



The World Economic Forum says that we're 268 years away from closing the gender pay gap, a disparity that's only grown since last year. (UBS)

Celebrating the women of economics

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Every year on International Women's Day, we commemorate the social, economic, and political achievements of women around the world.

This year, we're celebrating two women who have shaped economics, both with their discoveries and by breaking gender barriers.

The 2023 theme International Women's Day is Embrace Equity. And while progress has certainly been made, the world isn't on track to achieve gender equality by 2030. According to [the UN](#), it would take another 40 years for gender parity in national governments at our current pace. The [World Economic Forum](#) says that we're 268 years away from closing the gender pay gap, a disparity that's only grown since last year, and 132 years to closing the global gender gap. While these numbers can feel daunting, there's good news as well. The [top 10 economies](#) have closed their gender gaps by at least 80 percent and the education gap continues to shrink as well.

These numbers extend to almost every area of life, even the Nobel arena. Since 1901, only [60 women](#) have been awarded the Nobel Prize and the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel. The number of Laureates who have been awarded across all fields—Physics, Chemistry, Medicine, Literature, Peace, and Economic Sciences—is [954](#), meaning only 6 percent of prizes have gone to women. The simplest explanation for this is that the prize is often seen as a lifetime achievement award and for many decades, women simply didn't have the same access to science as men did. Economics is one of the fields where the most progress is needed; of the 92 prizes for Economic Sciences, only two have gone to women.

A landmark award

In 2009, [Elinor Ostrom](#) became the first woman to be awarded the prize, and it wasn't an easy journey to get there. Growing up in the Great Depression, her family struggled financially and otherwise. The expectation was that she would

start work after graduating high school, but Ostrom went to college. She was the first person in her immediate family to do so.

While she was studying, many of the faculty were upset that women were allowed in the program at all. While she'd hoped to pursue a PhD, the hostility was enough to deter her. But it was also during this time that she began to question how to organize a common, work that would ultimately lead to her winning the prize for her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons – natural resources that aren't privately owned but are accessible to everybody and collectively used.

Fast forward 10 years

It took another decade for a woman to be bestowed the same honor as Ostrom but in 2019, [Esther Duflo](#) broke another record by becoming the youngest economist ever to be awarded the prize. Duflo and her co-Laureates Abhijit Banerjee and Michael Kremer pioneered the use of randomized controlled trials, or RCTs, in economics—an approach similar to the one taken in clinical trials in medicine. They used these smaller scale experiments to conduct specific, targeted action on an otherwise complex issue like poverty. Duflo has researched the impact of incentivizing vaccines, providing free mosquito nets to reduce malaria infection, measuring affirmative action for women in politics within local elections, and much more.

Duflo is aware of the significance of her 2019 prize. As a professor at MIT, she sees the gender imbalance every day, and yet the underlying why remains a difficult question to answer.

“In the incoming class of graduate students, PhD students, there are very few women yet again,” says Duflo. “And so we are wondering what have we done? How come it has not changed? In part I think the field as a whole has not done much about it. Economists tend to believe in markets and that things should just flow their natural way without necessarily thinking that it makes sense to actually intervene to change a situation.”

But Duflo remains hopeful. With more leadership, more visibility, and more mentorship, it's only a matter of time before the gender equity gap is bridged in economics, in the workplace, and during the Nobel acceptance speech ceremony.

The UBS Nobel Perspectives series presents award-winning ideas in the field of economics from Nobel Laureates. For more, visit [Nobel Perspectives and Economic Views](#) or [Latest Economic Questions we asked Nobel Laureates](#).

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