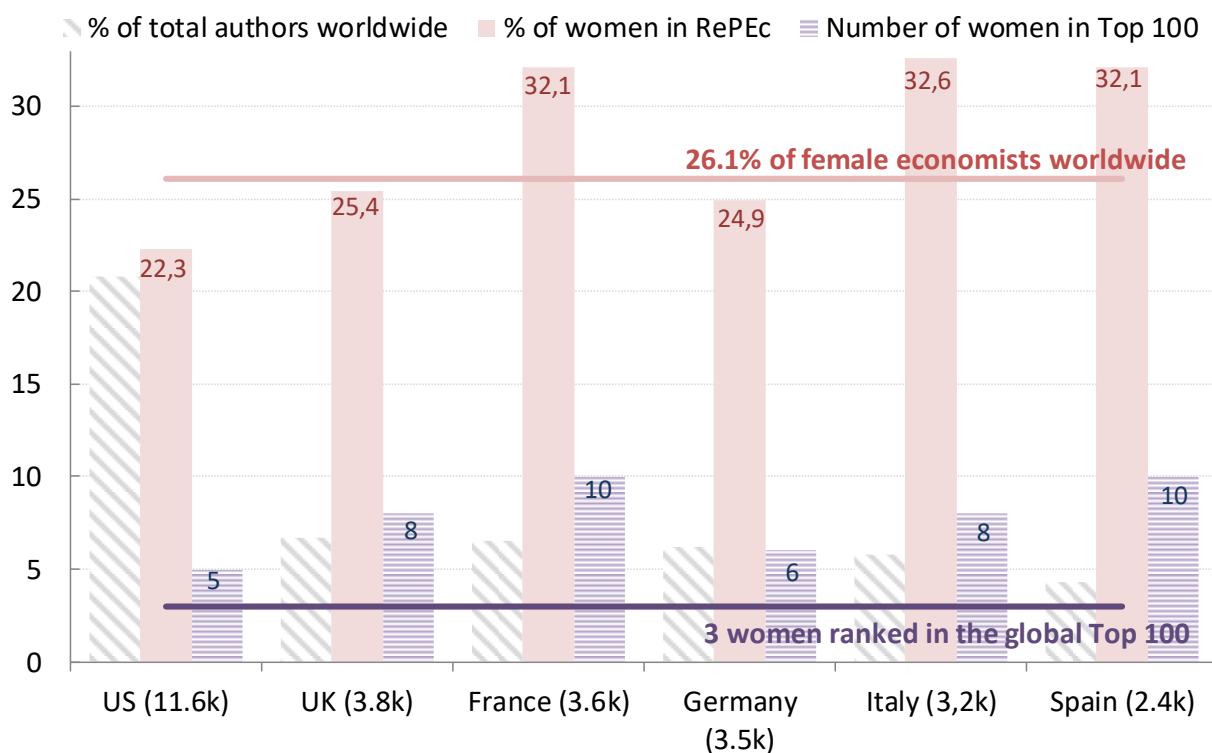


Implicit discrimination against women... economists

Par [Cecilia García-Peñalosa](#) et [Soledad Zignago](#)

In several sectors, including academic economics, considerable efforts have been made over at least the past two decades to combat gender discrimination. One of the most frequently debated policies over recent years has been positive discrimination. Hiring or promoting an equally qualified woman over a man is argued to have a positive impact on all individuals in the profession as it will reduce prejudice and provide role models for younger women. Despite these efforts, women still appear to be vastly underrepresented amongst researchers in economic and earn far less credit than men for their academic work.

Chart 1: Proportion of female economists according to RePEc



Source: RePEc, *Female representation in Economics and academic Rankings by country and for the world, as of February 2022.*

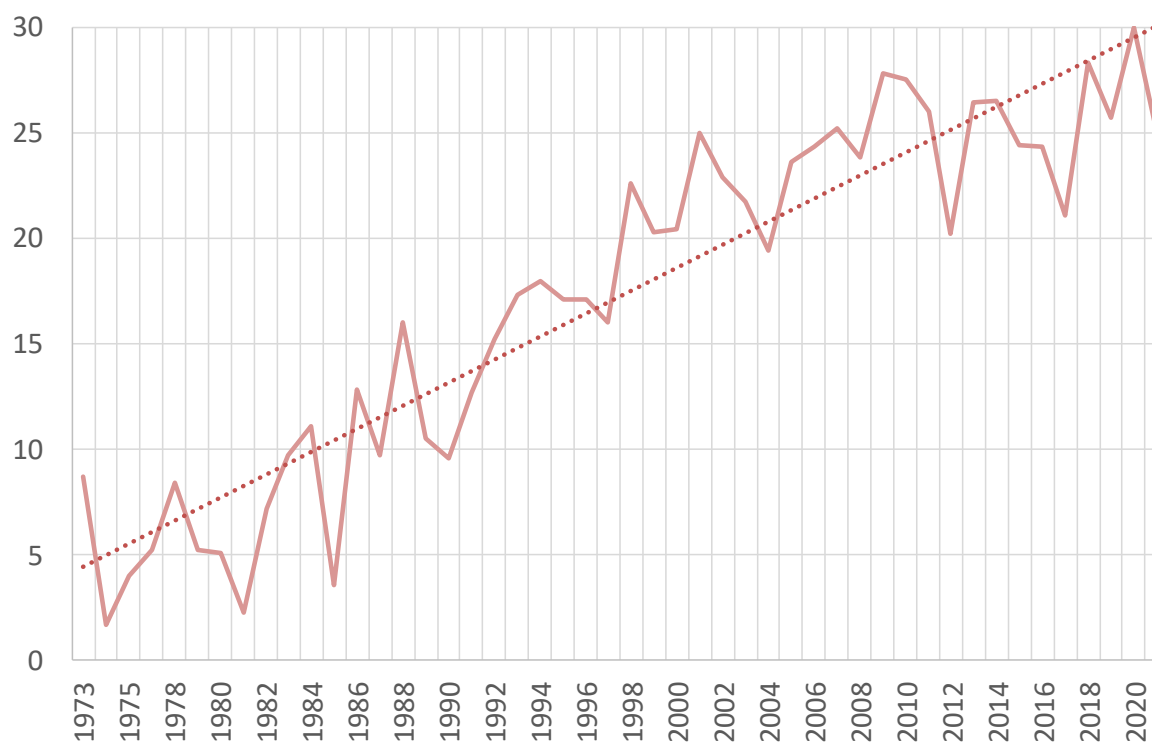
Note: Main countries are listed in descending order according to the number of authors they have listed in RePEc. The US is the biggest country in terms of authors, with more than 11,600, of whom 22% are women. Five of these female authors are listed in the Top 100 RePEc ranking of US economists.

Women are still vastly underrepresented amongst academic economists, in contrast to what is prevalent in the majority of the social sciences. Chart 1 shows the proportion of [RePEc](#) (the world's largest database of economic research papers) listed economists who are women for the six largest countries (in terms of total number of authors, in grey). It updates the chart published in [this blog on March 2018](#) on the same topic. A straightforward comparison of the two charts might give the impression that the share of female economists in the world has risen from 19% to 26% over four years. However, the jump is mainly due to the new filter that RePEc applies to first names to identify gender (the proportion of women in March 2018 would have been 25% if we had applied the new filter, see [today's RePEc blog post](#), which presents all that RePEc is doing to highlight the work of women economists).

The proportion of female economists is generally higher in Europe, especially in eastern Europe (Romania leads the world with 58%) and in France, Italy and Spain, compared to Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. The female share is more heterogeneous in Latin America, while it is often low in Asia (see the full list [here](#)). Moreover, the share of women amongst the Top 100 RePEc economists (i.e. the most productive and frequently cited, shown in purple in Chart 1) is even lower: only three women feature in the global list of ["Top 100 authors"](#) (Carmen Reinhart, Asli Demirguc-Kunt and Esther Duflo).

The profession regards the low level of female representation as a problem and says it wants to change things. However, at the current rate it would take another 40 years to reach gender parity in the RePEc author cohorts (see Chart 2).

Chart 2: Proportion of women by cohort of economics PhD graduates in RePEc (%)



Source: Female RePEc representation in Economics based on RePEc Genealogy, which lists, among other things, the year of graduation for many of the RePEc authors, as of February 2022.

Steps have been taken to increase the number of women in teaching and research, and numerous studies confirm the use of positive discrimination in economic circles throughout the world. These studies clearly show there is an awareness of gender inequality. For example, a study by [Thomas Breda and Mélina Hillion](#) finds a recruitment bias in favour of female teachers in French secondary schools. However, several [recent papers](#) on attitudes in economics research and teaching have questioned this optimistic view.

Despite a growing awareness of the issue, men and women are still not treated equally in the profession. For example, recruitment panels will often call into question the scientific quality of a female candidate's work if it has been coauthored with a man, whereas the same is not true for male candidates. [Heather Sarsons et al.](#) find that, in the United States, the gender of a male candidate's coauthors has no effect on his chances of promotion. By contrast, for women, papers coauthored with men have less of an impact on their chances of promotion than those that are single-authored or coauthored with another woman. Thus, when a woman coauthors a paper with a man, the academic community infers that she has made less of a contribution than her male colleague.

In addition, throughout the world, the experience of giving a research seminar is different for men and for women, as shown by data on hundreds of seminars collected by [Pascaline Dupas and her coauthors](#). When a female researcher presenting a paper is asked a question, a male audience member will often answer without letting her speak. This type of behaviour is rare when the presenter is a man. Perhaps women need help getting their message across? The same attitudes can be found when it comes to research papers. [A study by Erin Engel](#) finds that referees and editors at the top economics journals take longer to reply to female authors. They also ask for more revisions than in the case of male-authored texts, even if a comparison of first drafts shows that the quality of the text is identical. By contrast, the published versions of papers written by women tend to be of better quality than those written by men as they are held to tougher standards by editors.

Similar attitudes have been identified in other dimensions. [Letters of reference](#) tend to describe female job candidates as "hardworking" and male candidates as "brilliant", [papers written by women tend to be cited less frequently](#) by peers, and, worse still, in anonymous discussions on economics forums, [female authors receive more comments on their appearance and personal life than on their academic work](#).

How can we reconcile these results with the discourse in the profession about the need to increase the number of women? The studies cited here highlight the existence of "implicit discrimination", defined by psychologists as "subconscious attitudes that may or may not correspond to explicit attitudes". Unlike explicit discrimination, implicit discrimination stems from social constructs that are so deeply rooted in our societies that we are unaware that we are being discriminatory. Individuals who are convinced that they want to promote women may, in reality, discriminate against them subconsciously.