

## ECONOMIST SPOTLIGHT

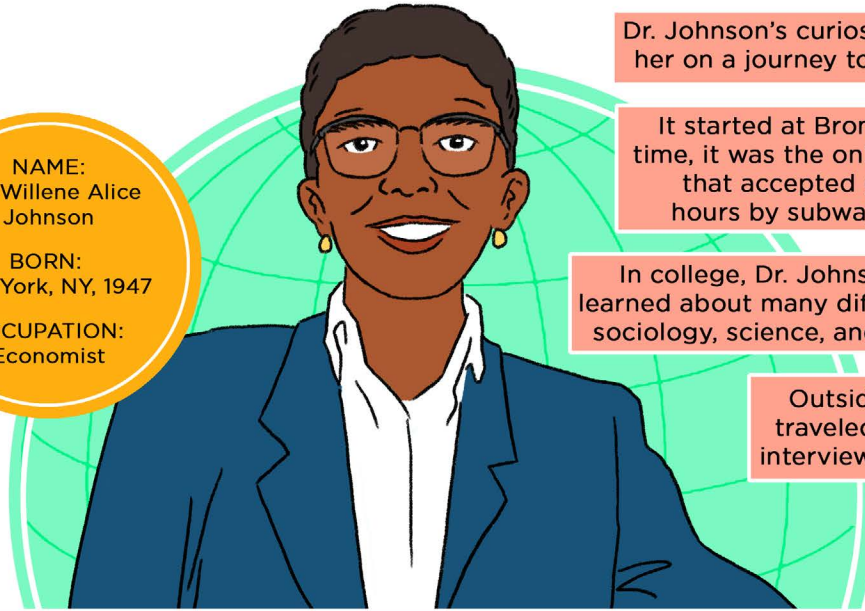
# Dr. Willene A. Johnson

Dr. Johnson Explores a World of Possibilities with Economics

NAME:  
Dr. Willene Alice  
Johnson

BORN:  
New York, NY, 1947

OCCUPATION:  
Economist



Dr. Johnson's curiosity about the world took her on a journey to the field of economics.

It started at Bronx High School of Science. At that time, it was the only technical school in New York City that accepted girls. Dr. Johnson traveled three hours by subway each day to study math there!

In college, Dr. Johnson focused on social studies. She learned about many different subjects—history, economics, sociology, science, and more—while earning her degree.

Outside the classroom, Dr. Johnson traveled to Ecuador and Colombia to interview families about their histories.

After college, Dr. Johnson directed volunteer teachers for Africa and taught dressmaking in Kenya. Then, back in New York, she taught elementary school, and earned a master's degree in African history.<sup>1</sup> She returned to a university to study development, or how to help countries improve the lives of their citizens. There, she saw an economics presentation.

### FUN FACT!

Dr. Johnson loves math! She wears a necklace with a charm shaped like an abacus (or calculator).



Dr. Johnson realized that

## ECONOMICS

brought together her different interests:

MATH SOCIAL STUDIES ANTHROPOLOGY TRAVEL  
(the study of humans and their ancestors)  
HISTORY SOCIOLOGY LANGUAGES and JUSTICE  
(the study of people and societies)

She could use economics to improve people's lives and answer her BIG QUESTIONS about the world.

### FUN FACT!

Dr. Johnson learned Spanish in the home of a high school friend. Today, she speaks English, Spanish, Portuguese, Swahili, and French!

### FUN FACT!

Dr. Johnson has visited more than 50 countries!

In 1983, Dr. Johnson earned her Ph.D., or doctorate degree, in economics at Columbia University.

From Africa to Asia, Europe to South America, Dr. Johnson has studied economies around the world. For 20 years, she was an economist for the Federal Reserve System.\* President Clinton appointed her to be the U.S. Executive Director at the African Development Bank. Today, she trains government officials and civilians to promote economic and social well-being, mentors future economists, and continues to use economics as a tool for change.

Dr. Johnson says economists “need to create new ways of looking.”<sup>2</sup>

\*What is this? To find out, read “The Story of the Federal Reserve System,” a comic available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

# ECONOMISTS GATHER & EVALUATE DATA!

Accomplished economist **Dr. Willene Johnson** gave **data** new dimension...



Dr. Willene Johnson  
Federal Reserve Bank  
of New York

**Q:** What is “**data**”?

**A:** **Data** is a collection of facts.

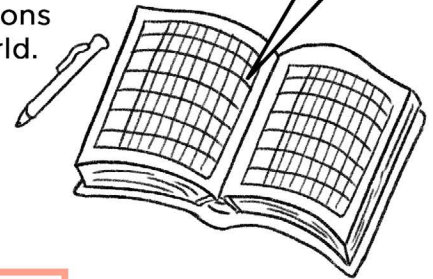
Economists, scientists, and researchers of all kinds use **data** to answer questions and draw conclusions about the world.

In her dissertation,\* Dr. Johnson looked at survey **data** collected in Tanzania, Africa to answer her **BIG QUESTION**:

Are women **economically active** in Tanzanian cities?

That is, are women **doing work** or **looking for work** there?<sup>3</sup>

A teacher's gradebook, for example, holds lots of **data**: names of students, attendance records, and grades. All of these facts are **data**!



Questions Answered in First Survey:  
Name? Age?  
Do you have a job?  
Part time or full-time?  
Are you looking for a job?

## DISSERTATION TITLE:

“The Economic Activities of Women in Urban Tanzania”

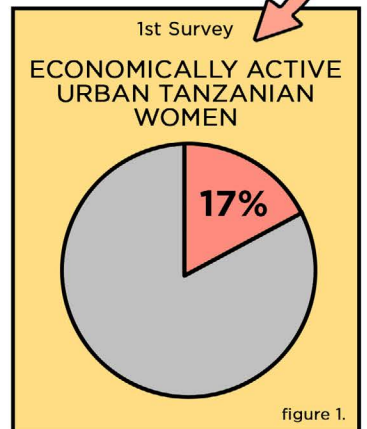


According to the first survey **data** she studied, only a small number of urban women were listed as “working” or “looking for work.” Dr. Johnson was puzzled. Based on her own observations, the number seemed too small.

\*A dissertation (dis-er-tay-shun) is a long essay on a specific topic. It includes original research you conduct to find answers to questions about your topic. You write a dissertation to earn your doctoral degree or Ph.D., and to add the “Dr.” before your name, just like Dr. Johnson did.



So, Dr. Johnson took a closer look at the **data**. She found a problem: the way “work” was defined didn’t always count the work of women living in cities.



Women there were working—they were homemakers, farmers,<sup>4</sup> cooks, and caretakers. But, if they weren’t doing certain kinds of jobs, the survey didn’t count them as “economically active.”

Dr. Johnson realized this **data** didn’t show the full picture of women and their work.

So, to find the answer to her **BIG QUESTION**, she looked for other sources of **data**...



Dr. Johnson found results from a different Tanzanian survey.  
It shared more detailed **data** on the work of women.

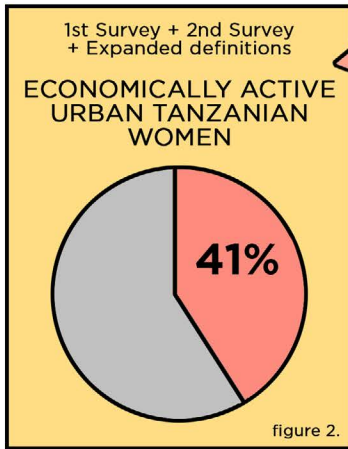
By combining **data** from both surveys, and looking at those numbers in a different way, Dr. Johnson was able to create a new set of **data** that added pieces to the puzzle.

Questions Answered  
in Second Survey:

Where do you work?

Do you work year-round?

What unpaid work do you do?



With her more complete **data**  
in place, Dr. Johnson asked  
her **BIG QUESTION** again:

**Are women economically active  
in Tanzanian cities?**

Dr. Johnson, and the **data**, said...

**"YES!"**



A Tanzanian farmer  
at work in her corn field.

1. Why do you think Dr. Johnson's study is an important one?

2. After studying the first survey, why did Dr. Johnson look for other sources of data to answer her **BIG QUESTION**?

3. Is it important to have people with different viewpoints collecting and studying data? Why or why not?

Like an economist,  
you've carefully  
thought about  
**DATA!**

If you could research anything, what **BIG QUESTION** would you ask in your dissertation?

What kind of **data** would you use to answer your **BIG QUESTION**?

"My life motto is 'water wears away stone,' so I'm just going to keep on going."<sup>5</sup>

- Dr. Willene A. Johnson



*Dr. Willene Johnson upon receiving the Clifton Wharton Emerging Markets Award at Cornell University, photographed by Jenny Nelson, April 2011.*

To learn more about Dr. Johnson, watch her keynote speech at the [2019 Sadie T. M. Alexander Conference for Economics and Related Fields](#).<sup>2</sup>

Interested in looking at some economic data? Here are a few places to start: Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED), the Center for Microeconomic Data, the U.S. Census, and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

1. U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Statement of Willene A. Johnson nominee for U.S. Executive Director of the African Development Bank Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee." Press release, October 29, 1999. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/l186>
2. Willene Johnson, "2019 Sadie T.M. Alexander Conference for Economics and Related Fields Livestream." February 23, 2019. Video recording, 2:20:02. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VyFzXFbnmk>
3. Willene Johnson, "The Economic Activities of Women in Urban Tanzania" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1983), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
4. Margaret Simms and Julianne Malveaux, *Slipping Through the Cracks: The Status of Black Women* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 246.
5. Willene Johnson, "Dr. Margaret Simms: Reflections on the Journey with a View Towards the Future." Conversation presented by the National Economics Association, March 5, 2021. Video recording, 54:29. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPh3Z8S8UGQ>

THANK YOU to Dr. Willene Johnson for participating in the Economist Spotlight series!

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