

## Christina Romer (by Nicole Mashoudy<sup>1</sup>)

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Growing up, Christina Romer found a natural interest in public policy questions. With a grandfather who was a newspaper editor and a mother who listened to the news all the time, Romer's formative years were surrounded by discussions on topics such as the 1970s gasoline shortages, inflation, and high unemployment.

Romer entered The College of William and Mary for her undergraduate career in 1977 believing that she was going to study political science and become a lawyer. Upon taking a required year of economics classes, Romer decided to switch majors to economics and recalls thinking to herself,

*Oh my goodness, there's this field where you can figure out the answers to all the questions I am interested in ... I had a really influential introductory economics professor... [who] made economics come alive ... It makes me as an instructor realize how important ... that first taste of economics [is] for some people. It's like a light ... And I certainly found it just incredibly exciting. (Romer, interview with the author, pp. 3 and 4.)*

She also recalls the importance of mentorship, especially from female role models, in her early life and education. Romer was inspired by the teaching and research of her political science professor Miss Hamilton and remembers being introduced to Miss Hamilton's life in a personal way.

*She brought me somewhat into ... her life. She'd have a group of students over for dinner. How about this for a random thing? I was so taken with Miss Hamilton's china that when we got married, I said, "I know what I want." [My dishes are] just like hers. These crazy little things ... You got ... a vision of somebody's life right down to what they eat off of. (Romer, interview with the author, p. 4.)*

After receiving a PhD in economics from MIT in 1985 and serving as an Assistant Professor of Economics and Public Affairs at Princeton University from 1985-1988, Romer began her career at the University of California, Berkeley. At the time, it was refreshing for Romer to see other women faculty and senior women in the Berkeley Economics Department. She quickly found support and friendship in George Akerlof and Janet Yellen, and she viewed Yellen as a role model for how she conducted research and managed having children.

Romer had entered the department with her husband, David Romer, whom she met and married in graduate school. Not many years before, the Romers would have been prohibited from being hired together owing to anti-nepotism rules of the university that were eventually repealed. When asked

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about the dynamics of being a couple in the same department, Romer says that Berkeley was unique in that she didn't feel as though the department or the students treated the two of them differently.

*[At Princeton], it was definitely an issue ... "We need to put Christy in the Public Policy School and David in the Economics Department because it would be so weird to have them ... in the same department" ... David loves to tell people that he was the affirmative action hire [at Berkeley] in the sense that they had one slot. They hired me ... and they said if we're going to get her, we need to get him a slot ... [Berkeley] didn't treat me like I was, you know, the "follow along." (Romer, interview with the author, p. 7.)*

In fact, Romer believes that once Berkeley got rid of the anti-nepotism rules, it saw a profit opportunity and invested heavily in couples such as George Akerlof and Janet Yellen as well as Joe Farrell and Suzanne Scotchmer. Gradually, Romer found enjoyment and fun in teaching and researching with her husband even though they began in two completely different fields, economic history and macroeconomics, respectively. When told that many undergraduates who have taken Econ 2, which is jointly taught by David and Christina Romer, see the Romers as the ultimate power couple and love them both equally, Romer responded

*We're now getting old enough [that] I think ... [students] find it kind of cute that we're married. So, we just embrace it. (Romer, interview with the author, p.9.)*

While Romer doesn't remember much organized support among women faculty when she first came to Berkeley in the late 1980s, she sees a strong sense of responsibility for the young faculty, a characteristic that is special to Berkeley. Upon considering a job offer from the Kennedy School and visiting Harvard, she realized that this special attention towards junior faculty was not universal.

*[At Berkeley], the first thing we ask the assistant professors is what they'd like to teach. And it's the full professors that fill in the other things ... I think Berkeley is kind of unique in ... mentoring and supporting young faculty. (Romer, interview with the author, p. 9.)*

Another instance of support that Romer recalls was when she was pregnant with her first son. Experiencing morning sickness and feeling unwell in general, Romer went to then-department-chair Bob Anderson for guidance.

*I said, "I'm in a mess here." And he said, "You know, why don't we just cut one of your classes?" ... It was kind of an ad hoc thing. But boy was that unbelievably important to my development, my career ... There [were] ... various times when we've thought of leaving Berkeley. I was drawn back because they had really supported me in those times when I wasn't all that productive because I was having children. I kind of felt like they really built loyalty. More employers ought to think that way about ... how they treat their women faculty. (Romer, interview with the author, p. 10.)*

Unfortunately, there were also times in Romer's career when prejudice against women in economics was explicit. While serving with Janet Yellen (Berkeley), Suzanne Scotchmer (Berkeley), and Bob Shiller (Yale) on a visiting committee tasked with evaluating the Economics Department at Harvard, Romer remembers a comment made by a male faculty member there.

*There was one faculty member ... kind of asking questions and he said, "Well, it's understood that women are systematically placed one or two ranks above what they actually deserve because of affirmative action." ... The three Berkeley women -- we were outraged. And Bob Shiller said, "Oh, that's just Barro being Barro." And it really made me realize that no, it's not just women who have to fight for themselves. The guys also can't give other guys a pass. (Romer, interview with the author, p. 11.)*

In 2008, then-President-elect Obama's transition team contacted Romer for the position of Chair of the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) given her knowledge and research of the Great Depression. She describes the experience as surreal. After receiving an email from the transition team and immediately catching a plane to Chicago, Romer soon found herself making policy recommendations to President Obama regarding an economic stimulus.

*I'm very glad that I did it. I can't honestly say that I enjoyed it, but the world was falling apart, and I wanted to try to help fix things." (Romer, interview with the author, p. 12.)*

When Romer joined the CEA, discussions revolved around implementing a \$500-\$600 billion stimulus. By the end of one meeting, Romer was able to increase the stimulus package to \$800 billion. And while Romer thought that it would have been better if the package was bigger, today she views it as one of her greatest triumphs.

Washington, however, felt like a "boys club." And Romer recalls moments when women had to band together to feel a sense of solidarity.

*We started having dinners with ten of us who were in the executive branch ... I felt like there was a lot of support ... [W]omen would make sure that other women got into meetings or got credit for the things they accomplished. (Romer, interview with the author, p. 14.)*

When asked how women could replicate this support in the field of economics, Romer says that women helping one another can be extremely valuable, but it should not be solely the responsibility of women to do so.

*[At the National Bureau of Economic Research meetings], I'd have to go around [to young women] and say, "Ok, you're sitting around the edge of the room, come up to the table. I'm tired of being the only woman sitting at the table." ... [But], it can't just be us helping one another ...*

*The good guys need to step up ... There are terrific women to put on your conference program or to hire for senior positions or whatever. Someone has to exert that small amount of effort to say, "Gee, are we forgetting any female possibilities?" (Romer, interview with the author, p. 15.)*

At the end of our interview, Romer explains that the biggest barrier for women in economics today, in her opinion, is maintaining a balance between academic and personal life.

*The conflict ... [is that] the time when you're an assistant professor is often the time people want to be starting their families. And balancing those two things is really hard. And it's just still incredibly unequal ... child care duties are almost never equally shared. And so, coming up with mechanisms to help women with this is incredibly important. (Romer, interview with the author, p. 13.)*

Furthermore, the degree of child care duties are felt differently across socioeconomic and racial strata. Making economics accessible to all women is imperative, says Romer.

*We need to get more women in graduate school, and we need to have our assistant faculty and then going right up the whole ladder be more reflective of the talent that there is in the country that is not all male, and not all white. We need to have a profession that is open to everybody. (Romer, interview with the author, p. 14.)*

Romer's advice to women currently studying or considering economics is to "take the leap." Making economics friendlier to women will help bring energy and improvement to the field. While current barriers seem immense and insurmountable, it will take the persistent effort of both women and men to diversify economics for the better.

#### **Work Cited**

Romer, Christina. Interview with the author. Berkeley, CA. November 11, 2020. Archived at <https://www.econ.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/Romer%20interview%20transcript%20Nov%2011%202020.pdf>