

INTRODUCING THE BOOK

COMMENTS BY BINA AGARWAL (book's co-editor) ON THE OCCASION OF
THE BOOK RELEASE (March 25, 2006)

Capabilities, Freedom and Equality: Amartya Sen's Work from a Gender Perspective, edited by Bina Agarwal, Jane Humphries, Ingrid Robeyns (Oxford University Press, India, 2006)

Justice Leila Seth, it is a privilege to have you chair this session. Thank you so much for being here and for your very kind words of introduction.

Friends, it is a great honor and privilege to have Amartya Sen with us today for the release of this book which engages with his work and ideas from a gender perspective. We also have with us one of our most distinguished authors, Martha Nussbaum. So we have a double bill!

There are many descriptions to which Amartya Sen might answer: social choice theorist, welfare economist, moral and ethical philosopher, development economist. But perhaps fewer know him as a "feminist economist". Yet, as he himself says in our interview with him in the book: "I do see myself, in part, as a feminist economist, in addition to having other descriptions to which I respond. This is partly because of my direct involvement with gender-related issues, but also because of my conviction that the perspective of gender inequality gives us real insight into asymmetries and deprivations of other kinds as well. ..." "I am very interested", *he goes on to say*, "in the works of contemporary feminist economists, and I have enormously benefited from the richness of contributions in this growing field."

It is especially drawing on *this* aspect of Sen's plural identities, that my coeditors and I claim him in this book. He has been a friend and member of the International Association for Feminist Economics since its inception in 1992.

Amartya Sen is of course renowned for his humanitarian approach to economics. But his contribution has also been crucial to several aspects of gender analysis. Many of his writings have addressed gender concerns directly. Others, even when not explicitly on gender, have engaged with themes that are central to feminist economics and philosophy. But he has done much more. Consistently over at least 22 years when I first heard him speak in this very auditorium, he has promoted the cause of gender equality in public forums, policy discussions, when presiding over major academic bodies such as the International Economics Association, and in his early use of "her" rather than "him" as the generic form when talking about humankind.

The book being released today is thus a tribute not just to a brilliant economist, but to a committed humanist and to a very fine man.

In paying this tribute, standing invisibly beside me are at least 3 others. My two coeditors Jane Humphries (Prof. of Eco history at Oxford), and Ingrid Robeyns (research fellow at the Univ of Amsterdam and earlier Sen's doctoral student). Also present in spirit is Diana

Strassmann, the editor of the journal FE in which many of the book's papers first appeared and who has a foreword in the book. I am sorry they could not be here in person.

We began this challenging project on a sunny summer's day in London by listing the major aspects of Sen's work, hoping to cover them all. Our list included justice, freedom, social choice, agency, functionings and capabilities, missing women, famines, inequality and poverty measures, the human development approach, and culture and identity. Given this enormous range of topics, we set ourselves a hard task.

It proved even more so when we found that although many scholars had engaged with Sen's ideas, rather few have done so from a gender perspective. There was a natural clustering of research, and not just feminist research, around Sen's capability approach and his concepts of freedom and democracy. There is much less on other aspects and few empirical applications of his ideas. The volume reflects this clustering.

However, the book not only builds on Sen's ideas; it also engages with them critically. It not only outlines the usefulness of his work for gender analysis, it also argues with him.

The papers are both theoretical and empirical. Many cover geographic and historical contexts different from Sen's original applications. Our authors come from many disciplines: economics, philosophy, sociology, politics, and history. In that sense the book seeks to transcend disciplinary boundaries, as does Sen's own work, and underlines the amazing range of its influence.

There are 13 contributed papers, including one by Sen himself; a long interview with Sen by Jane, Ingrid, and myself; and 5 of Sen's earlier papers impinging on gender, for ready reference.

SOCIAL CHOICE, CAPABILITIES

The book begins with Fabienne Peter's paper on social choice theory. This area of economics, in a sense, served as a launching pad for Sen's academic career, and his 1970 book *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* contains the seeds of many of his later ideas.

Peter notes that conventional social choice theory is preoccupied with the problem of aggregating individual preferences, and does not lend itself easily to themes such as women's agency, women's participation in democratic institutions, and the tensions between an ethics of impartial justice and an ethics of care.

Sen, she notes, has a broader conception of social choice, one which shifts the focus from aggregation problems to participation in public decision-making. Treating people as agents means giving them a chance to be heard, and to be involved in collective decisions. The challenge is to identify ways of enhancing women's participation and influence in policy discourse.

Sen's work on social choice already embodied early aspects of his capability approach. Today this dimension has developed a life of its own. In fact there is a *Human Development Capability Association* with over 600 members that meets annually. And of all his contributions this has most engaged feminist scholars, including Ingrid Robeyns and Martha Nussbaum who will later talk about *her take* on the capability approach.

Several other papers also engage with Sen's capability approach. Vegard Iversen for instance focuses on domestic power imbalances and interdependencies between individual capabilities. For example, in a marriage, a woman's well-being outcomes will depend not only on her own capabilities but also on her husband's. To illustrate this, Vegard elaborates on Sen's work on intra-household bargaining and calls attention to little focused capabilities such as "bargaining skills", in determining bargaining power.

FREEDOM: The second major clustering of papers is around "freedom". While this concept is embedded in Sen's definition of capability, in terms of an individual's freedom to achieve valuable functionings, Sen takes it farthest in his book *Development as Freedom*.

Several of our authors examine the limits of women's freedom and possibly of the concept of freedom itself. But a particularly unusual take is by economic historian Stanley Engerman. Using slavery in America as an example, he suggests that in many contexts individuals are forced to make difficult choices between physical survival and freedom, one of the starkest being under slavery. Faced with such a trade-off, some slaves were compelled to remain in slavery. By analogy, women might end up putting up with say domestic violence due to lack of outside options. To overcome such painful tradeoffs, Engerman stresses creative state intervention on many counts.

DEMOCRACY: A third notable theme in several papers is democracy. Philosopher, Elizabeth Anderson, e.g., explores Sen's treatment of democracy but notes that in practice democracy can fail to correct chronic deprivations in capabilities among significant sections, such as women and the poor. She argues for enhancing women's representation in democratic bodies, and points to its positive effect in fulfilling common social goals.

DEVELOPMENT: The 4th and final theme concerns development. A paper on Mexico by Beutelspacher, Martelo and Garcia, criticizes the popular assumption that fertility reducing policies necessarily enhance women's well-being. They demonstrate empirically that much depends on whether women are party to the decision.

In another paper, Stephan Klasen and Claudia Wink, revisit the debate on missing women. In 1990, you will recall, in a dramatically titled article "More than a 100 million women are missing" Sen focused world attention on the fact that in many developing countries, especially India and China, there are fewer females than males, because of gender bias in families. This is now widely accepted, but there is debate around methods of estimating the missing women. Klasen and Wink compare different methods and based on recent data find contradictory trends in sex ratios in India. An increase in female education and employment, for instance, has reduced gender bias, but new technologies help identify the unborn child's sex, leading to sex-selective abortions. This has worsened sex ratios.

Finally, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, then Director of the UNDP Human Development Reports, gives an historical overview of Sen's contributions to the Human Development Approach, arguing that gender analysis was crucial to the evolution of the approach.

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The book thus illustrates the many ways in which Amartya Sen's ideas have led to a major paradigm shift, captured our imagination and inspired scholarship across disciplines.

INTERVIEW

Apart from scholarly papers we have an interview with Sen himself. He answered our questions at length, with his characteristic combination of fact and wit, and a taste of the personal.

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For instance, we asked him if any personal experience had shaped his work on gender. He answered that among other influences “I had to raise as a single parent, two children (respectively 10 and 8 yrs old, when Eva died), through their childhood and teenage years”. This “learning by doing,” he says, directly enriched his understanding of the problems that working mothers face in pursuing careers while looking after children.

Again, since the issue of power is so central to studying gender inequality, we posed this question: “*Many argue that although you have written extensively on gender inequality, you do not directly address the question of power within gender relations. Do you agree?*”

Sen replied: “I do not think I can agree with that. I cannot even understand how it could be possible to discuss gender inequality extensively ... without going into the question of power within gender relations... Power has a central role in what I call ‘cooperative conflict’ which is central to my understanding of gender inequality within the family and ultimately in the society at large. Women and men have both *congruent* and *conflicting* interests affecting family living... In the emergence of some cooperative solution among the many that are available, the powers of the two parties play a crucial part: For example, the more powerful party can obtain more favourable divisions of the family’s overall benefits and chores”...

“Perhaps the point is not”, *he adds*, “about whether the *concept* of power is being used, but about the frequency with which the *word* ‘power’ occurs in my writing (as opposed to the ones I tend more often to use, such as ‘empowerment’ or ‘capability’ or ‘freedom’ or ‘agency’ or ‘threat’ or ‘vulnerability’)”

Sen’s response provides the basis for an interesting debate, including on how the issue of power is discussed in different disciplines.

To conclude, many books have carried papers on Sen’s work. But none, I believe, have examined the gamut of his ideas through the lens of gender. We hope this volume will inspire others to take this project further.

Let me end by thanking Oxford University Press – especially Manzar Khan, Nitasha Dewasar, Himanti Dey and Rowena Kapparith. I also thank IIC for co-sponsoring this event.

And on behalf of the community of feminist economists and other gender scholars I again thank Amartya for being a friend, and for his work that has provided such substantial intellectual challenges and policy shifts. And we look forward to a continuing engagement.