

Barbara Bergmann, Trailblazer for Study of Gender in Economics, Is Dead at 87

By [Nelson D. Schwartz](#)

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Barbara Bergmann in her 70s. Credit...Fred Bergmann

Barbara Bergmann, a pioneer in the study of gender in the economy who herself overcame barriers to women in the world of academic economics, died on April 5 at her home in Bethesda, Md. She was 87.

Her son, David Martin Bergmann, confirmed the death. [In a later interview, he said she committed suicide.]

Ms. Bergmann was an emeritus professor at both American University and the University of Maryland, and she continued to research, publish and consult until very recently.

Sixty years ago, Ms. Bergmann did not need to sift through economic data to find evidence of discrimination. When she was a graduate student at Harvard in the mid-1950s, one library at the university was off-limits to women, Alice Rivlin, a fellow Ph.D. student who went on to become vice chairwoman of the Federal Reserve and director of the Office of Management and Budget in the 1990s, said in a telephone interview on Friday.

Women had just begun to be permitted to work as teaching fellows at the time, Ms. Rivlin added, and they took exams separately from their male counterparts.

“It wasn’t an atmosphere that was very congenial to women,” she said. “It was hard to get an academic job unless you wanted to teach at a women’s college.”

Ms. Bergmann persisted. She initially taught at Harvard as an economics instructor after earning her Ph.D. there in 1958, and joined the White House Council of Economic Advisers in 1961 as a senior staff economist.

After working at Brandeis University and the Brookings Institution, Ms. Bergmann joined the University of Maryland faculty in 1965, teaching there until 1988. She taught economics at American University from 1988 to 1997.

A co-founder of the [International Association for Feminist Economics](#), Ms. Bergmann also contributed columns to the Sunday Business section of The New York Times in the 1980s.

Long a liberal voice in the field, Ms. Bergmann was a fierce critic of the laissez-faire policies then being advocated by the Reagan administration, and of proposed cuts to social programs that dated to the New Deal.

“We have our Scrooges, and lately the Scrooges have grown bolder in expressing themselves,” [she wrote](#) in December 1981. “But we are not a nation of Scrooges. On the contrary, we are a nation that, seeing voluntary efforts as commendable but chronically insufficient, has for almost 50 years been relieving social distress through the federal Treasury, using the coercive powers of government to collect the funds.”

Some of Ms. Bergmann’s columns turned out to be prescient, with [an early warning](#) of just how severe the recession of the early 1980s would be. She also wrote a column in May 1982 column entitled “A Threat Ahead From Word Processors.”

In that piece, she predicted that the advent of computers and an “an electronic revolution in the office” would decimate the need for typists, secretaries and clerical workers, who tended to be women.

She noted the downward pressure this might have on wages in some fields, and argued that while technological change and greater productivity might be a good thing economically, existing barriers to women in the work force might make finding new jobs difficult and worsen poverty.

“Will high-status people be willing to type their own documents in the future?” she asked. “Though the stigma runs deep, the spreading use of the computer for tasks other than word processing may succeed in removing the stain from the activity of typing on the job.”

In addition to frequent articles in academic journals, Ms. Bergmann was the author of a well-received history of women in the workplace, “The Economic Emergence of Women.” It first appeared in 1986 and was reissued in a new edition in 2005.

The book traces how women began joining the labor force in considerable numbers in the 19th century, well before the rise of modern feminism. Nor was leaving the home and working for hire a result of changing attitudes, Ms. Bergmann wrote; she concluded that economic forces made women’s labor too valuable to be confined to domestic work.

In the late 20th century, Ms. Bergmann called for the government to do more in the marketplace on behalf of women and single-parent families, including support for increased access to day care and the passage of legislation mandating comparable pay for women and men.

In her book, Ms. Bergmann proposed reforms “that she concedes will have to await a less traditional, more egalitarian administration,” the author Wendy Kaminer concluded in a review in *The Times* in October 1986.

Barbara Rose Berman was born July 20, 1927, in the Bronx to Eastern European immigrants. She earned a B.A. from Cornell in 1948 before going on to receive her M.A. and Ph.D. in economics at Harvard. In 1965 she married Fred H. Bergmann, a microbiologist at the National Institutes of Health; he died in 2011.

In addition to her son, Ms. Bergmann is survived a daughter, Sarah Nellie Bergmann, and three grandchildren.

Whether at Harvard in the 1950s or during the Reagan era, Ms. Bergmann was ready to challenge the prevailing orthodoxies of the time, Ms. Rivlin said.

“Barbara was always quite outspoken and forceful in her views,” she said. “She was never shy about them.”