

## The Social Provisioning Approach (of Feminist Economics)

The social provisioning approach (SPA) of feminist economics is a heterodox framework that seeks to understand and analyse the ways in which households, communities, and societies produce and reproduce well-being and **sustenance**. It recognizes that the economy is **embedded** in society, and that economic processes cannot be separated from social processes. The SPA views economic actors – agents – not as isolated individuals but as interconnected with other people. It stands in opposition to the methodological individualism of **mainstream economics** – the standard theory.

At the **core** of this approach is the idea that the economy should serve the needs and interests of all people, not just a select few. It emphasizes the importance of unpaid care work, such as childcare, eldercare, and housework. Such activities are often invisible or undervalued in mainstream economics, as reflected in the old, gendered observation by [Paul Samuelson](#) that if a man marries his housekeeper [sic], then GDP will fall.

The SPA also stresses the need to recognize and value the work of marginalized groups such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, and low-income individuals. The work of such persons, and its undervaluation, plays a role in shaping economic **outcomes** and hence inequalities. This contrasts with mainstream economics which often assumes that workers and labour are essentially gender, race and class-neutral.

Most significantly, the social provisioning approach also highlights the need for public policies and practices that promote economic justice and social equity, including access to education, healthcare, and other essential services. The provision of these services should not be left just to market forces, but government and social actors must intervene to guarantee their availability to all citizens.

Overall, the social provisioning approach of feminist economics offers a more inclusive and **holistic** framework for understanding economic activity and well-being, which recognizes the importance of unpaid care work, social provisioning, and social justice.

A key founding text of the SPA is Marilyn Power's article entitled "[Social provisioning as a starting point for feminist economics](#)", *Feminist Economics*, 10(3), November 2004, 3-19. In this article, she gives five core methodological starting points for the SPA, which include: i) the role of unpaid work; ii) well-being; iii) **agency**; iv) **intersectionality** and v) ethical judgements.

For a [video presenting SPA](#), see this "Fireside Chat" presentation of the Routledge *Handbook of Feminist Economics*, 2021.

**A/ Give three ways in which the SPA differs from the from standard economic theory.**

**B/ Match the following words and definitions:**

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 1/ sustenance                   | a/results or consequences   |
| 2/ embedded                     | b/ the condition and ability of being in action, in operation   |
| 3/ methodological individualism | c/ concerned with the whole rather than analysis of parts   |
| 4/ core                         | d/ fixed firmly in a surrounding mass   |
| 5/ outcomes                     | e/ central part   |
| 6/ holistic                     | f/ a framework for understanding how multiple categories of identity (like gender, race and class) interact, creating complex systems of oppression and power |
| 7/ agency                       | g/ supporting of life or health; means of livelihood  |
| 8/ intersectionality            | h/ a framework that describes social phenomena as resulting from subjective personal motivations by individual actors   |

**Answers: A/** among other things, the SPA looks at: i) how the economy fits into (is embedded in) society; ii) it sees persons as connected to each other and not just as isolated individuals; iii) it has an opposing position to methodological individualism; iv) economic activity should benefit everyone; v) the contribution of unpaid work to the economy (e.g. looking after children and the elderly) should be recognised; vi) the role of marginalised people also needs to be taken into account; vii) public policies should provide key services to all members of society. **B/** 1g; 2d; 3h; 4e; 5a; 6c; 7b; 8f.