

Women and Men*

Many Faces of Gender Inequality

Inequality between women and men can appear in many different forms – it has many faces.¹ Gender disparity is, in fact, not one affliction but a multitude of problems. Sometimes the different asymmetries are quite unrelated to each other. Indeed, there may be no significant inequality in one sphere but a great deal of inequality in another. For example, Japan has no particular gender bias in nutrition or health care or school education, but men do seem to have considerable relative advantage in securing high leadership positions in administration or business.

However, in other cases, gender inequality of one type tends to encourage and sustain gender inequality of other kinds. Consequential analysis can then be critically important even within the large corpus of gender relations in general, in order to examine and scrutinize how the different aspects of gender inequality relate to each other. For while gender inequality has many faces, these are not independent (like those in the austere image of Brahma in early Indian iconography). Rather, they speak to each other and sometimes strongly encourage one another. For example, when women lack decisional power within the family, which amounts to a deprivation of women's effective agency, this can also adversely affect their own well-being.

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The two kinds of deprivation may not only move together – be 'covariant' – but they may be linked with each other through causal connections.

Well-being and Agency

It is useful to relate the topic of this essay to the general distinction between two features of human life, to wit, 'well-being' and 'agency', which I have explored elsewhere.² This distinction corresponds to the old dichotomy, much used in medieval European literature, between 'the patient' and 'the agent'. The distinction is not only important in itself, it also has a very substantial bearing on the causal connections related to gender relations.*

The agency aspect refers to the pursuit of goals and objectives that a person has reason to value and advance, whether or not they are connected with the person's own well-being. People may actively choose to pursue other objectives (that is, other than personal well-being), which could, quite possibly, be very broad, such as independence of one's country, the elimination of famines and epidemics, or (related to the present context) the removal of gender inequality in general. Even though there may be some overlap between different objectives, nevertheless as a general rule in championing these broader ends people may not be primarily influenced by the extent to which these general objectives affect their own quality of life or welfare.

The distinction between 'agency' and 'well-being' is conceptually rich, since they refer to two distinct ways in which a person's values, ends, ambitions, freedoms and achievements can be understood, using two different perspectives of assessment. As it happens, the distinction is of substantial relevance, in general, in interpreting practical policies and activities, and, in particular, in understanding the priorities of social movements, including the increasingly powerful 'women's movements' in many parts of the world.

*The role of agency, in addition to that of well-being, is quite central to the process of development, as I have tried to discuss in *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Indeed, until recently the activities of these movements were typically aimed, at least to a great extent, at working towards achieving better treatment for women, in particular a more 'square deal'. This involved a focus on women's well-being in particular. The choice of this focus has, of course, an obvious rationale, given the way women's interests and well-being have been neglected in the past and continue to be neglected even today. But in the course of the evolution of women's movements, their objectives have gradually broadened from this narrowly 'welfarist' focus towards incorporating and emphasizing the active role of women as agents in doing things, assessing priorities, scrutinizing values, formulating policies and carrying out programmes.

Women are, in this broadened perspective, not passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help brought about by society, but are active promoters and facilitators of social transformations. Such transformations influence, of course, the lives and well-being of women, but also those of men and all children – boys as well as girls. This is a momentous enrichment of the reach of women's movements.

Interconnections and Reach

As far as women's own well-being is concerned, it is also important to take note of the extensive interconnections between the agency aspect and the well-being aspect of women's lives. It is obvious that the active agency of women cannot ignore the urgency of rectifying many social influences that blight the well-being of women and subject them to deprivations of various kinds. Thus the agency role must be deeply concerned *inter alia* with women's well-being as well. Similarly, to consider the link from the other direction, it is not only the case that a woman whose agency is severely restricted will – for that reason and to that extent – be handicapped in well-being as well, but also, any practical attempt at enhancing the well-being of women cannot ignore 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 substantial interconnections.

Despite these connections, however, agency and well-being are two

quite different perspectives, since the role of a person as an 'agent' is fundamentally different from the role of the same person as a 'patient'. It is, of course, true that agents may have to see themselves, at least to some extent, as patients as well. For example, the old admonition, 'physician, heal thyself', is an invitation to the physician to be both an agent and a patient. But this does not alter the additional modalities and responsibilities that are inescapably associated with the agency of a person. An agent has an active role in pursuing valuable goals, and while these goals would typically include, among other objects, the person's own well-being, they can be, at the same time, far more spacious and extensive in their coverage. The agency role can, thus, be much broader than the promotion of self welfare.

The changing focus of women's movements towards the agency aspect is, thus, a crucial broadening of the scope and reach of these movements, and involves substantial additions to older concerns (without denying the continuing relevance of those concerns). The earlier concentration on the well-being of women, or to be more exact, on the 'ill-being' of women and the deprivations that yield that ill-being, was not, of course, silly or mistaken. Deprivations in the well-being of women were certainly serious – sometimes atrocious – and their removal is clearly important for social justice. There are excellent reasons for bringing these deprivations of women's well-being to light, and to fight for the removal of these iniquities. But nevertheless, conceptualizing women's deprivation basically in terms of well-being, and thus concentrating on the 'patient' aspect of women, cannot but miss out something extraordinarily important about women as active agents of change, which can transform their own lives and the lives of other women, and indeed the lives of everyone in society – women, men and children. Women's movements as well as the growing volume of feminist literature have both been involved, in recent decades, in this broadening of focus. As a consequence, the new agenda has tended to transcend the view of women as patient solicitors of social equity, and see women as harbingers of major social change, in making the world a more liveable place for all. The focus on voice in this book fits well particularly with the agency aspect of gender relations.

Distinct Faces of Gender Inequality

The difference between well-being and agency has remarkable analytical reach, and I shall draw again on this conceptual distinction later on in this essay. But before that I would like to discuss the wide range of variations between the different 'faces' of gender inequality.³

I shall examine the distinct phenomena under the following headings:

- (1) survival inequality;
- (2) natality inequality;
- (3) unequal facilities;
- (4) ownership inequality;
- (5) unequal sharing of household benefits and chores; and
- (6) domestic violence and physical victimization.

Given the demographic and social complexity in identifying and understanding the first two categories, I shall concentrate on them in particular, and refer to the others only rather rapidly.

Survival Inequality

In many parts of the world, gender inequality takes the savage form of unusually high mortality rates of women and a consequent preponderance of men in the total population. This contrasts particularly sharply with the preponderance of women found in societies with little or no gender bias in health care and nutrition. It has been widely observed that, given similar health care and nutrition, women tend typically to have lower age-specific mortality rates than men. It is interesting that even female fetuses tend to have a lower probability of miscarriage than male fetuses. Even though, everywhere in the world, more male babies are born than female babies (and an even higher proportion of male fetuses are conceived than female fetuses), in those places in which men and women receive similar health care and attention, the overabundance of men is gradually reduced and then reversed. So the populations of Europe and North America have about 105 or more females per

100 males, and this higher female-male ratio (of about 1.05 or 1.06) comes about as a result of the greater survival chance of females in different age groups.

In contrast with this pattern, in many regions of the world, women receive less – sometimes far less – care than men, and in particular, girls often receive very much less support than boys. As a result of this gender bias in health care and social attention, mortality rates of females are unusually high compared with what may be expected from the local male mortality rates. Indeed, quite often female mortality rates actually exceed the male rates, in total contrast with what is biologically expected and what is actually observed in the pattern of mortality in Europe and North America.

The concept of 'missing women' was devised to give some idea of the enormity of this phenomenon by focusing on the women who are simply not there, primarily due to unusually high mortality compared with normal female-male mortality ratios. The methodology involves finding some way – unavoidably rather rough – of estimating the quantitative difference between the actual number of women in these countries, and the number we could expect to see had the gender ratio in survival been similar, in these countries, to that in other regions of the world where there is not such a significant anti-female bias in health care and other social influences relevant for survival.*

For example, if we take the ratio of women to men in sub-Saharan Africa as the standard (on the grounds that there is relatively little bias against women in health care, social status and mortality rates in sub-Saharan Africa, even though the absolute mortality rates are very high for both men and women), then its female-male ratio of 1.022 can be used to calculate the number of missing women in women-short countries. With India's female-male ratio of 0.93, there is a 'relative deficit' of women of 9 per cent of the Indian male population between that ratio and the standard used for comparison, that is, 1.02 (based on the sub-Saharan African ratio). This already

*I have discussed the methodology involved in estimating the number of missing women and the principal results in 'Missing Women', *British Medical Journal*, 304 (7 Mar. 1992), and 'Missing Women Revisited', *British Medical Journal*, 327 (6 Dec. 2003). See also my joint book with Jean Drèze, *Hunger and Public Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

yields a figure of 37 million missing women in India in 1986 (when I first did the estimation).⁴ Similarly, the use of the same 'standard' of 1.02 (based on the sub-Saharan African ratio) produces a figure of 44 million for missing women in China at the same point of time. By adding these country estimates together, it soon emerges that for the world as a whole the magnitude of shortfall of women easily exceeds 100 million, already 'missing' in 1986 (since then the numbers have grown with the growth of absolute size of the respective populations).⁵ Other standards and different demographic procedures can also be used, as has been done by Ansley Coale and Stephan Klasen. These procedures yield somewhat different numbers, but invariably very large ones. For example, Klasen's total number for the earlier period (as in the estimates by Coale and Sen) was about 80 million missing women. For more recent years, Stephan Klasen's method yields numbers that are larger than 100 million.⁶ Anti-female bias in care and mortality imposes a massive penalty across the world against the survival of women.

Natality Inequality and an Indian Divide

Even within the demographic domain, gender inequality can manifest itself not just in the old form of mortality asymmetry, but also in the new form of sex-specific abortions aimed at eliminating female fetuses. This 'natality inequality' reflects the fact that many parents want the newborn to be a boy rather than a girl, given a general preference for boys in many male-dominated societies. The availability of modern techniques to determine the gender of the fetus has made such sex-selective abortion possible and easy, and it has become very common in many societies. It is particularly prevalent in east Asia, in China and South Korea in particular, but there is evidence that it also occurs to a statistically identifiable extent in Singapore and Taiwan. It is beginning to emerge as a significant phenomenon in India and south Asia as well.

This 'high-tech sexism' has changed – and is continuing to change – the female–male ratios at birth. Compared with the biologically determined standard ratio of about 95 girls being born per 100 boys (which is the ratio we observe in Europe and North America since sex-

specific abortion does not exist as a significant phenomenon there), Singapore and Taiwan have 92, South Korea 88, and China a mere 86 girls born per 100 boys.

Given the incompleteness of birth registration in India, it is not easy to get exactly comparable female–male ratios at birth, but the ratio of females to males among children can serve, *inter alia*, as a guide to the natality bias as well, even though differences in child mortality rates of females and males can also influence these statistics. Indeed, both these phenomena (sex-selective abortions and female disadvantage in mortality of children) reflect anti-female bias, and they can certainly work together. As far as Indian statistics are concerned overall, even though mortality rates of boys and girls are now very close to each other, nevertheless the female–male ratio of the population under age 6 has fallen from 94.5 girls per 100 boys in 1991 (which was thus much in line with the ratio in Europe and North America) to 92.7 girls per 100 boys in 2001. This drop basically reflects the spread of sex-selective abortions and natality inequality, rather than any rise in the mortality of female children relative to male children.

There is a remarkable regional pattern associated with this new phenomenon in India. There has been, in fact, little (or no) decline in some parts of the country, mainly in the east and south, but it has fallen sharply in other regions, mainly in the north and west of India. There have been, for example, extremely sharp declines in the female–male ratios of children in Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat and Maharashtra, and significantly low ratios can be observed in most other states in the north and west of the country.

Because of the legitimate fear that sex-selective abortions might occur in India and serve as a new vehicle of India's traditional anti-female bias, some years ago the Indian parliament banned the use of sex determination techniques for fetuses, except when as a by-product of some necessary medical investigation. But it appears that the enforcement of this law has been comprehensively neglected.

Consolation might be sought in the fact that even the latest ratio of females to males among Indian children (93 girls per 100 boys), while lower than the figure ten years ago, is still much higher than South Korea's female–male ratio among children of 88 girls and China's 86 girls per 100 boys.⁷ There are, however, additional grounds for

concern, which require us to go beyond the current all-India average of female-male ratio of children. First, there are big variations within India, and the all-India average hides the fact that there are several states – in the north and west of India – where the female-male ratio for children is very much lower than the Indian average, and lower even than the Chinese and Korean numbers. Second, it must be asked whether these are 'early days' and whether – as the technology of sex determination becomes more widely available across India – the Indian ratio will continue to fall, catching up with – and perhaps even going below – the Korean and Chinese numbers.

There appears to be something of a social divide at this time running right across India and splitting the country effectively into two contiguous halves, in the extent of anti-female bias in natality and post-natality mortality. Since more boys than girls are born everywhere in the world for biological reasons, we must use as our comparative standard not a one-to-one ratio, but the proportions that can be observed in advanced industrial countries (in Europe and North America, for example), where sex-selective abortion is not a significant phenomenon. The female-male ratio for the 0-5 age group is 94.8 in Germany, 95.0 in the United Kingdom, and 95.7 in the United States, and perhaps we can sensibly pick the German ratio of 94.8 as the 'cut-off point' below which significant anti-female intervention can be suspected.

This dividing line produces a remarkable geographical split of the country. There are states in the north and west, led by Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Gujarat, where the female-male ratio of children is very substantially below the benchmark figure (with ratios between 79.3 and 87.8). Other states in these regions also have ratios significantly below the dividing line of 94.8 girls per 100 boys, such as Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Jammu and Kashmir, and Bihar.⁸ On the other side of the divide, the states in the east and south of India tend to have female-male ratios that are above the benchmark line (that is, 94.8 girls per 100 boys, taken as our cut-off standard): with Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Assam (each between 96.3 and 96.6 girls), and also Orissa, Karnataka and the north-eastern states to the east of Bangladesh (Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland,

Arunachal Pradesh). The country looks split in the middle, falling neatly into two divergent segments.⁹

A partial exception to this sharp pattern of twofold regional split is provided by the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where the female-male ratio is just below 94. As it happens, Tamil Nadu's female-child ratio is still higher than the ratio of any state in the north and west, which form the 'deficit list', but nevertheless Tamil Nadu's ratio is somewhat below the German cut-off point. However, the astonishing finding is not that one particular state seems to provide a marginal misfit, but that the vast majority of Indian states fall firmly into two contiguous halves, classified broadly into the north and west on one side and the south and east on the other. Indeed – and this is quite remarkable – every state in the north and west¹⁰ has a strictly lower female-male ratio of children than every state in the east and south (even Tamil Nadu fits into this classification), and the country stands firmly and sharply divided.

It may be asked whether the female-male ratio in child mortality is also similarly divisive. There is a statistical connection there, but nevertheless the pattern of female-male ratio of the number of children (which incorporates the impact of sex-specific abortion) produces a much sharper regional classification than does the female-male ratio of mortality of children, even though the two are also fairly strongly correlated. The female-male ratio in child mortality varies between, at one end, 0.91 in West Bengal and 0.93 in Kerala (in favour of girls) in the southern and eastern regions, on one side, to 1.3 in Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, at the other, with high ratios (against girls) also in Gujarat, Bihar and Rajasthan, in the northern and western regions.

The empirical contrasts make it difficult to escape the conclusion that the north and west have clear characteristics of anti-female bias, influencing the composition of children, in a way that is not quite present – at least, not yet – in most of the east and south. Also, the incidence of sex-specific abortions cannot be explained by the availability of medical resources for determining the sex of the fetus, that is, by the presumption that the states that have more sex-selective abortions are the ones in which medical facilities are more developed and thus usable for this purpose. For example, Kerala and West

Bengal in the non-deficit list, both with a ratio of 96.3 girls to 100 boys (comfortably higher than the benchmark cut-off of 94.8), have at least as many medical facilities as exist in such low-female-ratio states as Madhya Pradesh or Rajasthan. So the availability of medical opportunities cannot provide an adequate explanation – quite the contrary – and we have to look at factors that go beyond the supply side of medical technology. If facilities specifically for sex identification and subsequent abortion have been more extensively developed in some states than in others, the explanation has to be sought largely on the demand side, and not in terms of general development of medical opportunities.

Furthermore, the contrast does not seem to have any immediate and clearly explicable economic connection. The states with strong anti-female bias include rich ones (Punjab and Haryana) as well as poor (Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh), and fast-growing states (Gujarat and Maharashtra) as well as growth failures (Bihar and Uttar Pradesh). It is thus clear that we have to look beyond material prosperity or economic success or GNP growth into broadly cultural and social influences.

A variety of potential connections must be considered here, and there is a need for fresh research to explain the link between these demographic features and the subject matter of social anthropology and cultural studies.¹¹ There is, of course, a wealth of substantial social anthropological studies, undertaken in the past, that have examined regional contrasts within India.¹² These would certainly prove useful, though they must be further extended, especially since the regional division of India appears rather different in the new light of natality inequality. Indeed, the division between the north and west on the one hand and the east and south on the other is essentially different from the well-known traditional division between the broad north and the broad south that has received much attention already in Indian social anthropology, at least since Irawati Karve's pioneering work, *Kinship Organization in India*.

However, before I end this section of my essay, I must also sound two notes of caution, concerning the temptation to take the observable pattern of regional contrast to be something bigger and sharper than it, quite conceivably, might eventually prove to be. First, any cul-

tural resistance in the east and south to selective abortion against girls might not be immutable, and we must at least consider the possibility that, while the east and south seem more egalitarian in this respect at present, there can be a gradual spread of new practices – slower than in the north and west, but ultimately similarly pervasive. These are, of course, really pessimistic fears, but it is important to avoid complacency about the future of gender equity in the eastern and southern regions of India even as far as natality asymmetry is concerned. If counteracting measures are to be used, they must be considered even for those areas of India which seem relatively secure at the moment.

Having said that, however, it is certainly appropriate to note the observed regional division, from the gender perspective, between the north and west on one side and the east and south on the other. The causal antecedents of this division undoubtedly deserve investigative attention. This is also broadly, though not exactly, in line with the relatively lower relative mortality of female children vis-à-vis male children, in the east and south, compared with the north and west. The female-male ratio in child mortality varies, as was noted earlier, from as low as 0.91 in West Bengal and 0.93 in Kerala, on one side, all the way to 1.30 in Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, on the other.

Second, even in the eastern and southern states in which the overall female-male ratio is still within the European range, there are signs that urban centres have, by and large, a somewhat lower ratio than rural parts of those very states. For example, the female-children ratio per 100 boys is 93.7 in urban Orissa as opposed to the ratio for rural Orissa of 95.4. Karnataka's urban ratio is 93.9, compared with its rural ratio of 95.4. West Bengal's urban ratio of 94.8, while much the same as the German cut-off line, is still below its rural ratio of 96.7. There may be some evidence here of the use of sex-selective abortions in the urban areas of the east and south as well, even though they seem far less frequent than in the north and west. Indeed, while the eastern and southern urban ratios of girls to boys (such as 93.7 in Orissa, 93.9 in Kerala and 94.8 in West Bengal) are typically lower than the corresponding rural ratios, they are still close to – or even similar to – the international benchmark (94.8) and very much higher than the urban ratios in the north and west, such as 86.6 in Delhi, 84.4 in Chandigarh, 82.7 in Gujarat, 80.9 in Haryana and 78.9 in Punjab.

It is not easy to settle, without further scrutiny, how deep these regional or cultural influences are. But the remarkable geographical division of India into two halves in terms of female-male ratio among children (reflecting the combined influence of the inequality generated by sex-specific abortions and differential post-natal mortality) does call for acknowledgement and further analysis. It will also be extremely important to keep a close watch on whether the incidence of sex-specific abortions significantly increases in the states in the east and south, where they are at this time relatively uncommon.

Unequal Facilities

Natality inequality and survival disparity both have important demographic features, which means that gender bias can be identified, in these cases, on the basis of demographic statistics. However, even when the statistics of life and death do not show much – or any – anti-female bias, there are other ways in which women can have less than a square deal. For example, there are many countries in Asia and Africa, and in parts of Latin America, where girls have far less opportunity for schooling than boys. This is certainly true of most parts of India, and even more so in Pakistan, though the situation in Bangladesh, while still quite unequal, seems to be changing fairly rapidly. Inequality in schooling has far-reaching consequences for the fabric of society and it can profoundly influence many different aspects of gender inequality and also deprivation in general for men as well as women (on which more presently).

There are also other basic facilities that are often asymmetrically distributed. For example, the opportunity to enter politics or commerce may be particularly restricted for women. There are inequalities also in social participation, especially when women are confined to their homes and incarcerated within traditional family lives. These can impose significant handicaps for both the well-being and the agency of women, and they can, as I shall argue presently, have far-reaching social consequences – well beyond the immediate deprivation they directly reflect. Furthermore, even when there is relatively little difference in basic facilities including schooling, the opportunities of special facilities, such as higher education or technical

training, may be far fewer for young women than for young men.

Traditionally, this type of asymmetry has been linked to the superficially innocuous idea that the respective 'provinces' of men and women are different. This thesis has been championed in different forms over the centuries, and has had much implicit as well as explicit following. It was presented with particular directness in England by the Reverend James Fordyce in his *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), a book which, as Mary Wollstonecraft noted in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), had been 'long made a part of woman's library'. Fordyce warned the young women to whom his sermons were addressed against 'those masculine women that would plead for your sharing any part of their province with us', identifying the province of men as including not only 'war', but also 'commerce, politics, exercises of strength and dexterity, abstract philosophy and all the abstruser sciences'.¹³

Even though such clear-cut beliefs about the 'provinces' of men and women are now rather rare (or at least, expressing such beliefs has become quite unfashionable), nevertheless the presence of extensive gender asymmetry can be seen in many areas of education, training and professional work even in the advanced industrial countries, for example in Europe and North America. If India has gender inequality in basic education in a way, say, that Europe or North America does not, the latter has not yet been able to overcome entirely the inequality of educational facilities in general.

There is a similarity here with professional inequality as well. In terms of employment as well as promotion in work and occupation, women often face much greater handicap than men. This remains a problem even in the West. Indeed, if I may indulge in a bit of a personal reminiscence, as I worked sequentially at Delhi University, Oxford University and Harvard University, the proportion of women among my tenured colleagues steadily declined.

Since so much of this essay is based on probing in some detail such elementary manifestations of gender inequality as asymmetry in mortality and natality, in which many developing countries (including India) do very badly but which do not affect lives in the more economically advanced countries, it is particularly important to remember that the absence of one kind of gender inequality does not

entail immunity from other types of gender inequality. A country like Japan may be quite egalitarian in matters of demography or basic facilities, and even, to a great extent, in higher education, and yet there is evidence to indicate that progress to senior levels of employment and occupation can be much more problematic for Japanese women than for Japanese men.

In this essay I am paying particular attention to the experience of gender inequality in the subcontinent and India in particular, but I must warn against the temptation to think that the United States or Western Europe or Japan is in general free from gender bias simply because some of the empirical evidence of gender inequality that is readily observable in the subcontinent cannot be found, in that form, in these economically advanced societies.

In fact, sometimes the picture may be quite contrary. For example, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka all have – or have had – female heads of government, which the United States has not yet had (and does not, if I am any judge, seem very likely to have in the immediate future).^{*} Indeed, in the case of Bangladesh, where both the Prime Minister and the leader of the Opposition are women, one might begin to wonder whether any Bangladeshi man could, in the near future, plausibly aspire to rise to the top political leadership there. Given the many faces of gender inequality, much would depend on which face we choose to look at.

Ownership Inequality

Turning now to a different type of disparity, inequality in the ownership of property is a classic category of social inequality. This is, of course, the primary factor behind class divisions. While ownership differences between classes and their far-reaching implications have

^{*}Also, as was discussed in Essay 1, there has been a higher involvement of women in leadership positions in the Indian struggle for independence than in the Russian or Chinese revolutionary movements, and the Congress Party had women Presidents fifty years earlier than any major British political party. On the other hand, the ratio of women members of the Indian parliament is at this time significantly lower than in Britain. There is a strong move in India to find ways and means of making sure that a third of the parliamentary members are women, but there is much disagreement on how to bring this about.

received considerable attention (for example from Marx, who was particularly concerned with the class-based inequality in the ownership of 'means of production'), gender divisions in ownership can also be a source of much social inequality. In many societies the ownership of property, even that of basic assets (such as homes and land), tends to be very asymmetrically divided between men and women. The absence of claims to property can not only reduce the voice of women, it can also make it harder for women to enter and flourish in commercial, economic and social activities. Bina Agarwal has provided a far-reaching investigation of the disempowering effects of landlessness of women in many societies.¹⁴

Ownership inequality between women and men is not a newly emerging inequality, in contrast with natality inequality, for example. It has existed in most parts of the world for a very long time. However, there are also important local variations in the prevalence of this inequality. For example, even though traditional property rights tend to favour men over women in most parts of India, nevertheless in the state of Kerala, over a long period of history there has been matrilineal inheritance for an influential part of the community, most notably the Nayars, who constitute about a fifth of the total population of Kerala and who have long been influential in the governance and politics of Kerala. In the exceptional nature of Kerala's social achievements, the greater voice of women seems to have been an important factor, and in this the long tradition of matrilineal inheritance on the part of an influential segment of the society has played a significant role.

Unequal Sharing of Household Benefits and Chores

The common family tradition in many parts of the world by which men tend to own much of the assets of the household can also be an important factor in the inequality of power within the family. But household inequality has other causes as well, and this is an important subject which has only recently started to receive the attention it deserves. There are, often enough, basic inequalities in gender relations within the family or the household, which can take many different forms, involving variables I have already discussed, such as health

and nutritional attention or the opportunity of schooling and of post-school education.

Even in the cases in which there are no overt signs of crude anti-female bias in the form, say, of survival inequality, family arrangements can still be quite unequal in terms of sharing the burden of housework and child care. It is, for example, quite common in many societies to take for granted that while men will naturally work outside the home, it is acceptable for women to do this if and only if they could engage in such work in addition to their inescapable – and unequally shared – household duties.* This is sometimes called 'division of labour', though it may be more descriptive to see it as the 'accumulation of labour' on women.

The entrenched tradition of such 'division' of labour can also have far-reaching effects on the knowledge and understanding of different types of work in professional circles. When I first started working on gender inequality, in the 1970s, I remember being struck by the fact that the much-used *Handbook of Human Nutrition Requirement*, in presenting 'calorie requirements' for different categories of people, chose to classify household work as 'sedentary activity', requiring little deployment of energy.¹⁵ The influential *Handbook* was based on the report of a high-level Expert Committee jointly appointed by the WHO (World Health Organization) and FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization). It was hard not to think that the lack of experience of household work on the part of the patrician members of that august committee might have had a role in the remarkable diagnosis that household work was 'sedentary'.

Domestic Violence and Physical Victimization

One of the most brutal features of gender inequality takes the form of physical violence against women. The incidence of such violence is

* I have tried to discuss this issue in my 'Gender and Cooperative Conflict', in Irene Tinker (ed.), *Persistent Inequalities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); see also the extensive literature on household inequalities cited there. See also Nancy Folbre, 'Hearts and Spades: Paradigms of Household Economics', *World Development*, 14 (1986), and Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson (eds.), *Beyond Economic Man* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).

remarkably high, not only in poorer and less developed economies, but also in wealthy and modern societies. Indeed, the frequency of battering of women even in the richest and the most developed economies is astonishingly high. Some studies have suggested that there are as many as 1.5 million cases per year of rape and physical assault on women in the United States alone.

Turning to India, it must be acknowledged first that the frequency of assault on women is high in the country. To that terrible general recognition has to be added the special role of violence connected with particular social features, such as dowry and economic settlements. Even though the numbers involved in violent deaths are dwarfed by the larger numbers that perish from neglect of health care and social attention, the crude and brutal nature of this form of gender inequality makes it a particularly severe manifestation of the deprivation of women.

This inequality has been traced by some commentators to the physical asymmetry of women and men, with men having greater immediate power in the gross bodily sense. Undoubtedly, this asymmetry does have a substantial role in the prevalence and survival of this terrible state of affairs, made worse by periods of particular vulnerability for women, such as pregnancy and early post-natal phases. But in addition to the physical aspects of this inequality, attitudinal factors cannot but be major influences. The possibility of physical violence can actually be used (to settle a dispute or to gain an advantage) only when the permissibility of such behaviour is accepted, explicitly or by implication. While physical differences can be countered to a limited extent (training in self-defence rightly receives attention in this context), attitudinal factors can be more comprehensively targeted in any programme of social reform addressed to physical violence against women. Educational, cultural and political movements have roles to play in this transformation.

Free Agency and the Role of Critical Scrutiny

I return now to a subject introduced earlier, the role of women's agency, and the interdependence between the 'agency' aspect and the

'well-being' aspect of women's disadvantage. Perhaps the most immediate argument for focusing on women's agency is precisely the role that agency can play in removing the iniquities that depress the well-being of women. Recent empirical work 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 decrease sharply – and may even be eliminated – as progress is made in these agency aspects.

The differences between such distinct characteristics as women's earning power, economic role outside the family, literacy and education, property rights and so on may at first sight appear to be quite disparate and not linked with each other. What they all have in common, however, is the positive contribution of each in adding force to women's agency – through making women more independent and empowered. For example, empirical investigations have brought out the way in which women's working outside the home and earning an independent income tends to have a powerful impact on enhancing women's standing and voice in decision-making within the household and more broadly in society.¹⁶ The contribution of female members of the family to its prosperity, which is often ignored when women's work – typically very hard – is inside the home, becomes much more difficult to neglect when women work outside the home. Women tend, as a result, to have more 'say', both because of enhanced standing and also because of reduced financial dependence on men. Furthermore, outside employment often has useful 'educational' effects, in terms of exposure to the world outside the household, making a woman's agency better informed and more effective. Similarly, female education strengthens women's agency and also tends to make it better informed and functionally more powerful. The ownership of property can also add to the influence and power of women in decisions within the family and beyond.

The diverse variables that enhance women's social capability and effectiveness thus have empowering roles, both individually and

jointly. Their combined operation has to be related to the understanding that women's power – economic independence as well as social emancipation – can have far-reaching effects on the forces and organizing principles that govern divisions within the family, and can, in particular, influence what are implicitly accepted as women's 'entitlements'. From the crude barbarity of physical violence to the complex instrumentality of health neglect, the deprivation of women is ultimately linked not only to the lower status of women, but also to the fact that women often lack the power to influence the behaviour of other members of society and the operation of social institutions.

It is important in this context to understand the constructive role not only of information and knowledge, but also that of courage and temerity to think differently, in giving women's agency the independence and power to overturn iniquitous but entrenched practices and societal arrangements that are often accepted as part and parcel of an assumed 'natural order'. For example, in China or South Korea the standard routes to women's empowerment, such as female literacy and female economic independence (in which both Korea and China have had major achievements and which have done much for these countries in removing some standard forms of gender inequality, such as survival asymmetry), have not been able to stem the tide of natality inequality working through sex-specific abortions which specially target female fetuses. In India, too, even as women's increased empowerment has contributed to the reduction of excess female mortality, the tendency to use new technology to abort female fetuses has grown, in many parts of the country.

Indeed, there is some evidence that the immediate agency for taking decisions on sex-selective abortions is often that of the mothers themselves.* This raises important issues as to how to interpret the agency of women and its social influence. It is important to see the concept of agency as stretching beyond immediate

*In her insightful reports on India in the *New York Times* in 2001, Celia Dugger noted that the officials in charge of enforcing the ban on sex determination of fetuses frequently cited difficulties in achieving successful prosecution due to the reluctance of mothers to give evidence for the use of such techniques, which are often requested specifically by the mothers involved.

'control' over decisions. The fuller sense of 'agency' must, *inter alia*, involve the freedom to question established values and traditional priorities.*

Agency freedom must, in fact, include the freedom to think freely, without being severely restrained by pressured conformism or by the ignorance of how the prevailing practices in the rest of the world differ from what can be observed locally. For example, what is particularly critical in remedying the terrible biases in natality discrimination is the role of women's informed and independent agency, including the power of women to overcome unquestioningly inherited values and attitudes. What may make a real difference in dealing with this new – and 'high-tech' – face of gender disparity, is the willingness, ability and courage to reassess critically the dominance of received and entrenched norms. When anti-female bias in action reflects the hold of traditional masculinist values from which mothers themselves may not be immune, what is crucial is not just freedom of action but also freedom of thought.¹⁷ Informed and critical agency is important in combating inequality of every kind, and gender inequality is no exception.

Inequality within Families as Cooperative Conflicts

A particular field in which these interdependences are especially strong and blatant concerns inequality between women and men within the household. To understand the process more fully, we can start by noting the fact that women and men have both congruent and conflicting interests affecting family life. Because of the extensive areas of congruence of interest, decision-making in the family tends to take the form of the pursuit of cooperation, with some agreed solution – usually implicit – of the conflicting aspects. Each of the parties has much to lose if cooperation were to break down, and yet there are various

*On this, see my 'Well-being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lecture 1984', *Journal of Philosophy*, 83 (Apr. 1985); 'Open and Closed Impartiality', *Journal of Philosophy*, 99 (Sept. 2002); and *Rationality and Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

alternative 'cooperative solutions', each of which is better for both the parties than no cooperation at all, but which respectively give different – possibly extremely different – relative gains to the two parties.

The formal nature of this type of relationship with partial congruence of interest along with substantial conflicts was outlined by the mathematician John Nash in a classic paper, called 'The Bargaining Problem' (though he was not particularly concerned with family arrangements).^{*} The nature of the problem is very general and arises also in many other real-life contexts, including trade bargaining, labour relations, political treaties, and even in understanding the nature of the gains and losses from the contemporary globalization.[†] Nash's formulation and related ones also help to provide a basic understanding of what is involved in assessing the fairness of family division – of both chores and benefits. The simultaneous presence of cooperation and conflict is indeed a major feature of family arrangements which demand both predictive and normative scrutiny, even though, as I have argued elsewhere, the ethics and the politics of the problem have to be seen somewhat differently from the way Nash himself characterized it.[‡]

Exactly how does a problem of interactive relations involve both cooperation and conflict? Both the parties have a strong interest in having some cooperative solution rather than none, and yet they rank the different cooperative solutions in quite dissimilar ways – indeed, typically in opposite directions. For example, between two cooperative solutions *A* and *B* (the former more favourable to the first person and the latter to the second), each party is better off with either *A* or *B* than no cooperation at all, but while the first person's interests are better served by *A* than by *B*, the second gets a significantly better deal in *B* than in *A*. The first person has a self-interested reason to work towards the joint acceptance of *A*, whereas the second person has a similar reason for trying to get to *B*. There is,

^{*}Published in *Econometrica*, 1950. This was among the papers cited by the Royal Swedish Academy in awarding Nash the Nobel Prize in economics in 1994.

[†]On the last, see my 'How to Judge Globalism', *American Prospect*, Jan. 2002.

[‡]On this, see my *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (San Francisco: Holden-Day, 1970; repr. Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1979), chs. 8 and 8*, and also 'Gender and Cooperative Conflict', in Tinker (ed.), *Persistent Inequalities*.

therefore, the simultaneous presence of cooperation as well as conflict in relationships of this kind.

Family arrangements are quintessential examples of such cooperative conflict. The choice of one cooperative arrangement from the set of many alternative possibilities leads to a particular distribution of joint benefits. Some of these divisions are particularly unfavourable to women, and if cooperation is arranged through such a division, it can yield tremendous gender inequality. The structure of 'cooperative conflict' is a general feature of many group relations, and a better understanding of the nature and effects of cooperative conflicts can help to identify the influences that operate on the 'deal' that women get in family divisions.¹⁸ Conflicts between partially disparate interests within family living are typically resolved through implicitly agreed patterns of behaviour that may or may not be particularly egalitarian. The special nature of family life – leading joint lives and sharing a home – requires that the elements of conflict must not be explicitly emphasized. Indeed, dwelling on conflicts rather than the family's 'unity' tends to be seen as aberrant behaviour. Sometimes the deprived woman may not only be silent, she may not even have a clear assessment of the extent of her relative deprivation.

The perception of who is doing how much 'productive' work, or who is 'contributing' how much to the family's prosperity, can be, in this context, very influential, even though the underlying 'theory' regarding how 'contributions' or 'productivity' are to be assessed may rarely be discussed explicitly.¹⁹ The interpretation of individual contributions and appropriate entitlements of women and men plays a major role in the division of the family's joint benefits between men and women. 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 certainly include their own.

Women's Agency and the Survival of Children

I have been concentrating so far on the impact of women's agency on the well-being and freedom of women themselves. That is not the whole story, however. Other lives – men's and children's – are also involved. So the consequences of gender asymmetry, beyond the domain of gender inequality in all its forms, must also be considered. To illustrate, it is particularly important to see the role of women's agency in reducing child mortality and restraining fertility. Both relate to concerns that are central to the process of development, and while they clearly do influence the well-being of women as well, their relevance is undoubtedly very much wider.

Recent empirical work has brought out the influence of women's agency and women's empowerment in reducing child mortality. The influence works through many channels, but, perhaps most immediately, it works through the importance that mothers typically attach to the welfare of their children, and the opportunity they have, when their agency is respected and empowered, to influence family decisions in that direction. This has been a matter of particular interest in empirical studies in India.²⁰

There is, however, an interesting difference between distinct channels through which women's agency may be enhanced, for example the distinction between women's gainful employment in the labour force and women's literacy and education. It is natural to expect that the impact of female literacy and education must be entirely positive, and that is exactly what is observed. However, in the case of women's labour force participation, there are factors working in different directions. First, involvement in gainful employment has many positive effects on a woman's agency roles, and this, in turn, may entail increased emphasis being placed on child care and also a greater ability of women to emphasize the interests of children in joint family decisions. Second, since men typically show great reluctance to share domestic chores, the greater inclination towards more priority on child care (resulting from a larger voice of women in family decisions) may not be easy to execute when women are saddled with the 'double burden' of household work and outside employment. The net effect

could thus go in either direction. Not surprisingly, therefore, in the important comparison of inter-district data in India by Mamta Murthi, Anne-Catherine Guio and Jean Drèze, we do not get a clear-cut and statistically significant result in either direction for the impact of female employment on child mortality.²¹

In contrast, female literacy and education are found to have an unambiguously powerful and statistically significant impact in reducing under-5 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 other countries as well.²²

It is in this context also interesting to examine the impact of these agency variables on gender bias in child survival (as opposed to total child mortality and survival). For this particular variable, it turns out that both female labour force participation and female literacy have very strong ameliorating effects on the extent of female disadvantage in child survival, so that higher levels of female literacy and labour force participation are strongly associated with lower levels of relative female disadvantage in child survival. By contrast, variables that relate to the general level of economic development and modernization turn out, in these statistical studies, to have no significant effect on gender bias in child survival, and can sometimes – when not accompanied by empowerment of women – even strengthen, rather than weaken, the gender bias in child survival. This applies *inter alia* to urbanization, male literacy, the availability of medical facilities, and the level of poverty (with lower levels of poverty being sometimes associated with *lower* female-male ratios).²³ 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 labour force participation.

Emancipation, Agency and Fertility Reduction

To examine another causal connection, we can scrutinize the agency role of women in the reduction of fertility rates. The adverse effects of very high birth rates include the denial of women's freedom to do

other things – through persistent bearing and rearing of children – routinely imposed on many Asian and African women. It is thus not surprising that reductions in birth rates have often followed the enhancement of women's status and power. The lives that are most constrained by over-frequent bearing and rearing of children are those of young women, and any social change that increases their voice and influence on fertility decisions can be expected to have the effect of reducing the frequency of births.

This expectation is indeed confirmed in investigations of inter-district variations of the total fertility rate in India. In fact, among all the variables included in the comparative empirical analysis presented by Drèze, Guio and Murthi, the only ones that have a statistically significant effect in reducing fertility are female literacy and female labour 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, such as a rise in per capita real income.

The link between female literacy and fertility is particularly clear. This connection has been widely observed in other countries also, and it is not surprising that it should emerge in India, too. The unwillingness of educated women to be shackled to continuous child-rearing clearly plays a role in bringing about this change. Education also helps to broaden the horizon of vision, and, at a more mundane level, assists in disseminating 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 case of Kerala, the most socially advanced state in India, 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 as high as 3.0, that rate in Kerala has now fallen well below the 'replacement level' of 2.1 to 1.7 (even lower than China's fertility rate). Female agency and literacy are important also in the reduction of mortality rates, and this is another – more indirect – consequential route through which women's agency (including female literacy) may have helped to reduce birth rates, 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 favourable 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.*

Recently, there has been a good deal of discussion on the imperative need to reduce birth rates in the world. The issue has figured in the context of India in particular, and it has been predicted that India will overtake China in population size in a few decades. China's achievement in cutting down birth rates over a short period through rather draconian measures has suggested to many the need for countries such as India to emulate China in this respect. These coercive methods do involve many social costs, including the direct one of the loss of the effective freedom of people – in particular of women – to take decisions on matters that are clearly rather personal.

It is perhaps worth noting in this context that compulsion has not produced a lower birth rate in China compared with what Kerala has already achieved entirely through voluntary channels, relying on the educated agency of women. When China introduced its 'one child policy' and other coercive measures, China had a fertility rate of 2.8 while Kerala's fertility rate was somewhat higher, at 3.0. By the early 1990s, China's fertility rate was down from 2.8 to 2.0, whereas Kerala's had fallen from 3.0 to 1.9. Kerala has remained ahead of China as fertility rates have continued to fall both in Kerala and in China. Some other Indian states, such as Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh, have also experienced faster fertility decline than China has had with its coercive measures. The fertility decline in the successful Indian states has been closely linked with women's empowerment, particularly through female education, economic independence and involvement in remunerative work outside the household.

In fact, it is not quite clear exactly how much extra reduction in its birth rate China has been able to achieve by resorting to coercive methods. China has brought about many social and economic changes that have enhanced the power of women (for example, through raising

*On these and related general issues, see my 'Population: Delusion and Reality', *New York Review of Books*, 22 Sept. 1994; 'Fertility and Coercion', *University of Chicago Law Review*, 63 (Summer 1996); *Development as Freedom*, chs. 6, 8 and 9.

female literacy rates and expanding female participation rates in the labour force), and these changes have made conditions more favourable to fertility reduction through voluntary channels. These factors would themselves have reduced the birth rates (well below that of the Indian average, for example). While China seems to get too much credit for its coercive and brutal measures, it gets far too little credit for its supportive and facilitating policies that have actually helped it to cut its birth rate.

Kerala's low birth rate – lower than China's – also suggests that the consequential effects of these supportive developments may be effective enough to render compulsion largely redundant, even if it were acceptable otherwise. It so happens that Kerala not only has a much higher level of female literacy than India as a whole, it is also well ahead of China's female literacy rate (and higher indeed than every province of China).²⁴ The fact that the ranking of female literacy is exactly the same as that of birth rates is in line with other evidence for the close connection between the two. There is a 'virtuous circle' that deserves more attention than it tends to get.

Gender Inequality and Adult Diseases

I turn finally to an 'external' consequence of gender inequality that is only now beginning to receive serious attention. From English data, David Barker, and others working on a similar line, have found that low birth weight is often closely associated with higher incidence – many decades later – of a number of adult diseases, including hypertension, glucose intolerance and other cardiovascular hazards.²⁵ The 'Barker thesis', if further confirmed, will offer a possibility of identifying different empirical regularities that have been observed as prominent health-related phenomena in South Asia:

- (1) high rate of maternal undernourishment;
- (2) high incidence of underweight births;
- (3) widespread prevalence of undernourished children; and
- (4) high incidence of cardiovascular diseases.

If the Barker thesis gets further confirmation (the debate on this subject is quite intense at this moment), it would offer the 'missing link' in a chain of causal connections that have much policy importance in India and South Asia. Indeed, in understanding the different – and apparently disparate – empirical observations (1) to (4) above, social and medical relations have to be examined together and linked up.²⁶ There is much plausibility in seeing a causal pattern that goes from the nutritional neglect of women to maternal undernourishment, and from there to fetal growth retardation and underweight babies, thence to greater child undernourishment and – through the Barker connection – to a higher incidence of cardiovascular afflictions much later in adult life. What begins as a neglect of the interests of women ends up causing adversities in the health and survival of all – even at advanced ages.

At one level this finding is not surprising. Given the unique role of women in the reproductive process, it would be hard to imagine that the deprivation to which women are subjected would not have some adverse impact on the lives of all human beings who are 'born of a woman' (as the Book of Job describes every person, not particularly daringly). Interestingly enough, since men suffer disproportionately more from cardiovascular diseases than women, the suffering of women (particularly in the form of maternal undernourishment) ultimately hits men even harder than women (through heart disease and premature deaths). The extensive penalties of neglecting women's interests rebounds, it appears, on men with a vengeance.

It is clear from these biological connections that the consequences of neglecting women's interests extend far beyond the well-being of women only. Biology is not, however, the only consequential link. There are other, non-biological, connections that operate through women's conscious agency. The expansion of women's capabilities not only enhances women's own freedom and well-being, but also has many other effects on the lives of all.* Active agency of women can, in many circumstances, contribute substantially to the lives of all

*On the extensive role and reach of capabilities of women, see particularly Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

people – men as well as women, children as well as adults. Indeed, the effects, discussed earlier, of the impact of women's emancipation on child mortality and fertility already illustrate these broader – more conscious and less biological – connections.

There is also new evidence that the functioning of women in other areas, including in economic and political fields, makes a radical difference to the social outcome. Substantial links between women's agency and social achievements have been noted in many different countries. There is, for example, plenty of evidence that whenever social and economic 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 many other social benefits that come from women's enhanced status, enterprise and independence. The remarkable success in Bangladesh of organizations like the Grameen Bank and BRAC, directed particularly at the economic and social roles of women, illustrate how women's agency can help to transform the lives of all human beings. Indeed, in the gradual transformation of Bangladesh, which was seen not long ago as a 'basket case', into a country with significant economic and social success and much promise, the agency role of women is playing a critically important part. The precipitate fall of the total fertility rate in Bangladesh from 6.1 to 2.9 in the course of two decades (perhaps the fastest decline in the world) is merely one illustration of the dynamic power of women's agency and the consequential correlates of gender equity.

A Concluding Remark

When Queen Victoria wrote to Sir Theodore Martin complaining about 'this mad, wicked folly of "Woman's Rights"', she may have underrated the reach of that 'wicked folly', which can actually influence the lives of all, women, men and children. However, Victoria herself could not have been, I venture to say, unaware of the fact that women – indeed, even one woman – could make a difference to the lives of many. While hostility to women's rights, to which

the formidable queen-empress gave expression, has substantially weakened since that indictment was expressed (in 1870), the fact that women's reasoned agency has far-reaching consequences on the lives of all deserves a larger recognition than it tends to get, even today. Despite various achievements of Indian women, the need for a general recognition of this basic point remains strong.

I end with two final points, based on the conceptual and empirical discussions already presented. First, the importance of women's agency and voice reflects itself in nearly every field of social life. Even though for many purposes such simple indicators as women's education, employment and land ownership have much predictive power, there are broader influences on women's agency that also need consideration. For example, the parts of the country where there is extensive use of sex-specific abortion include some regions in which the simple characteristics of women's education and employment are not exceptionally low. A social and cultural climate in which mothers may themselves seek sons rather than daughters may require a more radical departure than mere schooling or outside employment can provide (even though they too would, to some limited extent, help). The issue of agency has to be broadened to focus particularly on deliberative agency. The social and political understanding that can make a crucial difference demands broad public discussion and informed agitation. The argumentative route has something to offer here, but it requires a very broad engagement indeed.

Second, it is necessary to widen the focus of attention from women's well-being, seen on its own, to women's agency (including, *inter alia*, its association with women's well-being but taking on, along with it, very many other aspects of society). We need a fuller cognizance of the power and reach of women's enlightened and constructive agency and an adequate appreciation of the fact that women's power and initiative can uplift the lives of all human beings – women, men and children. Gender inequality is a far-reaching societal impairment, not merely a special deprivation of women. That social understanding is urgent as well as momentous.

India and the Bomb*

Weapons of mass destruction have a peculiar fascination. They can generate a warm glow of strength and power carefully divorced from the brutality and genocide on which the potency of the weapons depends. The great epics – from the *Iliad* and *Rāmāyaṇa* to the *Kalevala* and *Nibelungenlied* – provide thrilling accounts of the might of special weapons, which are not only powerful in themselves, but also greatly empower their possessors. As India, along with Pakistan, goes down the route of cultivating nuclear weapons, the imagined radiance of perceived power is hard to miss.

The Moral and the Prudential

Perceptions can deceive. It has to be asked whether powerful weapons in general and nuclear armaments in particular can be expected – invariably or even typically – to strengthen and empower their possessor. An important prudential issue is involved here. There is, of course, also the question of ethics, and in particular the rightness or wrongness of a nuclear policy. That important issue can be distinguished from the question of practical benefit or loss to a nation from a particular policy. We have good grounds to be interested in both the questions – the prudential and the ethical – but also reason enough

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