaught. These include: in a bid to attract foreign investment, the conditions offered to foreign investors/buyers by developing countries ensured that these major employers were absolved of

virtually all responsibility for the welfare of their workers; despite the fact that units in EPZs are formal units which in turn implies that national regulations stipulating wage levels, non-wage benefits, hours of work, safety regulations, etc., do apply, all parties have routinely managed to negotiate exemptions from these measures. Apart from exemptions, these formal units have managed to protect themselves also legally by not designating their women workers as 'workers', through a simple device of employing their workers through contractors; the latter are on the pay roles of the employers not the women workers.

5. Amartya Sen's writings, particularly his argument that increasing women's freedom to work outside the home is crucial for increasing their freedom in domains such as the home, healthcare, reproductive control, etc., has been critically studied and commented upon by several feminist researchers. Feminists have critiqued the facile connections that are made between promoting women's workforce participation and increasing their agency. Without decrying the need for increasing women's paid employment outside the home, feminists have however directed attention to a number of factors that disempower women despite wage work. As Koggel [2003] puts it succinctly, "The central question... thus becomes: Is Sen's account sufficiently discerning of the ways in which global forces of power and local systems of oppression operate and interact in ways that limit women's freedom and agency even when they have paid work?" (167). An equally important contribution of feminist analysis of women's work is the futility of merely suggesting that better data be collected and that through better data collection techniques and tools, women's work as economic activity rather than leisure can be netted. The case of women not being counted as workers, of home-based work increasing women's wage employment but not contributing to their participation in the public sphere nor enhancing their freedom and/or agency in the private sphere – clearly illustrate why simply improving the definition of work and the collection of data on labour is not enough. But are these the only questions that such research raises? How do economists get away by couching their arguments in terms of enhancing the competitiveness of the economy, but in effect operationalizing it by exploiting workers, flouting work conditions, and yet asking for further flexibilisation of work structures and conditions? Further, how ethical is it for the discipline and for the practitioners of the discipline to continue to deal with the 'unorganized' sector and with 'informally' employed workers as residual categories?
6. Precisely because, as researchers, we do not continually critique the concepts that we employ, the association of certain concepts with certain kinds of values and endowments, in my opinion, creates dilemmas for the way we pose our research questions, and much more for the way in which such research is funded and/or prioritized over other research questions. Again, field-based research has become another term for descending on the rural areas and taking for granted the time and hospitality of rural folk. At one level, the term 'rural' has become synonymous with caste conflicts, poverty, ignorance, disempowered citizens, etc. At another level, 'urbanisation' has come to be associated with 'development'; in fact the degree of urbanization is directly correlated with level of development. While much of 'rural' research is silent

on class issues, 'urban' research has hardly any caste dimension. The continued existence of such dichotomies has several ramifications – for research, for policy, for funding and even for our teaching and understanding. Cumulatively, and over time, I feel they have a deep ethical dimension since, the usage of these terms also inadvertently imply that we subscribe to notions of inferiority, inefficiency, low productivity, helplessness, etc., that these terms have come to be associated with.