

INTERVIEW: BARBARA PETRONGOLO

Professor of Economics, Queen Mary University of London.

Director, Labour Economics Programme, CEPR.

Research Associate, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics



Q: We would like to start with a couple of questions regarding your career and your research. How did you decide to become an economist?

At the end of my high school I was interested in questions that are typical of the social sciences and at the same time I was drawn towards scientific disciplines like maths or statistics. The combination of these interests makes economics quite a natural choice, but surely there were also accidental factors involved in that choice. Admittedly, while there was some "randomness" in my choice of degree, once I started studying economics I had it very clear that I wanted to specialize in labor economics. Labor is the main factor of production, and occupies most of our time. Major events in people's work life determine their economic fortunes and their happiness (or unhappiness). Often an individual's career shapes their identity and their sense of worth for society. Thus studying labor markets addresses key questions about wellbeing of individuals and societies.

Q: What are your most and least favorite parts of your job as a research economist?

I most enjoy thinking about new ideas, and gradually laying out a path from an interesting research question to its implementation. Of course the mortality of ideas along this path is very high, as many research questions turn out not to be novel or interesting enough, or simply unfeasible. Something that I also very much enjoy is discussing ideas with other researchers, and especially working closely with my coauthors, from whom I constantly learn. My least favorite part of the job is revising an old paper if in the meantime my interest in its research question has faded away, but surely this is something that affects all us researchers.

Q: What do you consider your best work and why?

If you allow me to settle on a set of three papers I would pick my paper on local labor markets in the AER (with Alan Manning), my paper on spousal spillovers in labor supply in the AER (with Dominique Goux and Eric Maurin), and my paper on gender gaps in JOLE (with Claudia Olivetti).

The first two papers share an emphasis on economic spillovers (across local geographies in one case, and between the decisions of spouses in the other) as important factors that would shape the impact of public policy. In times of massive local disparities -- and with governments in most countries deeply involved in local development policies -- the first paper argues that, even if labor markets are very local, targeted labor demand stimulus may be ineffective, as it sends a ripple effect through surrounding areas, diffusing its impact over a much wider area than the target. If we want to create jobs in disadvantaged areas, the idea of local needs to be revisited, adequately taking into account the overlapping nature of local geographies

The second paper identifies interdependencies in the labor supply of spouses and in particular complementarities in spousal leisure time, showing that - when the workweek of some French employees was exogenously reduced by the short-workweek reform of the late 1990s - their spouses responded by working less, even if their own workweek was untouched by the reform. This effect is particularly sizeable for fathers of young children, with consequences on joint family leisure and potentially child development. We believe that this result is important because it shed lights on the structure of intra-household utility and on the unintended consequences of worktime and workplace practices beyond the targeted population.

The third paper is methodological in nature and is relevant for making sense of international comparisons in gender inequalities. We argue that drawing lessons on gender inequalities across countries from the observation of their respective gaps in wages is problematic whenever women are not randomly selected into employment. If women who are employed tend to have relatively high-wage characteristics, low female employment rates may become consistent with low gender wage gaps simply because low-wage women would not feature in the observed wage distribution. Indeed we find that, having corrected for lower female participation rates, the wage gap in southern Europe widens to levels similar to those of other European countries and the US.

Q: Now we would like to know about your experience regarding gender composition in the profession. In the departments where you have worked, what was the representation of women among the faculty?

In all places where I worked the proportion of women was well below 50%, particularly so in senior positions.

Q: Do you think gender plays a role, either in terms of how well you work with different colleagues (coauthors), or in terms of the recognition of your work (or in any other dimension)? For instance, were you surprised with the findings in a recent paper by Alice H. Wu, a current Harvard PhD student, quantifying strong gender stereotypes in the site econjobmarketrumors.com?

I guess my own introspection would not shed much light on gender issues in academia. But thanks to the increased interest on these issues and the availability of richer data we can now rely on evidence based on large and representative samples. One key stylized fact is that female representation in the economics profession declines sharply with seniority. In the UK, more than one third of assistant professors in economics are women, but only one sixth of full professors are women. Corresponding numbers for the US are in the same ballpark. Per se, this does not prove gender discrimination in the profession, but leaves open the question of why women are promoted more slowly in economics departments or are more likely to leave academia than men. I found the evidence presented by Alice H. Wu on stereotyping language in EJMR extremely worrying. At first sight I was quite shocked by the list of words mostly associated to discussions about women. With hindsight, much of that resonates with evidence from other professions. However, one important qualification to make is that opinions expressed on EJMR may not be entirely representative of the economic profession.

Q: Did you have any female mentors or role models? How about male mentors?

I had two main male mentors, Alan Manning and Christopher Pissarides, but no female mentor.

Q: What advice would you give to research economists starting their career, particularly women?

My main advice to junior economists, whether men or women, would be to choose topics that they genuinely care about and work hard on them. The job of an academic has very little structure, which could make it difficult to be productive unless you really like what you do. A more specific advice for women would be to defend equal gender roles in their household and workplace.

Q: Now a couple of policy questions. What do you think about department policies that extend the tenure clock to women or both men and women when they have children?

New mothers have less time available for work than new fathers, due to "incapacitation" related to pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding. Tenure clock extensions for mothers are a very welcome attempt to rebalance the time endowment of mothers and fathers in academia. Other similar interventions would be teaching and/or administrative exemptions.

Q: How about the introduction of gender quotas in different university committees and associations?

Broad evidence on the impact of gender quotas on female outcomes is mixed. Some studies find that exposure to female leaders (mostly in politics) improved males' perception of female productivity and female outcomes. Other studies find instead that gender quotas in company boards had no discernible effects on female representation beyond the board. Specific studies on academia and the judiciary system have found evidence that female presence in selection committees if anything reduces the share of women hired or promoted. Overall there is no compelling evidence that gender quotas on university committees and associations improves the careers of women.