

Clair Brown (by Renee Utter¹)

September 2020

Clair Brown was the first woman to be hired for a tenure track faculty position at the Berkeley Economics Department since the beginning of World War II. A native of Florida, Brown completed her Ph.D. in economics with a focus on Labor Economics at the University of Maryland. She joined the Berkeley economics department in January 1974. Brown was not just witness to but was also instrumental in increasing women's presence in Berkeley's Economics Department.

A math major at Wellesley, Clair wanted to help make the world a better place. It was the 1960s and change was at the forefront of most college students' minds. Ultimately, Clair realized there wasn't much social reform to be done with mathematical proofs. Armed with her strong background in math, Brown found a research assistant position in an economics think tank. She soon realized that to climb a career ladder, she would need a Ph.D.

I was a budding labor economist...I realized you had to go back to graduate school. ... I was married at the time and living in [Washington] DC. So I looked around and I saw that the University of Maryland had a great faculty and I said, "I'll go there." (Brown, interview with the author, page 1)

At Maryland, Brown got her first taste of sex discrimination, and how government actions can trigger change.

I was told initially that we [the University] don't give any money to women because you have a husband and he can support you. ... You can't teach because we don't have any women graduate student teachers. But then the draft deferral ended for Vietnam, so all of a sudden, the men were being drafted. ... They didn't have enough male graduate students to do all the [teaching] they needed...Finally I was hired as a TA. (Brown, interview with the author, page 1)

In 1973, she graduated from the University of Maryland with a Ph.D. in Economics. Her first position was as a postdoctoral at Brookings Institute. Gerard Debreu, a professor of Economics at UC Berkeley since 1962, called her in the fall of 1972 to encourage her to apply to an open position in his department. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) compelled Berkeley to, at a minimum, interview women for faculty positions.

When Gerard Debreu called me up, I'm thinking "Hmmm, I wonder why Berkeley is reaching out to me?" ... This was the first time I realized how extremely important laws and regulations were that structured markets. The EEOC had said to Berkeley, "There are a lot of women out there. You better go find them and hire them if you want to keep getting government money." ... There wasn't a requirement to actually hire women. The requirement was that they at least interview

¹ Renee Utter is an Economics Major at the University of California, Berkeley, Class of 2021.

women ... because no women were getting interviewed for faculty positions. None! (Brown, interview with the author, pp. 2-3)

Brown became the first female tenure-track faculty member hired by the Economics department since the 1930s.

One colleague, an assistant professor, took me aside [during my onsite interview] and said “I gotta tell you: the men that we’ve brought through here, they’re awful. If you can even just stand up and speak coherently, I think they will have a hard time not hiring you.” ... I guess I was coherent because they gave me a job offer. (Brown, interview with the author, page 4)

Given the history of women in the field, the department, and academia generally, salary negotiations almost always put women at a disadvantage. At Berkeley, Clair saw the excuses for not fairly compensating women. She recalls that a friend, the retired Professor Charles Gulick, advised her:

“Clair, just remember to demand equal pay because I know Emily Huntington was paid horribly. I’d say, “Emily you’ve got to go in there and demand better pay.” But she would say “Oh, I’m just so happy to have my job and I think I don’t want to cause any problems.” (Brown, interview with the author, page 3)

Clair Brown did not leave the Berkeley Economics department the way she found it. Shortly after her arrival, Brown wrote a memo to the EEOC after witnessing discrimination in an economics department hiring decision.

I then watched hiring in my first year in the department. I saw that they brought in women, of course; they now knew they had to interview at least one woman every year. They brought in this really smart woman who is in IO [Industrial Organization] and they brought in some men -- like four or five men. [At a department meeting,] we discussed the candidates to decide who would stay on the shortlist. The first person who got thrown off the list was the woman. They threw her off because she was in IO, and “we didn’t really need any more people in IO”. ... And so, they hired a man. The second year I was there, we did more hiring. We hired a man who happened to be in IO, although the need for fields hadn’t changed. So I decided I should write up this example of discrimination and send it to the EEOC, because my department doesn’t understand how they’re discriminating. (Brown, interview with the author, page 4)

After consulting with Professor Herma Hill Kay of Berkeley’s Law School, a professor and legal scholar on gender inequality, Brown sent her memo to the EEOC. This memo permanently altered some of Brown’s professional relationships.

And then of course all hell broke loose. The department got really upset with me. ‘We’re really nice people and we would never discriminate.’ ... What can I say? After the memo, the next year they hired two women and it totally changed my

life. . . . Years later, I still had faculty reminding me what an awful thing I did with that memo. I thought I should have gotten rewarded! ... It never dawned on me to have any regrets about that memo, because it was so great having Joan Hannon and Laura Tyson there. (Brown, interview with the author, pp. 5 and 7)

The two women? Laura Tyson and Joan Hannon. In the faculty meetings, there were now three female voices, and they did not represent the monolith that the men expected.

They could see we had differences of opinion, we had different experiences in different fields and knowledge, just like they did. (Brown, interview with the author, page 6)

The hiring of three women created the appearance of gender diversity, but the inner workings and social environment of the department left Brown at a disadvantage as she tried to advance her career. After all, she released a memo calling out sexism in her colleagues' actions. This resurfaced at Brown's tenure review when the vote was not unanimous and her review was subsequently pushed back a year. Despite the role it may have played, Brown never regretted the memo, because it brought two other women to her workplace. Brown has seen the department's gender diversity improve since 1973, but even today, she points out the need to be vigilant in keeping the department diverse in all ways.

There's definitely a diversity problem, that we definitely need people that are African-American and Latinx. In California especially, there's no reason not to have more faculty from these underrepresented groups. (Brown, interview with the author, page 10)

As Brown advanced in her academic career, she also advanced through life's milestones. There was one large factor that separated the male and female faculty's career paths: family leave. In the late 1970s, UC Berkeley's new maternity leave policy was based on 6-week disability laws. The chair of the department, Bent Hansen, a Danish Economist, was familiar with Europe's more progressive maternity leave, and gave her an entire 15-week semester.

I go in to see Chair Hansen, and I say, "I'm pregnant." He says, "We have this new law where you actually get six weeks of pay . . . but of course we are on a semester system. Don't you worry. I'm from Sweden. I know how to do this. We'll figure it out because clearly you've got to have a semester off." I was the first person in Economics -- actually, I was one of the first women on campus -- to get paid maternity leave. A lot of women wouldn't even ask for it, because they were afraid it might hurt their careers. But I've got to say I was really lucky to have a Social Democrat as my chair. (Brown, interview with the author, page 11)

Later, Brown was part of a group of female faculty and administrators who realized that many department chairs discouraged women from taking any leave after childbirth. The group worked for change on campus. Department chairs were told they could not discourage women from taking maternity leave, and should encourage men to take leave, as well. Rather than making faculty opt-in to a leave policy, they had to *opt-out*. Chairs had to write letters explaining why a faculty member was *not* taking their leave. Behavior changed, and both women and men faculty started taking their leave and feeling supported as parents.

Over four decades in Berkeley's economics department, Brown has witnessed a lot of change in both the department and the profession. Bringing more women into the field changes economics.

One of the reasons it's been so important to bring women into the field is that we actually change the way that economics is practiced. One of the things I'm very proud about is Berkeley now has a history of distinguished female faculty. Everybody's always looked at Berkeley as having female professors, at least more than any other major top 5 University. ... Women change the field. They present the field in a way that's not just about people caring only for themselves, that people have other-regarding and altruistic ways of behaving, which every other field thinks is true. It's just economics has this way of thinking, "Oh I maximize for myself. I'm selfish. That's how human nature is." Women are much more able to think about economics in a broader holistic way and really move the field along in a way that makes it much more relevant to how people and countries think about well-being, how we think about social welfare, and how we think about economic policies, and even how we interpret economic history. (Brown, interview with the author, pp. 12-13)

Brown's own work follows this with her teaching an undergraduate seminar based on her book *Buddhist Economics: An enlightened approach to the dismal science* (Bloomsbury Press). She integrates global sustainability, shared prosperity and care for the human spirit in an economic framework that assumes interdependence of people with each other and the planet. People are viewed as both self-caring and altruistic. Then economic performance depends on the well-being of all people and of the environment, and not only on market output (GDP). Brown continues to encourage all economists to be focused on how to solve our most critical problems—the climate emergency, racial injustice, and inequality.

Read about Clair in *Eminent Economists II: Their Life and Work Philosophies* (Cambridge), see <https://buddhisteconomics.net/about/>

Work Cited

Brown, Clair. Interview with the author. Richmond, CA. 15 April 2020. Archived at <https://www.econ.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/Brown%20Interview%20Transcript%20Apr%2015%202020.pdf>