



Engaging with Sen on Gender Relations

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ARGUMENTS FOR A BETTER WORLD

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF
AMARTYA SEN

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and Development

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CHAPTER 9

ENGAGING WITH SEN ON GENDER RELATIONS

COOPERATIVE CONFLICTS, FALSE PERCEPTIONS AND RELATIVE CAPABILITIES[†]

BINA AGARWAL

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.

Amartya Sen in conversation with the author and two colleagues
(Agarwal *et al.* 2006: 351)

AMARTYA Sen's work has inspired and challenged scholars across many disciplines, and it has been crucial to the development of several aspects of feminist economics

[†] I am grateful to Kaushik Basu for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

and gender analysis. Many of his writings address gender concerns directly, but even when they do not, his work focuses on themes that are central to feminist analysis not only in economics but across the social sciences, as well as philosophy. His humanitarian approach to the subject has also encouraged many to ground their economic analysis in real life, to question narrow notions of economic rationality, and to recognize the importance of qualitative factors in determining economic outcomes, notwithstanding their uneasy fit with formal economic models.

Over the years I have engaged with and learnt from many aspects of Sen's writings, in some cases applying or extending his ideas, in other cases contesting them. In this chapter, I bring together three forms of such engagement, each of which relates to an aspect of intra-household gender relations. In the first I apply his work on cooperative conflict within families, and his entitlement approach to famines, to explain why families might break up during famines and what this reveals about intra-family gender relations. In the second I contest his claim that women in traditional societies suffer from false perceptions about their self-interest and so become complicit in perpetuating gender inequalities. And in the third I use the context of domestic violence to demonstrate the importance of relative capabilities (and not just absolute capabilities) in determining well-being outcomes. In the process, the chapter also highlights the critical role played by a much neglected factor, women's property status, in determining their economic and social well-being.

I. INTRA-HOUSEHOLD BARGAINING, ENTITLEMENTS AND FAMINES

Few contexts illuminate intra-household gender relations as starkly as extreme calamities such as famines. Why do families break up during famines? In particular, why do we commonly observe the abandonment of women and children? Although Sen does not specifically address this issue in his seminal writings on famine, at least two aspects of his work provide the basis for an answer: one, the conceptualizing of intra-household relations as relations of cooperative conflict in which outcomes depend on each person's bargaining power; the other, his entitlement approach to famine and starvation. In Agarwal (1990) I applied these concepts to the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 and came up with rather different explanations for family dissolution than those provided by two leading anthropologists—Paul Greenough and Arjun Appadurai.

1.1 Cooperative Conflict and Bargaining Power

Adapting John Nash's (1950, 1951) game-theoretic formulation of cooperative "bargaining problems" to intra-household relations, Sen (1990) conceptualizes the family as a bargaining unit in which interactions between family members are characterized by both cooperation and conflict. Household members cooperate insofar as cooperative arrangements make each of them better off than non-cooperation. Many cooperative outcomes are possible that are beneficial to both parties compared with non-cooperation, but each party has strictly conflicting interests in her/his choice among the set of efficient cooperative arrangements. Which cooperative solution emerges—for instance, how household goods and services get allocated—depends on the relative bargaining power of each member. A member's bargaining power, in turn, depends on the strength of her/his fallback position should cooperation fail (though undeniably love and concern could impinge on this in unexpected ways). This conceptualization is in contrast to the unitary model of the household *à la* Gary Becker (1981), which assumes that all household resources and incomes are pooled, and intra-household allocations depend on decisions made by the household head, who represents the members' tastes and preferences and seeks to maximize household utility.¹

On the basis of Sen's formulation it can be argued that a calamity which leads to a collapse of the woman's fallback position and her ability to contribute to the family's material well-being (as can happen during a famine), while the husband's fallback position is sustained to some extent, could weaken her bargaining power even to the point where the man finds non-cooperation more beneficial than cooperation, creating a tendency toward family disintegration and the abandonment of women and children.

Key to understanding such outcomes are the factors which might affect a person's fallback position and bargaining power within the family in relation to subsistence needs such as food. In his entitlement approach to famine, Sen (1981) highlights two factors as significant in determining a person's ability to command subsistence: endowments (what a person owns, such as assets and labor power) and exchange entitlement mapping—the exchange possibilities that exist through production and trade, and which determine the consumption set available to a person with given endowments. Typically for rural families, the most important endowments are arable land and the ability to labor on which Sen has focused. However, I would like to suggest five additional factors. Three are in the nature of entitlements that do not derive from private ownership or market exchange, namely traditional rights in communal resources, traditional social support systems, and support from the state and civil society. Impinging on all these factors are two others—social norms embodying accepted notions about the division of labor and resources, and social

¹ Sen's conceptualization is in line with a range of efforts to provide an alternative to the unitary conceptualization of the household (for details, see Agarwal 1997).

perceptions about contributions, needs and abilities (and therefore about who deserves what). We might suggest that these seven factors would individually and interactively affect a person's ability to fulfill subsistence needs outside the family. The premise here is that the greater a person's ability to survive physically outside the family, the greater will be her/his bargaining power over subsistence within the family. Inequalities among family members in respect of these factors will place some members in a weaker bargaining position relative to others. Gender is one significant basis of inequality.

It needs to be emphasized that the bargaining framework does not require an explicit process of bargaining. Social norms that limit women's work mobility, education, or property access, or which otherwise undermine her capabilities and functionings,² can give men considerable power even without explicit discussion. It is also notable that many of the factors which determine a person's fallback position also influence her ability to contribute toward family well-being. If a woman loses her job and her assets, it both worsens her fallback position and diminishes the income she can bring into the family. This dual effect can undermine the benefits of cooperation that the husband might derive within marriage and so lead to marriage dissolution in periods of severe crisis, such as famine. Here, by going beyond the Nash bargaining framework, we can understand why cooperation might fail, and that the possibility of breakdown is real and not just a threat that influences the outcomes of bargaining.

Below I briefly outline the evidence of family dissolution and how this has been explained by some scholars, before presenting an alternative explanation.

1.2 Family Dissolution

Famines starkly pose the economic and moral dilemmas of intra-household food sharing and hold up a mirror to family relations that few other contexts can. The Bengal famine of 1943 provides a graphic case study in this respect. A range of evidence points to the specific disadvantages suffered by women and children of poor households during the famine.

First, among those made destitute in rural Bengal, young and middle-aged females were dominant: in January 1943, 55% of all destitutes, and 66% of those in the 15–50 age group, were women (Mahalanobis *et al.* 1946). In this age group, women destitutes also outnumbered male destitutes two to one, between January 1943 and May 1944. Children (girls and boys) in the 5–15 age category were next in number. Occupationally, the largest number of destitutes were fisherfolk, transport workers, agricultural laborers, paddy huskers and craftsmen (Chattopadhyay and Mukerjee

² Sen conceptualizes capabilities as the abilities or opportunities a person has to do or to be what she values, and functionings as that which she actually manages to do or to be.

1946: 18). Paddy husking was among the few occupations in which poor women, in normal circumstances, found employment.

Second, those who came to state relief centers during the worst months of the famine and were able to pay cash for food were mostly male adults, while those dependent entirely on gratuitous relief tended to be females (mostly adults), 84% of whom needed gratis aid compared with 43% of the male destitutes (calculated from Greenough 1982: 190).

Third, although excess mortality (the absolute and proportionate increases in mortality attributable to famine) was higher among males than females, the estimated absolute number of famine deaths during the critical year of 1943, and the absolute increase in mortality rates attributable to the 1943 famine, were greater for women than men in the 20–40 age group (Greenough 1982: 311). This is notable, given that childbirth and childbearing risk tends to decline for women of this reproductive age group due to famine-induced fall in birth rates. Also, most of these women were within marital relationships, which should normally have supported them.

Fourth, 53% of the 2,537 destitutes surveyed on the pavements of Calcutta in September 1943 were female, and 64% of married destitutes were women. The pavement dwellers had earlier belonged to 820 families; half of these had broken up shortly before arrival, 70% due to husbands and wives separating. The women said they had left their villages for Calcutta because their husbands had either deserted them or asked them to search elsewhere for food (Greenough 1982: 220).

There is also anecdotal evidence of women being abandoned by husbands or being forced into beggary or prostitution, and of parents selling off girls (2–13 years of age) into prostitution and boys into bondage. The Nari Seva Sangh (a private women's service society), established in 1944 to shelter abandoned women during famine, reported: "women were being thrown out into the streets and multitudes of them were being forced into a life of shame" (quoted in Greenough 1982: 225).

This abandonment of women and children is not unique to the Great Bengal Famine. It is commonly observed during famines across different cultural contexts. Alamgir (1980: 135), for instance, notes that during the 1974 Bangladesh famine "there were many cases of desertion. In Rangpur, special homes for deserted children were set up. In Dacca, there were many women who were deserted by their husbands among the inmates of vagrant homes." Similarly, the women interviewed by Vaughan during the 1949 Malawi famine stressed "how frequently they were abandoned by men" (who had external social and economic linkages), and left with dying children on their hands (Vaughan 1987: 123).

1.3 Possible Explanations

Greenough and Appadurai offer cultural and sociobiological explanations for abandonment during the Great Bengal Famine. Greenough (1982: 215) argues that the

disintegration of families “did not occur randomly but seems to have been the result of the intentional exclusion of the less-valued family members [women and children] from domestic subsistence” by a decision of the male household head. He further argues that “determinations as to who will eat and who must starve are not made suddenly or arbitrarily in the heat of the famine but draw upon an existing cultural arrangement that assigns a value to family members according to their roles” (Greenough 1980: 208). Such decisions, he explains, are in line with the ideal of family continuity, equated with the continuity of the patriline through the adult male, whose survival thus counts over that of women and children: “If the separated ‘master’ survives a crisis, he is enabled to marry again despite the death or violation of his spouse, and he may then engender children who can be expected to maintain the lineage under more prosperous conditions” (Greenough 1982: 224). In this “explanation”, the abandonment of the vulnerable is read as justified by the cultural notion of family continuity through males, rather than simply an act of individual self-interest by men who have a stronger fallback position. It also contradicts aspects of culture which value self-sacrifice and support of the poor and the disadvantaged. It is notable that despite their destitute state, women were found much more likely than men to have kept the children with them.

Appadurai (1984: 485) offers a somewhat different explanation. He suggests that the abandonment of women and children can be seen as “an effort to maximise the life-chance of each and every member of the family in circumstances where co-residence was clearly not feasible. Thus the sale of children... might be seen... as an effort to construct a better set of life-chances than those of the existing family structure.” However, this explanation too is difficult to uphold in a social context where female chastity is highly regarded, and where the husband would know that the abandoned spouse would fall prey to sexual exploitation and so become a social outcaste. Abandoning wives and selling little daughters into prostitution can hardly be seen as a way of improving their life chances. Even if the woman managed to survive, she would not be accepted back socially either by her husband’s family or by her birth family.³ This is in fact what happened—in the aftermath of the famine, women filled the shelters opened to accommodate them.

An alternative way of understanding this process lies in recognizing the family as a unit of both cooperation and conflict, of both sharing and selfishness, where self-interest can also dominate, and outcomes can depend on differential bargaining power. Family breakup and female victimization can thus be seen as outcomes of shifts in relative male–female entitlements and fallback positions, and so in their relative bargaining strengths within the family. It is striking that the decision of the

³ Greenough (1982: 225) recognizes this too; and this is also highlighted by research on the fate of women abducted during the partition of India (Menon and Bhasin 1998).

man to abandon his wife occurs at a point when the wife's entitlements appear to have collapsed completely while those of the husband are weakened but not entirely gone. It is a telling point that 57% of male but only 6% of female recipients of relief were found (in the survey mentioned earlier) to be able to pay cash for the food received, and also that the lowest excess mortality in absolute terms was among men in the age group 20–40. Moreover, one of the traditional (and few) fallback occupations for poor women in Bengal—paddy husking—was not sustaining. Paddy huskers ranked among the top four categories of those hardest hit by the famine (Sen 1981: 71); and the large number of new entrants to this occupation during the worst phase of the famine appears to have been symptomatic of women's growing marginalization in other occupations. The sudden congestion of this occupation would also have depressed the already low earnings of those who did find work. It is notable too that the abandoned women in the three illustrative accounts presented by Greenough all had husbands with resources to survive on. One account is of an 18-year-old found wandering in Calcutta, whose husband had pushed her out and “decided to stay on the [one acre of] land to look after his coming betel-vine”. In another case, the husband had divorced and abandoned his wife to go join the army, and in the third account the husband had simply migrated out without informing her. In general, Greenough notes that the men stayed behind if they had resources in the village, or migrated to other areas if they had none—in either case abandoning the women and children while availing themselves of other options.

Men's fallback position was stronger than women's on several counts. First, men were more mobile and could migrate longer distances for jobs. Second, they were more likely to have some leftover assets, including land, while women's assets—typically small animals and jewelry—would by then have been disposed of, since it is common for families facing severe food crisis to sell off such movable assets first, and to hold on to large animals and land (Jodha 1975; Greenough 1982), which are typically owned by men. Support by friends and neighbors facing similar conditions also tends to collapse during famines, as happened here, and support from the state came *ex post facto*. In other words, women's work options and asset positions collapsed at a much earlier stage in the process of famine impoverishment than men's, leaving women with virtually no potential to contribute toward family survival and hence little bargaining power. Within the cooperative conflict framework and bargaining view of the family, at this point non-cooperation by the husband would make sense in the interests of his individual physical survival, and do him no harm in social terms (he could marry again).

It needs stressing that in these famine conditions the woman's fallback position diminishes *simultaneously* with her potential contribution to family income, since her lack of asset ownership and access to employment undermine both. Hence even though the husband's bargaining position improves as a result, it is still in his economic interest to abandon her, since an improved bargaining position would

provide him no *realizable* advantage, given the simultaneous (and severe) decline in her ability to contribute to joint well-being.⁴

Essentially, Greenough's view of the family (which Appadurai implicitly accepts) comes close to what Sen (1983) describes as the "despotic" family, where the male head takes all decisions and the others just obey, in line with Becker's unitary household model. What I have suggested here is that the process of family disintegration fits in better with the cooperative conflict (bargaining) view of the family as outlined by Sen (among others), even if he does not apply this view to his work on famines. In more recent theoretical and empirical developments on intra-household bargaining, it is this view of intra-family relations which is found to better explain unequal outcomes within the home than the unitary household model.⁵

At the same time, formal bargaining models of the household assume fully aware and typically self-interested individuals participating in the bargaining process. But what if women do not act in their own interest and therefore do not bargain to their best advantage? This brings me to the second aspect of my engagement with Sen's ideas, but more as contention than as extension.

II. FALSE PERCEPTIONS OR STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY?

Sen (1990) argues that the outcome of intra-household bargaining will be less favorable to a person the less value s/he attaches to her/his own well-being relative to the well-being of others ("perceived interest response"), and that this tends to be especially so in "traditional societies" such as India, where women tend not to think in terms of self-interest or their individual well-being:

[I]nsofar as intrafamily divisions involve significant inequalities in the allotment of food, medical attention, health care, and the like (often unfavorable to the well-being—even survival—of women), the lack of perception of personal interest combined with a great concern for family welfare is, of course, just the kind of attitude that helps to sustain the

⁴ Partha Dasgupta (1993: 329) misinterprets my 1990 paper in attributing to me the argument that a collapse of the woman's fallback position relative to her husband's *in itself* leads to her being abandoned in a famine. Equally, his argument that a weakening of the woman's fallback position, and hence the strengthening of the man's bargaining power, should encourage the man to remain in the marriage rather than abandon his wife, fails to take into account the fact that she has by then little left to contribute, and hence there is little for him to gain from "cooperation".

⁵ See the references in Agarwal (1997). See also research undertaken at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI, Washington, DC; <www.ifpri.org>) which empirically tests different household models.

traditional inequalities. There is much evidence in history that acute inequalities often survive precisely by making allies out of the deprived. *The underdog comes to accept the legitimacy of the unequal order and becomes an implicit accomplice.*

(Sen 1990: 126; emphasis mine)

The idea that women tend not to have a clear perception of their individual interests in societies such as India—that is, that they may suffer from a form of “false consciousness”, in effect making them complicit in perpetuating their unequal position—is interesting, but debatable. The empirical evidence that can be culled points more to the contrary.

For a start, it is difficult to infer from simply observing people’s *overt* behavior whether they are conforming to an unequal order because they accept its legitimacy, or because they are afraid to challenge it, or because they lack exit options. To understand how women perceive unequal gender relations, we need to examine not only their overt acts of resistance (or lack thereof) but also the many covert ways in which they express their dissatisfaction. Empirical work which probes women’s covert responses, by recording their views in contexts where they can express themselves freely, or by using participant observation methods to penetrate hidden expressions, provides diverse examples of women’s “everyday resistance”⁶ to intra-household inequalities in resource distribution and control, and to their double work burdens. There are, for instance, many recorded cases of South Asian rural women, despite being restricted by seclusion norms, covertly trying to get some cash which they can independently control, by taking up income-earning work secretly, or by clandestinely selling small amounts of household grain.⁷ On the basis of their many interviews with village women in Bangladesh, Abdullah and Zeidenstein (1982: 47) observe:

Women told us usually what *other* women have done. For example, one woman stocked rice in another woman’s house so her husband could not know she had it. Another woman had a neighbour raise a goat for her so her husband would not know about it. Yet another woman has opened a *pan* [betel leaf] business with her young son and has told him to keep their earnings a secret from the husband. Most women say that they hide their savings in holes in the bamboo, in the roof, or under piles of cloth.

Similarly, Lindholm (1982: 201) notes that in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province, “The husband considers this [i.e. a wife secretly selling grain] theft, but the wife considers it her just dues for her work.” Risseuw (1988: 278) finds that in Sri Lanka, women coir workers “usually hide their money in different parts of the house, so that, after a beating, [the woman] can disclose one place, thereby giving [the husband] the illusion she has handed all her savings to him”.

⁶ See Scott (1985) for an elaboration of this term.

⁷ Abdullah and Zeidenstein (1982), Lindholm (1982), Luschinsky (1962), Nath (1984) and White (1992) give evidence from various parts of South Asia.

Most women spend the money so controlled on family subsistence, and especially on their children. However, again this need not imply false perceptions, since women's particular attention to children can indicate their distinct preferences⁸ and/or their investment in social protection,⁹ or old-age security (given their typical lack of other assets). Moreover, it is not uncommon for women to spend their hidden savings on personal needs (Abdullah and Zeidenstein 1982), or on building "social capital" by buying gifts for family members to win their support (Luschinsky 1962). Some invest in goats and cows which they keep in their parental homes as a form of social security, rather than sharing the earnings with spouses or in-laws (Nath 1984). Some others are found to circumvent unequal food-sharing in a joint family in ingenious ways, such as by holding clandestine picnics with women friends, as found in Nepal (Enslin 1990), or feigning spirit possession to extract food items otherwise denied them, as observed in Pakistan (Khan 1983) and north India (personal observation).

Interviews with peasant women by sociologists also establish that women do not accept the unequal gender division of labor as legitimate, whether they covertly resist it or merely lament it. White (1992: 318), for instance, observed that sometimes Bangladeshi village women served their husbands' friends tea without milk, so that the men would "not think she had nothing better to do than make tea for them all day and [would therefore] be discouraged from returning". Peasant women in north India comment:

Agricultural labourer men help Jat men in the fields, but for Jat women it only means more work. We have to cook more food and feed the labourers as well. . . . Women should also have fixed hours of work.

(Horowitz and Kishwar 1982: 17)

We women stay at home and do back-breaking work even if we are feeling ill or if we are pregnant. There is no sick leave for us. But we do not have any money of our own and when the men come home we have to cast our eyes down and bow our heads.

(Sharma 1980: 207)

Such examples challenge, in different ways, any simple notion that women in rural South Asia (or indeed elsewhere) have accepted the legitimacy of intra-household inequality.¹⁰ The overt appearance of compliance ("cast our eyes down") need not mean that women lack a perception of their best interests; rather it can reflect a survival strategy stemming from the constraints on their ability to pursue those interests overtly (e.g. "we do not have any money of our own"). Hence

⁸ See also Basu (2006) and Agarwal (1997) on situations where women may be willing to bargain with husbands on behalf of children, because they have preferences regarding children that are distinct from those of their spouses.

⁹ See Agarwal (1997) on interest coalitions between mothers and children. Such coalitions with older children could also protect mothers from domestic violence.

¹⁰ Women are also found to use covert forms of resistance in the workplace, especially if they have no formalized systems of expressing dissent (Gunawardena 1989).

although I agree with Sen (1990: 126) that it would be an error to take “the absence of protests and questioning of inequality as evidence of the absence of that inequality”, I believe it would equally be an error to interpret the absence of *overt* protest as indicating that women accept the inequality. Complying with inequality need not imply complicity in its perpetuation.

Sen does recognize that deprived groups may comply for many different reasons—habit, hopelessness, resignation, etc.—but he attributes this to their acceptance of the legitimacy of the established order rather than their covertly resisting that order. He writes (Sen 1990: 127): “Deprived groups may be habituated to inequality, may be unaware of possibilities of social change, may be hopeless about upliftment of objective circumstances of misery, may be resigned to fate, and may well be willing to accept the legitimacy of the established order.” My point of departure here is in emphasizing the many everyday but hidden ways in which women resist the established order.

It is likely, though, that this resistance varies by context. Hence on some issues women articulate or appear even to believe in ideologies that benefit men—for instance, maintaining that child care is women’s responsibility; on other issues there is observable opposition, such as towards family authority structures, male control over cash, and domestic violence. Class factors might also affect the degree to which women see their self-interest as congruent with that of the household. In northern South Asia, it is middle-class and rich peasant women (who benefit from their husbands’ properties and face greater social restrictions on outside employment), rather than women agricultural labourers, who typically insist that sons are important for continuing the lineage, and who have a more negative attitude toward daughters (Gardner 1990; Horowitz and Kishwar 1982; personal observation).

In order to explain gender inequalities I would therefore place much less emphasis than Sen does on women’s incorrect perceptions of their self-interest, and much more on the constraints they face in pursuing that interest. The policy implications would thus be less toward making women realize (say, through awareness raising) that they *deserve* better, and more toward having them believe they can *do* better (by improving their self-confidence, their information access, etc.), and by helping them actually to do better, by strengthening their economic and social position.

I would also like to distinguish here between Sen’s argument about women’s false consciousness (which I have contested above) and his argument about *adaptive preferences*, with which I substantially agree, namely that the deprived may adapt their preferences according to what appears feasible. Sen, for instance, gives a striking example from a 1945 survey conducted a year after the Great Bengal Famine, which found that only 2.5% of the widows compared with 48.5% of widowers reported themselves “ill” or in “indifferent health”, even though the former were widely recognized to be the more deprived (Sen 1984: 309). Sen notes (1999: 63): “The deprived people tend to come to terms with their deprivation because of the

sheer necessity of survival, and they may, as a result, lack the courage to demand any radical change, and may even adjust their desires and expectations to what they unambitiously see as feasible.” I would add that this could happen not only if the deprived adapt their needs and preferences (as Sen and some others rightly emphasize), but equally if the deprived adapt what they *reveal* of their needs and preferences, according to who asks the questions and how, and what the respondent thinks the researcher wants to hear. Women may not reveal their real preferences overtly, but may do so through their covert actions.

III. RELATIVE CAPABILITIES, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND WOMEN’S PROPERTY STATUS

I now move to the third aspect on which I have engaged with Sen’s ideas, namely capabilities and freedoms. This engagement represents both an extension and a contestation. It is an extension in that I move beyond the notion of absolute capabilities to that of relative capabilities. It is implicitly a contestation, in that I argue that higher absolute capabilities could in some contexts lead to perverse outcomes. It is also implicitly a contestation in two other respects: (1) I emphasize women’s property status as a critical element in their capability enhancement and empowerment, an aspect that Sen has largely neglected while privileging women’s employment status, and (2) I focus on hidden aspects of women’s unfreedom in Kerala, such as a high incidence of domestic violence, as a counterpoint to Sen’s overwhelmingly positive reading of women’s position in that state.

Freedom is a key concept in Sen’s definitions of capabilities and development. Sen defines capabilities as the freedom to choose what you have reason to value. And he defines development as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Development, he notes, “requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom” (Sen 1999: 3). Yet some serious forms of unfreedom have received rather little attention in discussions of capabilities or development. These are the unfreedoms hidden within families, in particular those stemming from domestic violence. If development means the expansion of human capabilities, then freedom from domestic violence should be integral to evaluating developmental progress. Actual evaluative exercises, such as the UNDP’s Human Development Indices (for which Sen’s capability approach provides the theoretical underpinnings), remain largely confined to conventional measures of well-being (e.g. income, education and longevity). Even the occasional broader formulation, such as in the Gender Empowerment Measure, neglects critical dimensions that can empower women, such as effective property rights and freedom from physical and mental abuse.

Although Sen himself does not grapple with this issue, many dimensions of his work are helpful in teasing out the adverse impact of domestic violence on such things as women's well-being, capabilities and agency, and on a country's overall development. As elaborated in Agarwal and Panda (2007), marital violence can undermine all the attributes on which Sen (1993, 1999) lays particular emphasis in terms of human development and well-being, such as a woman's capabilities and functionings (her economic, social and political freedoms and opportunities), and her well-being and agency goals (the goals she sets for her own advancement or for the advancement of others). By way of illustration, the serious physical and mental injury that can be caused by domestic violence can critically undermine a woman's economic freedoms—such as her capability of earning a living or acquiring property—by making her afraid of reprisal if she goes out to work, or seeks to upgrade her skills, or explores job options, or asserts her property rights. And when she suffers actual physical or mental injury it can affect her functioning in the job market by disrupting her work life, productivity and upward mobility. Domestic violence also undermines all five instrumental freedoms that Sen (1999) argues are central to evaluating human well-being and a country's development progress, namely protective security, economic facilities, social opportunities, political freedoms, and transparency guarantees.

At the same time, we also need to consider the reverse effect, namely the impact of given capabilities or functionings (or lack thereof) on the risk of domestic violence. Additionally, we need to look not just at the effects of a woman's *absolute* levels of capabilities or functionings on her risk of violence, but also at the effects of her *relative* capabilities or functionings *vis-à-vis* her spouse—an aspect that has received little attention.

III.1 Relative Capabilities and Perverse Outcomes

Normally we would expect that the greater a woman's educational level (functioning) and hence her job opportunities (capability), the higher her well-being. We would also expect any spousal *gap* in capabilities and functionings, which favors the woman, to improve her well-being outcomes by improving her bargaining power within the family. And we would expect her to be subject to less violence because her husband values her economic contribution. But consider a situation where a man married to a woman better employed than himself is irked by his wife's "superiority" and so beats her up. The injuries he causes can reduce her well-being outcomes both directly (e.g. by undermining her health and self-confidence) and indirectly (e.g. by reducing her earning abilities and social opportunities). In other words, in particular situations perverse effects can result, wherein a woman with higher absolute capabilities or functionings may be left worse off than one with

lower absolute capabilities or functionings, depending on her position *relative* to her husband's.

The extent of such perverse effects can, of course, vary with cultural context (including ideas about masculinity) and needs empirical testing. But irrespective of the empirical results, we need to recognize conceptually that well-being outcomes can depend not only on absolute capabilities and functionings but also on the play of relative capabilities and functionings, especially within families, and that this might sometimes lead to perverse effects.¹¹ In some respects, this recognition would help extend Sen's contribution on cooperative conflict within the family (Sen 1990), which he has linked rather little to his capability approach. At the same time, such a recognition would also complicate Sen's formulation, which does not deal with the possibility of perverse outcomes, such as husbands beating up wives who have higher capabilities (or functionings) than themselves.

Before illustrating this possibility empirically, an additional gap needs mention, namely, researchers' neglect of women's property status as a critical factor in women's well-being outcomes, sense of empowerment, and freedom from domestic violence.

III.2 Property Ownership versus Employment

The ownership of *immovable property* has several advantages over simply being employed. For a start, the security provided by property ownership does not vary with the vagaries of the labor market. A house or land also clearly indicates that the woman has a strong fallback position and tangible exit option.¹² This can deter violence. And if she still faces violence, owning (or otherwise having access to) a house or land can give her somewhere to go. A house, in particular, provides a ready roof over the head. But even with land she can build a homestead or set up a micro-enterprise, which brings in an income. Employment alone does not provide the same protection, for several reasons.¹³ If women are simply unpaid workers on family farms or in family businesses, as is the case for many women in developing countries, employment *in itself* is unlikely to improve their financial situation. But even when women have earnings, these may be insufficient to rent a place if they need to escape violence. Also, for social reasons women may find it difficult to rent accommodation—in many cultures landlords are suspicious of single women

¹¹ In the voluminous literature on the capability approach, there is rather little discussion on how well-being outcomes can be affected by one person's capabilities relative to another's. Although Richardson (2007) and Iversen (2006) provide interesting takes on this, they do not focus on the potential for intra-household perverse outcomes.

¹² See also Agarwal (1994, 1997) on the potential impact of owning immovable property on bargaining power.

¹³ Some studies find a lower incidence of violence among employed women, others a higher incidence, or no difference (see Agarwal and Panda 2007 for details).

tenants. A woman owning a home or land does not face the same problems. Moreover, in rural areas, land access enhances women's livelihood options and their overall sense of empowerment (Agarwal 1994). Property ownership can therefore reduce her risk of suffering violence by increasing her economic security, reducing her tolerance of violence, and providing a potential escape route should violence occur.

Would perverse capability effects also be less likely with property ownership compared to employment? We might indeed expect so. Employment alone, as noted above, typically does not provide a woman with an immediate, credible exit option. Hence a man wanting to show a wife who is better employed than himself her "proper place" within the relationship may not be deterred by the fact that she is employed. But owning a house or land visibly signals the strength of a woman's fallback position and clearly indicates that she has a tangible and credible exit route. Hence, a spousal gap in property ownership that favors the woman is less likely to lead to a perverse effect. What is important here is not whether a woman actually uses the exit option that immovable property provides, but that its very existence can deter the husband from abusing her.

III.3 Empirical Analysis

I jointly conducted (with Pradeep Panda) empirical analysis of the effect of women's capabilities (absolute and relative) on her risk of domestic violence, based on (1) his 2000/1 sample of 502 households (rural and urban) selected randomly from a population of ten wards in Trivandrum district in Kerala state (India), and (2) a panel resurvey of the same households by both of us in 2004/5 (which captured 80% of the earlier sample). The resurvey also provides information on the man's property status which the former did not (for details of both surveys see Agarwal and Panda 2007). The respondents were women aged 15 to 59 who had ever been married.

Table 9.1 gives the incidence of long-term physical violence (that is, where the women reported they had faced one or more incidents after marriage). This is cross-tabulated with the woman and her husband's individual and relative employment status and their individual and relative property status. We find that in and of itself, the woman's employment status does not protect her from violence. In fact there is a perverse effect—the incidence of physical violence is *higher* if a woman does seasonal or irregular work (as is usual with agricultural work) than if she is unemployed. Only where the woman has regular employment is the incidence of domestic violence lower than if she is unemployed (or does seasonal or irregular work). However, the gender gap in employment is again linked with a perverse effect. Where the woman has a higher employment status than her husband the

Table 9.1. Effects of absolute and relative capabilities on long-term physical violence against women

Capability	Number of cases	Long-term physical violence among cases (%)
<i>2000/1 survey (N = 502)</i>		
Employment of woman respondent		
Unemployed	342	35.1
Regular employment	93	28.0
Seasonal or irregular employment	67	49.3
Employment of husband		
Unemployed	34	70.6
Regular	406	31.3
Seasonal or irregular	62	45.2
Spousal employment difference ^a		
Wife = husband	126	34.9
Wife < husband	360	34.4
Wife > husband	16	68.8
Immovable property owned by woman		
None	330	49.1
Land only	28	17.9
House only	71	9.9
House and land	73	6.8
Spousal immovable property ownership difference		<i>2004/5 resurvey (N = 402)</i>
Neither spouse owns land or house	190	58.9 (112/190)
Woman is propertyless, husband owns land and/or house	68	23.5 (16/68)
Woman owns land and/or house, husband is propertyless	69	14.5 (10/69)
Both spouses own land and/or house	75	5.3 (4/75)

Note: W = wife, H = husband, u = unemployed, r = regular, s/i = seasonal or irregular.

^a Spousal employment difference was calculated as follows:

- (1) Wife = husband: wife and husband have similar type of employment
{W(u), H(u); W(r), H(r); W(s/i), H(s/i)}
- (2) Wife < husband: wife's employment status is lower than husband's
{W(u), H(r); W(u), H(s/i); W(s/i), H(r)}
- (3) Wife > husband: wife's employment status is higher than husband's
{W(r), H(u); W(r), H(s/i); W(s/i), H(u)}

Sources: Adapted from Panda and Agarwal (2005: 835–6) and Agarwal and Panda (2007: 374).

incidence of violence is *twice* that of a woman who has the same or a lower employment status.¹⁴ This empirically substantiates my point that it is important to take relative capabilities and functionings into account when assessing well-being outcomes.

¹⁴ Duvvury and Allendorf (2001) similarly find greater domestic violence when the woman has a better employment status as, for instance, when the woman is employed and the man is unemployed.

Table 9.2. Women's property ownership, long-term physical violence, and their leaving and returning home (2000/1 survey)

Characteristics	All women		Propertyless women		Propertied women (owning land or house or both)	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Among women facing long-term physical violence those who left home (N = 43)	24.0	43/179	19.1	31/162	70.6	12/17
Women who returned home among those who had left (N = 24)	55.8	24/43	67.7	21/31	25.0	3/12

Source: Adapted from Panda and Agarwal (2005: 838).

Second, unlike employment, women's property ownership is associated with a dramatically and *unambiguously* lower incidence of long-term physical violence. For instance, as many as 49% of the women who owned neither land nor house reported long-term physical violence. In contrast, the figure was 18% for those owning land, 10% for those owning a house, and 7% for those owning both.¹⁵ Also, the preliminary results of the 2004/5 survey show that women are not negatively affected even when the gender gap in property ownership tilts in their favor. The incidence of violence is 14% if the woman owns property and the husband does not, but it is 24% if the husband owns property and the wife does not. In other words, owning property protects the woman, and there is no perverse relative capability effect, in that a propertied woman married to a propertyless man is *not* subjected to more violence.

Moreover, not only is the incidence of violence lower if a woman owns property, but she is also more likely to leave home and stay away if violence occurs, since she has somewhere to go. Of the 179 women experiencing long-term physical violence, 43 left home (Table 9.2). The percentage leaving home was much greater among the propertied (71%) than among the propertyless (19%). Also, of the 43 women who left home, although 24 returned, 87% of the returning women were propertyless. Few among the propertied women returned to their husbands. From the 2004/5 panel resurvey we also found that all the house-owning women who left home and did not return were living in their own houses, while 88% of the propertyless women who left home and did not return were living in their parents' home. These observations further support my contention that property ownership serves both

¹⁵ Belonging to a matrilineal caste group (where property passes through the female line), however, does not make a difference over and above owning property (Panda and Agarwal 2005). Rather, the effect of matriliney is indirect, in that it enhances the chances of Kerala women (relative to women elsewhere) owning property, both among matrilineal communities and among others influenced by such communities.

as a deterrent to marital violence and as an exit option if violence does occur. As one woman said: “owning property is a powerful shield for women. It was because of these 10 cents of land [0.1 acre] and this small house [an outhouse] that I could escape from my in-laws’ place when life became a nightmare.”

The reduced risk of domestic violence to women if they own immovable property is further confirmed through logistic analysis, in which we controlled for the effect of a large number of other variables, such as the household’s economic status, the educational and employment status of both spouses and any gender gap therein, the woman’s age, duration of marriage, her access to social support, the woman and her husband’s exposure to such violence in childhood, husband’s alcohol abuse, and so on (see Agarwal and Panda 2007 for the results). The impact of a woman’s property status was statistically significant whether she owned only land, or only a house, or both. The odds of being beaten if the woman owned both a house and land were found to be 20 times lower than if she owned neither. The odds were 11 times lower if she only owned a house, and eight times lower if she owned only land.

It is notable that the deterrent effects of property ownership are not specific to Kerala. Gupta (2006) found a similar link in West Bengal (east India): current physical violence was 38% among propertyless women and 15% among the propertied. Owning a house made a particular difference.

IV. THE NEGLECTED ISSUE OF WOMEN’S PROPERTY STATUS

Women’s property status forms a connecting thread through the diverse dimensions of intra-household gender relations on which I have focused (applying, extending or contesting aspects of Sen’s wide-ranging work). It is an aspect which Sen has rarely touched on, beyond occasional references, but which I believe is of central importance in defining women’s capabilities and functionings, freedoms and agency.

For instance, a critical factor in the collapse of women’s fallback position during famine is the difference in the types of assets men and women typically own in South Asia. Women’s assets, as noted, tend to be movables—small animals, jewelry, etc. They seldom own agricultural land or homesteads (except in Kerala and Meghalaya in India, where there are substantial pockets of traditionally matrilineal communities, and Sri Lanka, where most communities were either bilateral or matrilineal¹⁶). In Martha Chen’s survey of rural widows in seven states, of the

¹⁶ In matrilineal inheritance systems property passes through the female line; in bilateral systems it passes to and through both men and women.

470 widows whose fathers owned land only 13% inherited any of that land as daughters, Kerala being the exception, with 43% of the women inheriting (Agarwal 1998: 22). In Nepal, according to its 2001 census, only 17% of women own land or a house. Hence even within land-owning households, in extreme contexts such as famines, women and children can be abandoned and forced into destitution, since few typically own immovable assets. Owning property could protect women and children in such dire circumstances both directly and by reducing the chances of family breakup. This is also being recognized in other contexts of vulnerability, such as HIV/AIDS, as women who lack secure property rights face destitution, along with their children, when husbands die of the disease.¹⁷ Similarly, as noted, women owning no immovable assets face significantly greater risk of domestic violence than those who own such assets, even in Kerala.

More generally, there is substantial evidence that if women own immovable property themselves, it makes a critical difference to their own and their children's economic and social well-being and overall empowerment. Owning even a small plot of land or a homestead enhances women's livelihood options and self-esteem, reduces their risk of poverty, and increases the likelihood of children surviving, attending school, and receiving health care (Agarwal 1994, 2003). With the growing feminization of agriculture in many parts of South Asia, land titles for women can also enhance agricultural productivity.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that the two regions in South Asia with relatively favourable human development indicators for women are Kerala in India and Sri Lanka as a whole. Neither have sex ratios adverse to women and hence "missing women" (Klasen and Wink 2006). Sen, in his interview in Agarwal *et al.* (2006: 353), concedes the importance of Kerala's matrilineal tradition (and hence openness to women owning property) as a factor in the state's favorable gender-related human development indicators, but in most of his writings he continues to emphasize female education and employment as the keys to women's advancement. I agree with him that we cannot depend simply on "historical luck" to improve women's position, and Kerala and Sri Lanka have certainly had historical advantages in women's property rights, but for those less favored by history, public policy could compensate by promoting land and housing rights for women, if policy-makers were persuaded to focus on this critically important, but sadly neglected, factor.

To conclude, there is much that Amartya Sen has written that we would agree with. There is some that he has written that we might disagree with. The important point, however, is not whether we agree with him on every aspect, but that we engage with the enormous wealth of ideas with which he has enriched us, and which challenge us in ways that the work of few thinkers of modern times can match.

¹⁷ For evidence from South Asia, note the live testimonies presented by women at a UNDP Asia Pacific Court of Women on "HIV, Inheritance and Property Rights", Colombo, 18 August 2007 (see <www.sundaytimes.lk/070819/News/nws.18.html>).

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