

**DEVELOPMENT AS FREEDOM – CONTRIBUTIONS AND SHORTCOMINGS  
OF AMARTYA SEN’S DEVELOPMENT PHILOSOPHY FOR FEMINIST  
ECONOMICS**

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July 2002

Working Paper 365

The paper will appear in a slightly edited form in a special issue of *Feminist Economics* on the work of Amartya Sen, in 2003. The authors are grateful to the editors of the special issue and to the referees for their comments and guidance.

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ISSN 0921-0210

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## **ABSTRACT**

To what extent can Amartya Sen's ideas on freedom and especially his conceptualisation of development as freedom enrich feminist economics? The notion of positive freedom that Sen employs has many attractions and provides important opportunities to analyse gender inequalities. Sen's increasing emphasis on freedom as the dominant overall value to evaluate individual well being and societal development also contains risks, not least for feminist analysis. We characterise the risks as 'under-elaboration' and 'over-extension' of the concept of freedom. Drawing on Sen's earlier work and various feminist theorists, we suggest instead a more emphatically pluralist characterisation of capability, well being and value. We illustrate this with reference to women's economic role as care givers.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* (1999) presents freedom as the central value in development. 'Expansion of freedom is viewed, in this approach, both as the primary end and as the principal means of development' (p.xii). He emphasises 'positive freedom', the capacity to be and do, rather than only 'negative freedom', freedom from interference; and that sometimes this freedom depends more on the government than on markets. This view of freedom, as positive as well as negative freedom, is an important commonality between Sen and feminist economics.

Sen's ideas on freedom have significantly influenced feminist development economics. He has addressed for example what Diane Elson and Nilufer Cagatay (2000) list as the three gender biases of macro economic policy: male breadwinner bias, commodification bias, and deflationary bias. He points in each case at the importance of positive freedom for women and men alike: in his analysis of women's poverty at household level, where he detects the breadwinner ideology as one of the causes of female poverty (Sen, 1984a); in his analysis of freedom from hunger, where he probes the results of the commodification of food in times of hunger (1989); and in his analysis of financial conservatism (1998).

Throughout his work, Sen also recognises other values than desire-fulfilment and freedom, like values of justice, of democracy, and of connectedness. In this paper, we try to assess to what extent Sen's recent increasingly strong focus on freedom helps feminist economists. First, we will elucidate his conception of positive freedom, embodied in his capability approach and expanded in his philosophy of development as freedom, and its value for feminist economics. Secondly we present what seem to us its shortcomings. As indicated by our title, this paper primarily addresses *Development as Freedom*, not only the earlier and narrower statements of a capability approach. Thirdly we outline a complementary or broadened approach, building from Sen's own work on a variety of values. It more emphatically highlights and examines a plurality of human values and of types of capability, as for example in Martha Nussbaum's '*capabilities* approach'. Freedom is best seen as a particular family of values which must be embedded within other types of values, including of caring. We illustrate the critique and the proposal with reference to the unpaid care economy.

We will conclude that Sen's recent focus on freedom provides an important space for gender-aware evaluation of female and male well being. The capability approach was devised however to refine the evaluation of well being and quality of life. It is less adequate for other tasks, such as description, understanding, explanation, persuasion and perhaps prescription related to well being from a gender-aware perspective. For such tasks we require a broadened picture.

## **2. SEN'S CAPABILITY APPROACH AND 'DEVELOPMENT AS FREEDOM'**

### **2.1 Negative freedom and positive freedom**

Many feminists have struggled for freedom for women, in particular freedom from patriarchy: freedom as more choices, ranging from access to abortion to access to education, freedom as better choices in women's personal lives such as through reliable contraceptives or at work through women's unions, and freedom from oppression in public life as well as private life. Freedom has undoubtedly been, and remains, an important value in the women's movement, feminist theory and feminist economics.

In mainstream economics, freedom is typically interpreted as 'negative freedom', the absence of coercion and interference by others, and specifically as the absence of government 'interference' in the market. That is the meaning given to 'free market'. It is a freedom-from, freedom from constraints on one's choices in markets, leaving producers and consumers *Free to Choose*, as a book by Milton and Rose Friedman (1980) has it. This negative freedom is accorded instrumental value as a means to promote well-being, through individual choice, well-functioning markets, and GDP growth. Real income is used as a measure of positive freedom, the ability to attain desired ends, albeit for many reasons an imperfect measure.

MacCallum and others have shown how statements about freedom implicitly use the form 'Agent X is free from constraint Y on doing/being/becoming Z, which is an important value' (William Connolly 1983). Thus both aspects - constraining factors (Y; 'negative') and valuable attainable life-states (Z; 'positive') - are present, whether explicitly or not. Arguments that positive freedom is an illicit addition to the idea of freedom are fallacious. Different conceptions of what are valuable life-states, and differences in the judgement (both explanatory and ethical) of what are constraints will lead to different as-

assessments of the degree of freedom that the agent enjoys. If a woman is free from legal constraints to enter a public activity, but constrained by her commitments to care for old, young or infirm family members, assessments of her freedom will reflect whether her participation in the public activity is considered important and whether care is seen only as a vocation and not also as a burden. The claim that the woman is 'free' to participate could reflect a focus only on legal constraints and active prevention, based on a view that there are no other ethically relevant constraints and on a voluntaristic conception of agency. For Sen, this limited interpretation of freedom is problematic: what matters is what this woman is really able to do and be.

Like Sen, feminist economists have criticised the predominant focus in much economics on negative freedom (e.g. Julie Nelson 1996; Gillian Hewitson 1999; Graham Dawson and Sue Hatt 2000) . They have argued that this implicitly idealises *Man* as independent, already autonomous, rather than as a social being, socialised into the norms and values of a community, cared for by parents, and having personal bonds as well as rights and duties towards society (Marianne Ferber and Julie Nelson 1993). The assumption of independence of utility functions in mainstream economics is one example of the masculine ideal of independence and autonomy (see, for example, Paula England 1993). Moreover, negative freedom, feminist development economists have argued, does not necessarily reduce women's poverty, increase their relative wages, or improve their share of consumption and decision making within the household (e.g., Naila Kabeer, 1994; Diane Elson, 1995). Sometimes, more of it even makes things worse for women, and justice is called for, or other values.

## **2.2 Sen's concern for positive freedom: the capability approach**

Amartya Sen has placed his critique of a purely negative conception of freedom within, first, a wider critique of various components in mainstream economics including its rationality concept (Sen, 1977 and 1995) and utilitarianism (Sen, 1987), and second, an emergent alternative framework. He stresses freedom in the positive sense of ability to function well in life, in terms of ends that people 'have reason to value'. He has contributed his ideas to the UNDP Human Development Reports, which provide broader meas-

ures of welfare and poverty than per capita GDP, such as the Human Development Index (HDI), the Human Poverty Index (HPI), and the Gender-related Development Index (GDI).

Sen's capability approach includes several components, which need to be distinguished. *Component 1* is an inclusive stance on the information relevant for evaluation of well-being and quality of life: there are more types of information relevant than those considered by mainstream economics, viz., people's incomes, assets, and utility satisfaction. Centrally, we should also look at how people actually live, and at what degree of freedom they have to choose how they live. To be precise, Sen argues in elaboration of Component 1 that looking at how much personal well-being agents achieve (well-being Achievement) should include looking at their actual functionings; and also at what they were free to achieve, both in terms of their own well-being (well-being Freedom) and of their actual values, including their values for other people (Agency Freedom). His primary category of capability is well being Freedom, which concerns the attainable functionings for the agent herself.

*Component 2* is a family of categories, a language for discussing these types of information. *Functionings* are components or aspects of how a person lives. Together a set (vector or, more formally, n-tuple) of such functionings makes up a person's life. A person's *capability* (capability set) is the set of alternative vectors of functionings she could attain, the alternative lives open to her, the extent of her positive freedom. (*Capabilities* in the plural refers for Sen to particular attainable functionings.)

*Component 3* concerns which categories and levels have ethical priority. Sen seems to use this ranking: 1 - capability, the set of life options a person is able to choose from; placed first because of a priority to freedom; 2 - functionings, how a person actually lives; placed above 3 - utility, meaning feelings of satisfaction or the fact of preference fulfilment, since preferences may be unconsidered or have been formed under situations of deprivation of information and of options; 4 - goods/commodities, placed last as a measure of well-being, because people have different requirements. This normative priority to capability could be read as an evaluative rule that 'capabilities are more valuable than functionings'. If instead, or in addition, it is read as a policy rule to promote capabilities and then 'let people make their own mistakes', that takes us to *Component 4*: priority to capability as a policy rule. Capability is here seen as an appropriate measure of advantage



rather than of well being itself, though it might contribute to well being.

*Component 5* goes further in prioritising: priority within the space of capabilities is by the criterion of what ‘people have reason to value’. How to operationalise this idea in multi-agent situations leads us to *Component 6*, stressed in Sen’s more recent work: *public procedures for prioritising and threshold setting*, regarding which and whose capabilities (e.g. 1999: 148).

The last component—*Component 7*— is less central but periodically found in Sen’s specification: notions of basic capabilities (basic for survival or dignity) and required minimum attainment levels. While these notions are ones most people find reason to value, component 7 guards against cases where agents’ reason instead leads to behaviour damaging to the agents or to others.

Sen’s positive notion of freedom can be applied to men and women alike and is potentially sensitive to gender inequalities in social structures (for example, social security systems that depend on families having someone in formal employment), in norms (for example, purdah), and in economic institutions (for example, gendered job segregation). On the basis of Sen’s approach, it is possible to more clearly assess how women’s freedom to live the lives that they value is generally less than men’s freedom to do so: women have lower levels of education, women suffer reproductive health risks, women’s behaviour in the public domain is often restricted by gender norms, and they suffer from labour market discrimination, just to mention a few gendered ‘unfreedoms’. He has vividly analysed women’s economic position in various publications.

### **2.3 From the Capability Approach to ‘Development as Freedom’**

Sen’s capability approach has grown since the mid 1980s from a position in welfare economics to become a wide-ranging development philosophy, presented at length in 1999 in his book *Development as Freedom*. The combination of concerns for positive freedom and for replacement of per capita GDP with human development indicators seems to have led him in the direction of an increasingly unified conception of development as freedom. He now highlights the ethical status of freedom, as the major means and end of development, dominating the specification of other values (1999: xii, 148). Over time, he has put increased stress in assessing well-being and advantage on the priority of capability seen as

opportunity, and on procedures of local prioritisation within that space (components 3 and 6 above); at the expense relatively speaking of component 7, a universal specification of basic requirements.

The labelling of development as freedom is perhaps in part strategic: *Development as Freedom* evolved from a series of lectures for the World Bank and seeks to influence audiences in mainstream development economics and seats of power (Des Gasper, 2000). More than that, Sen's capability approach is centrally about choice of an evaluative space: that we should measure advantage by the extent of valued opportunities which individuals have; and it contains no sharply formed views about which opportunities people *should have*.

Sen certainly accepts that there are other values, notably justice in the distribution of resources, but seems not to treat them fully on the same basis as freedom. First, he wishes to incorporate many values within his freedom framework by talking about the freedom to attain those things which one has reason to value. Second, he seems thus to wish to leave other values open for—free—specification *in situ*. Implicitly, none reflect essential features of humanity, in his view. Instead his framework seem to be neutral between, as well as open to, other values. Thirdly, justice in the distribution of advantages depends logically on clarification first of the nature of advantage. For these reasons, he sees his freedom framework as the primary framework. He accepts that there are limits of the capability approach; for example, limits to a principle of equalising even basic capabilities, when we realise for example that women have inherently greater life expectancy. But as is clear from this example, he sees the limitations as secondary qualifications around a valid primary emphasis.

The next section takes a more critical view of how Sen has so far used and extended his positive concept of freedom. A conception created to improve evaluation—by identifying the dimensions of opportunity and functionings in contrast to felt satisfaction, goods obtained, or other measures of real income—may not suffice for wider purposes. For description, explanation and prescription there are important building blocks from other parts of Sen's work, such as the concepts of sympathy and commitment, and in the work of Martha Nussbaum and others.

### **3. SHORTCOMINGS IN SEN'S DEGREE OF EMPHASIS ON FREEDOM**

#### **3.1 An Under-Elaborated and Over-Extended Notion of Freedom**

While Sen's notion of freedom centres on positive freedom, it remains in some key respects under-characterised in *Development as Freedom*. He writes extensively about 'un-freedoms', and it becomes clear what are the 'bads' when freedom is lacking. But we do not get a clear picture of the content of freedom itself, including the varieties, skills, dispositions and preconditions involved; it is instead an abstracted, umbrella category.

For Sen, freedom becomes the dominant evaluative space for human well being, subsuming many different ends. He uses the word when indicating the relevance of various goods in life, such as knowledge or health (freedom from ignorance, freedom from illness). All the capabilities that human beings could acquire are to be understood as freedoms. This inevitably makes the notion of freedom broad, vague and potentially confusing. There is no longer a highlighted distinction between the value of autonomous agency and all the opportunities to achieve other values which may be provided through such agency.<sup>1</sup> These two aspects of positive freedom deserve separation.

The focus on freedom (negative as well as positive) runs the risk of downgrading behaviour that contributes to well being which is not part of individual autonomy. It may neglect evaluations of well being in terms of social relations and personal relationships, important sources of women's well being as well as a result of women's joint efforts to create well-being for others. With subsuming of other values within freedom, rather than emphasising development as relating to a multitude of distinct human values, which demand separate attention, the distinctive substantive contents of specific values can become obscured. We shall investigate the importance of highlighting distinctive values, by examples from Sen's own rich and insightful work on democracy, respect and friendship, which can be used to extend his capability approach.

#### **3.2 The Importance of Other Values**

The 'Development As [not Is] Freedom' formulation leaves space for asking: And development (desirable change, desirable states) as what else also? Sen has packaged so much into his notion of positive freedom that he now says relatively little on what else. The instrumental roles of other values, towards other things considered important, may be

subsumable into his freedom language, since that is formulated in terms of ability to effect whatever one has reason to value; and he often seems to deal with their independent importance likewise. When our agenda is explanation and prescription, not only evaluation, a more differentiated language becomes essential. We will consider here the values of democracy, respect and friendship.

In his work on famines and hunger (1981a), Sen argues that democracy in addition to being valuable in itself has major instrumental contributions, in particular that democracies prevent famines. Democracy is not merely the value that people can choose freely, but a value that sometimes challenges freedom, and is even called sometimes to discipline freedom when freedom allocates food to where purchasing power is, rather than to where it is mostly needed. In his current language of development as freedom, the need for democracy to discipline freedom (such as the positive freedom to speculate in basic commodities) might become obscured.

Prioritisation of poor people's subsistence and survival over affluent people's valued freedoms (as in component 7 above) could require rooting in a national constitution or bill of rights. Otherwise, a language of promotion of valued positive freedoms could become used or misused to cloak massive injustice. Affluent people's freedoms can be *de facto* prioritised, through elaborate formal democratic procedures (as in component 6), in polities such as India's. With all priorities supposedly coming from a locally specified process of debate, consultation and decision, the outcome in practice can be harshly elitist, thanks to the power of wealth, established authority and differential access. The capabilities and functionings of one gender, for example, may concern public officials more than those of the other gender, even when reasoning from a human development perspective, as Thanh-Dam Truong (1997) has argued. As we see later, Martha Nussbaum therefore in her version of the capability approach adds a Rawlsian difference principle; and other responses having the same function are possible.

Another example of a value, which is different from freedom, is the value of respect. Again it has both independent and instrumental significance. Poverty is not only characterised by a lack of money or material resources but just as much by a lack of respect from others (Sen, 1984b). Being respected is a significant factor in growing out of poverty, and in turn involves and affects capabilities of self-esteem and confidence. Self-

esteem appears frequently as a vital first step for women to improve their well being, for example through education or joining women's NGOs. Interestingly again, an all-encompassing single language of freedom may not help in noting this. Women may be free to join a credit programme, but without the self-confidence that they are able to engage in a business activity, they will not seek credit. It is not a lack of freedom that hinders them to access credit, but a lack of (self-) respect. When Sen comes to list sources of interpersonal variation in well-being in *Development as Freedom*, conspicuous by their absence are self-esteem and related learned capacities (1999: 70-1, 88-90; and Gasper, 2000).

Friendship appears as another important value, having its own set of capabilities as skills. Sen has shown the instrumental importance of friendship—provided it is held as an independent value. His example features Donna who is committed to save the life of her friend Ali who would become victim of a planned racist attack (Sen, 1981b). In a utilitarian calculation, the benefits from the attack to the group of attackers might be greater than the costs to just one person, hence the principle of utility maximisation might not help Ali. As for recourse to the forces of justice, Sen tells us that the police dismisses Donna's story as a fantasy. Although Ali may be entitled to police protection, he does not get it. An alternative for her would be to break into the office of someone who happens to know where Ali is, but that would violate the law as well as the other person's privacy. Hence, Sen suggests with this story, the only value available to Donna which might save her friend Ali is her friendship. Committed as she is to her friend she is determined to find a way to save him, although it would cost time and effort and possibly also risk her becoming the next target of the attackers. In Sen's language, this is commitment, which means an agent follows values whose fulfilment does not raise her own satisfaction. In contrast, sympathy means that an agent's satisfaction is favourably affected by increase in well being for another.

While the case could still be described using Sen's language of capability as positive freedom, that does not seem the most enlightening way. It is not Ali's free agency or his rights, but his close relationship with Donna that will help him eventually out of the threatening situation. Friendship is a value that in a particular case contributes more effectively to further individual well being than the value of freedom is able to do.

### 3.3 Freedom Plus

So the language of freedom could sometimes hinder us from attending to important matters. A conception of Human Development, as essayed by UNDP, needs more than one value. Freedom is not enough, even in a version that includes reference to other values, and even when supplemented by a justice criterion. We are also not only interested in whether a girl had the potential, the positive freedom, to be healthy, but also in how healthy she is. We are not only interested in whether India has the potential to educate all its girls, but also whether it does so: both how far a society enjoys the possibility of fulfilment of important values and how far it fulfils them. In the Human Development Index two of the dimensions—knowledge and longevity—do directly reflect valuable functionings, not only the potential for such. That capability must often be measured via the proxy of functioning has been fortunate, for we need to measure functionings in their own right.

Freedom to choose among capabilities is only one relevant space for evaluation, even for individuals. For individuals it is relevant for adults more than children. Capability theory began as a statement in welfare economics (Sen, 1985), calling for reference to more than utilities, incomes and purchases. Over time Sen has put increasing emphasis on the dimension of capability as opportunity, even relative to functionings. But it remains just one dimension, even for the welfare economics exercise of judging the advantage of the responsible adult. For judging, and influencing, the state of human development of a society, we need to consider far more.

Sen provides a space for other values through his flexible phrase ‘what we have reason to value’. ‘To value’ is, in his usage, something more considered, more reasoned than a mere preference, urge, habit or whimsy; and to underline this he adds the phrase ‘have reason to’. Sebastian Silva Leander (2001) suggests that Sen’s capability notion should more clearly distinguish two types of freedom: having options, which connects to Kant’s concept of external freedom; and secondly, being able to make independent well-reasoned choices, which connects to Kant’s internal freedom concept. For Kant, internal freedom was central in his conceptions of humanity and progress. With autonomy seen as positive freedom (e.g. Connolly, 1983), we appreciate that autonomy is a matter of degree and can then, with for example Len Doyal and Ian Gough (1991), distinguish autonomy of

agency (being able to function competently as a member of one's society) and critical autonomy (being able also to independently assess one's society's dominant values).

Lawrence Hamilton (1999) argues that Sen holds back from a more substantive theory of values and needs because of excessive faith in a thinly specified version of practical reason. Persons are presumed rational and non-vicious, at least if provided with information, basic training (thus the theory applies for adults) and opportunities for public debate. These requirements are important but not sufficient for reasonableness. Sen in any case assumes, and advocates, a viable liberal democratic state, where basic rights can be articulated, operationalised and respected, for every group in society. In a market dominated, money dominated world with only a compass of the reasons-to-value set within existing polities, his capability approach faces some risk of being subordinated by what comes out of such market and money dominated processes, unless combined with richer languages for analysis and evaluation. If partnered similarly by richer pictures of personhood, the capability approach might help in identifying and facing consumerism.<sup>2</sup>

The 'Development as Freedom' formulation thus needs to be embedded in a broader picture of human values and with attention to 'internal freedom'. We sketch in the next section a move from a thinner and more unitary picture of persons and values to a thicker and more plural picture, to give a more adequately situated concept of freedom, drawing on Sen's own earlier work.

#### **4. A SITUATED AND MORE SUBSTANTIVE NOTION OF FREEDOM**

In this section, we consider responses to the under-definition and over-extension of Sen's positive notion of freedom. As remedy for under-definition, we outline aspects of the thicker notion presented by Martha Nussbaum et al. As remedy for over-extension, we emphasise the non-hierarchical relationship between a plurality of values that together make up well being or development. We will illustrate this in the subsequent section, with reference to the values of caring and to women's role in providing unpaid care.

##### **4.1. Combating Under-Definition with the help of Nussbaum**

Sen presents a richer picture of persons than Rational Economic Man. He notes the possibility of what he calls sympathy and commitment; and he notes preferences about

preferences, as part of reasoning about preference. However the picture remains predominantly one of reasoning choosers rather than more richly scripted actors. The conception of freedom as opportunity is an abstracted one, about possibilities in a given context, not a substantive conception about psychic states, capacities and propensities.

In defining capability as positive freedom, Sen has built on a usage, which is less common in everyday language. More common there is the sense of capability as a skill or aptitude. We can call this *S-capability* (S for skill) and Sen's sense *O-capability* (O for options and opportunity). The S-capability sense is elaborated by Nussbaum, who speaks of 'internal capability'. It is essential in description, explanation and thus also for more grounded prescription. An opportunity set is not a picture of presented or agency. Theorising capability only as opportunities and not also as skills and traits will limit us in building a more structured picture of personhood and agency. It can lead to underemphasis on key requirements for 'free choice', and underestimation of the extent of deprivation. We agree with David Crocker (1995: 182) that: 'Sen's theory of actual freedom would be more comprehensive and humanly nuanced if he followed Nussbaum and added internal powers to external opportunities and viewed humans not only as capable but as in need of nurture in a context of neediness.'

Nussbaum gives a richer, and a more gender balanced, picture of thought and emotion, and of influences on them; and is thus stronger than Sen on meanings and action, including on emotional development and on giving meaning to and making use of freedom. Her approach may have greater potential to understand the requirements of action and to motivate it (Nussbaum, 2000; IDEA, 2001).

The broader definition of capabilities, distinguishing both opportunities and skills, makes her approach less abstract than Sen's and closer to the texture of daily life. She proposes in Nussbaum (2000) ten sets of priority human functional capabilities, under the headings: 1. life, 2. bodily health, 3. bodily integrity, 4. senses, imagination, and thought, 5. emotions; 6. practical reason; 7. affiliation ('Being able to live with and toward others...[and] Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation...' (p.79); 8. other species ('Being able to live with concern for, and in relation to, animals, plants and the world of nature', p.80); 9. play; and 10. control over one's environment. These capabilities are a combination of skills and opportunities. Some are internal capabilities of a person,



like emotions, which require training and maturation but then do not depend on outside resources, unlike for example bodily health. They cannot all be well understood as freedoms. Capability for affiliation is only in part a freedom, as in the ILO Convention for workers' right to freedom of association; affiliation depends also upon intimate relationships between people, rather than their independence and autonomy.

Nussbaum notes that 'I am not pushing individuals into the *function*: once the stage is fully set, the choice is up to them.' (2000: 88; emphasis added). But this choice is embedded in individuals' social networks like families and communities, and 'the capabilities are an interlocking set; they support one another, and an impediment to one impedes others.' (p. 294).

Nussbaum stresses minimum thresholds for individual well being. Each citizen should enjoy minimum levels of capability before full freedom should be allowed to attain high levels for those who have the means to do so. She has also proposed a Rawlsian difference principle: inequalities in capabilities can be tolerated as long as these differences lead to more people attaining the threshold (Nussbaum, 1995: 87).

This approach to capabilities moves away from the dominant focus on freedom into the direction of an interlocking set of values, reflected by a diversity of capabilities. For women, Nussbaum notes, this view offers a way out of the dichotomy between exclusive individual freedom on the one hand and traditional women's roles on the other hand. Nussbaum's approach of a pluralist set of capabilities promises that 'we are not forced to choose between a deracinated type of individualism, where each person goes off as a loner, indifferent to others, and traditional types of community, which are frequently hierarchical and unfair to women' (2000: 289).

Nussbaum's approach also enables one to transcend the common dichotomy of masculine and feminine attributions of human agency (reason versus emotion, calculation versus interpretation, or independence versus dependence). Importantly, Nussbaum goes beyond such dualities, to argue for concrete human capabilities, addressing not only individualistic needs, but also social and inter-personal ones. Her approach is more open to highlight community and family as essential spheres.

Nussbaum's capabilities approach has its own limitations. It explicitly acknowledges that it is oriented to the design of political constitutions and policy frameworks

rather than the details of poverty research and administration, since it does not indicate how to measure the various capabilities and cannot easily be employed in a quantitative cost-benefit analysis (Nussbaum, 1999: 236). And although her list of ten priority capabilities has evolved and improved over several years of scholarly debate, and contains considerable room for plural versions and different local specifications, it will always be contestable (Fabienne Peter, 2001). It should be understood instead as an exemplar of an appropriately substantive agenda for discussion of priorities and basic rights—criteria for ‘a decent social minimum in a variety of areas’ (Nussbaum 2000: 75)—not as a universal blueprint. The list can be presented as a framework for dialogical investigation. A helpful set of papers on such issues and her approach’s contributions and limits is found in IDEA (2001).

#### **4.2. Combating Over-Extension: Highlighting Other Values As Elsewhere In Sen’s Work**

A variety of authors, such as Michael Walzer (1983) and Elizabeth Anderson (1993), suggest that values of freedom be seen as just one relevant sphere amongst others. For those authors, freedom is distinct from and even incommensurable with other values. This situated notion of freedom ensures recognition of the importance of other values, and implies a more modest value on freedom than when it is understood as an overall or dominant characterisation of development. The more clearly defined, and the better distinguished from other values, the more meaningful freedom in fact becomes as a value operating in economic processes.

Irene van Staveren (2001) has tried to link the idea of a range of distinct values to specific capabilities that are phrased in terms of these respective values. She emphasises three spheres of values in economic life—of freedom, justice, and caring—each encompassing a variety of incommensurable values that are, however, not unrelated to one another. Caring appears here as a critical sphere that must be added to Sen’s freedom-and-justice framework. Freedom is a family of values related to the self and what one can do. Next to the self-related values of freedom, a sphere of public values of justice can be recognised, including values of respect and solidarity, as well as a sphere of inter-personal values of caring which characterise relationships between people, for example expressing trust in a community and responsibility among family members. For values of freedom,

individuals may acquire capabilities related to free choices, autonomy, self-esteem, and most of all: individual agency. But having freedom of choice, for example, will not be particularly helpful for someone who is in mourning because his parents have died. The person's well-being in that situation will benefit more from friends who comfort, as well as from joint participation in a funeral ceremony which is appropriate for the cultural context. So, another set of values requires another set of capabilities. Values of justice, for example, are reflected in capabilities for solidarity, collective action, and respect for other human beings as well as animals and the natural environment.

These three spheres are not independent from each other: freedom enables justice and caring but also constrains these, whereas in turn, the values of justice and caring are similarly related to each other and to freedom. Just as Nussbaum argues regarding her set of priority capabilities, so too the values underlying capabilities should be understood as highly interdependent: one cannot be well attained without the others. The values can be thought of as continuously balancing each other, at the macro level as well as at the micro level of an individual agent. Too much caring will limit women's freedom, for example, and reflects an unfair distribution of the burden of caring labour in the household with men. But too much freedom, as independence from a household and community, will limit an individual's well-being in times of scarcity or illness: others will not feel responsible to help someone who has refused to contribute to social networks of mutual help in the past. Opportunities to receive care when needed will be diminished by an exclusive pursuit of freedom.

## **5. WOMEN'S ROLE AS CARE GIVERS**

Let us consider women's role as unpaid caregivers for the family and community, a role assigned to women worldwide. How far can the issues arising be understood in Sen's framework of development as freedom?

In Chapter 8 of *Development as Freedom*, Sen argues for gender policies to focus on women's capability and agency rather than the traditional focus on women's disadvantaged levels of functionings. For him, such a focus on women's agency—their formation, pursuit and attainment of goals—often implies promoting paid work outside the home for women, leading to their own independent incomes. 'So the freedom to seek and hold out-

side jobs can contribute to the reduction of women's relative - and absolute - deprivation' (Sen, 1999: 194). Paid jobs help women to become financially independent from their husbands and fathers and to make their own choices in consumer and financial markets. Feminist economists have underpinned this relationship between paid employment and well being by their critique of the model of the unitary household and by analysis of women's bargaining position. Sen adds that the freedom that goes with paid labour brings important values for women such as self-esteem, dignity, and autonomy, values long reserved for (white) men only.<sup>3</sup> And he elaborates the effects of greater bargaining power in and outside the household: '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)' (idem: 194).

However, women's working lives include a large share of unpaid labour, making up a major part of the care economy (see e.g. Nancy Folbre & Julie Nelson, 2000). This unpaid care economy is highly significant: it consists of production on a vast scale of goods and services for the benefit of others (households, family members, communities). Estimates of its monetary value, on the basis of opportunity costs of women's time, range from 6% to 55% of GNP as presently calculated (Marga Bruyn-Hundt, 1996: 51). The unpaid care economy is qualitatively essential since although some of the goods and services produced have market substitutes, many do not. If women did not care for children beyond the level of care as provided in child care organisations, for example, the market would hardly do it either. Similarly it is hard to buy friendship, or understanding and comfort in a mourning process. In addition, caring labour produces more than just goods and services: it generates and cherishes a set of values at the same time, interpersonal values of belonging and sharing.

Caring values include responsibility, loyalty, generosity, and trust. Many women value caring and find meaning, even part of their identity, in caring for others. They see the complementarity with market production, and they recognise the important contribution of caring to the well being of those cared for. But caring should not be romanticised, just like paid labour does not only bring benefits but costs as well (wage discrimination, sexual harassment, and pressure on one's health, for example). Caring is a burden to care givers; it takes time, energy, and emotional commitment, as well as accompanying resources. These

burdens are, as Nancy Folbre and Thomas Weisskopf (1998) note, largely designated to women, based on traditional gender norms, backed by power and coercion. The far greater share of time that women spend on caring, compared to men, could be characterised as ‘socially imposed altruism’ on women, as Lee Badgett and Nancy Folbre have argued (1999: 316). Martha Nussbaum (1995) points out how complex the relation between caring and women’s well-being is, recognising the material and emotional benefits as well as the pains that go with intimate relationships, particularly when a relationship is characterised by dependency.

So, the role of women as care givers is complementary to market production, involving the production of some goods and services which markets are unable to provide, and reflecting values of belonging and sharing, which are different values from those of freedom. It involves a burden, which often limits women’s capabilities related to freedom: their financial independence and their self-esteem as workers. Care affects the capabilities and functionings of both the caregiver and receiver. There will be a positive effect on the care receiver’s functionings, but often lowered functionings for the caregiver. Care involves time that goes without compensation, and generally ties one to the care receiver, often close to the home.

There is more going on in the activity of caring. As a practice between care giver and care receiver it generates a caring capability of individual agents. This capability is a set of intangible, informally acquired skills and values consisting of (1) attentiveness to the needs of others, (2) responsibility to address these needs, even if these do not arise from consequences of our own actions, (3) competence in addressing these needs well, and (4) responsiveness of the care receiver to the care giver, as a feedback into the caring process (Joan Tronto, 1993).

Just as the capabilities of freedom, like self-esteem and self-confidence, contribute to the functioning of the economy, so do the capabilities of caring. Caring capabilities in economic life strengthen economic processes by generating trust (both trusting and trustworthiness), taking responsibility for externalities of one’s market behaviour, communication (through engaging in human relationships), and interpretation (of others’ economic position in terms of their resources, skills, bargaining power, demand, etc.). Without such capabilities, economic processes would be characterised by tremendous transaction costs,

high externalities, and strong volatility and uncertainty in production, investment and consumption levels (Irene van Staveren, 2001).

So, both at the macro level as well as at the micro level – in households and in communities – caring contributes to people’s capabilities, functionings and in the end, to their well-being, although the distribution of costs and benefits is very uneven. On average women undertake about three-quarters of the caring work in the world, while at the same time men do most of the paid work and earn the larger share of income (UNDP, 1995).

In Sen’s framework of development as freedom, there is (and rightly so) much attention for increased freedom for women through paid employment. However, if women would all engage more in paid employment (with increased labour force participation in numbers of women as well as in hours per woman), who would do the unpaid caring? Women could become overburdened with a double workday, or lots of caring needs could be left unaddressed. Hence, there may sometimes be a trade off in development between women’s freedom and care. And as seen when women do not take paid labour but specialise in unpaid caring labour, there is a trade off between their freedom and that of the cared for, and hence a question of justice.

It might be possible to enable women’s increased labour force participation while reducing the impact on care by redistributing some caring work to men. For the sake of women’s functionings, this is essential. A more balanced distribution of paid and unpaid labour over men and women would have another benefit, the generation of a wider set of capabilities for both women and men: freedom-type capabilities, like independence and self-esteem, and caring-type capabilities, like responsibility and affection.

But such redistribution of unpaid caring labour from women to men would not fit easily with a view of development as freedom. The challenge would be to convince men to take their fair share in household-, childcare and community-work. It is hard to see how this could be done by referring to someone’s individual freedom: how can men be convinced to do more unpaid caring labour, in terms of a discourse of increase of freedom? As women know from experience, housework and childcare may bring various satisfactions, but not freedom. It is the lack of freedom that goes with caring which led Sen to emphasise paid employment in the first place.

An alternative would lie in emphasising the plurality of development, beyond freedom. This means the recognition of capabilities and functionings not only in terms of values related to the self, values that increase one's independence and autonomy, but also in terms of values related to relationships with others, as well as values related to fairness of distribution. The claims of justice themselves may become better grounded and more persuasive, a basis for accepted duties and not only claimed rights, through this more substantive attention to personhood and to experiences of care.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

We have analysed the focus in Sen's capability approach on freedom, as the principal means and end of development. Sen's notion of capability and its connection to positive freedom prove to be more useful for gender-aware analysis and the study of women's well-being than the neoclassical ideas of utility and negative freedom. His concern with autonomous agency helps economists to analyse women's freedom to live the lives they have reason to value and to identify the constraints to this freedom.

In comparison to his earlier work, where he analysed a wide variety of human values next to freedom, his now increased emphasis on freedom appears less sufficient for the tasks of describing, explaining and motivating, and then developing policy recommendations; especially for those economic roles of women that are tied to different values, such as values of solidarity or connectedness. We identified two main shortcomings in his treatment of development as freedom. First, we noted an over-extension of the emphasis on freedom at the cost of other values, to the extent that all capabilities that women and men could acquire are now to be understood as freedoms. However, some important values, such as those associated with friendship, respect and care, cannot be adequately understood in terms of individual freedom. Second, we found the concept of freedom to be underelaborated, since it lacks sufficient distinction between autonomous agency on the one hand and the variety of values which may be promoted through such agency on the other hand; and also between capability as a set of opportunities, and capabilities as skills and capacities that can be nurtured. We agree with Ingrid Robeyns (2001) that Sen's capability approach is, deliberately, underspecified, and thus at risk of being combined with ques-

tionable, not least gender-biased, partners. The risk increases if it is perceived as a general purpose philosophy of development, unless the approach is refined and complemented.

To address these shortcomings, we have argued for an explicit stress on other values equally important as freedom, values, which too are means and ends of development. This requires recognition of different capabilities, as valuable in their own terms, not only as examples of freedom, but not unrelated to each other. Freedom should be emphatically embedded within a fuller picture of other values and needs. This suggestion draws on Sen's earlier work, in which he shows the contribution of values like democracy, respect and friendship to well being and development. These varied values and the corresponding valuable capabilities require more specific and substantive designation, investigation and support than in the generalised language of 'development as freedom'. Here we endorse aspects of the work of Nancy Folbre, Julie Nelson and Martha Nussbaum, amongst others. Without this sort of more substantive theory of personhood, the capability approach's language of freedom is more easily co-opted by questionable and gender-biased partners.

We suggested moreover that promotion of individual well-being, in particular the well-being of women which in so many respects lags behind that of men, benefits from a recognition of minimum required levels of some priority capabilities and functionings, or thresholds as Nussbaum has called these minimums. The attainment of minimum levels would be prioritised over the freedom of those who have already reached higher levels to further increase their well being.

Finally, we proposed that such pluralist understanding of capabilities would help to acknowledge the contribution of women as care givers as well as the constraints of this role on women's freedom. On grounds of both personal development and justice, it becomes possible to argue for a redistribution of care giving from women to men - enabling women's freedom as well as men's contribution to caring.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Seabright (2001: 42) remarks that: ‘the wish to see freedom as the fundamental value underlying every other even leads Sen at one point to talk about mortality as a denial of ‘the freedom to survive.’ Well, yes, one can call it that, but is it really illuminating to suggest that what matters about being dead is the lack of freedom that goes with it? Being dead is also bad for the health and has a significant statistical association with dropping out of college, but personally I think it’s the deadness that would bother me.’ Sen in fact refers to the freedom *to survive*, not to the freedom that survival brings, but his wish to bring so much under the label of freedom gives potential for confusion of this sort. And what of the *right* to survive?

<sup>2</sup> In the language of freedom and capability as opportunity alone, the issue of excess of freedom hardly seems to arise. Sen does direct us to look at valued positive freedom, the holding of valuable options; but in practice a presumption can easily enter that more freedom (‘real’ freedom) is always good.

<sup>3</sup> In two volumes on freedom in economics, the following values and constitutive elements of freedom are listed: choice, free exchange, opportunity, individual will, agency, independence, exercise of one’s capacities, intentional action, self-creation, self-determination, awareness, self-esteem, value in the eyes of others, dignity and pride (Alan Peacock, 1997; Francois Laslier, Marc Fleurbaey, Nicolas Gravel, and Alain Tranoy, 1998).