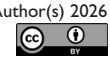
Article

The Sociological Review

Feminist expertise and the political work of building alternative futures

The Sociological Review
1–20



DOI: 10.1177/00380261261421329
journals.sagepub.com/home/sor

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Abstract

Sociological discussions on alternative futures have proliferated in recent years, yet the role of professional labour and expertise in building transformative social change remains underexplored. This article provides an original contribution by introducing the concept of transformative expertise, enabling a new framework that bridges the sociology of futures with feminist debates on expertise. Drawing on unique empirical data from interviews with feminist professionals engaged in networks that advocate alternative economic thinking and policies, we investigate how specialised knowledge is mobilised to imagine and build alternative, socially just futures. We identify three interrelated dimensions of transformative expertise: (1) exposing the harms of hegemonic future imaginaries; (2) carving out paths to desired futures; (3) sustaining potentialities for socially just futures. Our findings reveal that managing temporalities and developing a temporal orientation are pivotal in the struggle for alternative futures based on the identified potentialities for change. By illuminating the link between the politics of the future and the politics of knowledge, we advance theoretical and practical insights into how feminist expertise can shape alternative, utopian imaginaries and prefigurative politics.

Keywords

expertise, feminist knowledge, prefigurative politics, social change, sociology of futures, transformative politics, utopias

Introduction

The role of knowledge production in building alternative futures has become an urgent concern in contemporary global society. Overlapping emergencies, such as existential planetary threats, rising inequality and conflict, and the perennial crises of democracy

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and social reproduction, underscore the need to update the global economy and society towards one that would support the wellbeing of all while operating within planetary boundaries (Dixson-Declève et al., 2022; Fraser, 2022). While social movements and scholars from different disciplines have cultivated ecological and egalitarian imaginaries through knowledge production (Cooper et al., 2020; Monticelli, 2024), the active work of professional labour and counterhegemonic expertise in imagining and building alternative futures remains critically underexamined. In this article, we address this gap by introducing *transformative expertise*, enabling a novel framework that connects specialised knowledge with future-making practices. Through this framework, we highlight how knowledge production is mobilised to make socially just futures thinkable and actionable.

We focus on feminist knowledge, defined as a perspective that recognises gendered and intersectional inequality as structural and systemic and seeks transformative change towards social justice (Bustelo et al., 2016, p. 3; Cullen et al., 2019, p. 766; Ylöstalo, 2020). Theoretically, we bring together two debates that have hitherto been largely disconnected: sociological excavations into futures and feminist theorising on specialised expertise. This synthesis enables us to show not only how alternative futures are imagined but also how expertise operates politically – through temporal engagements, networked practices and institutional contestation – to make those futures tangible in the present. By integrating these discussions, we provide three original contributions.

First, we introduce the concept of transformative expertise as a way of conceptualising the connections between specialised knowledge and progressive projects of building alternative futures. This article identifies three interrelated dimensions of transformative expertise: (1) exposing the hidden harms of hegemonic future imaginaries; (2) carving out paths to desired alternative futures; and (3) sustaining potentialities for socially just futures. Second, we contribute to the sociology of futures by showing how transformative expertise is fundamentally temporal work shaped by engagements with the past, the present and the future. This work includes navigating uncertainty, becoming attuned to rhythms of change and recognising openings for transformation. In these efforts, the experts investigated in this study engaged in utopian imaginaries and prefigurative practices, bringing desired futures into the present by breaking them down into smaller, actionable steps. We further highlight the importance of intergenerational, long-term future-building as a core aspect of transformative expertise. Third, we contribute to feminist debates on expertise and political processes by illuminating both the limits and possibilities of specialised counterhegemonic knowledge in developing interventions that advance more socially just futures.

Our analysis draws on unique interviews with a little-explored group: feminist professionals who mobilise specialised macroeconomic knowledge to advance social change. The participants included economists, political economists and other professionals whose work aims to reshape economic thinking and policy. These experts contest dominant assumptions within economics, developing feminist analyses, mobilising against structural adjustment and austerity policies in both the Global South and the Global North, and proposing alternative measures of economic performance. Through professional and activist practice, they have contested dominant power structures and created space for counterhegemonic alternatives, resulting in numerous policy initiatives. Interrogating the

participants' practices of knowledge production and diffusion, we ask the following questions: First, how is feminist specialised knowledge mobilised to build alternative, more equitable and socially just futures? Second, what kinds of political work are used to enact these imaginaries in social and political practice? By answering these questions, we respond to the need to theorise the relationship between future visions and the practices that are used to gain traction for such visions (see Oomen et al., 2022).

This article is organised as follows. We first present our theoretical framework that bridges the sociology of futures with feminist theorising on expertise. We then discuss the materials and methodology underpinning our analysis. The core of this article unfolds over three sections, each examining one dimension of transformative expertise. We conclude by assessing the implications of transformative expertise for the politics of the future and the politics of knowledge, highlighting how feminist specialised knowledge can expand the repertoire of socially just interventions.

Future-making and feminist expertise

Over the past 15 years, debates within the sociology of futures have expanded significantly. Social scientists have theorised the future, developed imaginative methods for exploring alternative futures, and examined how these imaginaries relate to social change (Mische, 2014; see also Coleman & Tutton, 2017; Halford & Southerton, 2023; Salmenniemi et al., 2025; Suckert, 2022). Amid growing concerns about austerity and the climate emergency, calls to cultivate hopeful futures have intensified – even as a pervasive sense of futurelessness deepens (Coleman & Tutton, 2017; Tutton, 2023). The sociology of futures that we draw on treats the future as an analytical category, challenging the notion that time is a neutral, linear progression from the past to the present to the future (Coleman & Tutton, 2017, p. 444).

This analytical approach shapes our article in two key ways. First, we reject dominant, normative visions of the future as given, instead engaging with alternative imaginaries (Coleman, 2017; Tutton, 2023, p. 439). Since the future is not singular but plural, the realisation of particular imaginaries involves contestation over which visions should be prioritised. These struggles are performative, influencing which futures are seen as desirable, legitimate and credible. As noted by Tutton (2017, p. 483), 'the future is real in so far as social actors produce representations of the future which have an effect on others' actions in the present'. While no imaginary is fully realised, those that are prioritised can powerfully shape the future by guiding present decisions and actions, making some outcomes more likely than others (Halford & Southerton, 2023, p. 273).

Second, these debates have explored interactions between different temporalities – particularly the dynamic relationship between the past, the present and the future. How the future is imagined, and which futures are deemed desirable or avoidable, shapes the possibilities for action in the present (Coleman, 2017). These future-oriented perceptions are also revealing of contemporary societies, reflecting people's present hopes, fears and projections (Suckert, 2022, p. 394). The sociology of futures challenges linear conceptions of time, offering tools to rethink and even reconfigure the relationships between the past, the present and the future (Anderson, 2017; Perheentupa & Porkola, 2024). Alongside this framework, we draw on prior scholarship on utopias and

prefigurative politics. Recent work has approached utopia not as a fixed blueprint but as a method of generating counterimages that critique the present and express a desire for better ways of being (Eskelinen & Lakkala, 2025; Levitas, 2013). As for prefigurative practices, they emphasise living the desired future in the *here and now*, focusing on the creation of alternatives rather than solely critiquing existing conditions (Maeckelbergh, 2011; Yates, 2015).

Our analysis examines how socio-epistemic struggles over what counts as legitimate knowledge are deeply entangled with the politics of the future – specifically, 'the social practices that allow particular notions about the future to become performative' (Oomen et al., 2022, p. 253). This is crucial in societies marked by structural inequalities, including the uneven distribution of epistemic authority. Such dynamics are evident in economic theory: mainstream economics shapes policy, while feminist perspectives are marginalised as less objective (Elomäki et al., 2019; Lamberg, 2025). Yet, feminist critiques have highlighted significant blind spots in hegemonic economics. By prioritising market-based exchange and production, mainstream theory overlooks the role of gendered social reproduction in sustaining economies (Bakker, 2007). It also neglects how gendered, racialised and classed structures of exploitation underpin how our economies function – issues central to feminist economic thinking (Cantillon et al., 2023; Himmelweit, 2018).

To examine how feminist macroeconomic knowledge shapes alternative futures, we draw on feminist debates on expertise and knowledge production in challenging intersecting oppressions and advancing social justice. Scholarship in this area has interrogated the potential for feminist agendas within neoliberal governance, which privileges technocratic, ostensibly neutral expertise – particularly quantitative data and orthodox economic frameworks (e.g. Bustelo et al., 2016; Cavaghan & Kulawik, 2020; Cullen et al., 2019; Elomäki et al., 2019; Kunz & Prügl, 2019; Lamberg et al., 2023; Ylöstalo et al., 2024). This literature has shown how feminist perspectives are often sidelined in technocratic cultures, dismissed as ideological or lacking objectivity. Meanwhile, evidence-based policymaking pressures feminist actors to frame claims in depoliticised, institutionally acceptable terms, risking dilution or co-optation. Some have argued that technical gender expertise may even reinforce neoliberal policies that undermine feminist aims (Fraser, 2009).

In sum, previous scholarship has examined the challenges posed by technocratic and neoliberal governance to the exercise of feminist power (Prügl, 2016), offering nuanced accounts of the tensions between instrumental, specialised knowledge and the transformative aims of feminist politics (Ferguson, 2018). Such research has explored how feminist expertise can be strategically mobilised to influence institutions and navigate these contradictions. For example, technical expertise can at once depoliticise and repoliticise policymaking processes (Ylöstalo, 2020): while reliance on economised, quantitative knowledge may reduce feminist struggles to technocratic metrics, its strategic use can politicise decision-making by exposing the political nature of budgeting and the unequal impacts of austerity on women and marginalised groups.

By examining the transformative potential of feminist knowledge within dominant institutions, we contribute to discussions that have interrogated the ambivalent politics of feminist knowledge transfer beyond neoliberal frameworks and challenged the binary

between 'pure' and co-opted feminist knowledge (Cullen et al., 2019, p. 767). We bridge these discussions with the sociology of futures to examine the practices of a relatively under-researched group: feminists with macroeconomic expertise. In the current polycrisis of capitalism – spanning but not limited to care, climate and inequality – these questions gain renewed urgency. Drawing on Newman's (2012, 2020) conceptualisation of feminist knowledge production as imaginative political work capable of performing alternative worlds, we explore how these actors engage in a praxis of building alternative futures. Seen through this framework, feminist knowledge practices emerge as experimental, inventive and embodied, oriented towards cultivating the political viability of feminist futures and encouraging their wider adoption.

Materials and methods

This article is based on 15 qualitative interviews conducted by the first author between 2021 and 2023. The interviews, part of a broader project on feminist knowledge and political processes in economic policy, focused on professionals using expertise to promote feminist alternatives to dominant economic thinking. We identified the participants by mapping feminist expert networks that promoted transformative economic and social policy, and we used snowball sampling to ask for suggestions regarding the relevant participants. Email invitations were used to recruit the participants. Most of those invited promptly agreed to participate, with only a few declining the invitation.

Most participants worked in academia, and these participants were trained as economists, political economists or other social scientists. Others drew on insights into feminist economics or political economy in their work as policy consultants or experts in international and national organisations. The participants belonged to various age cohorts: the oldest participant entered feminist politics in the 1960s and early 1970s, and the youngest in the 2000s. Despite their varied backgrounds, all participants were situated in the Global North at the time of the interviews. Most participants were based in Anglo-American countries, and some were located in Central European and Nordic countries. Throughout their careers, they had integrated activism with professional work, striving to make feminist knowledge relevant to the social movements and political causes that they supported. They combined grassroots campaigning with knowledge production and engaged with policymakers to advance progressive economic, social and development agendas.

The participants did not share a single theoretical stance or a single idea of feminist politics, and their feminist politics entangled with different political causes, including ecology, human rights and development, yet they were united in their use of expertise to contest existing structural formations of power and to envision more socially just alternatives. By drawing on specialised knowledge to advocate change, the participants may be seen as constituting an epistemic community – a group of experts influencing policy through technical expertise (see Haas, 1992). However, as Hoskyns and Rai (2007, pp. 307–308) have argued, such communities are often framed as apolitical and detached. By contrast, feminists with macroeconomic expertise may more aptly be described as feminist networks, reflecting their explicitly political and transformative aims of challenging economic inequalities.

The study involved semi-structured expert interviews, each lasting approximately one hour. The interviews explored how the participants navigated their roles as professionals advocating social change and reflected on the interplay between specialised knowledge, feminist politics and social transformation. An open-ended interview style allowed the participants to steer the conversations in new directions. Prior to each interview, the participants were informed of this study's objectives and ethical principles, and they were asked to sign a consent form. In accordance with the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity guidelines, this study did not require institutional ethical review because its design involved no elements necessitating such review under Finnish standards. Such elements include deviation from informed consent, physical intervention, inclusion of minors without parental consent, exposure to strong stimuli, risk of mental harm or threats to safety.

Before the analysis, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analysis unfolded in two stages. First, we closely read the transcripts. Through initial coding and discussion, we found that imagining and enacting alternative futures was central to how participants linked knowledge production with transformative change; we then applied a combination of inductive and deductive coding to these descriptions. In the second stage, we analysed the material using the theoretical lenses outlined earlier. This revealed that the feminist experts' practices of enacting alternative future imaginaries comprised three interrelated dimensions which we analyse in detail in the following sections.

We used numeral signifiers to differentiate the participants in our analysis. While their contributions were shaped by specific organisational, political and national contexts, we chose not to disclose these details to safeguard anonymity. This decision resulted in a less thick description than we would have liked, but anonymity was a key priority. One participant, Professor Shirin M. Rai, who was interviewed late in this study, told us that she would not mind being recognised, so we used her real name in attributing her quotations. In retrospect, we could have more carefully considered the ethics and politics of naming (Guenther, 2009) before embarking on the data collection, perhaps by offering all participants the option of being named in publications.

In the analysis that follows, we examine how the interviewed experts engaged in politics of the future, seeking to advocate alternative future imaginaries within structurally unequal societies and their institutions.

Exposing the harms of hegemonic future imaginaries

This section explores the first dimension of transformative expertise: the knowledge-based praxis of making space for alternative futures by exposing the harms of hegemonic future imaginaries. Such efforts were especially evident in the experts' opposition to austerity measures. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, austerity policies have become a common strategy among governments and international financial institutions, with the aims of reducing public debt and boosting national competitiveness. Feminist scholarship has shown that these policies are based on gender-blind economic theories that overlook the critical role of social reproduction in sustaining economies. As public services are cut, unpaid household labour – primarily performed by women – rises to fill the gap (Bakker, 2023; Pearson & Elson, 2015). Minority women are particularly impacted

by the shrinking welfare state (Emejulu & Bassel, 2015). Austerity-driven approaches to public debt can be seen as stripping people of their futures (see Coleman, 2016; Tutton, 2023) because of their tendency to increase public suffering and deepen gendered, racial and class inequalities.

Our participants drew on feminist forms of knowing in ways that echoed these findings. One feminist economist pointed out how gender-blind ways of dealing with public debt crises contribute to perpetuating gendered exploitation by increasing the burdens on women and girls, who structurally bear most of the responsibility for unpaid care and social reproductive work:

> If you don't recognise unpaid labour, you also don't realise governments and employers can put a lot of additional burden on unpaid labour, simply because it will be continued to be performed and get done. So, it becomes a means of exploitation of those who engage in unpaid labour – that's predominantly women and girls. (Interview 1)

This quotation highlights how austerity policies obscure the economic value of household work and women's labour, while reflecting how feminists challenge dominant economic thinking for ignoring the role of social reproduction – and the associated intersecting structures of oppression – in sustaining economies.

Additionally, the experts suggested how the hegemony of austerity policies not only harms gender equality but may also weaken economies over time. As one political economist stated, cuts to social spending may save money in the short term, but they yield higher long-term future costs: 'So if you cut back on healthcare, childcare, in the future, it can lead to less capabilities; it can have health effects, and that adds costs to the system' (Interview 2). Research has suggested that failing to invest in social infrastructure, including childcare, health and social support, can lead to much higher long-term public costs, as neglecting these areas may result in increased spending on criminal justice, healthcare and welfare (Bakker, 2023, p. 56). Depicting alarming futures, these feminist insights serve as cautionary warnings about the present and future dangers of neglecting life-sustaining activities and gender relations in economic thought. By revealing how austerity disregards social reproduction and the invisible labour of households – especially that of women and marginalised groups – the experts exposed the blind spots of the mainstream macroeconomic theory that informs policy. Moreover, they aimed to curb the growing sense of futurelessness connected to austerity policies and the climate emergency (Coleman & Tutton, 2017; Tutton, 2023).

The participants resisted these bleak futures through *collective anticipation* – actions aimed at preventing or reshaping expected events that threaten present life (Bryant & Knight, 2019, pp. 42–43). This was primarily carried out by 'contribut[ing] to gendered analysis around public sector spending decisions' (Interview 3). The researchers interviewed had produced critical evaluations of the uneven intersectional impacts of government budget decisions, including tax changes and cuts to public expenditure, social services and welfare. One economist described how technical analysis of how budget changes impact different groups can be a useful way of advocating for social justice, as it shows how the most marginalised are often hit the hardest. Such technical analysis, she suggested, is particularly powerful when paired with lived testimonies of 'groups of

people who are being adversely affected', as journalists and parliamentarians are likely to respond well to 'good numbers and good stories' (Interview 4). However, the expert noted how governments often contest technical evidence that contradicts their goals or ideologies: '[I]t's always, of course, open to debate, I mean, the government, well, if it doesn't like the results of this, will always challenge some of the way that you've done the analysis.'

The normalisation of harm also emerged as a significant challenge, as noted by another economist. Since the financial crisis, she had been engaged in producing critical evaluations of austerity's differential impacts, observing a growing public desensitisation over time:

> [W]hen it initially came out [that men and women are differently impacted], it was very shocking. It got all the headlines in the paper, and people were quite shocked by it. But gradually, as it happened every year, people just got used to it, and it was sort of accepted that spending cuts will hit women more than men. (Interview 5)

Such normalisation reflects the gradual acceptance of austerity as a new common sense to which *there is no alternative* (Fisher & Davies, 2009). This idea makes it harder to generate a sense of emergency, that is, an affective state that can help advocate alternative futures by invoking urgency and exceptionality, while maintaining the hope that action can still make a difference (Anderson, 2017, p. 465). Within this context, the experts were constantly on the lookout for arguments and evidence that could be utilised to mobilise against cuts and to open up spaces for alternative thinking. These efforts involved considerations of how to establish credibility for feminist knowledge claims in economic discourse (see Elomäki et al., 2019; Lamberg, 2025).

Thus, another key practice of collective anticipation was what one expert called 'making macroeconomics about gender' (Interview 6), adding that 'obviously care is the way into that'. Working in a multilateral organisation, she emphasised the importance of arguing that investments in social infrastructure are economically sound and essential to long-term macroeconomic stability. Talking about her organisation's advocacy, she stated as follows:

> We selectively use instrumental arguments, . . . like if it . . . wasn't for the care economy, if it wasn't for women's unpaid care work, the whole economy would grind to halt. We wouldn't have the next generation of workers and so on. And I'm sure that that's an instrumental argument that many feminists would find kind of distasteful.

One political economist similarly expressed that it is crucial for civil society groups and journalists to make clear that cuts to social infrastructure are 'not a just and actually not an efficient response to the future' (Interview 2), including through arguments emphasising the long-term costs: 'you think you are saving, and in fact you are not, because this is what happens down the road'.

Crucial to contesting hegemonic imaginaries was the experts' abilities to navigate diverse sites and tactics, adapting interventions to where political mobilisation seemed most possible. As one economist suggested, energy is sometimes, especially in the

context of austerity, diverted from pushing forward to defending what's under threat: 'When confronted with a government definitely not progressive, [the work is about] trying to challenge them and to provide lots of evidence about what was wrong with their policies' (Interview 4). Yet, she also mentioned that shifts in political power can open new windows of opportunity:

> I've also seen that the political context can change quite rapidly. You can feel very despairing, not making any headway; things are going worse rather than better. But then if there is a political change, and you get a more progressive government coming to power, then there's much more opening for talking about gender-responsive economic policy . . . and governments are willing to implement something. . . . So I always say don't, completely, despair; keep on producing your evidence, keep on producing useful tools. . . . Then there might be opportunities that come up when you have political change.

This quotation captures the complex, often uneven rhythms of political change – where progress can feel agonisingly slow, even futile, yet it remains vital for sustaining ideas until shifts in power create new openings. The experts described a dynamic interplay between resisting setbacks and envisioning alternatives by 'writing new political scripts or performing new worlds' (Newman, 2012, p. 179). Their narratives evoked a waltz-like rhythm of change, encapsulated in phrases such as 'two steps forward, one step back' (Interview 2), shaped by fluctuating political climates, and unfolding in pulses rather than linear trajectories. The feminists' political work thus required temporal attunement to such rhythms, including through their abilities to recognise shifts in the political context and coordinate action accordingly. Such attunement was crucial in keeping alternative futures alive amid the prolonged *now* of austerity politics.

Carving out paths to desired futures

In this section, we examine the second dimension of transformative expertise: the creation of pathways towards desired alternative futures. For the experts, this involved reimagining political work through both utopian envisioning of alternative economic systems and prefigurative practices – that is, living out the values and structures of these futures in the present as if they were real (Swain, 2019; Yates, 2015). The feminist experts highlighted the need 'to move towards a more equal economy' and to 'create a more caring economy' (Interview 7) that would be socially just and globally solidaristic. As one economist emphasised, it is not enough to merely critique policies that deepen inequality; it is equally important to 'fashion a notion of what we would like to see' (Interview 5). This highlighted how transformative expertise is prefigurative in the sense of being creative rather than reactive (see Maeckelbergh, 2011) in its efforts to enact future alternatives.

The work of carving out routes to alternative desired futures was carried out, for example, by concretely advocating for feminist alternative economic visions. In the interviews, the participants mentioned action plans such as the Feminist Plan for Sustainability and Justice (UN Women, 2021), Purple Pact: A Feminist Approach to the Economy (European Women's Lobby, 2019) and Creating a Caring Economy (Women's Budget Group, 2020). While these visions differ in content and scope, they share

a radical reimagining of the economy – one that places care at its core and prioritises wellbeing and equality. Their transformative potential lies in recentring social reproduction as a productive activity underpinning all economic activities. They translate abstract goals into practical roadmaps, proposing actionable steps that governments can take now to move towards a more socially just, feminist economy. This includes the economic recognition and monitoring of unpaid care work and the integration of social reproduction into economic frameworks – along with various tax reforms and other concrete policy proposals (see Women's Budget Group, 2020). Drawing on feminist alternative economic paradigms, the experts reconceptualised the economy as fundamentally oriented towards human and ecological wellbeing, displacing profit, competition and utility maximisation as its primary objectives.

Such reimaginations echoed with feminist economics, which has emphasised shifting the focus away from the logic of rational choice and market individualism to support the broader goals of social provisioning and human wellbeing (see Himmelweit, 2018). This perspective stands in stark contrast to the prevailing economic policymaking, which continues to prioritise monetary growth. As one economist emphasised, the economy should not centre on narrowly defined productivity; instead, it should focus on meeting human needs while working within planetary boundaries. She criticised how decision-makers are still mostly concerned with growth in terms of gross domestic product (GDP):

> You couldn't run the Ministry of Finance without knowing what was happening to GDP, but that's very different from saying that your overarching objective should be to maximise GDP growth, because clearly now there are lots of other things that have to be brought into the picture. (Interview 4)

In working their way towards a more caring and equal economic system, many experts shared the goal of 'dethron[ing] gross domestic product' (Interview 8) from its position as the centrepiece of economic policy. In order to dethrone it, the experts discussed alternative metrics to GDP, such as the genuine progress indicator (GPI), which measures unpaid work, including domestic care work, and acknowledges environmental impacts.

Challenging the exclusion of unpaid care and social reproductive work from the definition of productive activities was seen as a crucial step in envisioning a caring economy and reshaping policies beyond conventional priorities. To promote this aim, feminist economists have developed techniques such as time-use surveys and so-called household satellite accounts that reveal how gender-segregated unpaid work contributes to GDP (see Rai, 2024, pp. 64–68). One economist spoke as follows regarding the struggles to include unpaid social reproduction within the GDP production boundary:

> Once the time-use data was available, it was pretty straightforward to construct a kind of a lower-bound estimate of the value of unpaid work. And that, in turn, challenged the official measures of GDP. I mean, there was resistance all along the way. Nobody has been willing to actually change the national income accounting system, but most countries . . . have established what they call [household] satellite accounts. . . . So, they're kind of saying, well, if you want to consider unpaid work, we provide an estimate over here that you can use and you can be satisfied with and stop bothering us. . . . But just the fact that satellite accounts are being published, I think, lends legitimacy to the criticism of the conventional measures of GDP. (Interview 8)

Although measuring unpaid work does not, in itself, lead to its recognition as a productive economic activity, this was perceived as a crucial step in dethroning GDP. One step in this process is to show the monetary value of unpaid work, thus translating the demand for recognition of unpaid work into language that governments can understand (Hoskyns & Rai, 2007, p. 302). Importantly, such processes of translation do not merely involve acts of making certain feminist arguments palatable to policymakers. Rather, translation provides creative resources for redescribing issues in such a way that they can be 'levered into existing policy programmes or resource streams' (Newman, 2012, pp. 72–73).

Such work of identifying steps reveals how transformative expertise reconsiders the relationship between the past, the present and the future – an aspect characteristic of temporal utopianism and prefigurative projects that challenge linear and ordinary conceptions of time (Anderson, 2017; Firth & Robinson, 2014; Habersang, 2022). Efforts to institutionalise alternative futures often involved looking back from the envisioned future to the present, pinpointing actions needed in the *here and now.* Simultaneously, they entailed recognising past moments that prefigured the present. For instance, the above-quoted economist noted that interest in measuring unpaid work has 'been in the background for a long time' (Interview 8), adding that 'Norway in the 1930s published estimates of national income that included . . . the value of household services; then they looked around, and they saw that other bigger, richer countries weren't doing that'. Thus, the experts' work of imagining feminist futures could involve examining the archives and bringing their insights into the present and the future (Weeks, 2021).

The steps towards desired futures also involved 'provid[ing] alternative framings, alternative discourse', as one academic put it (Interview 3). Redefining 'investment' was an often-mentioned practice through which feminist economic thinking aimed to bring future possibilities into present debates, thus disrupting the dominant narratives by showing alternative viable pathways. One academic put it as follows:

> Care was never conceived as [an investment]; it was seen as a cost, consumption, like most public services are seen as something that needs to be paid for by taxation, and if not, there needs to be efficiency gains et cetera. But the biggest effort from us was to change the narrative around care and health and education, seen as social infrastructure, as the structure without which societies cannot function, that was always kind of recognised . . . and COVID-19 showed how important those services were. (Interview 7)

This insight can be linked back to feminist economics (see Himmelweit, 2018, p. 72), which adopts broader definitions of investment and infrastructure. Investment refers to expenditures made to secure future benefits, which are not limited to monetary returns but encompass overall wellbeing. Thus, spending on education, childcare and healthcare is seen as investment because of its long-term societal benefits: a better-educated, healthier population and greater gender equality. Concomitantly, services such as education, healthcare and care work are reframed as crucial social infrastructure that sustains and improves societies. We consider that such conceptual reframings can be perceived as a way of prefiguring meanings, which refers to how concepts can be reimagined, stretched and cut in novel, hopeful ways (see Cooper, 2020a, 2020b).

The experts' conceptual reimaginings were not limited to the transformation of economic theory; these efforts also involved attempts to enact alternative, hopeful meanings in order to transform social and political practice in general and economic policymaking in particular. In applying such understandings to practice, the experts proposed concrete policy alternatives, showing how investments in the care economy – framed as essential social infrastructure – can both promote social justice and be economically sound. Some participants cited Plan F – a feminist economic recovery plan by economists Ruth Pearson and Diane Elson – as an example of how feminist research can inform better policy. This plan (Pearson & Elson, 2015) advocates public investment in social infrastructure, arguing that it supports wellbeing and delivers economic returns in the short, medium and long terms. It also outlines practical steps for financing these investments. Within the context of the economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants sought to similarly argue for the economic importance of investing in social infrastructure. They cited research suggesting that investing in social infrastructure yields higher economic and social returns than investing in physical infrastructure. Because these sectors are more labour-intensive than sectors such as construction, they also create more jobs – especially for women – and boost GDP growth by increasing the resources available for spending.

Although such arguments may seem like common sense, framing social spending as *investment* challenges conventional economics, which often treats it as a cost rather than a long-term gain. The work of paving the way to desired alternative futures thus required the shifting of narratives and perceptions. As suggested by political economist Shirin M. Rai, one of our interviewees, such work is profoundly important because '[c]oncepts have the power to change and challenge dominant ideas'.

Sustaining transformative potentialities

In the previous sections, we have interrogated how the feminist experts sought to imagine more socially just futures and to push for the actualisation of 'not-yets' (see Bryant & Knight, 2019, p. 135). Yet, many of these feminist imaginaries remain unrealised, highlighting the gap between potential and actual change. The interviews revealed recurring accounts of faded hopes. For example, the experts voiced disappointment that while the COVID-19 crisis highlighted society's dependence on care, it did not yield lasting policy shifts. This underscores how despite the deep knowledge and sustained advocacy of feminist macroeconomic networks, their theoretical contributions remain marginalised in mainstream discourse and policymaking, often overshadowed by other technical and quantifiable forms of knowledge (Hoskyns & Rai, 2007, p. 308; see also Elomäki et al., 2019; Lamberg, 2025; Ylöstalo et al., 2024). In this final analytical section, we interrogate how despite the obstacles, feminist experts work collectively to keep open the possibility of more just futures. Thus, sustaining potentialities through long-term collective organising is the third key dimension of transformative expertise.

This political work was exemplified in the enduring knowledge production among the feminist experts. Feminist economic knowledge was produced within cramped institutional spaces characterised by the continual marginalisation and dismissal of feminist

perspectives. One economist (Interview 10) recalled how feminist economics was met with 'utter silence' in mainstream economics in the 1990s, a response that still persists. In turn, the experts had created pockets of resistance (Newman, 2012) through activities such as founding academic journals, organising conferences and forming international networks in which feminist knowledge about the economy could be cultivated and political imaginaries nourished. Crucially, the everyday labour and relationships that contribute to 'maintaining the fabric of collective action' (Yates, 2021, p. 1045), such as raising funds, maintaining mailing lists, and organising events, were key to the collective project of feminist knowledge production. For instance, the economists emphasised the role of the International Association of Feminist Economics, established in the 1990s, in fostering global idea exchange and intellectual collaboration, often leading to lasting friendships. In prior feminist scholarship, the work of reproducing and transmitting collective memory has been identified as a key aspect of sustaining utopias and hopeful future imaginaries (Salmenniemi & Ylöstalo, 2024).

The experts highlighted the long-term nature of this work by placing themselves in an intergenerational lineage. One senior economist recalled as follows:

> It was very important that there were some older women, economists, who were really interested; they didn't have very loud voices but had strong voices nonetheless. [They] really helped give my generation a foothold in the process. (Interview 8)

These acknowledgements reflected a *feminist debt*, indicating that contemporary feminists are indebted to earlier generations who have laid the intellectual, institutional and political foundations that make certain kinds of knowledge production possible in the present (Madhok, 2020, p. 396). Recognising that feminist knowledge is collectively built across generations (see Hankinson Nelson, 1993), the experts also sought to prepare the way for future generations. As one economist put it, '[w]e old people . . . want to make sure that as we . . . stand back, there is a different cohort of professional women able to take up this work' (Interview 11). Another economist highlighted the importance of a new generation of experts who could integrate feminist evidence and other heterodox perspectives into policymaking:

> It's important to be trying to prepare a new generation of economists who will be open to feminist economics and indeed other kinds of critical economics. And when they get into positions in the Government Economic Service . . . or the Office of National Statistics . . . , of course they can't change things overnight, but they bring a new perspective; that means they're in a position to at least ask questions. (Interview 4)

These quotations illuminate how feminist networks' intergenerational efforts sustain the hope for more just futures, even when immediate change is elusive. They also reveal that building feminist knowledge is a collective process that can be deepened through engagement with both past and future generations of experts. Such practices epitomise a form of *cathedral thinking*: a concept used by the youth climate movement, cathedral thinking emphasises visionary planning and dedication to projects whose completion may lie beyond one's lifetime (Friberg, 2022, p. 61).

Moreover, the participants engaged in keeping alive the not-yets (Bryant & Knight, 2019) by supporting mobilisation in the broader civil society. While the experts used specialised knowledge to integrate feminist concerns into economic debates (see Ylöstalo, 2020), they acknowledged that producing rigorous evidence for policymakers alone is insufficient to drive transformation, as grassroots mobilisation is also essential. Because quantitative and economic evidence holds sway in policymaking, it can be strategically leveraged to support social movements. Yet, such advocacy demands technical expertise, access to quality data, and other resources often lacking among grassroots feminist groups.

The participants emphasised the importance of sharing knowledge to strengthen civil society's analytical capacity. As one of them noted, this is a challenge, as 'the interests of the status quo and the powerful are bigger than the interests of the people and the planet' (Interview 1), which can lead to institutional inertia and hinder democratic change. This economist suggested that expertise can support political mobilisation by translating the demands of social movements into 'specific policies that [people] demand of their governments':

> You have all of these people mobilising in different countries, saying do something. But they are not giving specifics. They are not saying, 'Cut this subsidy. Do not add that pipeline. Increase funding for X or Y.' . . . So it's very easy for governments not to do anything. . . . So we need to change the way we mobilise and force governments to make specific actions, rather than a generalised call for doing something. That means that we have to be linking together those who are analysing the changes and implications of different policies with people who are mobilising on the ground. It can't be two separate activities; they have to be very strongly linked.

The experts also organised workshops with grassroots groups, emphasising the co-production of knowledge while acknowledging that knowledge is not just created in the ivory towers of academia. As one expert noted, 'it's essential to have a coalition of equal-minded technical experts, but then to really be connected to grassroots organisations that may have a very different view of what needs to be done and how it should be done' (Interview 2). Such statements underscored how the democratic practices of knowledge dissemination invite non-experts to contribute to the desired transformation (see Prügl, 2016, p. 29), while also illuminating the need to integrate theory and practice to drive concrete transformation (Ferguson, 2018, p. 305; see also Maeckelbergh, 2011, p. 3).

Emphasising that political will depends on public awareness of viable alternatives (Interview 1), the experts also sustained political mobilisation by aiming to expand the political imagination. They highlighted strategic use of the media to challenge entrenched beliefs, such as the inevitability of austerity, and to circulate alternative ideas, thereby democratising knowledge. The following quotation from an economist underscores both the importance and the challenge of shifting public perceptions of the economy by appealing to common sense:

> I think we've got to people's common sense, but we haven't quite got to their view of what the economy is. . . . And it may be partly because our argument isn't quite complete. . . . When

> people say, 'Well, how would you pay for it?', we can say it sort of pays for itself because you'll get all these benefits, but that is something different from saying this is literally how we will raise the money. We've talked about wealth taxes, but . . . we haven't really connected that to this is actually going to be something that will make us a richer society. But what we mean by richer isn't more money, but this is how we'll pay for it nevertheless. It'll be a better society [for living] and more wellbeing. . . . It won't necessarily be one in which everybody has higher income. (Interview 5)

Noting that 'there's something missing in how we get from here to there', the expert pointed to a gap that feminist expert networks must work to bridge. Building futures as an ongoing, unfinished process resonates with prior scholarship on utopian and prefigurative imaginaries, which suggests that experimentation, missteps and the accumulation of insight are foundational to the construction of alternative futures (Lakkala, 2021, p. 136; Perheentupa et al., 2023; Swain, 2019, p. 56). Such an emphasis on trial and error also characterises the praxis of feminist expertise, in which the quality of the process has been seen to hold equal significance to the quality of the outcome (Ferguson, 2018, pp. 305–306; Prügl, 2016). Importantly, the experts engaged in the process of building more socially just future economies without guarantees of success. This is how one economist described the uncertainty of the process amid the overlapping crises of care, democracy and ecology:

> You know, whatever we say about what's going on in the future is speculation. I mean, my general speculation is going down the tubes fast, but the good side of uncertainty about the future is we really don't know. . . . And that's about the best we can say right now. And, you know, do whatever we can, little or great or whatever; it is to try to steer things in a healthier direction. That's all we can do. (Interview 10)

This quotation may be said to portray a grim scenario of rapidly approaching disaster ('going down the tubes fast'), but it also encapsulates how advancing desired – or even less bad – futures is essentially speculative, as these futures are unfinished. That is what keeps the possibility of better futures radically open.

Conclusion

This article has examined how professional work and specialised feminist macroeconomic expertise contribute to reimagining futures and enacting them in the present. It makes a distinctive and original contribution by introducing the concept of transformative expertise – a new theoretical lens that captures the political and temporal work through which specialised knowledge is mobilised to advocate socially just futures. We have identified three interrelated dimensions of transformative expertise: exposing the harms of hegemonic future imaginaries, carving out paths to desired alternative futures, and sustaining potentialities for socially just futures. While developed through the study of feminist economic agendas, this framework offers a transferable tool for analysing counterhegemonic expertise in its various domains, such as ecological, anti-racist and alter-globalist knowledge-based practices.

In addition, we advance sociological discussions on futures by demonstrating that transformative expertise is fundamentally temporal work. First, exposing the harms embedded within hegemonic future imaginaries involved a critical contestation of the futurelessness of austerity (Coleman, 2016; Tutton, 2023), with the feminist experts seeking to illuminate the present and anticipated future suffering that such imaginaries perpetuate. Second, the temporal relationships between the past, the present and the future were reshaped (Anderson, 2017; Habersang, 2022) through knowledge-based practices aimed at envisioning more equitable futures, a process that entailed tracing pathways from the present to the imagined future, thereby identifying actionable steps in the prefigurative here and now. Third, transformative expertise required the cultivation and maintenance of potentialities for change that span longer time frames through enduring, intergenerational efforts akin to cathedral building (Friberg, 2022), as well as through the everyday, often unglamorous collective labour (Yates, 2021) of sustaining communities.

Finally, we contribute to feminist debates on specialised expertise (e.g. Bustelo et al., 2016; Cavaghan & Kulawik, 2020; Kunz & Prügl, 2019) by demonstrating the possibilities and limits of feminist knowledge-based practices in fostering alternative futures. By examining feminist experts' political work of reimagining (Newman, 2012, 2020), we have highlighted how feminist actors carve out spaces for alternative ways of knowing and organising within entrenched power structures. We have shown how technical forms of expertise, such as quantitative modelling and macroeconomic analysis, can be employed to bolster feminist demands. At the same time, feminist expertise encompasses conceptual, prefigurative work (see Cooper, 2020a, 2020b) that reimagines the economy as solidaristic, caring and democratic, thus challenging the dominant paradigms. Sustaining potentialities for change also includes collaboration with social movements and the creation of spaces in which alternative economic futures can be imagined against the grain of the prevailing imaginaries.

These struggles over futures unfold within a broader politics of knowledge, in which epistemic authority is unevenly distributed: depoliticised economic arguments are often seen as objective, while feminist political economy is dismissed as ideological (see Elomäki et al., 2019). In structurally unequal societies, hegemonic imaginaries continue to sideline feminist visions. Yet, it can be suggested that the transformative potential of feminist visions lies not in swift policy shifts but in preserving the *not-yet* (Bryant & Knight, 2019) and nurturing hope beyond immediate change. Such work, we argue, is key to disrupting the dominant paradigms and expanding the collective imagination by making space for visions that initially seem implausible (see Eskelinen et al., 2019). Temporal framing also matters: short-term views can obscure the enduring influence of feminist macroeconomic agendas, which may unfold across generations.

The sidelining of feminist expertise and politics in policymaking is evident in today's political climate, which is increasingly shaped by a harsh illiberal turn in global politics. While feminist experts continue to work towards socially just future economies, recent years have witnessed the rising influence of anti-gender and conservative forces across various regions. On a hopeful note, this intensifying resistance to liberal ideals suggests that the so-called post-political era of neoliberalism may be behind us, as we have entered a new phase – one that is not characterised by active repoliticisation across the political

spectrum (Blühdorn & Deflorian, 2021). In this interregnum, the need for counterpowers that unite social justice with ecological sustainability is more urgent than ever. After all, articulating alternative futures – even incomplete ones – is better than being silenced by the risks and challenges of achieving them (Gill, 2020). By theorising transformative expertise, this article opens new avenues for research and practice regarding how knowledge can serve as both a strategic and an imaginative force in shaping futures that are essential for our collective survival.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all interview participants who generously shared their time and experiences with us; their insights were central to the development of this article. Our thanks also go to the project leader Hanna Ylöstalo and colleagues Heini Kinnunen and Taru Lepistö involved in the 'Equality to Economics, Feminism to Fiscal Policy' project for their support and thoughtful engagement throughout the research process. We further appreciate the constructive comments provided by the three anonymous reviewers, which helped to strengthen the argument and sharpen the analysis.

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Funding

This work was supported by the Kone Foundation (grant numbers 202009133 and 202304973) and the Research Council of Finland (grant number 363129).

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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