Chapter 17

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WOMEN'S AGENCY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S CLASSIC BOOK *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, had various distinct claims within the general program of "vindication" that she outlined. The rights she spoke about included not only some that particularly related to the well-being of women (and the entitlements that were directly geared to promote that well-being), but also rights that were aimed mainly at the free agency of women.

Both these features figure in the agenda of women's movements today, but it is, I think, fair to say that the agency aspects are beginning to receive some attention at last, in contrast to the earlier exclusive concentration on well-being aspects. Not long ago, the tasks these movements faced primarily involved working to achieve better treatment for women – a squarer deal. The concentration was mainly on women's *well-being* – and it was a much needed corrective. The objectives have, however, gradually evolved and broadened from this "welfarist" focus to incorporate – and emphasize – the active role of women's *agency*. No longer the passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help, women are increasingly seen, by men as well as women, as active agents of change: the dynamic promoters of social transformations that can alter the lives of *both* women and men.[1]

Agency and well-being

The nature of this shift in concentration and emphasis is sometimes missed because of the *overlap* between the two approaches. The active agency of women cannot, in any serious way, ignore the urgency of rectifying many inequalities that blight the well-being of women and subject them to unequal treatment; thus the agency role must be much concerned with women's well-being also. Similarly, coming from the other end, any practical attempt at enhancing the well-being of women cannot but draw on the agency of women themselves in bringing about such a change. So the *well-being aspect* and the *agency aspect*

of women's movements inevitably have a substantial intersection. And yet they cannot but be different at a foundational level, since the role of a person as an "agent" is fundamentally distinct from (though not independent of) the role of the same person as a "patient."[2] The fact that the agent may have to see herself as a patient as well does not alter the additional modalities and responsibilities that are inescapably associated with the agency of a person.

To see individuals as entities that experience and have well-being is an important recognition, but to stop there would amount to a very restricted view of the personhood of women. Understanding the agency role is thus central to recognizing people as responsible persons: not only are we well or ill, but also we act or refuse to act, and can choose to act one way rather than another. And thus we – women *and* men – must take responsibility for doing things or not doing them. It makes a difference, and we have to take note of that difference. This elementary acknowledgment, though simple enough in principle, can be exacting in its implications, both for social analysis and for practical reason and action.

The changing focus of women's movements is, thus, a crucial *addition* to previous concerns; it is not a rejection of those concerns. The old concentration on the well-being of women, or, to be more exact, on the "ill-being" of women, was not, of course, pointless. The relative deprivations in the well-being of women were – and are – certainly present in the world in which we live, and are clearly important for social justice, including justice for women. For example, there is plenty of evidence that identifies the biologically "contrary" (socially generated) "excess mortality" of women in Asia and North Africa, with gigantic numbers of "missing women" – "missing" in the sense of being dead as a result of gender bias in the distribution of health care and other necessities (on this see my essay "Missing Women" in *British Medical Journal*, March 1992).[3] That problem is unquestionably important for the well-being of women, and in understanding the treatment of women as "less than equal." There are also pervasive indications of culturally neglected needs of women across the world. There are excellent reasons for bringing these deprivations to light and keeping the removal of these iniquities very firmly on the agenda.

But it is also the case that the limited role of women's active agency seriously afflicts the lives of *all* people – men as well as women, children as well as adults. While there is every reason not to slacken the concern about women's well-being and ill-being, and to continue to pay attention to the sufferings and deprivations of women, there is also an urgent and basic necessity, particularly at this time, to take an agent-oriented approach to the women's agenda.

Perhaps the most immediate argument for focusing on women's *agency* may be precisely the role that such an agency can play in removing the iniquities that depress the *well-being* of women. Empirical work in recent years has brought out very clearly how the relative respect and regard for women's well-being is strongly influenced by such variables as women's ability to earn an independent income, to find employment outside the home, to have ownership rights and to have literacy and be educated participants in decisions within and outside the family. Indeed, even the survival disadvantage of women compared with men in developing countries seems to go down sharply – and may even get eliminated – as progress is made in these agency aspects.[4]

These different aspects (women's earning power, economic role outside the family, literacy and education, property rights and so on) may at first sight appear to be rather diverse and disparate. But what they all have in common is their positive contribution in adding force to women's voice and agency – through independence and empowerment.

For example, working outside the home and earning an independent income tend to have a clear impact on enhancing the social standing of a woman in the household and the society. Her contribution to the prosperity of the family is then more visible, and she also has more voice, because of being less dependent on others. Further, outside employment often has useful "educational" effects, in terms of exposure to the world outside the household, making her agency more effective. Similarly, women's education strengthens women's agency and also tends to make it more informed and skilled. The ownership of property can also make women more powerful in family decisions.

The diverse variables identified in the literature thus have a unified empowering role. This role has to be related to the acknowledgment that women's power – economic independence as well as social emancipation – can have far-reaching impacts on the forces and organizing principles that govern divisions *within* the family and in society as a whole, and can, in particular, influence what are implicitly accepted as women's "entitlements."[5]

Cooperative conflict

To understand the process, we can start by noting that women and men have both *congruent* and *conflicting* interests that affect family living. Decision making in the family thus tends to take the form of pursuing cooperation, with some agreed solution – usually *implicit* – of the conflicting aspects. Such "cooperative conflict" is a general feature of many group relations, and an analysis of cooperative conflicts can provide a useful way of understanding the influences that operate on the "deal" that women get in family divisions. There are gains to be made by both parties through following implicitly agreed patterns of behavior. But there are many alternative possible agreements – some more favorable to one party than others. The choice of one such cooperative arrangement from the set of alternative possibilities leads to a particular distribution of joint benefits.[6]

Conflicts between the partially disparate interests within family living are typically resolved through implicitly agreed patterns of behavior that may or may not be particularly egalitarian. The very nature of family living – sharing a home and leading joint lives – requires that the elements of conflict must not be explicitly emphasized (dwelling on conflicts will be seen as a sign of a "failed" union), and sometimes the deprived woman cannot even clearly assess the extent of her relative deprivation. Similarly, the perception of who is doing how much "productive" work, or who is "contributing" how much to the family's prosperity, can be very influential, even though the underlying "theory" regarding how "contributions" and "productivity" are to be assessed may rarely be discussed explicitly.

Perceptions of entitlement

The perception of individual contributions and appropriate entitlements of women and men plays a major role in the division of a family's joint benefits between men and women.[7] As a result, the circumstances that influence these perceptions of contributions and appropriate entitlements (such as women's ability to earn an independent income, to work outside the home, to be educated, to own property) can have a crucial bearing on these divisions. The impact of greater empowerment and independent agency of women thus includes the correction of the iniquities that blight the lives and well-being of women vis-à-vis men. The lives that women save through more powerful agency will certainly include their own.[8]

That, however, is not the whole story. There are other lives – men's and children's – also involved. Even within the family, the lives affected may be those of the children, since there is considerable evidence that women's empowerment within the family can reduce child mortality significantly. Going well beyond that, women's agency and voice, influenced by education and employment, can in turn influence the nature of the public discussion on a variety of social subjects, including acceptable fertility rates (not just in the family of the particular women themselves) and environmental priorities.

There is also the important issue of *intrafamily* division of food, health care, and other provisions. Much depends on how the family's economic means are used to cater to the interests of different individuals in the household: women and men, girls and boys, children and adults, old and young.[9]

The arrangements for sharing within the family are given, to a great extent, by established conventions, but they are also influenced by such factors as the economic role and empowerment of women and the value systems of the community at large.[10] In the evolution of value systems and conventions of intrafamily division, an important role can be played by female education, female employment and female ownership rights, and these "social" features can be very crucial for the economic fortunes (as well as well-being and freedom) of different members of the family.[11]

In the context of the general theme of this book, this relationship is worth considering a bit more. As has already been discussed, the most useful way of understanding famines is in terms of the loss of entitlement – a sharp decline in the substantive freedom to buy food. This would lead to a collapse in the amount of food the family as a whole can buy and consume. While distributional problems within the family can be serious even in famine situations, they are particularly crucial in determining the general undernourishment and hunger of different members of the family in situations of persistent poverty, which is "normal" in many communities. It is in the continued inequality in the division of food – and (perhaps even more) that of health care – that gender inequality manifests itself most blatantly and persistently in poor societies with strong antifemale bias.

This antifemale bias seems to be influenced by the social standing and economic power of women in general. Men's relative dominance connects with a number of factors, including the position of being the "breadwinner" whose economic power commands respect even within the family.[12] On the other side of the coin, there is considerable evidence that when women can and do earn income outside the household, this tends to enhance the relative position of women even in the distributions within the household.

While women work long hours every day at home, since this work does not produce a remuneration it is often ignored in the accounting of the respective contributions of women and men in the family's joint prosperity.[13] When, however, the work is done outside the home and the employed woman earns a wage, her contribution to the family's prosperity is more visible. She also has more voice, because of being less dependent on others. The higher status of women even affects, it appears, ideas on the female child's "due." So the freedom to seek and hold outside jobs can contribute to the reduction of women's relative – and absolute – deprivation. Freedom in one area (that of being able to work outside the household) seems to help to foster freedom in others (in enhancing freedom from hunger, illness and relative deprivation).

There is also considerable evidence that fertility rates tend to go down with greater empowerment of women. This is not surprising, since the lives that are most battered by the frequent bearing and rearing of children are those of young women, and anything that enhances young women's decisional power and increases the attention that their interests receive tends, in general, to prevent over-frequent childbearing. For example, in a comparative study of nearly three hundred districts within India, it emerges that women's education and women's employment are the two most important influences in reducing fertility rates.[14] The influences that help the emancipation of women (including women's literacy and women's employment) do make a major difference to fertility rates. I shall return to this presently in the context of assessing the nature and severity of the "world population problem." General problems of environmental overcrowding, from which both women and men may suffer, link closely with women's specific freedom from the constant bearing and rearing of children that plagues the lives of young women in many societies in the developing world.

Child survival and the agency of women

There is considerable evidence that women's education and literacy tend to reduce the mortality rates of children. The influence works through many channels, but perhaps most immediately, it works through the importance that mothers typically attach to the welfare of the children, and the opportunity the mothers have, when their agency is respected and empowered, to influence family decisions in that direction. Similarly, women's empowerment appears to have a strong influence in reducing the much observed gender bias in survival (particularly against young girls).

Countries with basic gender inequality – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Iran, those in West Asia, those in North Africa and others – often tend to have higher female mortality of infants and children, in contrast with the situation in Europe or America or sub-Saharan Africa, where female children typically have a substantial survival advantage. In India, male and female death rates in the 0–4 age group are now very similar to each other in terms of the average for the country as a whole, but a heavy disadvantage persists for women in regions where gender inequality is particularly pronounced, including most states of northern India.[15]

One of the most interesting studies of these issues – presented in an important statistical contribution by Mamta Murthi, Anne-Catherine Guio, and Jean Drèze – deals with data from 296 districts in India in the census of India of 1981.[16] There have been follow-up studies by Mamta Murthi and Jean Drèze dealing with later evidence, particularly the 1991 census, which broadly confirm the findings based on the 1981 census.[17]

A set of different – but interrelated – causal relations are examined in the studies. The variables to be explained include fertility rates, child mortality rates, and also female disadvantage in child survival (reflecting the *ratio* of female-to-male mortality in the 0–4 age group) in interdistrict comparisons. These variables are related to a number of other district-level variables with explanatory potential, such as female literacy rates, female labor force participation, incidence of poverty (and levels of income), extent of urbanization, availability of medical facilities and the proportion of socially underprivileged groups (scheduled castes and scheduled tribes) in the population.[18]

What should we expect to be the impact on child survival and mortality of the variables that may link most closely to women's agency – in this case women's participation in the labor force and women's literacy and education? It is natural to expect this connection to be entirely positive as far as women's literacy and education are concerned. This is strongly confirmed (more on this presently).

However, in the case of women's labor force participation, social and economic analyses have tended to identify factors working in different directions. First, involvement in gainful employment has many positive effects on a woman's agency roles, which often include greater emphasis being placed on child care and greater ability to attach more priority to child care in joint family decisions. Second, since men typically show great reluctance to share the domestic chores, this greater desire for more priority on child care may not be easy for the women to execute when they are saddled with the "double burden" of household work and outside employment. Thus the net effect could go in either direction. In the Murthi et al. study, the analysis of Indian district-level data does not yield any statistically significant, definite pattern on the connection between women's outside employment and the survival of children.[19]

Female literacy, in contrast, is found to have an unambiguous and statistically significant reducing impact on under-five mortality, even after controlling for male literacy. This is consistent with growing evidence of a close relationship between female literacy and child survival in many countries in the world, and particularly in intercountry comparisons.[20] In this case, the impact of greater empowerment and agency role of women is not reduced in effectiveness by problems arising from inflexible male participation in child care and household work.

There is also the further issue of *gender bias* in child survival (as opposed to *total* child survival). For this variable, it turns out that the female labor force participation rate and female literacy rate *both* have very strong ameliorating effects on the extent of female disadvantage in child survival, with higher levels of female literacy and labor force participation being strongly associated with lower levels of relative female disadvantage in child survival. By contrast, variables that relate to the *general* level of development and modernization *either* turn out to have no statistically significant effect, *or* suggest that modernization (when not accompanied by empowerment of women) can even *strengthen*, rather than weaken, the gender bias in child survival. This applies to, inter alia, urbanization, male literacy, the availability of medical facilities, and the level of poverty (with higher levels of poverty being associated with *higher* female-male ratios among the poor). In so far as a positive connection does exist in India between the level of development and reduced gender bias in survival, it seems to work mainly *through* variables that are directly related to women's agency, such as female literacy and female labor force participation.

It is worth making a further comment on the impact of enhanced women's agency through greater female education. Murthi, Guio and Drèze's statistical analysis indicates that, in quantitative terms, the effect of female literacy on child mortality is extraordinarily large. It is more powerful an influence in reducing child mortality than the other variables that also work in that general direction. For instance, keeping other variables constant, an increase in the crude female literacy rate from, say, 22 percent (the actual 1981 figure for India) to 75 percent reduces the predicted value of under-five mortality for males and females combined from 156 per thousand (again, the actual 1981 figure) to 110 per thousand.

The powerful effect of female literacy contrasts with the comparatively ineffective roles of, say, male literacy or general poverty reduction as instruments of child mortality reduction. The increase in male literacy over the same range (from 22 to 75 percent) only reduces under-five mortality from 169 per thousand to 141 per thousand. And a 50 percent reduction in the incidence of poverty (from the actual 1981 level) only reduces the predicted value of under-five mortality from 156 per thousand to 153 per thousand.

Here again, the message seems to be that some variables relating to women's agency (in this case, female literacy) often play a much more important role in promoting social well-being (in particular, child survival) than variables relating to the general level of opulence in the society. These findings have important practical implications.[21] Both types of variables can be influenced through public action, but respectively require rather different forms of public intervention.

Agency, emancipation and fertility reduction

The agency role of women is also particularly important for the reduction of fertility rates. The adverse effects of high birthrates powerfully include the denial of substantial freedoms – through persistent childbearing and child rearing – routinely imposed on many Asian and African women. There is, as a result, a close connection between women's *well-being* and women's *agency* in bringing about a change in the fertility pattern. Thus it is not surprising that reductions in birthrates have often followed the enhancement of women's status and power.

These connections are indeed reflected in interdistrict variations of the total fertility rate in India. In fact, among all the variables included in the analysis presented by Murthi, Guio and Drèze, the *only* ones that have a statistically significant effect on fertility are female literacy and female labor force participation. Once again, the importance of women's agency emerges forcefully from this analysis, especially in comparison with the weaker effects of variables relating to general economic progress.

The negative linkage between female literacy and fertility appears to be, on the whole, empirically well founded.[22] Such connections have been widely observed in other countries also, and it is not surprising that they should emerge in India. The unwillingness of educated women to be shackled to continuous child rearing clearly plays a role in bringing about this change. Education also makes the horizon of vision wider, and, at a more mundane level, helps to disseminate the knowledge of family planning. And of course educated women tend to have greater freedom to exercise their agency in family decisions, including in matters of fertility and childbirth.

The particular case of the most socially advanced state in India, viz., Kerala, is also worth noting here, because of its particular success in fertility reduction based on women's agency. While the total fertility rate for India as a whole is still higher than 3.0, that rate in Kerala has now fallen well below the "replacement level" (around 2.0, roughly speaking two children per couple) to 1.7, which is also considerably lower than China's fertility rate of 1.9. Kerala's high level of female education has been particularly influential in bringing about a precipitate decline in birthrate. Since female agency and literacy are important also in the reduction of mortality rates, that is another – more indirect – route through which women's agency (including female literacy) may have helped to reduce birthrates, since there is some evidence that a reduction of death rates, especially of

children, tends to contribute to the reduction of fertility rates. Kerala has also had other favorable features for women's empowerment and agency, including a greater recognition of women's property rights for a substantial and influential part of the community.[23] There will be an opportunity to further probe these connections, along with other possible causal linkages, in the next chapter.

Women's political, social and economic roles

There is plenty of evidence that when women get the opportunities that are typically the preserve of men, they are no less successful in making use of these facilities that men have claimed to be their own over the centuries. The opportunities at the highest political levels happen to have come to women, in many developing countries, only in rather special circumstances – often related to the demise of their more established husbands or fathers – but the chances have been invariably seized with much vigor. While the recent history of the role of women in top leadership positions in Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines, Burma or Indonesia may be very well recognized, there is a need to pay more attention to the part that women have been able to play – given the opportunity – at diverse levels of political activities and social initiatives.[24]

The impact of women's activities on social life can be similarly extensive. Sometimes the roles are well known and well anticipated or are becoming so (the impact of women's education on the reduction of fertility rates – already discussed – is a good example of that). However, there are also other connections that call for greater investigation and analysis. One of the more interesting hypotheses concerns the relation between men's influence and the prevalence of violent crimes. The fact that most of the violent crimes in the world are committed by men is well recognized, but there are possible causal influences that have not yet received the attention they may deserve.

An interesting statistical finding in India relates to extensive interdistrict contrasts that show a strong – and statistically very significant – relation between the female-male ratio in the population and the scarcity of violent crimes. Indeed, the inverse connection between murder rates and the female-male ratio in the population has been observed by many researchers, and there have been alternative explanations of the causal processes involved.[25] Some have looked for causal explanations running from the incidence of violent crimes leading to a greater preference for sons (taken to be better equipped to encounter a violent society), whereas others have seen it running from a larger presence of women (less inclined toward violence) to a consequently lower rate of crime.[26] There can also be some third factor that relates both to violent crime and to the male dominance of the sex ratio. There are many issues to be sorted out here, but the importance of gender and the influence of women's agency vis-à-vis men's are hard to overlook under any of the alternative explanations.

If we turn now to economic activities, women's participation can also make a big difference. One reason for the relatively low participation of women in day-to-day economic affairs in many countries is a relative lack of access to economic resources. The ownership of land and capital in the developing countries has tended to be very heavily biased in favor of the male members of the family. It is typically much harder for a woman to start a business enterprise, even of a very modest size, given the lack of collateral resources.

And yet there is plenty of evidence that whenever social arrangements depart from the standard practice of male ownership, women can seize business and economic initiative with much success. It is also clear that the result of women's participation is not merely to generate income for women, but also to provide the social benefits that come from women's enhanced status and independence (including the reduction of mortality and fertility rates, just discussed). The economic participation of women is, thus, both a reward on its own (with associated reduction of gender bias in the treatment of women in family decisions), and a major influence for social change in general.

The remarkable success of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh is a good example of this. That visionary microcredit movement, led by Muhammad Yunus, has consistently aimed at removing the disadvantage from which women suffer, because of discriminatory treatment in the rural credit market, by making a special effort to provide credit to women borrowers. The result has been a very high proportion of women among the customers of the Grameen Bank. The remarkable record of that bank in having a very high rate of repayment (reported to be close to 98 percent) is not unrelated to the way women have responded to the opportunities offered to them and to the prospects of ensuring the continuation of such arrangements.[27] Also in Bangladesh, similar emphasis has been placed on women's participation by BRAC, led by another visionary leader, Fazle Hasan Abed.[28] These and other economic and social movements in Bangladesh have done a lot not merely to raise the "deal" that women get, but also – through the greater agency of women – to bring about other major changes in the society. For example, the sharp decline in fertility rate that has occurred in Bangladesh in recent years seems to have clear connections with the increasingly higher involvement of women in social and economic affairs, in addition to much greater availability of family planning facilities, even in rural Bangladesh.[29]

Another area in which women's involvement in economic affairs varies is that of agricultural activities related to land ownership. There too the economic opportunities that women get can have a decisive influence on the working of the economy and the related social arrangements. Indeed, "a field of one's own" (as Bina Agarwal calls it) can be a major influence on women's initiative and involvement, with far-reaching effects on the balance of economic and social power between women and men.[30] Similar issues arise in understanding women's role in environmental developments, particularly in conserving natural resources (such as trees), with a particular linkage to women's life and work.[31]

Indeed, the empowerment of women is one of the central issues in the process of development for many countries in the world today. The factors involved include women's education, their ownership pattern, their employment opportunities and the workings of the labor market.[32] But going beyond these rather "classic" variables, they include also the nature of the employment arrangements, attitudes of the family and of the society at large toward women's economic activities, and the economic and social circumstances that encourage or resist change in these attitudes.[33] As Naila Kabeer's illuminating study of the work and economic involvement of Bangladeshi women in Dhaka and London brings out, the continuation of, or break from, past arrangements is strongly influenced by the exact economic and social relations that operate in the local environment.[34] The changing agency of women is one of the major mediators of economic and social change, and its determination as well as consequences closely relate to many of the central features of the development process.[35]

A concluding remark

The focus on the agency role of women has a direct bearing on women's well-being, but its reach goes well beyond that. In this chapter, I have tried to explore the distinction between – and interrelations of – agency and well-being, and then have gone on to illustrate the reach and power of women's agency, particularly in two specific fields: (1) in promoting child survival and (2) in helping to reduce fertility rates. Both these matters have general developmental interest that goes well beyond the pursuit specifically of female well-being, though – as we have seen – female well-being is also directly involved and has a crucial intermediating role in enhancing these general achievements.

The same applies to many other areas of economic, political and social action, varying from rural credit and economic activities, on the one hand, to political agitation and social debates, on the other.[36] The extensive reach of women's agency is one of the more neglected areas of development studies, and most urgently in need of correction. Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women. This is indeed a crucial aspect of "development as freedom."

Notes

1. I have discussed this issue in some previous works, including: "Economics and the Family," *Asian Development Review* 1 (1983); "Women, Technology and Sexual Divisions," *Trade and Development* 6 (1985); "Missing Women," *British Medical Journal* 304 (March 1992); "Gender and Cooperative Conflict," *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development*, edited by Irene Tinker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); "Gender Inequality and Theories of Justice," *Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*, edited by Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); (jointly with Jean Drèze) *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); "Agency and Well-Being: The Development Agenda," in *A Commitment to the Women*, edited by Noeleen Heyzer (New York: UNIFEM, 1996).
2. My paper "Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984," *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (April 1985), investigates the philosophical distinction between the "agency aspect" and the "well-being aspect" of a person, and attempts to identify the far-reaching practical implications of this distinction, applied to many different fields.
3. Alternative statistical estimates of the extent of "extra mortality" of women in many countries in Asia and North Africa also are discussed in my *Resources, Values and Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984); (jointly with Jean Drèze) *Hunger and Public Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). See also Stephen Klasen, "'Missing Women' Reconsidered," *World Development* 22 (1994).
4. There is a vast literature on this; my own attempts at analyzing and using the available evidence can be found in "Gender and Cooperative Conflict" (1990), and "More Than a Hundred Million Women Are Missing," *New York Review of Books*, (Christmas number, December 20, 1990).
5. These issues have been discussed in my *Resources, Values and Development* (1984), "Gender and Cooperative Conflict" (1990), and "More Than a Hundred Million Women Are Missing" (1990). A pioneering study of this general field was presented in Ester Boserup's

classic work, *Women's Role in Economic Development* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971). The recent literature on gender inequality in developing countries include a number of interesting and important studies of different types of determining variables. See, for example, Hanna Papanek, "Family Status and Production: The 'Work' and 'Non-Work' of Women," *Signs* 4 (1979). Martha Loutfi, ed., *Rural Work: Unequal Partners in Development* (Geneva: ILO, 1980); Mark R. Rosenzweig and T. Paul Schultz, "Market Opportunities, Genetic Endowment and Intrafamily Resource Distribution," *American Economic Review* 72 (1982); Myra Buvinic, M. Lycette and W.P. McGreevy, eds., *Women and Poverty in the Third World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Pranab Bardhan, *Land, Labor and Rural Poverty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Devaki Jain and Nirmala Banerjee, eds., *Tyranny of the Household: Investigative Essays in Women's Work* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1985); Gita Sen and C. Sen, "Women's Domestic Work and Economic Activity," *Economic and Political Weekly* 20 (1985); Martha Alter Chen, *A Quiet Revolution: Women in Transition in Rural Bangladesh* (Dhaka: BRAC, 1986); Jere Behrman and B. L. Wolfe, "How Does Mother's Schooling Affect Family Health, Nutrition, Medical Care Usage and Household Sanitation?" *Journal of Econometrics* 36 (1987); Monica Das Gupta, "Selective Discrimination against Female Children in India," *Population and Development Review* 13 (1987); Gita Sen and Caren Grown, *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives* (London: Earthscan, 1987); Alaka Basu, *Culture, the Status of Women and Demographic Behaviour* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Nancy Folbre, Barbara Bergmann, Bina Agarwal and Maria Flore, eds., *Women's Work in the World Economy* (London: Macmillan, 1992); United Nations ESCAP, *Integration of Women's Concerns into Development Planning in Asia and the Pacific* (New York: United Nations, 1992); Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Edith Kuiper and Jolande Sap, with Susan Feiner, Notburga Ott and Zafiris Tzannatos, *Out of Margin: Feminist Perspectives on Economics* (New York: Routledge, 1995); among other contributions.

6. Gender divisions within the family are sometimes studied as "bargaining problems"; the literature includes, among many other contributions, Marilyn Manser and Murray Brown, "Marriage and Household Decision Making: A Bargaining Analysis," *International Economic Review* 21 (1980); M. B. McElroy and M. J. Horney, "Nash Bargained Household Decisions: Toward a Generalization of Theory of Demand," *International Economic Review* 22 (1981); Shelley Lundberg and Robert Pollak, "Noncooperative Bargaining Models of Marriage," *American Economic Review* 84 (1994). For approaches different from that of "bargaining models," see Sen, "Women, Technology and Sexual Divisions" (1985); Nancy Folbre, "Hearts and Spades: Paradigms of Household Economics," *World Development* 14 (1986); J. Brannen and G. Wilson, eds., *Give and Take in Families* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987); Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Sen, "Gender and Cooperative Conflict" (1990); Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson, eds., *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993); among other contributions. Useful collections of papers on these issues can also be found in Jane Humphries, ed., *Gender and Economics* (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 1995), and Nancy Folbre, ed., *The Economics of the Family* (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 1996).
7. On this see Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (1989); Drèze and Sen, *Hunger and Public Action* (1989); Sen, "Gender and Cooperative Conflict" (1990); Nussbaum and Glover, *Woman, Culture and Development* (1995). See also the papers of Julie Nelson, Shelley Lundberg, Robert Pollak, Diana Strassman, Myra Strober and Vivians Zelizer in the 1994 Papers and Proceedings in *American Economic Review* 84 (1994).
8. This issue has started receiving considerable attention in India. See Asoke Mitra, *Implications of Declining Sex Ratios in India's Population* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1980); Jocelyn Kynch and Amartya Sen, "Indian Women: Well-Being and Survival," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 7 (1983); Bardhan, *Land, Labor and Rural Poverty* (1984); Jain and Banerjee, eds., *Tyranny of the Household* (1985). The "survival problem" relates to the broader issue of neglect, on which see also the studies presented in Swapna Mukhopadhyay, ed., *Women's Health, Public Policy and Community Action* (Delhi: Manohar, 1998), and Swapna Mukhopadhyay and R. Savithri, *Poverty, Gender and Reproductive Choice* (Delhi: Manohar, 1998).
9. On this see Tinker, *Persistent Inequalities* (1990). My own paper in this collection ("Gender and Cooperative Conflict") goes into the economic and social influences that affect the divisions within the family, and discusses why the divisions vary so much between regions (for example, antifemale bias being much stronger in South Asia, West Asia, North Africa and China than in sub-Saharan Africa or Southeast Asia), and also within different areas inside the same country (for example, gender bias at this level being very strong in some Indian states, such as Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, and effectively absent in Kerala). There are also close linkages between different influences on women's relative position, such as those connecting legal rights and basic education (since the use of legal provisions relates to the ability to read and write); see Salma Sobhan, *Legal Status of Women in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Legal and International Affairs, 1978).
10. The role of gender divisions in the sharing of hunger has been illuminatingly studied by Megan Vaughan, *The Story of an African Famine: Hunger, Gender and Politics is Malawi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Barbara Harriss, "The Intrafamily Distribution of Hunger in South Asia," in *The Political Economy of Hunger*, edited by Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1990), among others.
11. Some of these issues have been discussed in the specific context of India, with comparisons *within* and *outside* India in Drèze and Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (1995); see also Alaka Basu, *Culture, the Status of Women and Demographic Behaviour* (1992), and Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own*, (1995). The different sources of disadvantage are particularly important to study in analyzing the special deprivation of groups with little economic or social leverage – for example, widows, especially from poorer families. On that, see Martha Alter Chen, ed., *Widows in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1998), and her forthcoming book, *Perpetual Mourning: Widowhood in Rural India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999; Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).
12. On the issues involved, see my "Gender and Cooperative Conflict," in Tinker, *Persistent Inequalities* (1990), and the literature cited there.
13. See L. Beneria, ed., *Women and Development: The Sexual Division of Labor in Rural Societies* (New York: Praeger, 1982). See also Jain and Banerjee, *Tyranny of the Household* (1985); Gita Sen and Grown, *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions* (1987); Haleh Afshar, ed., *Women and Empowerment: Illustrations from the Third World* (London: Macmillan, 1998).
14. See Mamta Murthi, Anne-Catherine Guio and Jean Drèze, "Mortality, Fertility and Gender Bias in India: A District Level Analysis," *Population and Development Review* 21 (December 1995). See also Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, eds., *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). Questions can certainly be raised about the direction of causation in the identified relations – for example, whether women's

literacy influences the status and standing of women in the family *or* whether women's higher standing inclines a family to send young girls to school. There could be, statistically, also a third factor that correlates with both. And yet recent empirical studies suggest that most families – even in socially backward areas in India – seem to have a strong preference for educating the children, including girls. One large survey indicates that the proportion of parents who think it is "important" to send girls to school even in the states with the *least* female literacy is remarkably high: 85 percent in Rajasthan, 88 percent in Bihar, 92 percent in Uttar Pradesh, and 93 percent in Madhya Pradesh. The main barrier to the education of girls appears to be the absence of convenient schools in the neighborhood – a major difference between high-literacy and low-literacy states. See the Probe Team, *Public Report on Basic Education in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). Public policy, therefore, has a central role to play. There have been recent public policy initiatives with good effect on literacy, especially in Himachal Pradesh, and more recently in West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and a few other states.

15. The 1991 Indian census indicates that the death rate per thousand in the 0–4 age group was 25.6 for males and 27.5 for females at the all-India level. The female mortality rate in that age group was lower than the male mortality rate in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, but higher in all the other major Indian states. The female disadvantage was most pronounced in Bihar, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.
16. Murthi, Guio and Drèze, "Mortality, Fertility and Gender Bias in India" (1995).
17. See Jean Drèze and Mamta Murthi, "Female Literacy and Fertility: Recent Census Evidence from India," mimeographed, Centre for History and Economics, King's College, Cambridge, U.K., 1999.
18. There were, apparently, not enough data with adequate interdistrict variations to examine the impact of different forms of property rights, which are relatively more uniform across India. On an isolated basis, there is, of course, the strong and much-discussed example of the Nairs in Kerala, who have had matrilineal inheritance for a long time (an association that confirms, rather than contradicts, insofar as it goes, the positive impact of female property rights on child survival in general and the survival of female children in particular).
19. There is, it appears, a positive association between female labor force participation and under-five mortality in these fits, but this association is not statistically significant.
20. See, among other important contributions, J. C. Caldwell, "Routes to Low Mortality in Poor Countries," *Population and Development Review* 12 (1986); and Behrman and Wolfe, "How Does Mother's Schooling Affect Family Health, Nutrition, Medical Care Usage and Household Sanitation?" (1987).
21. These have been extensively discussed in my joint book with Jean Drèze, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (1995).
22. The various sources of evidence on this have been subjected to critical examination, and not surprisingly, the different empirical studies emerge with rather disparate force in these critical scrutinies. See particularly the "critical perspectives" on this issue presented in Caroline H. Bledsoe, John B. Casterline, Jennifer A. Johnson-Kuhn and John G. Haaga, eds., *Critical Perspectives on Schooling and Fertility in the Developing World* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999). See also Susan Greenhalgh, *Situating Fertility: Anthropology and Demographic Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Robert J. Barro and Jong-Wha Lee, "International Comparisons of Educational Attainment," paper

presented at a conference on How Do National Policies Affect Long-Run Growth?, World Bank, Washington, D.C., 1993; Robert Cassen, with contributors, *Population and Development: Old Debates, New Conclusions* (Washington, D.C.: Transaction Books for Overseas Development Council, 1994).

23. On these and related general issues, see my "Population: Delusion and Reality," *New York Review of Books*, September 22, 1994; *Population Policy: Authoritarianism versus Cooperation* (Chicago: MacArthur Foundation, 1995); and "Fertility and Coercion," *University of Chicago Law Review* 63 (summer 1996).
24. See United Nations, ESCAP, *Integration of Women's Concerns into Development Planning in Asia and the Pacific* (New York: United Nations, 1992), especially the paper of Rehman Sobhan and the references cited there. The practical issues relate closely to the social conception of women's role in society and thus touch on the central focus of feminist studies. A wide-ranging collection of papers (including many classics) can be found in Susan Moller Okin and Jane Mansbridge, eds., *Feminism* (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 1994). See also Catherine A. Mackinnon, *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), and Barbara Johnson, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychology, Race and Gender* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).
25. See Philip Oldenberg, "Sex Ratio, Son Preference and Violence in India: A Research Note," *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 5–12, 1998; Jean Drèze and Reetika Khera, "Crime, Society and Gender in India: Some Clues for Homicidal Data," mimeographed, Centre for Development Economics, Delhi School of Economics, 1999. The explanations of this interesting finding can invoke cultural factors as well as economic and social ones. Though the brief discussion here concentrates on the latter, there are obvious connections with psychological and valuational questions raised by those who see a basic gender contrast in morals and attitudes, most notably Carol Gilligan; see *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). Importance may well be attached to the fact that the most remarkable case of humane prison reform in India came from one of that rare breed, a woman prison governor, Kiran Bedi. Her own account of the radical change and the opposition she faced can be found in Kiran Bedi, *It's Always Possible: Transforming One of the Largest Prisons in the World* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1998). I do not pursue further here the important issue of distinguishing between alternative explanations of the nature of women's leadership in social change of this type, since the analysis presented in this work does not require that we try to resolve this complex issue.
26. Oldenberg argues for the former hypothesis; but see also Arup Mitra, "Sex Ratio and Violence: Spurious Results," *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 2–9, 1993. Drèze and Khera argue for an explanation with the opposite direction of causation. See also the literature cited there, including older studies, such as Baldev Raj Nayar, *Violence and Crime in India: A Quantitative Study* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1975); S. M. Edwards, *Crime in India* (Jaipur: Printwell Publishers, 1988); S. Venugopal Rao, ed., *Perspectives in Criminology* (Delhi: Vikas, 1988).
27. Another factor has been the use of group responsibility in seeking a high rate of repayment. On this see Muhammad Yunus with Alan Jolis, *Banker to the Poor: Micro Lending and the Battle Against World Poverty* (London: Aurum Press, 1998). See also Lutfun N. Khan Osmani, "Credit and Women's Relative Well-Being: A Case Study of the Grameen Bank, Bangladesh" (Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University of Belfast, 1998). See also Kaushik Basu, *Analytical Development Economics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), chapters 13

and 14; Debraj Ray, *Development Economics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), chapter 14.

28. See Catherine H. Lovell, *Breaking the Cycle of Poverty: The BRAC Strategy* (Hartford, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 1992).
29. See John C. Caldwell, Barkat-e-Khuda, Bruce Caldwell, Indrani Pieries and Pat Caldwell, "The Bangladesh Fertility Decline: An Interpretation," *Population and Development Review* 25 (1999). See also John Cleland, James F. Phillips, Sajeda Amin and G. M. Kamal, *The Determinants of Reproductive Change in Bangladesh: Success in a Challenging Environment* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1996), and John Bongaarts, "The Role of Family Planning Programmes in Contemporary Fertility Transition," in *The Continuing Demographic Transition*, edited by G.W. Jones et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
30. See Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own* (1995).
31. See Henrietta Moore and Megan Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890–1990* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1994).
32. The difficulties to be overcome by women in the labor market and in economic relations in society have been plentiful even in advanced market economies. See Barbara Bergmann, *The Economic Emergence of Women* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Francine D. Blau and Marianne A. Ferber, *The Economics of Women, Men and Work* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1986); Victor R. Fuchs, *Women's Quest for Economic Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Claudia Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). See also the collection of papers in Marianne A. Ferber, *Women in the Labor Market* (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 1998).
33. There is a danger of oversimplification in seeing the issue of women's "agency" or "autonomy" in too formulaic terms, focusing on simple statistical connections with variables such as female literacy or employment. On this see the insightful anthropological analysis of Alaka M. Basu, *Culture, Status of Women, and Demographic Behavior* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). See also the studies presented in Roger Jeffery and Alaka M. Basu, eds., *Girls' Schooling, Women's Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia* (London: Sage, 1996).
34. See Naila Kabeer, "The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka," mimeographed, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, 1998.
35. The changing role of women (and its far-reaching effects) in India since independence is discussed in an interesting collection of papers edited by Bharati Ray and Aparna Basu, *From Independence towards Freedom* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).
36. UNDP's *Human Development Report 1995* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) presents an intercountry investigation of gender differences in social, political and business leadership, in addition to reporting on gender inequality in terms of more conventional indicators. See also the literature cited there.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1 Explain how, according to Sen, promoting women's agency is more important for economic development than just promoting women's well-being (start by explaining what Sen means by "women's agency").
2 In what ways is greater empowerment of women likely to affect gender inequality within the family according to Sen?
3 What does evidence from India show about the relation between women's employment outside the household and child mortality? What does it show about the relation between women's literacy and child mortality? Why is there a difference between these two relations according to Sen?
4 Sen states that "the agency role of women is also particularly important for the reduction of fertility rates." Explain why this is the case.
5 What other economic and social effects can result from an increase in women's agency?
6 What specific government policies would you propose to increase women's agency? Explain.