

TRANSCRIPT

The Work Goes On

Guest: Myra Strober

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Myra Strober:

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Orley Ashenfelter:

Welcome to [The Work Goes On](#), a podcast from the [Industrial Relations Section at Princeton University](#). I'm your host, [Orley Ashenfelter](#), the Joseph Douglas Green 1895 Professor of Economics at [Princeton University](#).

In this series of podcasts, conversations really, with leading thinkers and practitioners, we are creating an oral history of an entire generation of industrial relations experts and labor economists who have been absolutely extraordinary in the work they've done. Our guest today is [Myra Strober](#), who is Professor of Education Emeritus at the [Stanford University](#). She is an expert in labor economics and especially well-known for her work on the economics of gender and gender issues. Myra, welcome to [The Work Goes On](#).

Myra Strober:

Thanks so much, Orley.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Let's begin the discussion by talking about your background. Where did you grow up?

Myra Strober:

I grew up in Brooklyn, New York.

Orley Ashenfelter:

There you go. I know you went to Cornell eventually. How did that happen?

Myra Strober:

Well, I started life in Canarsie, which is in Brooklyn, and then my mother thought that my sister and I would do better at a school that emphasized intellectual growth, and so they moved to an apartment building right near Brooklyn College, and they wanted me to go to Brooklyn College. They thought that was fantastic that I could actually go during the day and not have to work, and I had to rebel and ask for an opportunity to go to a school that I thought was more intellectually challenging. I'm not sure that Cornell was more intellectually challenging, but I think I just wanted to get away, certainly out of the city.

And my next-door neighbor in this apartment house was a professor at Brooklyn College, and my mother insisted that I go talk to him, which was really a great idea, and he asked about my interests, and

when I told him, he suggested that the right place for me would be the School of Industrial Labor Relations at Cornell. So, of course, I'd never even heard of it, but once he talked about it, I wrote away for a brochure. There was no internet in those days, and I really thought this would be a fabulous place for me as it turned out.

Orley Ashenfelter:

It's fascinating because many people that have been on the podcast series have had connections at Cornell, including Bob McKersie, who was the dean at one point. What did you think of the place?

Myra Strober:

I thought it was just incredible. First of all, we were still in Quonset huts. For those people who don't know what a Quonset hut is, it was a semi-permanent building built during World War II, and here it was 1958, and we were still in the Quonset huts. The most extraordinary experience at Cornell was freshman year, a course that we labeled Bus Riding 101. We went every Wednesday morning early on a bus to some factory within busing distance of Ithaca. And so, by the time the semester was over, we had visited a steel mill in Ithaca, a pajama factory somewhere in Pennsylvania, IBM, Corning Glass, and a coal mine where they had to get special permission for women to go down into the mine because it was considered bad luck to have women in the mines.

And I have to say that exposure to work, real work by real people who were struggling, as a 18-year-old, was an extraordinary experience. And I have to tell you that, years later, I was teaching a course in labor relations at the Stanford Business School, and we got to the part on grievance procedures. And the case that we were studying was in a chemical factory, and one of the employees was grieving because he was not permitted by the foreman to go and use the bathroom when he needed to use it. And two students in the class objected to this case. They said that they were not paying the kind of tuition that they were paying in order to read a case about somebody who wasn't permitted to go to the bathroom.

And something clicked in my head, and I said, "How many of you have ever been inside a factory?" Not a single student in that MBA class had ever been inside a factory. So, I dismissed the class, and I called the... which one was it? It was Chevy, I guess at the time, over in Fremont, a Chevy plant. And I asked if we could come and have a tour of the plant and have some time talking to the UAW local, and they agreed. And so after this field trip, we resumed, and I said, "How do you feel about this case now?" And, of course, they understood because they remembered the paint shop at the auto factory and realized that not being permitted to leave in order to go to the bathroom warranted a grievance.

Orley Ashenfelter:

That's actually fascinating. So they were still in Quonset huts back then. That's fascinating.

Myra Strober:

We were.

Orley Ashenfelter:

What did you do after Cornell? I know you went to MIT eventually, but what did you do after Cornell?

Myra Strober:

First, I went to Tufts to get a master's in economics because ILR was very interdisciplinary, and hopefully, we can come back to that too. And I needed more economics in order to do a Ph.D. So, I did a year of economics master's degree at Tufts and then went to MIT.

Orley Ashenfelter:

How did you end up at MIT? It must've been quite a place too.

Myra Strober:

Well, I restricted my search for graduate school to Boston because my fiancé, then my husband, was a student at Harvard Medical School, and I wanted to get married and live in Boston. And so luckily for me, there were two terrific programs in economics in Boston. Harvard was a non-starter. I had an interview at Harvard. It was extremely brief. The first question the interviewer asked me was, was I normal? And I, in turn, asked him what that meant. And he said, "Oh, you know. Do you want to get married and have children?" And I said, "Well, I'm already married." And he said, "well there you have it" and he opened the door and showed me into the hallway. So that was the end of Harvard.

MIT was different. They accepted me. I was one of three women. One of them left at the end of the year. So, there were two women in my class, and then there were two women in the class ahead of me, two women in the class behind me. And then they accepted a nun the following year, assuming that she would not get married and have children, but she fooled them. She married a man who lived across the street from her. He left the church. She left the church. And so, there was no safety for MIT.

Orley Ashenfelter:

I know we'll come back to this issue of family and motherhood and women and so on. Who did you work with at MIT?

Myra Strober:

I worked with Charley Meyers and Abe Siegel and Doug Brown, and then there were a couple of other economists. Evsey Domar had a huge influence on me and my thoughts about my thesis, and Bob Solow, Paul Samuelson. But my thesis committee was Charley Meyers and Abe Siegel.

Orley Ashenfelter:

And what... We had Bob Solow on, actually. He did do a podcast. He joined the Army at age 18 when he was a junior at Harvard, from what I can tell. What did you write about?

Myra Strober:

You mean my thesis?

Orley Ashenfelter:

Yes.

Myra Strober:

I looked at manufacturing wages by two-digit industries in 53 countries, and I had data on average earnings in those industries and productivity in those industries. And I tried to see what the hierarchy of industries was with regard to pay in developed economies and less developed economies. And the hierarchy was pretty much the same in all developed economies, but quite different in less developed

economies. And I was trying to see whether productivity could explain the differences across countries in that way.

Orley Ashenfelter:

And what did you find?

Myra Strober:

Well, I found that the undeveloped countries, less developed countries, were individual depending upon which industry was being emphasized, but that, eventually, as these countries developed, they all became similar to the developed country's hierarchy.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Interesting. Interesting. What was your first job?

Myra Strober:

My first job was at the University of Maryland, and I was fortunate enough to have Barbara Bergmann as a colleague...

Orley Ashenfelter:

Oh, wonderful.

Myra Strober:

...which was just really wonderful. But I had a lot of great colleagues at Maryland. I didn't have any trouble as a woman at Maryland, probably because Barbara had paved the way, but the difficulties came later.

Orley Ashenfelter:

I see. Now you left Maryland, I guess, at some point.

Myra Strober:

I left Maryland because my husband had been at the NIH, and he got really a terrific offer at Stanford. And so, in those days, there was really no job market. The way the job market worked was your thesis advisor knew someone somewhere, and that's how you got a job. So my thesis advisor didn't know anybody at Stanford. And when I got there, I talked to Mel Reeder, who was the senior labor economist and very, very nice, very helpful, but there was no vacancy for a junior labor economist at Stanford. However, there was one at Berkeley, and that was a commute away but possible. And my thesis advisor did know Lloyd Ulman at Berkeley.

And so, I did get a job at Berkeley, but not as an assistant professor. I had been an assistant professor at Maryland, and I could not get a job as an assistant professor at Berkeley. The last woman at Berkeley, faculty member in economics at Berkeley had been hired, I think, in 1928 or '36 or some time like that and was long gone. Margaret Gordon, who was Aaron Gordon's wife, was at Berkeley in the Economics Department but she was a lecturer, and I was hired as a lecturer, and two of my classmates from MIT were assistant professors at Berkeley. So, I went to see the chair of the department and asked him why they were assistant professors, and I was a lecturer, and he said it was because I lived in Palo Alto.

Orley Ashenfelter:

I read your autobiography, in which you recount this in the first chapter. It's actually quite amusing. I guess we can say the name. He's not alive anymore. George Brake, I guess, was the chair at that time. Well-known public finance economist. And then I remember the end of the chapter, you talk about Lloyd Ulman, who you had much-

Myra Strober:

Yes.

Orley Ashenfelter:

... fonder things to say about.

Myra Strober:

Much fonder. Yes. After my experience with George Brake, and it is completely outlined in my memoir, at first I thought, "My goodness, I didn't know you had to live in Berkeley in order to be on the faculty." Then, eventually, it hit me that this was just ridiculous. And so I really began to be a feminist after that because I started reading about discrimination against women. I read Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and I decided I wanted to teach a course on Women and Work. And so I asked Lloyd Ulman-

Orley Ashenfelter:

And when was this? This must have been one of the first courses ever on this.

Myra Strober:

It was. It was. It was 1970. And Lloyd said that if I taught this course, then he would have to teach the course I was teaching, and he would do that if I agreed to give him the Susan B. Anthony Medal of Valor.

Orley Ashenfelter:

I bet he did that with a grin too.

Myra Strober:

He did. He was a lovely man and always had a good joke in mind. And then, when Lloyd retired, I actually had a little medal made, and I gave him the Susan B. Anthony Medal.

Orley Ashenfelter:

So you actually... you lived up to your part of the bargain. And then you... Now, what happened? You moved to Stanford at some point?

Myra Strober:

Yeah, so what had happened was before I came to Berkeley the previous spring, many women who were lecturers at Berkeley filed a complaint against Berkeley with the Labor Department for sex discrimination. So, I remember when the investigators came from the Labor Department, at first, they took a hotel room, then they decided they had to take an apartment because they'd be there for a while investigating sex discrimination at Berkeley. And so, eventually Berkeley made me an offer as an

assistant professor. But Stanford did not have a suit filed against it because there were no women to file a suit.

I mean, not only did Stanford not have women faculty; they didn't even have lectures. So, Stanford got nervous that somehow there would be a complaint. And so I got an offer from the Stanford Business School to come and teach. I was the first woman faculty there. And that same year, in 1972, they hired their first Black man, their first Asian American man, and their first Hispanic man. So, it was a banner year. Stanford also hired the first woman faculty member in the law school and the School of Engineering. So they wanted to show that they were being good people.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Very faithful to the cause of the law, I guess in this case. What... Now you ended up in the education school because I do want to talk about that. How did that happen?

Myra Strober:

Okay. So, I had a very difficult time at the Business School. After my experience with George Brake and the Economics Department, I really changed my field. So, I was no longer looking at wages and productivity in developed countries. And I was thinking about doing work on unemployment, and I jettisoned all of that and began working on women and work. And so, my field was never defined when I got this job at the business school.

And when I came up for tenure, it was unclear to everybody, including me, who should be reviewing my work, and who should be asked to write letters, and so on and so forth. And so I would say it was a huge mess, and I got turned down for tenure, as did three other men faculty that year, and people wanted to know if I was going to sue Stanford. And I thought, "no, I'm not doing that. I'm moving forward in whatever way that means." I was a prisoner at Palo Alto because my husband refused to move, and I thought I was going to wind up working for the Bank of America or Wells Fargo or-

Orley Ashenfelter:

Well, that might've worked out okay too. Who knows?

Myra Strober:

Might've. But I had begun doing work on how teaching became a woman's occupation, and I was looking at teaching. I was looking at bank telling. I was really interested in occupational segregation and the feminization of occupations, and there was a historian at the School of Education, David Tyack, who was also interested in the feminization of teaching, and he and I began working together.

We co-authored quite a few papers. And when I was turned down for tenure at the business school, he went to the dean at the School of Education and said he thought the business school had made a mistake and could we, the School of Education, hire me. And the dean was very much in favor of that. And so, ultimately, with a lot of painful twists and turns, I got a job in education.

Orley Ashenfelter:

And one of the things I noticed that people mention about you, apparently, at some point, you organized a program that involved students from the education school with people in the business school.

Myra Strober:

Yes. So, I did not organize that program. Michael Kirst, who was a professor at the School of Education, organized it some years before. But in 2000, Mike wanted to leave that position, and he recommended that I take it over. That is director of this Dual Degree Program. And in order to do that, the business school had to give me a faculty appointment. So, here we go. 25 years after they turned me down, they give me the faculty appointment.

Orley Ashenfelter:

That must... I was wondered about it because I mentioned, in fact, because Cecilia Rouse, my colleague here, works on the economics of education.

Myra Strober:

Yes.

Orley Ashenfelter:

She was interested too. That must be a unique program.

Myra Strober:

I think it is. We've arranged it so that students can get the two master's degrees within two years. So, the courses that they take in the School of Education count toward both degrees.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Mm-hmm. Pretty demanding.

Myra Strober:

Yeah, it's a wonderful program.

Orley Ashenfelter:

That sounds interesting. I had not heard about it until I started looking into what you were doing. Let's talk about feminist economics. So, there is an association, I know a little bit about it, that the [International Association for Feminist Economics](#), and I guess it meets annually, and you were one of the early presidents of it.

Myra Strober:

That's right. So, when I was studying the feminization of teaching and feminization of occupations in general and occupational segregation, I began to realize that there was something fundamentally wrong with the way in which economists were looking at this problem. And I have come to see that what we have done in the social sciences and maybe in disciplines, in general, is taken some small part of human behavior and burrowed down into that and just ignored everything else about human behavior that might give us some understanding of how people are making decisions.

And so I realized that the idea that economics was focusing on things like scarcity and choice and profit maximization and selfishness was really only a small part of the picture. And if you wanted to know why teaching, which had been a man's occupation became a woman's occupation, it really was not solely about profit maximization or even cost minimization in the nonprofit sector. It really was a much more complex question and set of answers that had to do with issues outside of economics, that had to do

with social structures and our way of thinking about gender, and that you couldn't answer that question just by focusing on profit maximization.

And so I began to be interested, particularly in Julie Nelson's work, and Julie had recognized that although Adam Smith thought that economics was about provisioning somehow or other in her view and mine as well, the discipline lost its way and became about profit maximization and choice and scarcity, selfishness and so on. And so, Julie and I and several others were very active in forming the International Association for Feminist Economics.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Have you been to many of the meetings? They seem to have one every year.

Myra Strober:

They have one every year, and they have one in a different country every year. So, I've been all over the world with feminist economics.

Orley Ashenfelter:

That's wonderful. Actually, I did want to ask you about that too because, as I say, I have your... I'm one of the purchasers of your memoir autobiography.

Myra Strober:

Well, thank you.

Orley Ashenfelter:

It has a lot of details about your whole life. And of course, you now have a new book and the new book I have not read, but it does have some.... Well, tell us the title. What is the title?

Myra Strober:

Well, it's funny because we told the publisher that we wanted the title to be "Love and Money," but they decided it should be "Money and Love". And then my 16-year-old grandson said that was a good decision because if we wanted men to read this book, which we certainly do, they would be much more likely to read it if it were "Money and Love". So that's the title.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Well, the reason I mention it partly is because it's not typical that an economist uses the word "love," let alone in the title of a book. What is it about?

Myra Strober:

Well, the course that I taught for so many years, beginning with Lloyd Ulman in Berkeley, was... Well, originally, the course was called Women and Work, and then one year, some intrepid men took the class and said they would help me recruit men the following year if I would change the class, not call it Women and Work, but call it Work and Family.

So, I called it Work and Family. And sure enough, by the time I stopped teaching the class, 40 percent of the students were men, and the conversations were far better than they had been, more interesting.

And we thought, my co-author and I... My co-author was my former student. We thought that "Love and Money" was much more sexy than "Work and Family," so that's why we changed it.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Yeah, it's interesting. I had a friend actually, long gone now, who actually wrote a book called "The Work and Family Experience" sort of.

Myra Strober:

Mm-hmm.

Orley Ashenfelter:

It was interesting about a lot of things related to it. I know there's an entire podcast about your book that McKinsey has organized. What would be the brief summary that you would give about what it is about now?

Myra Strober:

The two underlying principles are first that although conventional wisdom tells you to make money decisions with your head and love decisions with your heart, in fact, for most of these really important decisions, the love and money aspects are intertwined. So, whom you marry has probably the most important effect on your career of anything you might do, and on your life, and on your family. And the idea that you marry simply for love without ever thinking about money is probably not quite correct.

And so, all of these decisions need you to engage both your heart and your head. And in fact, some of the people who are most interested in this book are those that run financial advising firms because they recognize that their advisors can be far more effective if they consider family issues when they advise their clients rather than simply running the numbers and telling them what age they can retire at. So, that's the first thing. That love and money are intertwined for all these decisions.

The second principle really comes from Daniel Kahneman, who has argued that people make decisions about important things far too quickly and need to think more about these decisions. And so we have developed a framework, we call it the Five Cs, that's really designed to slow down your decision-making process to let you think about all the different aspects and facets of your decision and hopefully come to the best decision you can make.

Orley Ashenfelter:

That's fascinating, actually. I'm not sure that money and love gives a complete description of what you're talking about, but it certainly sounds like something that could be a very great interest to many people. Well, we're coming to the end of our podcast, and I did want to ask you one last question. You must be one of the earliest women that entered the economics profession. Now, there, of course, there are many more women than there used to be the case. A lot of women who do labor economics. In that part, you're not unusual. But how do you feel, or do you feel that the profession has changed enough to be welcoming with regard to gender?

Myra Strober:

Well, I think all of academia is more welcoming than it used to be, not only in economics but also in science and law, but I still think that the profession itself is too narrow in the way that it considers

economic decisions. I think economic decisions are far more complex than just being selfish. People are selfish but they're also altruistic and people do in their decision-making consider many things.

I always ask myself, "Why did the owners of steel mills in the 1890s go all the way to Eastern Europe to find new steel workers and spend money to pay their travel costs across the Atlantic and so on when they could have simply hired the wives of the current steel makers who were home ready to work?" But the idea of hiring women to work in steel mills, even though it would've been far more profit maximizing, they probably at that time could have even paid them less. They didn't do it. Why not? Because social constraints were very strong. It was simply considered an impossible thing to do, to hire, recruit the wives of steelworkers or even the young daughters of steelworkers to work in those factories.

Orley Ashenfelter:

That is sort of the view of the economics of discrimination that Gary Becker, surprisingly I guess, more or less proposed. That it is... People aren't optimizing money, profits. They're optimizing something else, and that permits this odd behavior even though obviously there are sometimes incentives to break it down. Well, it's been wonderful talking to you, Myra.

Myra Strober:

Thank you.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Yes. Our guest today has been [Myra Strober](#), Professor of Education Emeritus at the [Stanford University](#). Please join us again for the next episode of [The Work Goes On](#), an Oral History of Industrial Relations and Labor Economics from the [Industrial Relations Section at Princeton University](#). I'm your host, Orley Ashenfelter. Thanks for listening.

Announcer:

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