EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF AMARTYA SEN’S WORK AND IDEAS: AN INTRODUCTION

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Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen is renowned for his humanitarian approach to economics. His contribution has also been crucial to the development of several aspects of feminist economics and gender analysis. Many of his writings have addressed gender concerns directly, but even when not explicitly feminist, his work has often engaged with themes that are central to feminist economics and philosophy. Indeed, IAFFE has claimed him as “a feminist economist.” This special issue of Feminist Economics is meant as a tribute to a brilliant economist and a fine man. It is also intended as a contribution to scholarship and future research on gender. It both builds on Sen’s ideas and engages with them critically. It outlines the range and usefulness of his work for gender analysis but does not shy away from exploring some of its silences and implicit assumptions.

This challenging project was initiated on a sunny summer’s day in London in June 2000. The three of us met to identify the major topics and concepts in Sen’s work which we would endeavor to cover, such as justice, freedom, social choice, agency, functionings and capabilities, missing women, famines, inequality and poverty measures, the human development approach, and culture and identity. Papers were invited through an open “Call” publicized through academic journals, e-mail lists, and publications with a wide readership in developing countries, such as the Economic and Political Weekly (Bombay, India). We also actively solicited papers from experts working on the relevant themes. For the final set of papers we held a workshop at All Souls College, Oxford, UK, in September 2002. The aim of the workshop was to facilitate wide-ranging and in-depth interactions between Sen and the authors, as well as among the paper writers themselves and others invited. The discussions were interactive, spirited, and challenging. We were privileged to have Amartya Sen join us for the full duration of the workshop, and comment on all the presentations. After the workshop, with a final round of revisions, the papers took the form in which they appear in this special issue.

Although at the project’s initiation we had hoped to cover all the major aspects of Sen’s work, we were only partially successful. For a start,
we found that although a large number of scholars and policy-makers have engaged with Sen’s ideas, relatively few have done so from a gender perspective. Also, there appears to be a natural clustering of research, and not just feminist research, around Sen’s capability approach and his concept of freedom (especially as enunciated in his 1999 book, *Development as Freedom*), with relatively few writers engaging with other dimensions, such as social choice theory or famines, or applying his concepts empirically. Our attempts to invite papers on some of these relatively neglected issues, or to locate more authors in developing countries, also had limited success. Nonetheless, we are happy with the coverage achieved. We are also pleased that Sen agreed to answer some questions we posed about aspects of his work, as well as about the intellectual and personal trajectories that propelled him to focus on gender inequality and explore the field of feminist economics. We hope the readers of the journal will find our dialogue with him (“Continuing the Conversation”) illuminating.

The contributions to this special issue are both theoretical and empirical. Where possible, the authors have applied Sen’s concepts to cultural, geographic, and historical contexts that are different from his original applications. Perspectives have been drawn from developing as well as developed countries. Our authors include both established scholars and younger researchers, and come from across the globe: Belgium, Canada, Germany, India, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the USA. Several of our authors work and live in more than one country.

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The first paper in this special issue provides a gender perspective on a theoretical area of economics—social choice theory—which, in a sense, served as the launching pad for Amartya Sen’s academic career, and which contains the seeds of many of the ideas he was to develop later. It is also an area of work (embodied in his 1970 book *Collective Choice and Social Welfare*) highlighted at length in his Nobel Prize citation. Sen’s writings on social choice have, however, received little attention from feminist economists. An exception is Fabienne Peter, who engages with this field in her article “Gender and the Foundations of Social Choice.” In examining the relationship between gender and the theory of social choice, Peter poses two questions: how can insights from social choice theory benefit the study of women’s well-being and gender inequality; and how can social choice theory benefit from insights from women’s studies and gender studies? In pursuing these questions, Peter uses different aspects of Sen’s work to provide, she argues, a fuller account of the role of gender in social choice than he has done so far.
Peter points out that conventional and narrowly-interpreted social choice theory is preoccupied with solving the problem of aggregating individual preferences, and does not lend itself easily to exploring themes such as women’s agency, women’s participation in democratic institutions, democracy and difference, universalism vs. relativism, and the tensions between an ethics of impartial justice and an ethics of care. She notes that Sen rejects the notion that social evaluation should be based on purely subjective assessments of individual welfare because, among other things, people’s overt preferences may be adapted to adverse circumstances. He also emphasizes the importance of people’s agency. This emphasis, Peter argues, brings to the fore a broader conception of social choice, and shifts the focus from problems of aggregating individual preferences to participation and inclusion in democratic decision-making. Hence, in contrast to much of social choice theory, it calls attention to fair procedures. Treating people as agents means giving them a chance to be heard, and to be involved in collective evaluations and decisions. The challenge for social evaluation of policy alternatives is to take seriously women’s evaluations as situated agents, and to identify ways of enhancing their participation in policy discourse. This would also strengthen the role of freedom in social evaluation. Peter suggests that research in social choice theory and related fields should investigate avenues that make social choice and evaluation more responsive to situated agency and thus to issues of participation and inclusion, building on but moving beyond the foundations for this laid by Sen’s work.

As Peter’s article illustrates, Sen’s early work on social choice already embodied preliminary aspects of his capability approach (and relatedly his ideas on agency and freedom). Today this dimension of Sen’s work has developed a life of its own. The capability approach is currently being examined, applied, and discussed in a wide range of disciplines and subfields. And of all his contributions, this is the one that has most engaged feminist scholars, as is clearly reflected in this special issue— the majority of our authors, in one way or another, focus on Sen’s capability approach. Indeed several authors, such as Martha Nussbaum, Ingrid Robeyns, Vegard Iversen, and Marianne Hill, have made it their primary focus.

Martha Nussbaum is undoubtedly the most notable among feminist scholars who have engaged with, critiqued, and extended Sen’s capability approach. In fact today an entire body of literature is devoted to Nussbaum’s version of the capability approach, parallel to Sen’s own formulation. Nussbaum’s paper in this volume—“Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements”—discusses Sen’s writings on the capability approach and her own development of those ideas, outlining in the process both the usefulness of the approach for examining gender and social justice, and some of the limitations of its current version. Nussbaum notes that Sen has made a major contribution to the theories of social justice and gender
justice by arguing that capabilities are the relevant space of comparison for justice-related issues. She agrees with Sen that the capability approach as a framework for examining social justice is superior to utilitarianism, resource-focused analysis, the social contract tradition, or even some accounts of human rights. At the same time, she argues that to make the capability approach more useful for exploring social justice, Sen needs to take a more definite stand on which capabilities are important in our ethical judgments and our conceptions of justice. According to her, without such a list, the capability approach cannot offer valuable normative guidance on gender justice. Nussbaum also holds that Sen’s treatment of freedom needs to be more specific. Freedom, she argues, can have both good and bad dimensions and not all freedoms are of equal worth. Nussbaum proposes a list of ten capabilities for which she claims a degree of universal relevance, although she also emphasizes that the list could be modified by context.

The argument that we need a definite “list of capabilities” is extended further by Ingrid Robeyns in her paper “Sen’s Capability Approach and Gender Inequality.” Like Nussbaum, Robeyns begins with a positive appreciation of Sen’s capability approach for gender analysis, but goes on to argue that the approach also has the drawback of being “under-specified.” For applying the approach to concrete questions, additional theoretical specifications are needed. Robeyns proposes a method for selecting the relevant capabilities, and applies this method to an analysis of gender inequality in affluent societies. In particular, she emphasizes the importance of process in specifying a list, such as taking account of the existing literature in the field and having a public discussion on it, to give the list academic and political legitimacy. According to her, the list should fulfill a number of criteria. In particular, it should be exhaustive, nonreducible, and sensitive to context. On some counts, her list is similar to previous ones such as that of Nussbaum; but on other counts it is quite different, as indicated in the helpful comparative table she provides. Robeyns also briefly discusses how inequalities in capabilities can be judged if information is only available at the level of achieved functionings.

Vegard Iversen’s engagement with Sen’s capability approach in his paper “Intra-household Inequality – A Challenge for the Capability Approach?” is conceptual rather than focused on identifying concrete lists of capabilities. He examines the extent to which Sen’s work has taken account of intra-household inequality when evaluating people’s well-being. He emphasizes the importance of being sensitive to the role of domestic power imbalances when interpreting central concepts of the capability approach, such as agency, freedom, and choice. Drawing on literature on household behavior in developing countries, he examines these concepts through a feminist lens, and argues that when evaluating well-being more attention should be paid to the existence of alternative types of power within the realm of the
household. He points to the interdependence between individual capabilities which affects well-being outcomes. For instance, in a marriage, a woman’s well-being will depend not only on her own capabilities but also on those of her spouse. To illustrate this interdependence, he draws especially on recent literature on intra-household bargaining. In this context, he also calls attention to the central relevance of nonmaterial capabilities, such as “bargaining skills,” in determining well-being outcomes. Such skills matter, along with a person’s individual characteristics, resource endowments, and so on. Because of interdependencies and power relations (with material, nonmaterial, and agency constituents), Iversen argues, one household member’s opportunities for achieving well-being will be influenced by the fall-back position and bargaining skills of other household members. According to him, taking these features into account poses a challenge for the capability approach.

A plea for more attention to social power is also central to Marianne Hill’s article “Development as Empowerment.” She begins with the observation that Sen’s capability approach, while valuable as a starting point, also needs to take into account the impact of social power on human capabilities. Because social power is primarily mediated through social institutions, the latter deserve special attention by scholars aiming to take the capability approach forward. The approach, Hill argues, pays inadequate attention to the role of institutional power in generating or sustaining gender inequalities. And until the analytical frameworks being developed to extend the capability approach address the issue of social power, the analysis of well-being will be incomplete, and decisions made to enhance human capabilities will systematically fall short. She focuses especially on democratization as a way to begin incorporating power into the capability framework, but notes that there are significant differences between Sen and several other authors in their understanding of what democratization would imply. Democratization, she emphasizes, should be a process which allows recognition of the interests of those who are subordinate, oppressed, or for other reasons lack voice. To take this process forward, she argues, will require, among other things, extending more social power to those currently disadvantaged, and changing practices that are deeply embedded in institutions such as the family, the firm, and the state.

Since the issue of power is so central to studying gender inequality, and given that many feminist scholars (including several of our authors) have argued that Sen does not directly address this issue in examining gender, it is useful to highlight his response to it in our dialogue with him. Sen argues that it is not possible to discuss gender inequality as extensively as he has done without recognizing the centrality of power asymmetries. He emphasizes that even if he does not often use the word power, the concept itself is embedded in all his writings on gender, including his assessment of gender inequality in terms of real “capabilities”; his work on “cooperative
conflict’’ which shows how one form of power asymmetry can lead to other forms of power asymmetries; and his discussions on women’s agency, empowerment, and freedom. Sen’s response provides the basis for an interesting debate, including on how the issue of power is discussed in different disciplines. In any case, the capability approach, whether or not it adequately captures the complexity of gendered power relations, provides the single most significant dimension around which papers tend to cluster in this volume.

The second major clustering of papers is around the concept of “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 further in his book *Development as Freedom*. Indeed, according to Des Gasper and Irene van Staveren, Sen takes the concept of freedom too far, and makes it overarching. Nussbaum, as noted, had also commented on Sen’s concept of freedom, finding it not specific enough, and not allowing for the possibility of freedom having both good and bad dimensions. Gasper and van Staveren, while drawing on Nussbaum, take this discussion in a somewhat different direction, arguing that the language of freedom itself, as used in *Development as Freedom*, could be misleading. According to them, the concept of freedom, as elaborated in Sen’s book, has been overextended, in that all the capabilities that human beings could acquire are to be understood as freedom. This, according to them, can lead to confusion since freedom does not have this overarching meaning in everyday parlance. They argue that freedom needs to be seen as one value among a number of other significant values, such as justice, respect, friendship, and care—hence the title of their paper “Development as Freedom—and What Else?” Indeed they feel Sen has, in some sense, downsized his notion of capability in giving so much importance to the language of freedom, ignoring the baggage that comes with the term. They emphasize, in particular, the values of justice and caring which they see as related to freedom, but which cannot be subsumed within it. Too much of a burden of caring labor (which falls particularly in women’s domain as unpaid caregivers), for example, can limit women’s freedom. Too much freedom could be read as independence from household and community. They stress the need for an alternative language to the language of freedom—one that also incorporates the importance of other values. They argue that this would provide a more pluralistic understanding of capabilities.

Sen’s notion of freedom, especially as elaborated in *Development as Freedom*, is also the starting point of Christine Koggel’s discussion in her paper “Globalization and Women’s Paid Work: Expanding Freedom?” In particular, she engages with Sen’s emphasis on women’s agency as central for development, and the importance he gives to increasing women’s freedom to work outside the home as a way of strengthening their agency. She seeks to problematize the effect of paid employment on women’s lives,
and asks whether increasing such employment as a strategy for expanding women’s agency, does in fact achieve that end. She notes that the impact of paid work on women’s agency can depend on a complex range of local and global factors which affect opportunities, earnings, and the work environment. Drawing on empirical studies of women workers linked to the global market either as home-based workers producing items for export, or as employees in export factories in free trade zones, Koggel stresses that often the conditions of work seriously limit the ability of paid work to enhance women’s well-being. She argues that further levels of complexity thus need to be added to Sen’s account of freedom, by examining how global forces of power interact with local systems of oppression in ways that limit women’s freedom.

A different perspective on the issue of freedom is obtained in Stanley Engerman’s paper, “Slavery, Freedom, and Sen.” Implicit in Sen’s writings on the capability approach, and explicit in his book *Development as Freedom*, is the idea that all good things tend to go together. In contrast, Engerman argues that there can be important tradeoffs between different dimensions of well-being in societies and contexts where people live at the edge of subsistence. Using slavery as an illustration, Engerman suggests that in many historical contexts individuals were forced to make complex and difficult choices between physical survival and freedom, one of the starkest being under slavery. Faced with such a tradeoff, there were slaves who decided to remain in slavery. Such choices provide one important explanation for the contested phenomenon of “voluntary slavery.” Apart from examining differences in gender roles under slavery and after emancipation, Engerman also applies this analogy to the more general situation of women today, where women might end up accepting an oppressive family situation, or staying in abusive marriages, for their own and their children’s material well-being. To overcome such painful tradeoffs and correct these adverse outcomes, Engerman stresses the importance of creative and more extensive state intervention on a range of counts.

The complexities involved in assessing well-being and agency, highlighted conceptually in several papers, are explored empirically by Austraberta Nazar Beutelspacher, Emma Zapata Martelo, and Verónica Vázquez García. In their paper “Does Contraception Benefit Women?” they apply Sen’s work on well-being and agency to evaluate the Mexican government’s family planning policies in rural Chiapas, Mexico. They critique the popular and simplistic assumption that fertility-reducing family planning policies, such as those set in place by the government, necessarily enhance women’s well-being. They demonstrate empirically that several factors intervene to determine whether or not greater contraception use and a reduction in overall fertility rates improve women’s well-being, one of the most important being whether or not women themselves are party to the decision. In situations where women have
relatively little education and few possibilities of well-paid work outside the home, rural women do not see having fewer children as necessarily a benefit. If allowed the choice by the state and by their husbands, many would have preferred to have more children. The authors thus lay particular stress on women’s subjective perception of well-being. They note that their empirical analysis provides further support for the significance Sen places on agency and choice, in exercises for evaluating the impact of public policies on individual well-being.

The importance of agency and a situated analysis is again underlined in Elizabeth Anderson’s paper “Sen, Ethics, and Democracy,” in which she emphasizes the issue of public discussion and democratic choice. Anderson builds on Sen’s concept of “positional objectivity” to highlight how value judgments, made from particular social positions, can be consistent with shared universal values such as democracy. She also explores at considerable length various elements in Sen’s treatment of democracy: for instance, as a means by which the government can respond to people’s needs, as a practice that includes public discussions among ordinary citizens which helps them learn from each other, as a way of defining needs and preference formation, and as a way of sorting out differences in initial positions. Anderson notes, however, that in practice democracy can fail to correct chronic deprivations in capabilities among significant sections of citizens, such as women, the poor, and the lower castes. She then makes a persuasive case for enhancing the representation of such groups, in particular of women, in democratic political bodies, arguing that this can be seen (among other things) as a way of mobilizing local positional knowledge for shared ends. For example, women elected to local offices might focus government energies to previously neglected basic needs such as safe drinking water—needs which are not just specific to women’s interests but which speak to the larger social good.

The last two papers in this volume discuss some aspects of Sen’s work which impinge particularly on the effects of development on women’s well-being: the question of “missing women,” and the comparison of countries in terms of their level of human development. In 1990, in a dramatically titled article “More Than a 100 Million Women Are Missing,” which appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, Sen focused international attention on the fact that in a large part of the developing world there are fewer females than males, not because of natural causes but because of a major bias against females leading to excess female mortality. While none have disputed Sen’s argument, there has been debate about the appropriate method for arriving at exact estimates of the missing women. Stephan Klasen has been a major contributor to this debate on methodology and estimates. In the paper “Missing Women,” he and Claudia Wink revisit the debate and compare different methodologies for measurement. They present alternative estimates of the number of women missing; that is, the number of females who would have been alive
today had there been no bias against females, and both sexes had been treated equally. They also provide estimates of sex ratios (defined by them as male/female ratios) based on recent data. Their careful empirical work shows that in aggregate terms discrimination against females still persists, and the absolute number of missing women has been increasing over time. However, there are notable regional variations both in the levels and in the direction of shifts over time. While in some countries (and in some regions within countries) there has been substantial improvement, in others there has been only moderate improvement, and yet others have seen a deterioration. The spread of female education and job opportunities for women has helped reduce gender bias, but the spread of new technologies for identifying the unborn child’s sex and associated sex-selective abortions has tended to worsen the gender imbalances in sex ratios.

Finally, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr’s paper gives an historical account of Sen’s contributions to the human development approach to assessing a country’s development, as adopted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) over a decade ago. In her paper titled “The Human Development Paradigm: Operationalizing Sen’s Ideas on Capabilities,” she highlights the importance and influence of Sen’s work and ideas in the framing of the human development paradigm. The paper identifies the three key elements of this paradigm: namely, the explicit philosophical basis of its concept of well-being, its evaluative aspect, and its agency aspect. This paradigm and the associated Human Development Reports (HDRs) brought out by the UNDP have provided an increasingly important alternative to standard assessments of development and welfare. The Human Development Indices are today widely discussed and used as broad evaluative measures. The paper also traces the evolution of the HDRs over time from their earlier emphasis on public services to the more recent emphasis on people’s political empowerment. Gender analysis, Fukuda-Parr argues, has been central to the evolution of the human development approach, both in developing indices such as the Gender-Related Development Index and the Gender Empowerment Index, and in its impact on the human development paradigm itself. A gender perspective has particularly helped in highlighting significant aspects of this paradigm, such as the role of collective agency in promoting development.

The volume concludes with a dialogue with Sen himself. In this we have sought to ask several of the questions that were on our minds (and we presume have been on the minds of many others), but which have seldom been posed to him directly. This covers both personalized questions about the factors that led him to examine gender concerns and the impact of feminist writings on his work, and more general questions about his approach to issues of power, identity politics, and environmental sustainability. His responses flag additional topics for research and provoke further questions, which could provide the basis for future conversations.
In recent years, a number of volumes have appeared with papers that engage with Sen’s work, in particular with his capability approach to evaluating human well-being. But none have examined the wide gamut of his ideas through the specific lens of gender. This makes this volume, in many senses, unique. We recognize of course that some of the work presented here is still exploratory in nature, and that aspects of Sen’s writings, such as that on famines (and more generally food entitlements), and inequality and poverty indices, do not feature in this collection. But, as noted earlier, the gaps largely reflect the limited feminist scholarship on these aspects of his work. And what we see included here reflects the overwhelmingly greater interest in his work on capabilities, freedom, agency, and democracy.

While working on this volume, we have felt privileged in having had the chance to engage with Sen and our authors on the significant ideas with which Sen has challenged the intellectual world. We thank Sen too for his stimulating interactions at the September 2002 workshop at All Souls, and for his detailed and illuminating responses to the issues we raised in our dialogue with him. We are also enormously grateful to all the contributors to this special issue for their wide-ranging intellectual engagement, their careful responses to the reviewers’ comments, and their good humor and patience in dealing with our detailed editorial inputs which, in some cases, required several rounds of revisions. Our thanks go also to Diana Strassmann, Jean Shackelford, Barbara Krohn, Cheryl Morehead, Anna Mueller, and Amy Storrow, as well as to the many experts (too numerous to name individually) who gave generously of their time and energy in reviewing the papers submitted for this volume. Finally, we thank the Ford Foundation (New York), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA, Stockholm), Rice University, the British Academy (UK), and All Souls College, Oxford, for their financial support for various aspects of this project.

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