

COSME

Committee on the situation
of women in economics

Newsletter 2018: Interview to Anandi Mani

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Anandi Mani was one of the keynote speakers at the Gender Economic Workshop held in
Madrid

COSME: We would like to start with some questions regarding your career and your research. How did you decide to become an economist?

ANANDI MANI: As someone who grew up in Mumbai city and traveled by the city buses and trains, I sometimes found it hard to even look at the squalid conditions in which many poor people in slums lived, right next to high-rise buildings. I had actually studied only a couple of courses of economics in my undergraduate studies – but I found it I also appealing because I thought it applied both ‘head and heart’ to addressing a lot of challenges faced in a developing country. Intellectually too, I found it had a larger vision than any of the other courses I had been exposed to. Hence I picked economics as what I should study in graduate school.

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

The most exciting part of any project is the stage when the idea takes shape, designing the interventions and engaging in the field visits around it. Seeing the patterns in the data for the first time after it is collected is something I really look forward to as well. The least exciting bit is when you have to revise papers for the nth time!

ANANDI MANI:

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

ANANDI MANI: To me, the research I do is as much about my personal consumption value and experience, as it is about the outcome. So in this sense, I cannot pick a single piece as my best work. For instance, I enjoyed the project with sex workers because it gave me a window into a world that I had never been exposed to before. I found the project on poverty and decision-making very satisfying because the insights from it have had both a cross-disciplinary and policy resonance, on an important issue. I enjoyed the work on women's political representation and gender crime because it points to some concrete institutional frameworks that could help improve outcomes on a tough problem.... And as a researcher, the excitement of being on the hunt is what keeps me going -- I would like to believe that my best work is yet to come 😊

COSME: 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?

ANANDI MANI: The gender composition has been roughly between 20-30% women, roughly speaking – across the different departments I have been.

COSME: 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)?

ANANDI MANI: I don't personally feel that gender plays a role in how I interact with my co-authors based on their gender. Having said that, it is true that women in the profession, including myself, have lots of female co-authors (which is significant, considering that women are in a minority in the economics profession). We do choose our co-authors of course based on a certain comfort level, as well as the topics we work on – so it is hard to separate the effect of such selection from whether there are some other factors at play. And based on the evidence from a paper by Heather Sarsons, it seems to hurt women to co-author with men career-wise – so women co-authoring with women does seem to be sensible choice.

On recognition, yes – I think that there is a sense of not being taken as seriously as a woman, given equal talent. The recent spat raised by the website on Economics job market rumors points to how women are rated on dimensions that don't matter for a man. I am writing in the week when Donna Strickland has won the Nobel prize in Physics for 2018 – and she is not even a full professor! So yes, gender does seem to affect the recognition that people get.

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

ANANDI MANI: I would say that I have had a somewhat unusual path to economics (coming from an accounting background straight to a PhD), and also within economics (where my research interests have gone from more theoretical to more empirical). So, this has meant

that I have not had a specific mentor, male or female. My graduate school advisors my advisors Debraj Ray, Michael Manove and Dilip Mookherjee were very supportive during my Phd and I continue to have a great relationship with them, but my interests have since moved away from the more theoretical kind of work they do.

On role models within the profession, I do find many development economists, male and female, very inspiring in the sheer range of academic and non-academic work they engage in, without compromising on depth -- and the behavioral scientists I would like to emulate are very fun and creative, in how they approach questions. Ideally, I would like to combine this mix of seriousness and play in everything I do.

In terms of how I would like to lead my life as an academic, my role models are actually one of my sister's professors from medical school who became as close as family. He transmitted both great warmth and affection for each of his students (and in my case, their siblings too!) combined with a genuine sense of intellectual curiosity, social purpose and fun! I have fond memories of days where we would read Shakespeare or Don Quixote on Saturday mornings, go hiking in the monsoon rain, go to a tribal village next morning where we ran a medical camp in a tribal village, and come back to Mumbai city by Sunday evening, singing songs and enjoying picnic food on a bus.

COSME: What advice would you give to research economist starting their career, particularly women?

ANANDI MANI: Build a core network of people whom you can brainstorm your ideas with and look to for advice/support; for women economists especially, I do think that female networks and forums like COSME are very helpful (so power to you!); read outside of economics on the topics that interest you because interesting things happen with cross-pollination.

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

ANANDI MANI: In fact, there is a recent paper in the Sept 2018 American Economic Review that shows that parental tenure-clock stopping policies actually hurts women and helps men, in terms of their likelihood of achieving tenure. So we should not assume that gender-neutral policies will achieve gender neutral outcomes, because policies are not implemented in a vacuum. So we need to get more creative, or tolerate some policies that favor women more for a while (it is funny how it was not regarded as a problem when policies favored men for the longest time!).

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

ANANDI MANI: Based on my own work and that of many other researchers on political gender quotas, I can say that they do have some positive impacts. My hunch is that the

gender dynamics could be very different depending upon whether there is a single woman, or some significant fraction of women in various committees and associations. When women are not at the table, there are small, subtle (but cumulatively significant ways) in which their concerns are not represented – for instance, the timing of meetings may be set very early/late could be enough to make it hard for women to be there, but if committee members were mostly men, they may even not notice it. Quotas may not be the golden bullet, but they would be worth a try, based on the available evidence – and given that there are not too many other initiatives that seem to have made enough of a dent.

COSME: Thank you so much for your time.