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ON KLASSEN'S LEADERSHIP IN ECONOMIC RESEARCH

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**1**

I came to know Stephan Klasen more than a quarter century ago. I saw him a few times when he took a course with me on “hunger in the modern world,” in which he did, as could be readily guessed, exceedingly well. But this was a large course with close to three hundred students. It was a couple of years later, in 1991, when I came to know him personally. I was one of the two examiners of his Senior Honours Thesis for his Bachelor's degree from Harvard University. In that hugely impressive thesis, Klasen applied what economists call a “computable general equilibrium model” to the analysis of agriculture in Bolivia. Two things were immediately clear to me as I read his splendid economic analysis. First, that I am dealing with a totally brilliant student, and second, that Stephan Klasen must be - absolutely must be - rescued from the arid ground of computable general equilibrium model-building.

The rescue was needed not because Klasen's reasoning was not powerful – it was in fact extremely robust, within its context. In fact, the need for rescue arose precisely because Klasen's extraordinary skills were manifest in the thesis. With a mind like that, I asked myself, why is this totally exceptional young economist following the disastrous practice common in the pedagogy of modern economics of

the brightest of students being persuaded to work on the remotest of subjects. Sure enough, general equilibrium of competitive markets is a great subject to study for an economist seeking clarity on how markets are supposed to work, but doing the exacting calculations for applying that theory to real-life problems – whether in Bolivia or elsewhere – is a gigantic leap into an imagined land. Klasen knew all that, but the exercise was still one which would bring him credit for addressing a complicated analytical and mathematical problem. Indeed, computable general equilibrium does demand technical skill, which Stephan Klasen had plentifully. I did not have the slightest hesitation in giving Stephan the highest mark for the quality of his work – Summa Cum Laude – that Harvard can bestow on a student. He also got the Allyn Young Prize for the best senior thesis that year among all the Harvard student. But why use such an extraordinary mind with exceptional skills to get some small answers to tiny questions using a model of market relations that strays far away from the actual markets, not to mention actual economic and social relations, that could be found anywhere - whether in Bolivia, or in Germany and the United States.

I much enjoyed the discussions that followed about what Stephan was going to do in his post-graduate research. After some discussions, Stephan chose “gender inequality and development strategies.” He was clearly excited to work on what we may understand as a “real problem,” and going beyond that, on what we may call a “world problem.” As we discussed his earlier days, there

were clear indications that he was inclined in the direction of taking a world view – including a real and relevantly accurate understanding of the world. Klasen’s choice of post-graduate research fitted in well with his school-day commitments at the United World College in Montezuma, New Mexico, where he had been admitted as the German representative among students from 70 different countries studying in that great international school.

Klasen’s post-graduate work on gender inequality and development proceeded with sure-footed mastery, and before long we had a new leader of gender-related economics in the world. He shunned take any short-cuts. His study of the present – of the challenges of high relative mortality rates of girls and of women, compared with what could be expected given the observed mortality rates of boys and men – had to be founded on painstaking historical research of what had happened in the past of the now rich countries, for example Germany a century or so ago. The subtitle of his Ph.D. thesis – “Lessons from the Past and Policy Issues for the future” – well reflects how he had to extend the epistemological basis of his work, along with using the emerging knowledge to draw policy conclusions of relevance today and tomorrow.

What began as doctoral work led Stephan to continue, expand and radically develop his research in the post-doctoral phase, and then eventually in his academic career as an immensely influential and successful Professor at very distinguished universities. Before long Stephan Klasen emerged as the strongest and most clear-headed

contributor to the subject of gender inequality and its policy implications. He influenced research in this whole area both through his writings, but also through his guidance on the research of others – in Munich and in Gottingen particularly, but also in a number of other places which he visited - from New York to Johannesburg, from Harvard to the University of Cambridge. Klasen's leadership in gender economics is now well established. This is a good moment to recognise and applaud Stephan's achievements on his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday!

## 2

I will not attempt to go through Stephan's publication list, but it is important to see with clarity the nature of his work. Many problems of gender inequality are easy to air as general ideas - as I had, for example, done with the idea of "missing women," reflecting how many more women we should expect to see in different countries of the world if women's mortality rates were not artificially elevated through neglect and gender discrimination (elevated well beyond what could be expected on the basis of biological features alone, in which women actually have a survival advantage). I had presented, in 1990, some illustrative numbers of plausible figures of missing women based on very aggregate contemporary statistics. But since these numbers keep being cited in different publications in the world, they came to be used well beyond their intended use, and for this reason – as well as for our basic scientific curiosity as well as policy guidance - we need to do more detailed assessments, based on a larger

set of more disaggregated information, and making use also of extensive historical studies. That is one of the large and multi-dimensional exercises that Klasen went on to complete effectively.

However, even as Stephan was working on missing women, the nature of the problem was changing - happily with declining mortality disadvantages of women in most regions of the world, but unhappily, with the emergence of a new source of women's disadvantage in the form of sex-selective abortion of female foetuses, drawing on the increased availability of new techniques of sex-determination of foetuses. This is the primary reason why despite a fall in the mortality disadvantages of women in China and India, the incidence of missing women – fed by selective abortion – has not radically declined. Klasen's work makes us understand how gender inequality can be sustained by many different factors.

### 3

Many different kinds of development problems and different manifestations of gender disparity have received Stephan Klasen's systematic attention, and we know a lot more about these problems as a result of what he has done. However, since new questions always arise – sometimes sensibly and at other times through hurried conclusions based on a puny set of under-examined data – Klasen as the most accomplished researcher in this area has also been playing the role of a referee, checking whether a new point is convincing or not, and deciding on what is foul and what is fair. Klasen may not

have foreseen that being a leader of a field makes it necessary to have the referee's whistle in his mouth all the time, but given his accomplishments, he is not really at liberty to throw the whistle away. Since it is clear that Stephan Klasen would have been in a leadership position in whatever area of research on which he chose to work, this supervisory role is not a special burden that has come to him only because he has been working on gender inequality (though it is possible that he would have been allowed more peace and solitude had he been applying computable general equilibrium models to one country after another, following Bolivia).

Missing women was Stephan's point of entry into gender economics and into the study of human deprivation in general. He has been able to enhance our understanding of a cluster of very different development problems, by making major contributions to the analysis of - to choose some examples as illustrations - the causation of high fertility and the forces that lead to rapid fertility decline, the appreciation of what works and what does not among the proposed ways of poverty removal, to the investigation of the nature and reach of public health services as well as of the consequences of their neglect, and the critical evaluation of the newly fashionable "capability approach" for investigating gender inequality and poverty. Klasen's students and colleagues have pursued many further problems, influenced by his originality and guided by his advice, but also inspired by Klasen's firm commitment to work for deprived people across the world.

## 4

I see my task here today as more of initiating a discussion, rather than giving a long uninterrupted lecture. So I must not go on and on, and look forward instead to discussion. However, I will take the liberty, before ending, of pointing to a couple of very important problems to which Stephan is rightly turning his attention at this time.

The first is the linkage of women's position in society with their ability to participate in valued and remunerative employment. The fact, for example, that there has been a remarkable stagnation of female labour force participation in urban India, which Klasen has been studying with his collaborators, is extremely important for understanding the continuation of sharp gender inequality in India. The role of employment can not only be transformative (for example, female employment gives women a much more effective voice in the direction of gender equity), it also reflects social and cultural forces that encourage or discourage female employment, especially as people's incomes rise. These attitudinal issues are both very important and have been peculiarly neglected in the development literature.

The second point relates to the first, and concerns the relevance of people's – women's and men's – understanding of the nature of the world, including social institutions and societal barriers. In one of his recent papers, Klasen refers to the idea of "false consciousness" that Karl Marx had talked about. That concept belongs to the study of

what Marx called “objective illusion.” An illusion can be based on very objective observation from a certain confined position, but that positional objectivity does not indicate that the illusion is the only way of analysing a real phenomenon. For example, it is not defective vision that makes people on earth see the sun and the moon to be roughly of the same size – indeed anyone with a good vision on earth will see the moon and the sun to be similar in size. But this is only a position-related observation, without indicating that the sun and the moon really have the same volume, or identical mass.

Gender discrimination survives on the basis of a set of objective illusions, which among the reasons why it is so difficult to eliminate. It is not hard to form the view, given the way the society is currently organized in different parts of the world, that men have the ability to achieve more in life than do women. Observed men can do more original work, accomplish greater breakthroughs, and typically earn much more than women. It is not hard to understand why parents – including mothers as well - tend to believe, in many countries, that women are intrinsically less capable – even less worthy - than men. But of course that conclusion is a total mistake and reflects only the kind of experiences of societies that many people actually have (or see), overlooking the possibilities of social organization that stretch well beyond those limited experiences. I was personally spared this perceptual bias because at the age of 18 when I was undergoing radiation therapy for oral cancer in Calcutta, the name that was most strongly present in my clinical concerns was that of Marie Curie (as it



happens, her daughter Irene Jolio-Curie, had also inaugurated the cancer hospital in Calcutta in which I was one of the first radio-therapy patients).

It is important to understand how the prevailing social attitudes can be transformed with scientific education, informed political discussion and probing literary and social analyses related to the roles of men and women (just as we move from the positionally objective but mistaken view that the sun and the moon are of the same size to a better comprehension of their relative sizes on the basis of scientific information and data, and fuller epistemic engagement, that go beyond mere appearances). One of the lessons from Stephan Klasen's continuing accomplishments in several different fields is to appreciate, first, the importance of knowledge and understanding in our critical thoughts, and second, the role of our critical thoughts in altering the world as we know it.

I take the liberty of ending my presentation on a self-centred note. I have been extremely fortunate in many different ways from my childhood onwards in being helped by circumstances, but nothing has given me as much satisfaction as having totally outstanding students with whom I have had to privilege to work. Stephan Klasen cannot be surpassed in his success in generating amazement and joy. To see a person like Klasen alter the world of understanding and initiate big social changes is totally wonderful. Let me stop on that happy note, as we celebrate Stephan Klasen's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.