Thanks for this opportunity to discuss Prof. Folbre’s book and presentation. Let me start by saying how much I enjoyed both and also that I agree with a lot of what she says.

Her book in particular is a survey of how men and women have been treated in Western economic thought over the last two to three hundred years. Despite the title, the book does not provide as one reviewer of the book put it, “a luridly sensational experience.” Nevertheless, it more than satisfies and for me at least, served as a reminder of how I really should have taken more courses on the history of economic thought when I was in graduate school.

One thing that stands out from her survey is that most male economists – even famous ones like Alfred Marshall and Stanley Jevons – don’t come out looking too good! John Stuart Mills is the exception. The women on the other hand come out pretty well.

Prof. Folbre also draws several other compelling conclusions. First, self-interest has been viewed differently by economists for women and men. In particular, there has been a tradition of encouraging self interest in men and demanding altruism in women. So, as she puts it,
“the line separating self-interest from greed was drawn differently for women than men.”

Second, for the longest time, carework and housework were seen by economists as unproductive. This in turn has led to the view of housewives as being unproductive, inactive and/or dependent.

Third, until recently, economics has viewed the family as an idealized, moral, feminine and non-economic realm. And, flowing from this is the view that the provision of care is an important dimension of women’s identity as women.

The main focus of the latter part of Prof. Folbre’s presentation has been on what these gendered views of “greed” and “lust” mean for the care economy. In particular, she asks how the costs of caring for dependents should be shared within the family and between the family and the state. And that is an important question.

I am going to pivot back to what I think is an equally important set of questions about gender inequalities and what should be done to address those. Turning to those questions, I agree that the norms underlying the division of care work between women and men and the implied gender roles are important determinants of inequality between men and women, particularly regarding access to economic opportunities. However, they are not the only underlying determinants that matter. And for policy, it is necessary to examine all of the underlying causes and to understand which ones are most amenable to change.

Let me illustrate this with gender segregation in economic activity – the tendency for women and men to work in different parts of the
economy. As we show in the WDR, these differences are pervasive across economies, irrespective of how rich they are, and they change little as countries get richer. So, women are more likely than men to work in lower productivity activities, in unpaid family activities, in the informal wage sector. They tend to operate smaller farms and grow less profitable crops as farmers, or manage smaller firms in less lucrative sectors as entrepreneurs. And in formal employment, they are concentrated in “female” occupations and sectors, which are typically not the best paid. And in turn, these patterns underpin much of the differences in observed productivity and earnings between women and men. So, what is going on here? In part, through its influence on time use, it is the societal norm about how care work (and housework more generally) is allocated predominantly to the females within the household. But it is more than that as we argue in the WDR – it is also about the way in which formal institutions – laws, regulations and the ways in which services are delivered – work as well as about how markets operate in contexts in which information is scarce. So, for instance, there may be laws aimed at differentially “protecting” women against working in certain sectors or for long hours. Or it may be the institutions that shape men’s and women’s access to inputs or ownership and control of assets. Or it may be the beliefs among employers that men are better at some tasks than women. In other words, there are market failures or institutional constraints that interact with normative factors to explain and perpetuate gender inequalities.

What is needed then are multiple and context-specific interventions to address each of these factors – a topic we address at some length in the WDR. These will include measures to release women’s time from care
and housework, close gaps in assets and access to inputs; and address information problems in labor markets. The underlying norm regarding the allocation of much of care and housework to females may itself be much less amenable to policy change.

Let me end by noting my own bias in all of this, which can also be seen in the WDR. It is that standard microeconomics with its analytical and empirical tools and guided by the valuable historical perspective that the work of Prof. Folbre and others provides, is well equipped to take this discussion forward both on the diagnostic and the policy aspects. In her book and presentation, Prof. Folbre suggests that a distinctive feminist economics would be better placed to do so. This is perhaps something that could be picked up during the discussion this afternoon.

Thank you again.