

Report on the HES survey on diversity in the field of history of economics

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At the June 2018 HES annual conference, some members of the board organized a women's breakfast, which resulted in the establishment of an ad-hoc committee tasked with carrying out a survey on the status of women within our field and within our history research. The first topic involves more personal and sociological reflections and the second historiographical ones, yet we felt the two might be connected. It was then enlarged to include a broader set of question on the status of various minorities in our field and how to improve diversity.¹ The set of question circulated in January 2019 is in Annex 1.

This report is a summary of the 31 responses we received. It is intended to document the present situation and spur discussion, rather than suggest a specific course of action. Should the HES want to take action, a more systematic comparison with measures implemented in other professional societies should be implemented.²

Summary:

(1) Most seniors (male and female) write that diversity in profiles and topics has improved in the last decades. There are now women in positions of power and "highly-regarded," some note. Yet testimonies from younger female scholars are remarkably similar to those of seniors, and most of them report feeling under-represented in conferences, workshops and journals, especially those working on non-western history of economics or with feminist or structuralist epistemologies.

(2) At least 5 scholars report that history of economics is a more welcoming, friendly and caring community than the other ones they interact with (economics, history, history of science, sociology, etc.), but an equivalent number of respondents believe our field is lagging behind in terms of professional standards.

(3) Most respondents concur that as outright sexist behavior or harassment has become less frequent, biases have become entrenched in subtler ways (like clubishness or prizes given by the HES), which makes them sometimes difficult to identify: "the barriers are real and still very effective," a historian summarizes. These biases are not just about gender, but also young scholars, non English-natives. Unprofessional behaviors were reported (for instance in article reviewing).

¹ One reason diversity might be pursued for its own sake is that role model matter.

² Preliminary research on childcare has already been conducted, and some members of the present committee have studied, as historians, attempts to raise the status of women within science. A difficulty is that information on diversity policies is mostly available for academic societies with thousands of members, which makes those practices less transferable to the case of HES.

(4) There was a large array of remedies proposed (see Annex 2). Childcare provision is unanimously supported by young scholars and most seniors report that they would have welcomed such a service. A majority advocate for the establishment of a professional code but a few voiced substantial doubt. Most young scholars mentioned that they have hugely benefited from mentorship, but there is disagreement on whether it should be organized or informal. There is also disagreement on actions targeted at specific types of researchers (like women-only events or funding for under-represented scholars) or topics (funding, sessions, special issues, training programs). Some feel it would be necessary; other that there is a risk of marginalizing these topics and approaches further.

Summary statistics

We received 31 responses. 5 men specifically wrote to decline to respond, arguing they did not feel it appropriate for them to answer the survey.

By gender: 68% of respondents are women. The rest are men. No respondent reported being non-binary

By geographical area: 76% of respondents are currently located in Europe, the rest in the Americas (Canada, USA, Latin America). We did not receive any response from other regions

By career status: To preserve anonymity, we have retained two categories only: 68% of respondents belong to the “tenured or tenure-track” category, which include both junior and senior scholars with stable and permanent positions. The remaining 32% are mostly doctoral or postdoctoral students, with a few scholars in temporary positions. In the qualitative analysis of responses, we sometimes write about “senior” or “junior” scholars (which include doctoral, postdoctoral students as well as assistant professors who have defended their dissertation less than 5 years ago). Though we don’t have precise information on age, we estimate that 2/3 of the respondents are under 40.

By type of response: All respondents but one express the need for action to improve diversity both among researchers and among topics.

Issues experienced or reported:

Representation

All women, senior and junior, report experience of **being the only female participant in session or seminars**, and not seeing even one person of color around. "It regularly feels like 'crashing' a gentlemen's club which comes with unspoken barriers to speaking and contributing effectively," a woman writes. "I still find myself attending workshops where I am the only woman. This should be viewed as unacceptable," another adds. "I've never seen so many old, white men in one room before," the student of a third said upon attending his/her first history of economics conference. Some feel less in a minority as they become senior, but some more. Many argue that presenting research in such an

environment is intimidating. At least 5 respondents testify to the importance of “role models” in the development of their career, which makes the recurring experience of being the only female or person of color in a workshop or conference a problematic experience. There is need for “more women in position of power,” one noted.

4 respondents noted that the domination of white Western men in our field is exemplified by the **demography of HES prize laureates**. While they are 7/28 female Dorfman prize laureates, only 2/17 women received the Spengler book prize, 4/42 became distinguished fellows, and 3/26 were selected for a Goodwin best paper award (including a female best paper laureate last year, and female distinguished fellow and a female Spengler prize laureate this year)

The representative historian of economics is not just a western white male, some note, but also an English-speaking one. Scholars not yet fluent feel marginalized in conferences as well as in dealing with editors. Latin American, French, Italian and Japanese scholars were specifically mentioned. The language barrier is sometimes yoked to geographical issues. Doctoral programs and conferences are often located in Europe and the US, which makes it more expensive for scholars outside these zones to participate, and also influences the hierarchy of topics published in major history of economics journals (see below).

Some respondents emphasize that, in spite of not being demographically represented, they nevertheless experience integration issues. As a young scholar wrote: "I never felt under-represented. However, I felt, right from the beginning of my career, that I did not belong." Experiencing “club mentality” is highlighted in more than 5 testimonies. One scholar remembers witnessing aggressive argument between two giants in our field while attending her first conference, and that the conference dinner conversation was all about golf and whiskey. Another one reports a longstanding feeling that men were usually more confident in presenting their papers than she was. Another remembers being told by a male senior that her female role model was "intellectual weak." Another one remarks that it's the “same names, same people invited to participate in various events, to publish in special issues” while other “names are absent from bibliography where they should appear.”

Finally, nearly all respondents also reported being *primarily* impaired in their research by the lack of funding, and many pointed to heavy administrative and teaching loads, which, they believe, should be taken into account when selecting conference locations and providing travel support.

Sexism and biases

No sexual harassment was reported, but it is likely that no such issue would be reported through an online survey. Two types of issues were noted: individual behavior and collective biases.

Some respondents experienced or witnessed sexist remarks, women being interrupted in conferences and seminars, and many young scholars received condescending and

patronizing remarks. "Is there a way to prohibit mansplaining Marx or Ricardo to someone young and female?" one respondent asks. More than 5 scholars report comments (from male and female colleagues) on their look, how they dress, or being pregnant before tenure. "High heels would shape a woman's buttocks in a pleasant way," one female young scholar was told.

Though some point that abusive individual behavioral should not be tolerated, a respondent encapsulates a shared belief that it's sometimes a collective dynamic and not always a problem of isolated individuals: "a person individually could not hold any sexist belief, or at least think they do not, and still take part in collective dynamics that exclude woman."

Two senior women remark that they experienced a mix of negative and positive discrimination. Targeted hires tend to "rectify" gender imbalances to some extent, one writes, but also "tends to create resentment." Being a woman can be an advantage if conference organizers want to avoid all-male panels, another noted. But, a third added, wanting female representation sometimes results in "unlikely women invited to fill a perceived gap when there are other female candidates who should be present."

Professional standards and ethics

Two kinds of issues are reported:

(1) difficulty in acquiring professional standards and codes

5 respondents emphasize their own difficulties in learning basic things about career development: writing a research proposal, what's a good publication strategy. They felt they had no space to learn these skills. One writes: my male colleagues "figured out potential reviewers of the papers they submitted and sent them out to these folks as they wrote them for comments. That way they improved their chances for publication by insuring that they had incorporated the recommendations of potential reviewers or thought about rebuttals to unfavorable comments to send back to the editors. Frankly, it took me too long to understand this process."

(2) unprofessional behavior by colleagues with more power

More than 10 respondents mention cases of "abuse of dominant position," ranging from paternalistic remarks during presentations to impediment to research: "you are too nationalistic," "you are trying to find someone to blame," some young scholars were told publicly. "There are important transparency issues in some institutions," a response read. Several scholars feel that ethically dubious behaviors are not taken into account seriously enough, in particular when some "kind of hierarchy ... that puts the young scholars in a position of subordination and vulnerability" exist. 3 young scholars mention the lack of professional PhD supervision, and issues with the tone and content of many referee reports are emphasized by students and faculty, men and women, seniors and juniors alike.

Connection between demography and topic dominance

One scholar articulated well an idea found in 1/3 of the responses: “the lack of diversity, i.e. over-representation of middle-aged/old white males, is in some part the result of a lack of diversity in research topics. HET is mostly about the 10 or so ‘great economists’ who happened to be white males.” Whether the lack of diversity in researchers’ backgrounds result in narrow topics or the other way round is not clear, but there is a shared sense that the two are related. “Showing why women were ignored historically and what can be done about it can give clues on what to do with the present situation and help change mentalities,” one respondent concludes.

One respondent mentions the “dominance of ‘internalist’ method” focused on what author A or author B writes, and another writes that there is a “clash between generations over methods, with young women attacked for pushing new approaches in a different way than men are.” A third historian thinks that diversity in topics is impaired by the “interpretation of some scholars (particularly retired or currently very famous) about some authors or notions, and the place they have in our community” (Ricardo, Marx, Smith, Keynes).” This can lead to “topic avoidance” as a publication strategy.

Lack of diversity in topics and methods

1/3 of respondents regret the marginal status of women’s studies, feminist approaches, decolonization studies, or simply topics which are not about great Western male economists (in particular history of economic ideas in China, Africa and India, areas in which a few young scholars are doing “pathbreaking work”, a senior notes). This also includes efforts to decolonize syllabi, work on intersectionality and working class economists; and researching why some people are written out of history in more structural ways. One historian notes that her work is often considered “not history, but rather area studies.” At least 5 historians writing on women economists feel they had to fight to be taken seriously, to establish some kind of intellectual legitimacy. One young scholar complained about the lack of freedom in choosing dissertation topics, resulting in a systematic focus on the contribution of men to American economics. 3 respondents pointed to perceived publication biases in major journals, possibility because of the lack of associate editors knowledgeable about non Western topics. Someone suggested that such topics are marginal because scholars usually write in the language of the region they research.

Suggested actions the HES executive committee could take:

A full list of the ideas historians have kindly sent us is provided in Annex 2. We only discuss the most popular and most debated actions here.

- 1) Childcare:** it is by far the most demanded action. There is generally no preference expressed on specifics. Preliminary research on practices in small professional societies suggest that a society of the size of the HES will not be able to set up onsite conference childcare, if only because the insurance costs are prohibitive. It seems easier to offer financial support to pay for babysitting offered at some hotels or help fund the trip of a relative.

- 2) Alternative methods to foster conference attendance:** suggestions included offsetting disabilities through captioning, livestreaming keynotes, and allowing video participation through software like Zoom or even an interactive platform. The HES already has an ambitious young scholar program, but awareness to diversity should be built into the selection process, some respondents suggested.

3) Code of conduct and binding commitments

That the HES should establish a code of conduct is the second most requested action. Two respondents write that it is an 'absolute necessity', and others mention that other societies (AEA, American Sociological Association, History of Science) have one, resulting in substantial improvement of the representation of women and minorities. At least 3 scholars, however, express serious doubt, suggesting it would do more harm than good. There is also considerable variation as to what such a code should include. For some scholars, it is more a symbol, a signal that HES cares about diversity, a commitment to take it into account. For others, it should be a set of indicative guidelines: "a code should include shared expectations and values," a historian writes. For more than 5 respondents, it should, on the contrary, include concrete proposals and compliance mechanisms. "If some guidelines have to be written, it should definitely include standards references to a safe environment free of any kind of harassment, and at least a definition of inappropriate use of dominant position," someone writes.

It is also suggested that the HES establish a permanent diversity committee with the ability to fund some initiatives, and adopt binding commitments like parity in the executive committee, at least one equity member on each selection committee, and quotas or guidelines for selection of keynotes and laureates. "It is not wise to demand 50% representation, best is to slightly exceed the PhD ratio," one respondent suggests. Others favor awareness over rules. As regards HES annual conference sessions, for instance, one respondent suggests to ask "all session organizers to complete a form in which they declare whether they have included emerging or under-represented scholars in their program and, if not, why not. We could use the same or a modified form for grant applications."

4) Mentoring, network, creating a space

More than half of the respondents emphasize the importance of mentoring in career and intellectual development: "The conversations I've had with senior scholars and the advice I have gotten from them has been very useful, and I'm sure that part of the reason I have been able to have these opportunities is because I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time, or because my advisor or a professor I knew suggested I do something or talk to someone," one young scholar characteristically relates, adding that such opportunities should be offered to under-represented scholars.

There is however disagreement on whether mentoring should be formally organized or remain informal. Organized mentoring can be a problem because of bad matching, one senior notes. Better "encourage people to reach out and be mentored informally, encourage

the culture of helping to cultivate the work of others for the good of the field and everyone in it." "Young scholars need to reach out," the senior concludes. "'You should have asked' is not a good answer," a young scholar points out, praising mentoring lunches, networking events and summer schools. It is also suggested that some faculty should be encouraged to mentor or to organize collective mentoring sessions so that the burden is not always on the same, small set of senior scholars.

The content of such mentoring sessions is also debated. Should they learn how to write, how to present, how to behave? "I don't think, for example, that young women (or men) should become aggressive competitors. I don't think for example that lack of diversity is always about training women to speak up. Sometimes, it is about telling men to shut up," a woman warns.

Finally, responses on whether such space should be closed or open display a longstanding rift in diversity-related discussion. At least 2 female respondents emphasize "female-only events that allows for coaching and strategizing," while another one favors "open space to share experience; open to all so that other members understand the impediments under-represented groups experience."

5) Dedicated sessions, special issues and events for under-represented topics vs integration into mainstream

Likewise, there is huge disagreement over whether non western and white male economist centered research topics should be actively encouraging through distinct sessions and publications and positive discrimination, or through integration into "the mainstream" (see annex 2-5). Some respondents targeted funding, keynote selection, sessions, special issues, editors, or training programs. Others want female, black American, workers, Indian, Chinese, African economists integrated into "normal" sessions, as well as research aimed at understanding why these protagonists were erased from canonical history. A scholar argues that there should not be specific funding or support for these topic, that it's better not to "discourage women's studies," that "studying the "greats" have de facto marginalizing effect, so that the boundaries of acceptable topics should be gradually enlarge." "Support top work rather than specific lines of research and avoid balkanization," the scholar concludes.

Annex 1: survey questions

The History of Economic Society has established a committee to consider the status of women and underrepresented populations in our field. The goal is to attract new people to the society as well as improve the retention of members.

We are now seeking testimonies and suggestions on the following issues, which touch not only upon women but any scholar who feels under-represented in our community.

1) Issues of representation in our field

-What do you feel are significant impediments to your research and your participation in the various communities of historians of economics?

-What types of initiatives do you think would improve on the current situation? Possibilities include networking events, organized mentoring, a women's or diversity lunch, the provision of childcare. Additional ideas?

-Do you know any young scholars who feel under-represented in history of economics? Why do they feel this way, and what do you think can be done about it?

-Do you have any reflections about the professional climate in our field that you would like to share? The American Economic Association, among others, has recently adopted a professional code of conduct. Is there any reason to do so for the HES? And if so, what should it include?

2) Historiographical questions on the status of women and underrepresented groups in economics

Documenting the changing status of women and other groups of underrepresented economists is a research topic we often consider as a community. We would like to consider questions related to the visibility of this type of research as well as theoretical and methodological questions regarding how to do this type of research well. How should we support its visibility? With sessions? A specific network? Or perhaps training programs or dedicated conferences?

Annex 2: Exhaustive List of Suggested Actions³

Number of times suggestion appeared in response in ()

1) Conference attendance

- Child care (19): organize child care at major history of economics conference
: child care grants to travel with kids and contract with a local babysitter provided by hotel or independent organization
(necessary to avoid late cancelation by women; advertised before conference)
- Allow video participation into HES sessions (3) or participate via interactive platform
- Early acceptance decisions to ease lecture rescheduling
- guidelines for impaired participant on where to get funding
- livestreaming keynotes (2)
- sign language or live captioning. Announce possibility for such arrangement in advance (2)

2) Specific events and mentoring

- Female-only events that allows for coaching and strategizing (2)
- open space to share experience; open to all so that other members understand the impediments under-represented groups experience
- Mentoring schemes would help to discuss such matters confidentially and also find solutions together with someone who is more experienced, knows the community, knows the people, and has a lot of information about those informal matters (5)
- mentoring lunches (6)
- informal mentoring (4)
- women's caucus
- networking events (5)
- writing sessions (2)
- safe space to discuss issues of ethics

3) Institution building

- permanent structure within HES (with funding to organize events), or intersociety committee (2)
- code of conduct (13). "Concrete mechanisms," compliance mechanism (2), not just about sexism, racism, but also about professional conduct in refereeing, PhD supervision, recruiting, editing, etc.
- skeptical about code of conduct (1)
- general discussion on professional standards
- set up a grievance committee within HES (2)
- Creation of online data base that contains all female scholars in HET and their area of specialization. Here is a model: <https://updirectory.apaonline.org>
- improve channels of communication with ALAPHE
- differentiated stipends of Latin-American scholars, who sometimes don't have much support

³ At least as exhaustive as sleep deprivation allowed

4) Representation

- quotas or representativity for keynotes (2)
- quotas for book contributors
- guidelines on parity in conferences
- representativity in prizes, including young scholar awards (3); “not wise to demand 50% representation, best is to slightly exceed the PhD ratio;” “solicit nominations from under-represented communities”
- informal positive discrimination in selection for young scholar support or PhD dissertation prizes
- Working ahead of conferences to try to get more submissions by women
- 1 equity member per session or panel at the HES, more than one for any smaller workshop
- 2 equity members on the HES board anytime
- “ask all session organizers to complete a form in which they declare whether they have included emerging or under-represented scholars in their program and, if not, why not. We could use the same or a modified form for grant applications”
- Chairs should support interventions of young scholars and women; frame discussions of paper as short series of actual questions and in a more constructive way

5) Encourage work on women economists and gender topics

- set up a lecture series on diversity topics
- dedicated session (2) vs
- more research on women economists and non western economists in regular sessions to encourage “mainstreamization” of these topics (4)
- set up a website with a roster of scholars working on these topics to help connection and improve visibility (1)
- focus not just on individual stories but on structural causes
- Inclusion of a section of women publication in JHET with woman editor, referees, clear interest in new lines of research on any topic including "women's issues"
- associate JHET editor specialized in non western and diversity topics
- sponsor a series of webinars about specific topics (like gender and economics, gender and the history of economics)
- choice of PhD candidate, the way we help them select topics and the supervision itself (2)
- quotas on research topics at big history conferences
- permanent special sessions could be marketed by receiving the name of a famous non western and/or non male economist
- encourage the collection of women economists' papers and archives of people of color and otherwise underrepresented group
- include new topics explicitly in CFPs
- dedicated funding calls to under-represented themes and groups (2)
- improve supervision on less-represented topics (2)
- build new topic into undergraduate curricula
- quotas for selection committees and decision-making agencies

6) Others

- survey who publishes what in history of economics. Are topics and methods gendered?
- statistics on number of men/women and minorities in HET (2)
- check your own biases (3)
- speak out (4)
- emulate what is being done in other disciplines, inviting people to speak on diversity issues and how it changed in their respective fields