



**Transcript of IMF podcast:**

## **Women in Economics: Clair Brown's Holistic Approach**

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Bruce Edwards:

Becoming an economist in the 1970s for a woman was a lonely road.

Clair Brown:

The problem wasn't me. The problem was the system.

Bruce Edwards:

And the system was clearly dominated by men.

Clair Brown:

I'd already been told by several economists, including the chair, "You can work on all kinds of things and we'll take it seriously, but please just don't keep working on discrimination." And I'm thinking, oh my, that's really a dilemma, because it's one of our biggest social problems right now.

Clair Brown:

I'm Clair Brown, Professor of Economics at University of California, Berkeley. So I started off as a labor economist and more recently I've been teaching sustainability in Buddhist economics.

Bruce Edwards:

In 1974 when Clair Brown joined the economics department at Berkeley, alongside people like Nobel laureate George Akerlof, she was the only female faculty member, and she led the charge to get more women hired into the department.

Clair Brown:

And Berkeley actually became quite well known for its female economists, among other things.

Bruce Edwards:

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Brown has always seen the power of diversity and today she's advocating for a new, more sustainable approach to economic thinking in her book, "Buddhist Economics." Journalists Rhoda Metcalfe spoke with Clair Brown for our special series on extraordinary women in economics.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Well, I want to start off by taking you back in time a bit. People talk about how few women there are in the economics field today, but you became an economist at a time when women almost never entered the field. I mean, a lot of the time you were the only woman in a room full of male economists. So how were you able to move forward in your career in that kind of environment?

Clair Brown:

Well, I think it helped enormously that I studied discrimination, but at Berkeley I was also especially fortunate because female faculty across the campus, often only one or two per department, they really supported each other. And that meant an enormous amount, both in learning about the campus and how to deal with it.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

But when you first started, for example, when you were doing your graduate studies, was it not true that at that point, I guess this was the very early seventies, you weren't allowed to be a teaching assistant. This was strictly the purview of men, right?

Clair Brown:

Oh yes, that's right. They said, "We're so sorry, but women don't need jobs. You have husbands." Well, I did have a husband, but the other female economists in our class didn't. And I said, "Yeah, but I don't want to take money from him. I support myself in what I'm doing." And they said, "Sorry, we can't have men and women in the same room." I mean, it just got worse and worse. But what happened was the Vietnam War that all of a sudden, unfortunately they didn't have enough men to teach. Because I was sorry that men had to go serve, but it gave the women in the class a chance to be teaching assistants. We were told by the chair, "Now you have to go across campus to this little office five stories up." And I just looked at my colleague, I said, "No, let's just go get desks... We know they have extra desks..."

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Sorry, they wanted to send all of the women to some obscure location on the other side of campus?

Clair Brown:

That's right. They couldn't put us in the same room as the men. And so we wouldn't have been part of what was happening in the department. So we just went into the men and said, "We see you have two

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empty desks. May we have them?" And they said, "Of course," and we just integrated ourselves. And one of the things I did learn, Rhoda, is that we had to do that constantly. Women can't accept these dumb rules that make sure that we're segregated all the time, we're kept apart.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Right, right. Was your work taken seriously by the men around you?

Clair Brown:

Well, that's a great question, because I was working on discrimination. My thesis was on why unemployment rights differ by race and sex. And so I was hired at Berkeley. I was at Brookings at that time in a post-doc fellowship. I got hired by Berkeley as their first female full faculty member. They'd had a wonderful economist there, Myra Strober, but they refused to make her a regular faculty member. So she went off to work at Stanford. Well, I was there and I'm thinking, how do I present my work? Because I'd already been told by several economists, including the chair, "You can work on all kinds of things and we'll take it seriously, but please just don't keep working on discrimination. Because we don't think that that's actually a serious topic worthy of research."

Clair Brown:

And I'm thinking, oh my that's really a dilemma, because it's one of our biggest social problems right now. So I continued working on discrimination until I felt I'd completed what I wanted to do, and then went on to work on poverty. But that was also considered a disproportionate problem for women. So I had a hard time, Rhoda, thinking of what I thought were really important research topics that were labor related that didn't somehow have a feminist angle.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Were you looking for the kinds of questions that men economists were not asking? The household issues, things that affected women and children that at that point perhaps were not really in the gaze of the male economists around you.

Clair Brown:

I didn't actually realize that when I went into economics. I went into economics from math, I was a math major, and I went into economics for graduate school because I wanted to improve the world. I wanted to make the world a better place. And I knew that poverty was a major issue, discrimination was a major issue. Inequality was not quite the problem it is today, but it was starting to become a problem. This was in the seventies and then the eighties, it took off as a problem as we started changing taxes and social programs and so forth. So I really cared about inequality and poverty and they are disproportionately

issues that affect women and children. But to be honest, I didn't think about it that way. I just thought about it as a really important social problem that we needed to do better.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Especially in those early days, it must have been kind of lonely being the only woman in the room. Did you ever doubt your career decision?

Clair Brown:

I didn't. I was so happy to be practicing economics at Berkeley, and my colleagues... You have to understand, many of the men in the room really were excited to have a woman there. And when I went to say, we need more women, they were 100% behind it.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Oh, that's great.

Clair Brown:

Although, they were a minority of course. And to be honest though, we had the law on our side. It had now become illegal to discriminate by gender, and Berkeley had been chosen as the public university to come in and make sure that women were being hired. And what was so interesting is, Berkeley's ranking in economics didn't go down as we hired more and more women. But in fact, our ranking improved, we went from about sixth or seventh to fourth or fifth. So we got better.

Clair Brown:

And I think also having a group of really highly qualified, really productive, really bright women, they supported each other. They worked together and the men understood... They actually didn't take very long. Once you've had quite a few women, they got it... that women really could be great economists. And they quit viewing us as just oh, women. But they viewed us then as macro-economists or econometricians. Finally, we weren't identified by women. We were identified by what we were doing, just like the men.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Right. So in the course of your work, you traveled, you got to see a lot of the world, and you became interested in global poverty, poverty that you'd seen in other countries. Now about 10 years ago, you helped develop a new program at Berkeley called development engineering, which brings together, as I understand it, economics and engineering to find solutions for developing countries. Tell me a bit about this program and why economics and engineering together? It's not your usual coupling.

Clair Brown:

That's right, although it's a very powerful coupling across disciplines. I started working with engineers earlier in the late eighties. I became the lead economist on a joint engineering/social science project at Berkeley on semiconductors. So I learned a lot from engineers and how to work with them, because I could bring all the economics for evaluations of systems, but I couldn't bring in the technology of how semiconductors work or how to actually look at the technical side. And they, to be honest, didn't really know how to do good systemic analysis or evaluation. And so I learned to work with them, and I really learned how great it was to cross disciplines and truly do a transdisciplinary approach.

Clair Brown:

And so I was approached at the campus to say, "Would you start to develop an engineering minor for PhD students?" And I said, "Only if I can find the right engineer to do it with me." And I already knew the woman that I wanted to work with from mechanical engineering, because I had done some other leadership work with her, and I knew she'd be great. So I approached her, Alice Agogino, she said yes. And I made it real clear what our goal was. Because she understood that engineers are going into the lab to solve problems, really important problems to improve quality of life globally. The problem was when the engineers took these great technical outcomes, like water purification or cook stoves or so forth, they took it out to the field, it never worked the same.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Oh, okay.

Clair Brown:

What happened on the economics side is our students were super bright and really knew how to analyze data once it had been collected correctly. The problem was they would go in and go to the cook stove project and say, "May I analyze your data for you?" And they'd say, "Oh great, here it is." And the economists would look at it and say, "You only have a treatment group. Where's your control group?" Or they would come and say, "Well, I can see that actually you have these sensors that collect data, but actually they didn't collect the data." And the engineers say, "Oh, that's because the women turn the stoves over, and like the way they used it differently, and that burned the sensors."

Clair Brown:

So problem after problem came up, and I said to the economists, "You've got to go in day one and teach the engineers how to set up the data, how to define the problem, how to have treatment and control groups, and actually do rapid prototyping with them," so that we could collect data as economists and rapidly provide feedback to the engineers, so they could quickly do the next beta. And so the engineers loved it. They were able to do quick beta prototyping, make changes, and actually the economists ended

up loving it. Because they could see instant results and they could really find all kinds of clever ways to have a dynamic analysis. Because, to be honest, this is never just at the end of life, let's see if it worked. But it's really a process of engaging and improving and finding ways to solve the problem from the user's viewpoint. We call it user design. And this program has worked really well, and is really popular.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Interesting. So do they have some sort of field experiments happening in various developing countries?

Clair Brown:

Yes. Mainly Southern Asia and Africa.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

So then - was it 2017? - you came out with a book called "Buddhist Economics: An Enlightened Approach to the Dismal Science." Which I like the title.... Is economics known as the dismal science?

Clair Brown:

Well, I always thought it was. Isn't that where everyone says, "Oh, just as the party's getting fun, the economists grab the punch bowl and leave."

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Right. So what drew you to Buddhism and what do you think Buddhism has to offer to economic thinking?

Clair Brown:

I grew up an Episcopalian, but I quit going to Episcopal church when I left home and went to college. And I always though cared about what we think of as inner wealth. Like, who am I? And knowing who I am, and consciously giving back to the world, but I never found anything that really suited me. And then I had a student and he wrote to me once he said, "I've started doing some Buddhist practice in the Nyingma tradition and we chant a lot. And I know you'd love the idea of singing and chanting. Why don't you try that?" And then just about the same time, a meditation hall opened up within a five minute walk of my house in an old Episcopal church. And I said, oh, I think I'll try it out.

Clair Brown:

And I met a lot of people there that sort of shared my values of caring for people in the planet and learning to meditate was actually really helpful. It really calmed my mind, opened my heart, just relaxed me, and helped me really get in touch with what was most important to me. And actually it led me to

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rethink how to teach economics. I was out walking one day in the hills by my house, and all of a sudden, I just thought this idea of, oh my gosh, how would Buddha teach Econ I? Because none of us were really happy with Econ I and just teaching free markets all the time.

Clair Brown:

But that really led me to then teaching an undergraduate seminar at Berkeley called Buddhist Economics. And one of the things I love about Berkeley is I went in to see the vice chair to say, "I want to teach this undergraduate seminar on Buddhist Economics," and he'd say, "Wow, that sounds so interesting. Tell me what you're thinking." Others came and said, "Oh, what a great idea," because they understood that I was integrating theories that we all were doing ourselves or our colleagues were. So it was really just an alternative way of bringing in a worldview that most of us shared.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

So what happens to economics when you apply Buddhist concepts?

Clair Brown:

Well, actually the Buddhist part is based upon three assumptions, which are three key teachings. If you assume that people are altruistic as well as self-caring and not just selfish and self-caring, and if you assume humans are interdependent with other people and with nature and not just... humans can do whatever they want because they rule the world and they rule nature. And then if you assume that everything is impermanent and dynamic, then you really turn the neoliberal or neoclassical model on its head. And you have this holistic approach.

Clair Brown:

Everything that I just stated is actually based upon theories that come from Amartya Sen, from Joe Stiglitz, from actually a wide array of economists that see the world more broadly. And so I just put together Amartya Sen's capabilities approach and Joe Stiglitz's approach to shared prosperity. Then really the only thing that I might add, but Amartya Sen would add this too, because I've talked to him about this, is actually care for the human spirit. Not just for body and mind, but the human spirit. We all are spiritual in some ways that we care much more than just about our consumption. But we really care about what makes life meaningful and sort of what makes me feel really good about who I am and what can I offer the world? Because from a Buddhist viewpoint, if you're aggressive, if you're just greedy and out to do whatever you want to do, you're just somewhat delusional and you've sort of lost your sense of interdependence.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

And the concept of interdependence is a key part of your Buddhist economic model, right?

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Clair Brown:

Yes, absolutely, because it is a law of science. Interdependence is a critical law of ecology, and it's actually the basis for all of our work on sustainability. That the health of humans depends upon the health of nature and vice versa. That there's one ecosystem. So right now, today I'd say my work is mostly focused on sustainability because of the climate crisis, as you know, has only gotten worse and worse and worse. And I've now looked at my colleagues and I said, "We can't fail. If we fail, we're not going to pass on a habitable world to our children, grandchildren, our students." And so many of them have also started at least adding aspects of sustainability to their teaching and their way of thinking about the world. It's helping us get out of our silos.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Right. That's very interesting. And then very recently, you developed a new index, which is kind of an extension of the Buddhist economics principles, right?

Clair Brown:

Well actually in the literature, there was no one index that looked just at policies across the entire economy. You could find a policy index for, say, court systems or anti-competitiveness, but not for the whole economy. So my research team has set up what we call the Shared Sustainable Prosperity Policy Index, which you're right, directly relates to Buddhist economics. And it has three pillars. Sustainability, because it's so important like carbon emissions, overuse of groundwater, so we have sustainability. And then government rules and regulations for the market, so that the markets work well for the common good and big business doesn't just set up rules for maximizing profits. And then the government also has provision of goods and services like healthcare and education. So we have these three pillars and then within the three pillars, we have a total of over 50 policies, and the political scientists that I've shared it with are very excited.

Clair Brown:

They said, "Oh, this is just what we need. We're so happy to see rankings of countries by something other than just what economists keep talking about efficiency or lowest cost." And really one thing I've noticed since I wrote Buddhist Economics the first edition is that now people seem much more interested, and I think the pandemic really helped us. It isolated us, so we became more aware of interdependence. The climate crisis is just getting worse and worse, much faster than we thought. And so the interdependence with nature is becoming more obvious, and global wellbeing I think is much more on people's minds, especially now with the Ukrainian war. So I've just been delighted by all the people I hear from who really do want to learn how to get involved in changing the world or transforming policies. I'm finding being an activist plus an academic and teacher and researcher is really a wonderful combination of activities right now in today's world that's changing very quickly and really needs us to all change very quickly.

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Rhoda Metcalfe:

Well, Clair Brown, this has been a really interesting and inspiring conversation and I thank you for all your work.

Clair Brown:

Thank you so much, Rhoda.

Bruce Edwards:

Clair Brown is a professor of economics at University of California Berkeley and author of "Buddhist Economics." She was speaking with journalist Rhoda Metcalfe.

Bruce Edwards:

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Rhoda Metcalfe:

And I'm Rhoda Metcalfe. Thanks for listening.