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Building reproductive justice as a research program in economics

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Abstract: The concept of reproductive justice was first developed by organized women of color in the United States in the late 90s and gained increased relevance in academia and grassroots movements worldwide, but a clear framework on how to approach reproductive justice within economics is not yet developed. This paper aims to start that theoretical discussion. We provide an overview of the reproductive justice framework and advocate for its adoption as a research program in economics, proposing one hardcore and four softcore hypotheses. To develop a proper method capable of investigating those hypotheses simultaneously, we propose a synthesis among elements of analysis advanced within development, feminist, and stratification economics. We provide a selected historical example to apply the framework, illuminating how it advances economists' understanding and evaluation of reproductive policies and their consequences in diverse scenarios, and discuss the relevance and possible tensions of such applications in future analyses.

Keywords: Reproductive Justice; Reproductive Rights; Feminist Economics; Stratification Economics; Development Economics; Research Program.

JEL: B54; Z13; A12

1. Introduction

In 1994, black women in the United States created the concept of reproductive justice (RJ) aiming to bridge the gap between reproductive rights and social justice movements. Organizations like the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective (a broad coalition of various grassroots organizations and individuals representing primary ethnic populations and indigenous nations in the United States) proposed this new paradigm centered on the needs of women of color grappling with issues of pregnancy, birth, abortion, and parenting, recognizing that peoples' ability to make meaningful choices about their reproductive lives is shaped by intersecting systemic oppressions (Ross and Solinger 2017; Eaton and Stephens 2020).¹

They criticized the traditional reproductive rights agenda narrow focus on "choice", which propagated an individualistic perspective and excluded people who couldn't access the choice market due to class, religion, societal norms, or mobility constraints, for example (West 2009; Onís 2015; Roberts 2015; Price 2020). Social justice movements, on the other hand, frequently shared a broad perspective that didn't center the role of reproduction for societies, how power structures colonize people's reproductive health for economic and political goals, and whose bodies are exploited for their achievement (Shaw 2013; Ross and Solinger 2017). Building from

¹ Despite acknowledging that women are not the only people biologically capable of carrying pregnancies (non-binary, gender non-conforming, and transgender men, for example, may also be able to give birth) here we are discussing the experiences that were being centered by the early reproductive justice movement, without minimizing other communities. This paper attempts to be as inclusive as possible in terms of language, understanding that inclusion is a central value of the reproductive justice framework. Our efforts are limited by the rapidly changing conventions and terminologies in the healthy debate of inclusive language.

those movements, the RJ agenda focuses on three main rights: (1) the right to have children, (2) the right to not have children, and (3) the right to parent happy and healthy kids to the best of one's ability, understanding that those rights are severely impacted by different oppressions in a stratified society (Ross et al. 2001; Silliman et al. 2004; Ross et al. 2017; Ross and Solinger 2017).

This powerful new framework soon grew among scholars and activists, attracted by its unique capacity to articulate a wide range of pressing concerns for underprivileged individuals and communities – such as racism, xenophobia, classism, homophobia, environmental degradation, and ableism – while still centering reproductive issues. In 2003, the National Organization for Women – the largest feminist organization in the United States, founded in 1966 and currently with more than half a million members – included the concept of reproductive justice in one of their newsletters for the first time. In 2004, doctors Jael Silliman, Marlene Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena Gutiérrez published the first book focusing on RJ, titled *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organizing for Reproductive Justice*. Their backgrounds as activists and intellectuals in the fields of education, history, philosophy, women's studies, and sociology solidified reproductive justice as a framework nested in grassroots movements and collective action that simultaneously dialogues with transdisciplinary academic circles.

The ambitious task of “proposing both a theoretical paradigm shift and model for activist organization” (Ross et al. 2017, p. 8) resonated among a diverse set of scholars, that identify in RJ a theory, a practice, and a strategy to advance scholarship in several fields and ultimately promote human rights progress (Silliman et al. 2004). Efforts to consolidate the RJ framework within academia flourished in fields such as law (e.g. West 2009; Luna and Luker 2013; Franklin 2018; Murray 2020), health and medicine (e.g. Gold 2017; Knight et al. 2019; Leath 2022),

environmental and natural resources (e.g. Gaard 2010; Hoover 2018; Liddell and Kington 2021), communications and media (e.g. Jaworski 2009; Onís 2015; Sundstrom 2015), psychology (e.g. the special issue on reproductive justice published by the Journal of Social Issues – a journal of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues – in 2020, featuring ten papers), and many others.

In the field of economics, however, we don't see similar excitement. Despite our great history of important contributions from feminist economists to the discussion of reproductive rights and contraception, frequently from international and intersectional perspectives (e.g. Smyth 1996; Beutelspacher, Martelo, and García 2003; Blunch 2019; John, Tsui, and Roro 2020; Pekkurnaz 2020; Myers 2022), and the adoption of the expression “reproductive justice” in some academic spaces recently – like the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE) Presidential Panel during the 2023 Allied Social Science Associations (ASSA) Annual Meeting – there's barely any use of the term in economic journals.² To the best of our ability, we couldn't find any publication in economics discussing how RJ is a different framework than the ideas of reproductive rights and social justice, nor any theoretical discussion about how this new vision could be used in economics.

This paper attempts to start that discussion, claiming that the adoption of the RJ framework as a research program in economics would increase feminist scholars' ability to conduct meaningful research and contribute to social movements and policy making in several

² Our ability to research the use of the expression “reproductive justice” in economic journals is limited by our own language barriers and access to journal archives. We researched online economic publications in English, Spanish, and Portuguese - which account for more than 95% of contemporary academic publications (Beigel and Bringel 2022) - including mainstream and heterodox economic journals.

ways. We argue that such a framework can increase interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research, address economics' overreliance on WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) samples (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010; Lowes 2021), improve our ability to detect analytical blind spots, prevent policy gaps – when governments act in ways that undermine their own stated goals (Altman and Pannell 2012) – and increase the connection among academic feminist scholarship, social movements, and policy makers.

Our paper is organized as follows. We first differentiate RJ from reproductive rights and reproductive health, highlighting why this framework can be particularly fruitful to economics scholarship. Then, we define RJ as a research program and identify the hypotheses that constitute its hardcore and softcore. Next, we apply the framework to a selected historical example to illuminate its usefulness for economic science and the feminist agenda. Finally, we discuss the relevance of advancing this research program and debate possible tensions of such applications in future analyses.

2. Reproductive justice as a useful framework for economics

The general idea that women's rights are constrained by a complex system of oppressions is not new in economics. Even John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* (2006 [1896], p. 26), considered by many the first piece by an economist discussing gender equality, claims that “what is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing – the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others”. Feminist economists discussed such structural constraints for decades, frequently including an intersectional approach – “the need to account for multiple identity [not only gender] when considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1245). Such discussion, however, are mostly centered in

reproductive rights (particularly on the right to planned pregnancy and abortion access) and reproductive health (eg. Beutelspacher, Martelo, and García 2003; Crane 2005; Gammage, Sultana and Glinski 2020).

The reproductive health and reproductive rights frameworks are important contributions to the feminist economics literature, but they can be incorporated and complexified in the reproductive justice framework. In fact, RJ authors addressed some of the limitations of those approaches, specifically talking about the heavier weight they put on the individual – particularly on the idea of “choice” – rather than on communities, collectives, structures, and historical backgrounds. RJ agrees that legislation, access to health care, and education about those resources are necessary to guarantee a person’s autonomy in making meaningful decisions about their reproduction; in fact, those constitute basic human rights (Ross & Solinger 2017). However, the position that such individual occupy in society, their religious/spiritual beliefs, the history of their community, and so many other factors are just as important – and sometimes even more relevant – to understand and fight against human rights violations.

Consider the example of a native-American woman who finds herself pregnant and decides to interrupt such pregnancy because it offers risks for her own well-being. If she only has access to the Indian Health Services, she can’t legally have an abortion through her healthcare, and if she lives in a state with an abortion ban (like Texas), mobility and income limitations can eliminate access to a private option too. If those options were available – which is what the reproductive rights and reproductive health frameworks focus on – it doesn’t mean that now she has access to “choice.” Maybe the religious/spiritual beliefs of her community would push her to seek an at-home, hidden abortion option; maybe a history of forced sterilization of her community members by the health care system would make her too afraid of using those

resources; maybe she feels safer using an abortion technique based on natural teas passed on from generation to generation among women in her community, instead of pharmaceutical pills.³ The RJ framework allows us to not lose sight of those possibilities, while still promoting the idea that reproductive rights and reproductive health are essential. Particularly, it helps us see why economic policies focusing only on those two issues could be insufficient for the promotion of “choice,” and better captures the intersectionality and historical processes that can only be understood when we consider collectives, not only individuals, as important social agents.

Table 1 summarizes the differences among the three frameworks, based on the definitions presented by the Asian Communities of Reproductive Justice (ACRJ)⁴. In Section 6 of this paper, we discuss the limitations of the RJ framework in more detail and justify why we defend its adoption within economics despite them.

Table 1. Differences between frameworks: reproductive health, reproductive rights, and reproductive justice.

	Reproductive Health	Reproductive Rights	Reproductive Justice
Main problem addresses	Lack of information about and access to reproductive and health care services	Lack of legal protection guaranteeing individuals’ access to reproductive decisions	Society’s institutions, environment, economics, and culture prevents communities and individuals from exercising self-determination
Key players	Health care providers and educators	Advocates (legal experts, policymakers, elected officials)	Organizers (including reproductive rights and health activists)
Constituents	Patients	Voters, lobbyists	Women, people with uterus, and their communities

³ In the Section 5, we present a historical (instead of hypothetical) example of how the RJ framework can promote the integration of the reproductive rights and health agendas, advancing reproduction decisions as a human right.

⁴ Now, the movement is called Forward Together (learn more at <https://www.forwardtogether.org>).

Strategy	Improving research, access, quality, quantity, and education about health care services, focusing on reproduction	Protecting existing laws, demanding their enforcement, and creating/passing legislation guaranteeing access to reproductive rights	Promoting the leadership of and connection between grassroots groups, individuals, and communities who identify and confront multi-layered oppressions in society focusing on reproduction issues
Limitations	Diminished structural and intersectional approach (provision of services and education about them happen at the individual level)	Promotes individual (instead of collective) rights at its core, and ignores the disenfranchisement of some communities	Long-term change approach, which confronts sticky institutions (power and social values)

Source: own formulation based on ACSJ 2005.

3. Reproductive Justice as a research program

According to Lakatos (1978), a new research program is created within a specific field of knowledge not to provide new tools to answer old research questions, but precisely to analyze and explain different phenomena and new issues. Reproductive Justice was created by women of color to address the intersectionality of urgent matters that crossed their bodies, but were still somehow distant from each other in organized social movements and academia: the social justice and the reproductive rights agendas. It is, therefore, an attempt to understand and change pressing issues about reproduction within contemporary societies, bringing that complex intersection to the forefront.

Instead of focusing on individual-based decisions and how to increase their resources (either in terms of more rights, more health care, or more access to and education about both), RJ frames questions centering structural issues, like capitalism and imperialism dynamics, race and gender as varying social constructs, social struggles and organized social movements. By defining RJ as a (Lakatosian) research program, we can formulate a framework that is broad enough to

enlighten the study of different societies in varying historical contexts, but also specific enough to contribute to the advancement of economic policy construction, evaluation, and overall economic analyses.

Lakatos (1978) creates a theoretical model for a research program: it is a collection of interrelated theories, united by a common hypothesis that forms its hardcore. Around that hardcore, there are a series of accessory hypotheses that form a softcore, which allows for the dialogue of diverse theories (in our case, different schools of thought and fields in economics) and diverse applications of the framework.⁵

The core hypothesis of the RJ research program is evident in academic literature and pamphlets of grassroots organizations: people's abilities to make meaningful reproductive decisions for themselves and their communities is severely restricted by systematic and intersectional oppressions. Given the very recent development of RJ, the softcore of auxiliary hypotheses is more challenging to define (especially with the deep interdisciplinary nature of RJ academic production), but that's one of the advantages of the definition of a research program: the softcore can be enhanced by the inclusion of new hypothesis as the framework develops, and our goal is to define RJ as a useful research program within economics only, so we can focus on the research questions that are relevant to our science. Our literature review suggests four auxiliary hypotheses: (1) capitalist development produces colonization and polarization; (2) sexual autonomy and reproductive freedom (safe and dignified fertility management, childbirth, and parenting) are human rights; (3) gender and race/ethnicity are socially constructed concepts

⁵ Kvangraven (2020) provides an interesting discussion about dependency theory as a Lakatosian research program, elucidating how this framework can embrace diverse points of view while preserving a theory's strengths and relevance.

that exist under a strict hierarchy defined by those in power; (4) grassroots movements and academic production (and constant dialogue among them) are necessary for social change.

The capitalism development trends and the centrality of colonization and polarization for RJ are clear in the historical analysis of (the lack of) access to safe and dignified fertility management. Ross and Solinger (2017) start their book examining the history of the thirteen colonies of the United States with the purpose of showing “how colonizers, enslavers, employers, and the state, among other entities, have used reproductive capacity to pursue goals associated with power, wealth, status, and property” (Ross and Solinger 2017, p. 16), precisely to stress that connection between advancing a societies’ mode of production (centered in the idea of wealth and private property accumulation), class polarization (while making explicit the intersections among class and other identities) and colonization of nations, communities, peoples, and bodies.⁶ The centrality of class, property, income, and sovereignty as key elements to access resources (such as power, health care, rights, education, dignified housing, safe water, and food), together with RJ’s preoccupation in understanding them as structural constraints, instead of individual choice-limiters, constantly shaped by the mode of production and those in power is an integral element of the analyzed literature.⁷

⁶ An interesting discussion about the concept of body (de)colonization centering the experience of women of color is presented in Blackwell (2023).

⁷ Lana and Luker (2013) discuss how white supremacist ideas and the rise of industrial capitalism in the United States impacted fertility policies and gave rise to the reproductive rights framework, together with a classicist and sexist “professionalization” project promoted by medical doctors to limit abortion practices. Their historical analysis is built within the RJ framework and is a good example of the importance of this auxiliary hypothesis, and of how RJ can complexify the knowledge of historical processes with its holistic, structural perspective.

The discussion about sexual autonomy and reproductive freedom as human rights is also a constant preoccupation of the literature and grassroots movements, and a particularly important element for the discussion of RJ among law studies. In economics, tensions between feminist movements working on gender justice and economic justice agendas highlight the difficulty of promoting human rights in a diverse global context, frequently promoting an unnecessary and atomistic hierarchization of oppressions (being poor versus being of native/indigenous race, for example) instead of a convergence of agendas that understand all human rights as equally important and achievable (Barton 2005). The integrated analysis, holistic vision, and comprehensive strategies that push against structural conditions of control and constraint proposed by RJ assumes human rights promotion as unnegotiable, therefore being an important auxiliary hypothesis of this research program.⁸

The definition of race and gender as socially constructed dynamic concepts is also central, and the inclusion of those categories in the auxiliary hypothesis doesn't mean that they are more important than other intersectional identities of people and communities – in fact, intersectionality is part of the hardcore hypothesis of the research program. We established Hypothesis 3 by analyzing the always-present term “women of color” in the RJ literature, the importance of understanding gender as the social category used to organize and understand sexuality and reproduction, and the central role that RJ authors and social movements give to white-supremacy ideology as a dominant and perverse structural constraint. Hierarchies of gender – which women are better, superior, mother-material (“legitimate mothers”) – and race/ethnicity – who is consider part of “whiteness” and therefore allowed more power, respect,

⁸ It is important to acknowledge the distinction between positive and negative rights in this discussion; such definition is one of the many tensions of the RJ framework. We will present that discussion on Section 6.

resources, and legitimacy, either legally or by social institutions and culture – are particularly dynamic definitions that must be treated as a separate hypothesis in the definition of this research program.⁹

Finally, the social change element of the RJ framework and the necessary dialogue among grassroots movements and academic production to achieve it is evident as a hypothesis due to the very roots of RJ, and the convergence of intellectuals, academics, and activists that characterize the framework. All definitions of RJ we accessed had a clear social change goal (frequently called liberation), saw activism and social organizing as the means to achieve it, and highlighted the role of theories and research as an integral part of that process. As Ross et al. (2017, p. 7) described, reproductive justice “focuses on structural oppression and the development of new theories and activism to create radical pathways of resistance and strategies for change that incorporate the complexities of our diverse economic, racial, gendered, cultural, and geographic locations”.

There are, of course, other hypotheses and elements of analysis that are common to several RJ papers, books, and pamphlets. Migration status as a social construct that exist under a strict and dynamic hierarchy, for example, is particularly important for some communities, but since it seems to be a category relevant to the United States more than anywhere else (in fact, several grassroots movements located in the Global South ignore it completely), we decided not to include it in our soft core, and feel that it can be added as a ramification of softcore Hypothesis

⁹ We use the word “whiteness” in quotes to reflect the deep and malleable definitions of white races globally, while still highlighting the global white supremacy ideology. A good framework that explores race and racism as a modern global project that takes shape differently in diverse structural and ideological forms across all geographies but is based in global white supremacy is presented in Christian (2019).

3.¹⁰ Similarly, the unequal impacts of climate change, overwhelmingly felt by poor women of color living in periphery countries/regions through decreasing infrastructure, poverty intensification, and biological reactions are increasingly discussed among RJ researchers and activists (Denton 2010; Hoover 2018). However, the debate is not consistently presented among the literature analyzed, and we claim that such analysis can be included as a further consequence of capitalist development, dialoguing and advancing softcore Hypothesis 1. Our softcore hypotheses consist of the main themes identified in the literature that seemed relevant for the RJ framework within economics, and not an exhaustive list of all phenomena and elements of analysis that this rich framework can provide. We reiterate our proposal of defining a research program that constitutes a starting point for research and activism within economics, instead of a definite and limiting description of which topics can be studied under the RJ framework.

The hypotheses here discussed are also not inaugurated by the RJ framework; in fact, several schools of thought in economics share similar perspectives and research questions. What makes the RJ framework unique is the proposition of all these elements simultaneously. According to Lakatos (1978), the definition of the hardcore and softcore hypotheses allows for the identification of the method capable of approaching those questions successfully, and it is through the review of schools of thought within economics that propose similar hypotheses that we can establish such a method. In the next section, we discuss which contributions within

¹⁰ GIRE (*Grupo de Información em Reprodución Elegida*, Information Group in Elected Reproduction), for example, is a reproductive justice organization located in Mexico that doesn't mention migration status as a category of analysis in their reports and documents. The National Latina Institute for Reproductive Justice, on the other hand, highlights such element as one of the most important aspects of the struggle of Mexican women in the United States.

economics address similar issues and, therefore, contribute to the building of the global, historical, feminist, holistic method requested by the RJ research program.

4. Synthesis: development, feminist, and stratification economics as building blocks for the Reproductive Justice research program

The definition of RJ's hypotheses above explicit the method required by this framework: a global (instead of local), historical (instead of ahistorical and generical), feminist (bringing gender and power as central elements of analysis), holistic (instead of linear) one. We understand that method refers to the techniques used to gather evidence supporting hypotheses, methodology refers to theories and analysis of how research should proceed, and epistemology discusses adequate theories for understanding phenomena (Harding 1987). With those in mind, we propose a synthesis among different schools of thought in economics that we believe align those three elements with unique capacity to advance the RJ research program, highlighting elements of analysis proposed by those theories that contribute to the understanding of the hypotheses outlined in Section 3. Specifically, we rely on strains of development, feminist, and stratification economics theories.

4.1 Contributions from development economics

The discussion about polarizing forces of capitalism, colonization/imperialism, and the advancement of social justice from a class perspective has been a topic of discussion among development economics for more than a century. Out of the three schools of thought here outlined, this is the most traditional and controversial one, with several competing and often contradictory definitions of development among its researchers.

To dialogue with the RJ research program, it is important for the development theory to approach development through the lens of a global historical analysis – so we are not interested in the literature focused on the creation of abstract models of economic growth, for example – and that such development tends to promote polarizing trends, that can be at least partially challenged by the organized civil society.¹¹ There are several development theories that fit that criteria, e.g.: dependency theory (and all its ramifications), post-colonial theory, classical Marxian economics, neo-Marxist economics, some approaches to global value chain analyses, some approaches to post-Keynesian analysis, world systems theory, certain classes of north-south trade models, Canadian staple theory, theories of imperialism, and theories of subordinate financialization (Kvangraven 2020).

Depending on the application of the RJ framework – if to the analysis of a short-term contemporary on-going phenomena or a long-term historical trend, if for a country of the global south or a region in the global north, if focused on income polarization within a nation or wealth concentration among countries, etc. – one development theory may be more suited than other. We claim that this research program is broad enough to dialogue with any development theory that relies on the basic premises discussed above (i.e. global historical approach assuming dynamic polarizing tendencies that can be at least partially challenged), and that an underlying

¹¹ The discussion about to what extent those trends can be challenged, and which instruments are legitimate and efficient to stop or attenuate those polarizing tendencies (voting, peaceful protesting, striking, terrorism, *guerrillas*, etc.) is vast, and echoes some of the discussions currently taking place within the RJ movements. Here, we are assuming that any theory that assumes some possible attenuation of those polarizing tendencies (decreasing income inequality within a country, for example) through some sort of civil organizing (e.g. unionizing) belongs to the group of development theories that can serve as a building block for the RJ framework.

acknowledgement of how that polarization takes place and how it's being challenged (or not) is necessary for an analysis to be nested in the RJ framework here defined.

4.2 Contributions from feminist economics

Feminist economics differentiates itself from gender economics due to two main ideas: its clear agenda of advancing gender equality and the centrality of power (and unequal access to it) as an element of analysis. Instead of assuming that gendered economic outcomes, such as smaller labor market participation for women in most societies, are a result of natural endowments or different opportunity costs, feminist economics understands oppression and power struggles as necessary elements for the understanding and the advancement of equality in society. Therefore, feminist economics (instead of the broader area of gender in the economy) is the school of thought that best serves as a building block for the RJ framework, directly dialoguing with the structural and intersectional constraints idea, the definition of gender as a socially constructed concept that dynamically change to serve the interest of those in power, and particularly resonating with softcore Hypothesis 4: the need for research and activism to walk hand-in-hand.

Within feminist economics, some concepts are particularly fruitful for applications of this research program, since they were designed to investigate similar hypotheses to the ones outlined in Section 3. First and foremost, the idea of intersectionality – the concept that people's different identities are integrative (instead of additive) – was developed within feminist social sciences, is widely used among feminist economists, and is clearly imperative to the RJ research program. In fact, Ross et al. (2017, p. 8) claim that, in the RJ vision, “intersectionality is our process; human rights are our goal”. Such concept highlights the need for a holistic method, capable of capturing

the universality, simultaneity, and interdependence of identities that cross different human beings, who are entitled the same human rights.

About sexual autonomy and reproductive freedom (safe and dignified fertility management, childbirth, and parenting), and the critique from the RJ framework to the individualistic idea of “choice” promoted by several reproductive rights and health movements, feminist economics literature showed similar concerns with such simplistic, individual-based approach. Particularly, the discussion about voice and agency, and the possibility of exercising those within one’s household and community, in the market, or in the State are important elements of analysis pushed forwards by feminist economics tradition (Kabeer 1999; Gammage, Kabeer, and Rodgers 2016).

Gammage, Kabeer, and Rodgers (2016) define agency as the capacity for purposive action, and the ability to make decisions and pursue goals free from violence, retribution, and fear, while voice is the ability to articulate practical needs and strategic interests, individually and collectively, in the private and public domains, and the guarantee that such manifestations will be heard, listened to, and acted on. Those two elements of analysis are useful for the understanding and evaluation of sexual autonomy and reproductive freedom, and directly dialogue with the structural, collective, and intersectional focus propagated by RJ.

Further, the three main rights advanced by RJ movements – namely the right to have children, to not have children, and to parent happy and healthy kids to the best of one’s ability – are central in social reproduction theory, a perspective also nested in the concepts of intersectionality, structural analysis, polarizing tendencies of capitalism, and necessary articulation between academia and activism (Bhattacharya 2017). Its deep roots within Marxist theory, however, that centers the oppressions propagated by the capitalist mode of production

through its process of accumulation and can only be surpassed through a revolutionary process, characterize social reproduction theory as one possible application of the RJ framework, but not necessarily the only one; as discussed in Section 4.1, there are several other development theories within economics that can contribute to the RJ research program.

So, feminist economics and the concepts of intersectionality, voice, and agency, together with the contributions about the reproductive rights agenda as understood by social reproduction theory, are the main elements of analysis that we identify as relevant for the building of the RJ research program within economics. Again, we stress that many other elements can (and should) be included depending on the application of the framework – the capabilities approach, for example, is relevant to feminist economics and frequently used for the analysis of well-being (Nussbaum 2003; Strenio 2020), and so is the concept of economic empowerment (Kabeer 1999) – but our goal is to map central concepts that serve as building blocks within economic literature for the analysis of our hardcore and softcore hypothesis, therefore justifying our parsimonious approach.

4.3 Contributions from stratification economics

Out of the three schools of thought highlighted here, stratification economics is the most recently developed one, and its origins are associated with a blind spot within economic literature that is central to the RJ research program: the study of the significant and enduring disparities in income and wealth by social groups (Darity 2005; Davis 2014). This school of thought understands that hierarchization is structural and intentional, designed to perpetuate power dynamics, and that individual's responses to stigmas associated with different social groups (defined by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc) dynamically reinforce stratification

(Darity 2005). Therefore, stratification economists highlight the need for a historical method, that systematically and empirically (instead of anecdotally) investigates the rise and maintenance of those hierarchies within societies (such as white supremacy), and sustains that only conscious policies to combat the privilege of certain groups can effectively decrease stratification.

Some of the core contributions of the stratification literature are the importance of colonization for the long-term poverty of a nation/region, the role of intergeneration wealth for the maintenance of group power, and the analysis of overwhelming evidence combating the idea that more capitalist development – and highly correlated variables, such as higher average educational attainment – decrease discrimination and social exclusion of certain groups. Therefore, the historical, intergenerational, power-centered analysis promoted by stratification economists directly dialogues with the RJ framework, and the argument about capitalist development possibly generating polarizing tendencies not only in terms of class, but also among social groups (in terms of their income, wealth, and power), is an essential contribution for the analysis of the softcore Hypothesis 1 (capitalist development produces colonization and polarization).

Further, stratification theory proposes a debate about the tensions between structural oppressions and individual's acknowledgements, ideas, and actions when faced with them. Instead of relying on the masculine figure of the rational choice model, according to which people are going to behave seeking their immediate perceived utility-maximization based on their ability to highlight belonging to socially advantaged groups, this school acknowledges the value of community, individual dignity, rights of peoples, fairness, and justice as core beliefs share by many individuals that, instead of personal costs, can be long-term unnegotiable goals

(Davis 2018). As discussed in Section 6, such tension is an important topic to be addressed in the RJ framework, and stratification economics provides good tools of analysis for that task.

5. Possible applications of the RJ framework: a historical example

In Section 3 we defined RJ as a Lakatosian research program, identifying its hardcore and softcore hypotheses. In Section 4, we nested that research program in the intersection between development, feminist, and stratification economics, and highlighted some elements of analysis within those schools of thought that seem particularly useful to constitute the building blocks of this framework. Now, we will apply that theoretical model to a historical example, supporting our claims that such research program can address economics' overreliance on WEIRD samples, improve our ability to detect analytical blind spots, prevent policy gaps, and increase the connection among academic feminist scholarship, social movements, and policy makers.

By the late 60s and early 70s, neo-Malthusian theories started to spread among economists and policy makers. Instead of just focusing on food supply – the original Malthusian proposition, according to which food grows in arithmetic projection while population grows in geometric projection – this new school of thought used more refined arguments to defend population checks, like evoking the “Entropy Law” or second Law of Thermodynamics to justify why nature resources were necessarily limited (Georgescu-Roegen 1971).¹² The popularity of those ideas incentivized the global north to finance policies of population control on the global south –

¹² The second law of thermodynamics claims that energy/matter necessarily moves from high entropy (organized and highly usable) to low entropy (chaotic and unusable), so the limited stocks of high entropy materials on Earth (like fossil fuels) would be the basis of our scarcity.

like the one-child-policy in China, established in 1979, and the “Emergency” period in India (1975-77), which sterilized millions of people (Wang *at al* 2016; Gupte 2017).¹³

In the United States, that meant the resurgence of the Eugenics movements (that lost popularity among scholars and politicians since the Nuremberg trials, in the 40s), especially with the creation of new pseudo-biological theories of species evolutionary development, like the r/K selection theory created in the late 60s (Mehler 1989).¹⁴ Not surprisingly, black leadership in the United States – from the Black Panthers to Malcon X – saw with great distrust the federal funding of birth control campaigns, announced by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 (Cooper 2023). For them, it seemed like a plan to exterminate the black race, especially after the new wave of coerced sterilizations of minority women: the *Jessin v. County of Shasta* case of 1969, which ruled that “voluntary sterilization is legal when informed consent has been given, that sterilization is an accepted method of family planning, and that sterilization may be a fundamental right requiring constitutional protection”, together with the US\$383 million dollar allocation to family planning (including to sterilization procedures) through the Family Planning Services and Population Research Act in 1970, resulted in women sterilizations increasing 350 percent from 1970 to 1975, with about one million women being sterilized per year, the vast

¹³ Gupte 2017 reports several ideological and financial incentives from the global North to help with the mass sterilization project, including a US\$66 million loan from the World Bank to the Indian government from 1972 to 1980 specifically for sterilization purposes.

¹⁴ The r/K selection theory claims that some species reproduce lots of offspring and invest little resources in each (r strategy), like cockroaches, while others reproduce less and invest more resources to see the few offspring thrive (K strategy), like humans. Doctors like J. Phillip Rushton applied the theory to humans, claiming that black races were biologically closer to r strategies, while whites and Asians (named yellow race in his classification) were biologically closer to K strategies (Mehler 1989).

majority being poor women of color – particularly Native American, but also black and brown women (Lawrence 2000; Torpy 2000).

This created a severe tension within liberation movements in the United States, particularly black-centered ones: in one side, there were educated men with well-founded theories about white supremacy, capitalism, and oppression, fighting the (very real) black race erasure project and even arguing, due to religious beliefs, that women are men's fields to produce his nation – in the words of Elijah Muhammad, mentor of Malcom X (Cooper 2023); on the other, there were women with very good reasons to welcome state-funded birth control, that were still building a black-centered notion of reproductive rights that simultaneously claims the right to deny childbearing while fighting state and market coercion, but were accused of supporting the Eugenics project when defending such policy (Nelson 2003; Roberts 2014; Cooper 2023).

The RJ research program provides several insights for the analysis of this historical episode. First, through the lens of development theory, we understand the polarizing tendencies of capitalism that culminated in the rise of anti-imperialism and social justice movements worldwide in the 60s and 70s, and the material conditions that contributed to the surge of neo-Malthusian and Eugenics policies as a response. Stratification economics provides us the theoretical tools to analyze the white supremacy ideology behind the policies pushed forward by those in power, and together with the feminist concept of intersectionality, also provides historical grounds for the understanding of why men dominated the rhetoric of social justice movements, but were still excluded from and directly confrontational towards the State power dynamics. Also important is the analysis of how individual women made decisions (if using the service or not) based on individual interests versus group dynamics, and how their perception about their ability to perform motherhood was impacted by socially constructed stereotypes of a

black woman at the time. Finally, the definition of reproductive rights as not only women's rights to carry a healthy pregnancy and raise children, but also the right to deny such reproductive choices (a human right minimized or even denied by some men leaderships), together with the concepts of voice and agency – the recognition that, even within social justice movements, women didn't have agency (since their ability to make decisions about their own reproductive destinies were targeted Eugenic support) nor voice (particularly collectively, since their manifestations about reproductive rights were not heard, listened to, and acted on) in this specific discussion – are central for the critical analysis of this period.

Those elements allow us to increase our knowledge about how public policies can impact communities with historical reasons to deny, confront, and distrust birth control programs (decrease our reliance on WEIRD samples). This example also explicit how the 1960-70s birth control public policy ignored black women in the United States, particularly the ones articulated in social justice movements, therefore not reaching one of the most vulnerable populations in terms of health care coverage in the country. It shows that if policy makers, researchers, and social movements were more integrated, it would be possible for this issue to be acknowledged and increase the likelihood of the promotion of coercion-free reproductive decisions as a human right.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper aimed to define Reproductive Justice as a research program in economics. Far from proposing a strict and static definition of what RJ is, our approach suggested the definition of one hardcore and four softcore hypotheses nested in a multidisciplinary overview of the RJ literature (both produced in academic and activist circles), then situated such research program in

the intersection between development, feminist, and stratification economics, and finally defined some useful and necessary elements of analysis within each of those schools of thought in a parsimonious fashion – we selected what we believe are the most useful concepts within economic thinking to support and investigate the hypotheses outlined in the research program, incentivizing the addition of other elements of analysis depending on the application of the framework.

The exercise of this paper is, therefore, a starting point for a discussion. Several questions remain answered, and a few tensions within the RJ framework seem particularly challenging and fruitful for future discussion within economics. We highlight two: the tension between the individual level stigmatization, associated with personal bias and discrimination, versus the social groups reparations agenda, associated with historical social exclusion (particularly in a world of relevant intersectionalities); and the definition of negative and positive human rights, with the associated discussion of how to promote public policy to address them.

As discussed in Section 4.3, we propose stratification economics as one of the building blocks of this research program precisely given its preoccupation and adequate analytical tools to deal with such complex contradictions. Maybe additional elements of analysis need to be integrated in the research program for that goal – like the club goods concept from the standard goods taxonomy and the capabilities approach (Davis 2022) – but the framework here proposed welcomes those additions. Further, we argue that such complex dynamics must be comprehended through a complex research program, that relies on global, historical, feminist, holistic methods, which is precisely what the RJ framework proposes.

The negative versus positive rights distinction – i.e. a government's obligation to refrain from unduly interfering with people's mental, physical, and spiritual autonomy, versus a

government's obligation to ensure that people can exercise their freedoms and enjoy the benefits of society, respectively – is particularly important for public policy and activism. If sexual autonomy and reproductive freedom are human rights, they must be equally promoted by elected officials and policy makers, but which ones are negative and which ones are positive rights, and how those definitions change through time? The recent overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, for example, can be interpreted as a transition of abortion rights from the later to the former in the United States. As another example, the right to have kids and parent them to the best of one's ability is so broad and involves so many elements that it is challenging to define limits. Should the provision of assisted technology for people who want to carry pregnancies be a positive right? What about people who biologically can't carry pregnancies regardless of technology access, should be a society's duty to somehow provide children for them? Again, we claim that the RJ framework is uniquely equipped to deal with such challenging debates. It is through the radical centering of intersectionality and the connection between activism and research that we can investigate those issues and trace public policy aware of the variety of needs and wants of diverse communities.

One of the most common criticism faced by the RJ framework is precisely its goal to acknowledge such a broad set of questions and social issues, which requires too much time and energy to understand and confront. We claim that this broad perspective is one of its most important strengths: RJ proposes that reproductive freedom is an essential part of the inalienable and untransferable human rights, but not everyone is oppressed the same way, or at the same time, or by the same forces; so reproductive justice is universally applicable because every human being has the same human rights, becoming a unified theory and practice dedicated to the study of the constant oppression and struggling against oppression of different human

experiences. This is why we believe that the RJ research program should be included in economics, and this is the relevance we identify in our contribution.

7. References

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