

**BOOK REVIEW**

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The sex factor: How women made the West rich

Victoria Bateman

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Spanning the globe and the last three centuries of our history, Victoria Bateman discusses in depth how women's freedom is too often seen as a by-product of growth rather than an underlying driver. Contrary to traditional studies in which women are considered as passive beneficiaries, Bateman discusses the very active role of women in society in value generation, products and services creation, and innovation.

Victoria Bateman strongly believes in women's freedom not only in her research studies on economic history but also in practice by calling for a sexual revolution in economics. She is both an active researcher and writer in her role as a fellow and economics lecturer at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge University, and freethinker leading various 'naked protests' to highlight the ostracism of women's roles and the female body in public life and the restriction on women's freedoms. In 2014, she posed nude for a life-sized portrait by Anthony Connolly, and in June 2018, attended the Gonville and Caius College end of term dinner wearing a see-through body suit with the words 'my body my choice' written on her body. This was not just a way of showing off but real motive that guides Bateman's life and work: the very interesting, scientifically appropriate and in-depth content of her book thus has the provocative title, *The Sex Factor: How Women Made the West Rich*.

One of the most significant statements in her book is:

'The truth is that women were equally important in the rise of the West; it's just that their role has gone relatively unnoticed. At a time when women's right and freedoms are under attack in large parts of the world, the role of women in creating successful economies must now be recognized' (p. 174).

In this book, a new viewpoint and an innovative perspective of the analysis of female empowerment are proposed. In particular, both the status and freedom of women are central to our prosperity and affect, as well as being affected by, markets and government policies. The more women are free to earn, the more the societies, to which they belong, will flourish.

Bateman believes that women's freedom should be considered as important as other factors that drive economic prosperity, for example, technology, savings, skills, entrepreneurship and even democracy. This innovative and original perspective calls into question the common understanding of economic issues, the traditional gender-neutral economic models and the well-established rules of gender equality, which celebrate the brain more than the body.

What then are the implications of gender inequality for economic growth? Why did the West become so rich? Is inequality rising, and why? These are the questions Victoria Bateman analyses and discusses, targeting both academia and society in general.

Bateman explains how the status of women's freedom is central to our prosperity even if the sex factor (sex and gender freedom) is generally neglected by traditional economic studies. In traditional approaches, segregation by gender is considered a pervasive characteristic in most economies where the low or unpaid work of women helps to generate the labour force but it is not properly acknowledged (Jacobsen, 1997).

In the last decades, feminist scholars have considered gender as an important macroeconomic variable that affects social development and economic growth; women and men occupy different class positions, with women more likely to be poor, malnourished, less educated and overworked relative to men (Davis, 1981; Elson, 1995; England, 2017; McGinn & Oh, 2017; Wright, 1996). This gender inequality is neither constant over time nor across countries, but can be observed through a number of commonly accepted measures such as wage differentials, unemployment rates, hours of unpaid work, educational attainment and life expectancy rates.

The very essence of the book is underlined in the conclusions where Bateman argues, '[...] to fully understand the economy, we need to think about both sets of polar extremes: individuality and relationships, independence and dependence, reason and emotions' (p. 173). In order to embrace feminism, economics should re-centre on content rather than on approaches including human-centric and interdisciplinary studies.

The Sex Factor: How Women Made the West Rich consists of ten core chapters divided into four parts, with introductory and conclusion chapters. The book is well organized and accurate, and the reader can gain in-depth knowledge on how economists' neglect of sex and gender is severely limiting the ability to understand our concrete world or to design and deliver appropriate policies.

The potential audience of this book is experts, researchers, students and non-specialist readers who simply have an interest in the subject. In the more theoretical chapters, Bateman manages to reduce the complexity of the issue by presenting examples and case studies. As a result, an expert encounters many repetitions that reduce the readability of the text and the fluidity of the exposed concepts.

The first part of the book, 'Part I: Prosperity', is very engaging and captures the interest of the reader by providing an overview of the current thinking about gender inequality and growth. In Chapter 1, 'Censored: How the West (Supposedly) got Ahead', Bateman proposes five lessons from current thinking about how the West became rich. The first refers to the market explaining that during the Industrial Revolution women faced relatively fewer restrictions on their engagement with the market. The second explains how legal and political institutions as well as culture (informal institutions) matter in the creation of economic prosperity. Women's freedom is at the root of the cultural practices that deliver and sustain institutions supporting prosperity. Thirdly, freedom is needed outside, as well as inside, the marketplace since industrialization began first in areas of Europe where women had greater freedoms. Then fourthly, high wages are good for growth, pushing the economic system to innovate and enabling women to be more autonomous and free. The fifth lesson provides three main reasons for a halt in economic expansion – population growth, environmental ruin and politics. In 'Uncensored: The Secret Recipe of Economic Success' (Chapter 2), the following innovative and original contribution is introduced. In contrast to traditional approaches, the subordination of women is considered one of the principal limitations to human improvement. Analysing the long span of history, what emerges is that women's freedom is vital for economic prosperity, boosting wages, skills, savings and entrepreneurial spirit.

In the second part of the book 'Part II: Inequality', Bateman discusses how the role of women's freedom has affected growth from the Stone Age to modern times. It emerges that in some cases women help growth, but not always does growth help women's freedom. The egalitarian nature of society started to change as the hunter-gatherer existence gave way to farming even if the degree of inequality varies a lot in Europe and in the rest of the world. Various elements contributed to the gender gap, for example, the utilization of the plough, the introduction of private property, the development of technologies, the process of industrialization, etc. (Chapter 3). As happened during Britain's Industrial Revolution, low salaries helped the economic growth of an industrialized country, but after a while, automation reduced labour forces and women's freedom (Chapter 4). Women were usually unskilled workers: there was a time when technological change benefited from unskilled workers but in the late 19th century, technology replaced unskilled labour. The wealth of females is based much more on inheritance than is that of men, implying that fewer women are recognized in important roles in society. A lack of bodily autonomy in women is often associated with economic independence. This latter aspect is vital for women as they can delay marriage, gain an education, join the workforce in more skilled roles where more complex competence is required, and be represented in political decisions involving norms and regulations on birth control, family issues, etc.

In 'Sex Sells: The Body versus the Brain' (Chapter 5), Bateman explains that trading sex is seen usually as a fundamental violation of women's human rights, and a serious form of male violence against women. As a common consequence, modern society attempts to eliminate sex work by criminalizing the purchase of sex, preventing sex workers having bank accounts and paying taxes. According to the new perspective, a woman may act in a proactive way, deciding to sell her body instead of her brain. Since even modern societies tend to denigrate sex sells, women's freedom decreases and the life of sex workers becomes more difficult by exposing them to unnecessary dangers. Although the feminist mantra is '*my body, my choice*', the monetization of the body remains a taboo. This means that we, just as in the past, detect a woman's value from her sexual virtue instead in her ability to think and use her brain/intelligence.

In 'Part III: State versus Markets', Bateman critically discusses both state and society versus capitalism and the market. These chapters are the most complex and at the same time unclear. In some parts, it is difficult to follow the common thread of the discussion because examples and counterfactuals are intertwined. In Chapter 6, 'Marx versus Markets', for instance, two approaches are exploited. On the one hand, gender inequality is considered good for capitalist growth since the production relies on the exploitation of cheap female, poor and ethnic minority labour forces. On the other, the market may help to set women free. Unfortunately, markets present some inefficiencies and may fail to deliver equitable outcomes to women.

Bateman explains that the state and families, public and private spheres, are profoundly linked and the more egalitarian family forms support democratic states and market exchange. In the same way, women live on the periphery of the markets in vulnerable positions, dealing with social and environmental degradation. Thus, higher female political representation may lead governments to take vulnerable subjects, the family and environment more seriously (Chapter 7).

Since markets are strictly connected to society (laws, regulations and institutions), they will fail when the society is un-progressive, patriarchal and biased. Therefore, inequality can occur in the less expected situations and should always be kept in mind.

In 'Part IV: Humanity', behavioural economics is introduced to encourage economists to break into gender issues and adopt a behavioural-cum-feminist approach to life. The real nature of the female, with her needs, motivations and desires, is introduced (Chapter 8). The attempt is to improve the traditional paradigm of the rational self-interested economic agent with bundle rationality and intrinsic motivations (Chapter 9). The aim is to develop more accurate prediction models that take into consideration erratic human behaviours influenced by the social norms of a group instead of individualistic rational choices.

Perhaps the most important chapter is the last one, Chapter 10, in which the role of women's bodily freedom, female autonomy, the family (and the social norms that regulate roles among family members) as well as society (which expresses the exogenous needs and desires) are considered as relevant elements that should be taken into consideration to fully understand an economy.

Concluding a comparison with other publications is useful. Bateman provides a scientific viewpoint overcoming the limits of general discussions and facts reported by Perez (2019) and Saini (2017) or other journalists as Gates (2019) and Gruber (2019).

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