

Book review

COUNTING ON MARILYN WARING: NEW ADVANCES IN FEMINIST ECONOMICS

Edited by Margunn Bjornholt and Ailsa McKay

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The treatment of breastfeeding in *Counting on Marilyn Waring*

In 1988, New Zealand feminist and ex Member of Parliament, Marilyn Waring, published a groundbreaking book called *Counting for Nothing* (published in other countries as *If Women Counted*). This identified the exclusion of women's unpaid work from national accounting systems, notably the Gross Domestic Product measure (GDP). Waring's central claim was that women's unpaid work – including reproductive and care work – needed to be valued and 'counted'. Significantly, Waring identified breastfeeding and the production of human milk as an important component of women's unpaid and unrecognised 'work' and one that needed to be counted. At the time of her writing this was a relatively radical concept, at least in the English language literature.

In 2014, as a tribute to Waring's pioneering work in developing and popularising a feminist framework for thinking about economics, Demeter Press has published an edited collection entitled *Counting on Marilyn Waring: New Advances in Feminist Economics*, which contains 17 essays on feminist economics that build on and advance Waring's work. While Waring's analysis of the lack of value attached to women's unpaid work is wide ranging, the specific focus of our review is on Waring's contribution to identifying breastfeeding as an important component of women's unpaid 'work' and how this has been addressed in this 2014 tribute compilation.

According to Waring (1988), human milk is a valuable commodity, and the value of time involved in its production should be counted as part of GDP. Waring argued that the failure to value breastfeeding exemplifies the invisibility of women's work and is part of a worldwide pattern of undervaluing women's economic contribution.

An important figure in furthering this understanding of breastfeeding as a form of unrecognised 'work' – and one that is time costly – is fellow Antipodean Dr Julie Smith, an economist at the Australian Centre for Economic Research on Health (Australian National University) and one of the contributors to this collection on Waring's work.

In her chapter entitled *Making Mothers' Milk Count* Smith argues that although *Counting for Nothing* 'was not the first call to acknowledge the economic value of mother's milk and breastfeeding, ... it was the first to demand its proper valuation and to insist that the costs of breastfeeding to women be accounted for.' (p. 214). According to Smith, prior to the 1990s there existed 1) a 'mothers' milk equals cows' milk' approach to valuing breastfeeding and 2)

the view that mothers' time involved in breastfeeding is free/without cost (p. 215). Since the 1990s, thanks largely to Waring's 1988 critique, there has been a challenge to these misconceptions. Smith also describes how in the Australian context Waring's work has inspired and supported breastfeeding advocacy as well as influencing policy. Yet, despite several high level reports and extensive advocacy, the value of human milk production has still not been included in Australia's economic statistics. This also holds true for New Zealand.

Smith contends that 'excluding human milk production from GDP means that Australia's policymakers focus on promoting the activities of commercial firms producing less than \$200 million of infant food products per year, whilst giving no importance to protecting household production of human milk worth \$2 billion a year or more. It is difficult to see why disrupting the system by comparing these values is undesirable, or why it overburdens policy analysis to show the large magnitude of non market production of infant food' (p. 222).

This oversight is also relevant at the international level. As Smith points out, two of the world's leading economists, Nobel prize-winners Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen (along with Jean-Paul Fitoussi) in a 2009 review of GDP measurement cited human milk production as an example of how a focus on GDP-biased policymaking failed to account for women's unpaid work of breastfeeding and the economic value of this unique food for infants and young children.

For those interested in the strategic issue of how to value breastfeeding/human milk production using an economics (including time use) framework, this chapter is a must read. But the perceptive reader will also note in the wider collection a paradox that reflects the wider political reality faced by many theorists and others who attempt to address breastfeeding. For it is only in Smith's chapter that breastfeeding – a fundamental female function in contrast, for example, to housework and for this reason theoretically central to any feminist analysis – is mentioned at all. Even in the one other chapter that discusses infant feeding (Katzav & Richter, 2014) there is no mention of breastfeeding but only of 'bottles' and 'pacifiers'. Nor does the chapter on infant mortality (Casper & Simmons, 2014) consider breastfeeding, despite strong evidence showing the protective effects of human breastmilk on infant death, in both developing and developed countries. In other words, it appears that the wider societal silence or, dare we say, lack of value attributed to breastfeeding is perpetuated in this collection aside from Smith's 'niche market' chapter.

This begs the important question as to whether this wider silence reflects a commonly held assumption – even among some feminists – that breastfeeding is an 'optional' practice rather than a core part of women's reproductive and productive 'work' (Galtry, 1997). The problem with this approach is that it often fails to consider or challenge structural (e.g. workplace) barriers to breastfeeding, whereby only privileged and well-resourced mothers (e.g. those with supportive workplaces) have any 'real' choice to breastfeed.

There is another anomaly and that is this: does viewing breastfeeding as 'work' and pointing out its lack of attributed value result in mothers themselves valuing it less? Some object to this approach, believing that it potentially demeans breastfeeding's intrinsic value and that by trying to place a monetary/counting value on breastfeeding reduces it to an (exchangeable) commodity at least in the minds of some.

Perhaps more fundamentally, there is debate among economists, including feminist economists, about whether GDP is an appropriate measure for counting unpaid work (e.g. for discussion see Hyman, 1994; Lequiller & Blades, 2004). Detractors claim that GDP is a flawed measurement of productive activity and economic well-being and that chasing its growth is akin to worshipping a false god. A significant shortcoming of GDP (and other measures of national income and production such as GNP and National Income) as a measure of economic

and wider societal and environmental well-being is not only that it counts just the monetary value of traded activities but it does so with no discernment as to whether the activities have beneficial or detrimental impacts or indeed any real impact at all on overall activity.

As Smith points out, under the current model of GDP not only is some of the most important and valuable production – such as women producing milk for their babies – completely unaccounted for, but the substitute – infant formula – is counted as a positive contribution simply because it is part of the traded (money) economy. Few would argue that any reasonable measures of well-being – be they economic, societal or environmental – could be improved if more babies were formula-fed rather than breastfed; yet perversely the established measure of economic well-being – GDP – indicates just that (Smith & Ingham, 2001). Moreover, bringing the analysis back to Waring’s home country, through international trade of our dairy exports and the golden profit opportunities of infant formula in particular, New Zealand manages to undermine environmental health both domestically (through dairy-degraded land and waterways) (Galtry, 2013) and abroad (rainforests and habitats destroyed to produce stock feed that New Zealand imports) and compromise human health both nationally and internationally.

Smith notes that in United Nations discourse there has recently been a shift in focus ‘from “measuring” and “possibly compensating” unpaid work, to counting as “essential to well-being” but “costly” for those who provide it, and justifying claims for strategic policy interventions to reduce unpaid work and redistribute its burden within and between households. This is known as the ‘three R’s of unpaid work: recognition, reduction and redistribution’ (p. 214).

This book has a strong Nordic influence, with several contributors, including one of the editors (Margunn Bjornholt), coming from Norway. This is no coincidence as historically the Nordic social democratic model – through economic redistribution and supportive social policies – has tended to value and support unpaid work. Thus, in Norway, although human milk production is not counted as part of GDP (Reinertsen, 2014), it has nevertheless been counted in economic (food production) statistics since the 1990s (as noted by Smith) *and* there is also a range of policies (including relatively generous parental leave provision) which support breastfeeding (Galtry, 2003). Not only do Denmark, Sweden and Norway have very high breastfeeding rates and very low infant mortality rates in world terms, they also rank among the most gender equal countries, as measured by the United Nations’ Gender Inequality Index (GII).

The very notion that human breastmilk is valuable, and that its production and delivery is also time costly, continues to be largely overlooked in economic and policy thinking. We conclude that Waring’s analysis regarding the need to value and count women’s unpaid work, including mothers’ milk production, and its development by Smith, represents a significant contribution to understanding how to approach infant feeding from a strategic and policy perspective. And we also conclude, sadly, that the feminist silence on suckling appears as yet unbroken.

DR JUDITH GALTRY is an Adjunct Research Fellow at the Australian National University (ACERH). She has had a long-standing interest in health and gender research and policy, including a specific focus on pregnancy and breastfeeding in relation to labour market, child care and parental leave policies.

BARBARA STURMFELS is an Auckland based economist whose productive contribution has been largely out of the paid sector since she became a parent. She works as a volunteer with the breastfeeding support charity La Leche League, is a former National Director of La Leche League New Zealand, and was a member of the National Breastfeeding Committee until its disestablishment in 2008.

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