

Mary Paley

An early champion of women in economics



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Mary Paley was a pioneer in the field of economics. In this article, **Sarah Smith** explains how her insights still hold relevance for modern economists

Mary Paley was a pioneer in the field of economics. She was the first woman to pass finals in political economy at the University of Cambridge (although barred from graduating due to her gender), and in 1875 she was invited to return to her former Cambridge college, Newnham, as the first female economics lecturer.

From Cambridge to Bristol

Mary arrived in Bristol in 1876 with her husband, the economist Alfred Marshall,

after being forced to leave Cambridge because of regulations preventing college fellows from marrying. Marshall became the first principal of University College Bristol, and professor of political economy, while Mary became one of the first female lecturers. Although Bristol was the first higher education institution to admit women students on an equal basis to men, Mary's salary was paid out of that of her husband.

While at Bristol, Mary co-wrote *The Economics of Industry* with Marshall,

having been asked to turn her Cambridge lectures into a book. Her influence was evident from the book's discussion about inequality in wages between men and women. She put forward the argument that even though men and women may be equally productive, they may receive unequal pay because of 'custom and general opinion.' While it was published 140 years ago, this argument is still highly relevant to understanding the persistent gender pay gap, although economists may refer to this as 'unconscious bias.'

Opposition

A few insights indicate that, whatever he might have thought about his wife's economic ability, Alfred Marshall was not, as might be thought, a champion of women in economics. Although he was initially sympathetic to the idea of women studying economics and was Mary's tutor at Cambridge, he went so far as to declare in 1894 note (15 years after *The Economics of Industry* was published) that 'economics is like a fine chest of tools, which will not turn out anything of value except in skilful hands. This indicates that economics is a subject generally unsuited for advance by women.' He also campaigned against women being allowed to graduate when he and Mary returned to Cambridge.

A champion of women's education

We don't know what Mary thought of her husband's views, but she remained an active champion of women's education and of the increase in their employment, particularly in the domains of teaching and business management. She herself continued to lecture and was an inspiration to many generations of her students. Never allowed to graduate from Cambridge, she was, however, awarded with an honorary degree by the University of Bristol in 1926 for her lifelong work as a teacher of economics.

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