**Economic Opportunities and Gender Differences in Human Capital: Experimental Evidence from India**

**ABSTRACT**

The old saying ‘Caring for a daughter is like watering another’s tree’ reflects the historic view of many Indian families that investing in the education of girls is a waste of resources because she will be lost to another family through marriage. Under this background the present study [of four higher education institutions in Darbhangā in Bihar, north eastern India] suggests that this situation is changing in Bihar with contemporary views of girls’ education varying from the traditional belief that it is a luxury to its being a need and a right. It is generally accepted that education facilitates the employability of women (although this is a view that is more pronounced amongst the more economically advantaged families) but women and men typically have different interpretations of what it enables beyond this. Women tend to talk of education and employment as a way of escaping the bonds of tradition and leading to greater independence, confidence and self-worth. However, men typically see the greater employability of women generated through investment in their education in terms of financial benefits, particularly as a supplement to household income, and a means of reifying traditional domestic structures.

Moreover, whilst women and men tend to express the view that educating girls will make them better wives and mothers and benefit society as a whole, there is considerably less emphasis on the individual benefits to women and a clear sense from men that greater employability should not lead to greater empowerment. Some men (and some women, too) perceive girls’ education as a threat to traditional ways of life. The study shows that women do want to make use of their higher education to secure greater independence, including financial independence, but that they are willing to forsake this within traditional domestic structures. That is, marriage marks the adaptation of their preferences.

Key words- adaptive preference, education, human capital, gender difference

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**Brief Biographical note of the Author**

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### Introduction

The adaptive preference problem concerns subconscious psychological changes that enable people to accommodate their aspirations to their experiences. They allow people to reduce the dissonance between the lack of freedom generated by impoverished circumstances and, in the language of the capability approach, what they value and have reason to value. The adaptive preference problem is a central justification for the capability approach; and both Sen and Nussbaum use it in their critiques of utilitarianism and its failure to distinguish between what people really prefer and what they are made to prefer through resignation to their situations. Adaptive preferences ‘are formed without one’s control or awareness, by a causal mechanism that isn’t of one’s own choosing’ (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 137). The acceptance and internalisation of a reduced life can lead to people expressing satisfaction with the limitations imposed on them by discriminatory and oppressive social structures. Those in relatively weak positions are often the best custodians of their own impoverishment and this self-abnegation – the failure to recognise a better life for oneself – denies the agency that is fundamental to capability assessments of well-being.

Here, we summarise the different interpretations of adaptive preferences put forward by Elster, Sen and Nussbaum. We then relate the adaptive preference problem to education and consider it through a case study of the future preferences of women in higher education institutions in the Indian state of Bihar. The case study is used to illustrate the need to turn to counterfactuals to identify adaptive preferences. The capability approach de-emphasises goods, including educational goods, and focuses instead on what they enable. We argue that although social and policy changes mean women in Bihar are less likely to adapt their preferences for higher education, they continue to accept and valorise the lack of freedoms imposed by marriage. These adaptive preferences therefore limit their freedoms to benefit from their higher education.

**Adaptations**

We begin by considering Elster’s interpretation of adaptive preferences as ‘sour grapes’ because it continues to misinform capability analyses. Elster identifies adaptive preferences as non-conscious psychological processes that take place ‘behind the back’ of individuals and so generate non-intentional actions by causing them to change their preferences without their knowledge (1983). In his taxonomy, this highly specific form of mental adjustment is distinct from other forms of preference deformation such as post-hoc rationalisation, addiction and compulsion. Elster illustrates his interpretation of adaptive preferences with reference to the ‘English version’ of the fable of *The Fox and the Grapes* in which the starving fox spies a bunch of grapes that are out of reach and concludes that they must be sour and therefore undesirable. That is, it downgrades the inaccessible by reversing its original preference through a process of dissonance reduction. In order to resolve the ‘state of tension between what [it] can do and what [it] might like to do’ (1983, p. 117) it retroactively revises its original preference (convincing itself that it prefers not having the grapes to having them) by constructing a logical but false justification which goes something like this: ‘I like sweet grapes; these grapes are sour; therefore I do not want them.’

This adaptation of preferences is self-deceptive and irrational because there is neither an epistemologically justifiable belief nor empirical evidence that the grapes are sour. Unlike preference changes generated by genuine learning, this particular form of preference deformation is reversible: if the grapes were to come within reach, the fox would revert to its original preference for having them rather than not having them. From a capability perspective, though, there are problems with this specific interpretation of the adaptive preference problem: it can incorporate trivial adaptations (for example, to not possessing expensive commodities) and it excludes preferences deformed through habituation to impoverishment.

**Sen and adaptation**

Sen, like Elster, argues that utilitarianism is an insufficient means of assessing well-being because it fails to account for preference deformations but he offers a broader understanding of adaptive preferences (albeit one that incorporates many aspects of Elster’s taxonomy). His interpretation of adaptive preferences can be seen in his early work on the gendered division of labour within and beyond the family which relates them to the ‘adapted perceptions’ (Sen, 1985a, p. 196) that lead to acquiescence in unequal social and domestic structures (Sen, 1990, p. 126). These adapted perceptions influence the desires of individuals as well as their comprehension of satisfaction.

His account of adjusting perceptions and desires to make life bearable suggests an initial resistance to long-term adversity: for example, references to the ‘tamed housewife’ or the ‘broken unemployed’ (*inter alia*, 1985b, p. 11) imply a period pre-dating the eventual resignation to those circumstances under which the sheer effort of maintaining frustration or anger becomes too great. This presumed change of circumstances echoes Berlin’s ‘strategic retreat into an inner citadel’ (1958/2002, p. 182) in the sub-conscious search for ‘some psychological security’ (Comim, 2008a, p. 144) and Elster’s concern with preference changes. However, Sen is also concerned with those who have never known anything other than deprivation. Such habituation to lifelong deprivation informs his argument that:

if a typical Indian rural woman was asked about her personal “welfare”, she would find the question unintelligible and if she was able to reply, she might answer the question in terms of her reading of the welfare of her family. The idea of personal welfare may not be viable in such a context (Sen, 1990, p. 126).

Self-assessments of individual well-being will ‘always be influenced by cultural circumstances’ (Teschl & Comim, 2005, p. 236) and so adaptation is bound up with the ‘social discipline’ (Sen, 1992, p. 149) that causes individuals to ‘become implicit accomplices to injustices that are reified through traditions, norms and social rules’ (Watts, 2007, p. 25). Sen observes that well-being assessments based upon subjective information generated under such circumstances are particularly unfair to the ‘usual underdogs in stratified societies’ (1999, p. 62) because they fundamentally misrepresent the true circumstances of those such as the ‘thoroughly deprived person, leading a very reduced life’ who accepts hardship with ‘non-grumbling resignation’ and makes ‘great efforts to take pleasure in small mercies and to cut down personal desires to modest – “realistic” – proportions’ (1992, p. 55) in order to ‘come to terms with their deprivation because of the sheer necessity of survival’ (1985b, p. 11; 1999, pp. 62-63).

As suggested here, Sen is concerned with adaptations to severe deprivation. For example, he writes of ‘perennially oppressed minorities in intolerant communities,’ ‘hopelessly subdued housewives in severely sexist cultures’ (1999, pp. 62-63) and of ‘people living under tyranny [who] may lack the courage to desire freedom, and may come to terms with the deprivations of liberty’ (2002, p. 634). These illustrations of adaptation as resignation to extreme deprivation mark his departure from Elster’s definition of adaptive preferences: Sen’s interpretation incorporates the rational thought processes that Elster addresses elsewhere in his taxonomy of preference deformation; and, for Sen, adaptations are never non-trivial.

**Nussbaum’s argument**

Like Sen, Nussbaum argues that the notion of adaptive preferences should incorporate the self-abnegation – that is, the failure to recognise a better life for one’s self – that is typically generated by long-term habituation to deprivation. She provides a robust critique of utilitarianism, particularly when it is manifest as subjective welfares, as it denies respect for people and their capacity for reflective thought and practical reason (one of her central human functional capabilities). She argues that it treats individuals as nothing more than ‘bags of unscrutinized desires’ rather than complex beings who ‘usually do not respect all of their own desires on an equal footing, but apply some kind of ranking and ordering to their own lives’ (2000, p. 122) and suggests that ‘contemporary economics has not yet put itself onto the map of conceptually respectable theories of human action’ (*ibid*.).

Nussbaum’s concern with the articulation of internal capabilities and external circumstances to account for their ‘*social basis*’ (*inter alia*, 2000, pp. 84-89, original emphasis) – that is, what she terms combined capabilities – highlights factors such as ‘habit, fear, low expectations and unjust background conditions’ that can significantly influence choice (2000, p. 114). Accommodating and accepting the oppressive circumstances of deprivation can lead to a form of contentment that not only erases the concept of the self as a person with rights that can be violated but denies the sense that what is happening is wrong. This is because individual desires are highly malleable and people ‘adjust their preferences to what they think they can achieve, and also to what their society tells them a suitable achievement is for someone like them’ (2006, p. 73). This is particularly, but not exclusively, so for women (2000, 2006) and the disabled (2006) who ‘often learn not to want things that convention and political reality have placed out of their reach’ (2006, p. 283) and are who are likely to be ignored even if they are able to voice concerns challenging historically and traditionally established norms. For example, in her account of the women she worked with in India, Nussbaum notes how Jayamma ‘didn’t even waste mental energy getting upset, since these things couldn’t be changed’ and that ‘this didn’t strike her as wrong or bad, it was just the way things were, and she didn’t waste time yearning for another way’ (2000, p. 113).

Nussbaum criticises Elster’s ‘rather narrowly focused’ interpretation of adaptive preferences because it sidesteps adjustments made to the reality of individual circumstances (2000, p., 136). However, there is no inconsistency here as she is concerned with aspects of well-being, and therefore with desires, that reach beyond the basic goods of life. Adaptations to the central human functional capabilities are matters of serious concern but adaptations to more trivial desires should not be automatically dismissed as limitations on well-being:

We get used to having the bodies we do have, and even if, as children, we wanted to fly like birds, we simply drop that after a while, and are the better for it... But clearly this is often a good thing, and we probably should not encourage people to persist in unrealistic aspirations (2000, pp. 137-38).

**Impact of education on adaptive preferences**

Sen and Nussbaum both consider the adaptive preference problem in terms of self-abnegation rather than sour grapes but they bring different perspectives to it. For Sen, who is primarily concerned with basic capabilities and extremes of deprivation, adaptive preferences always limit agency and freedom and therefore always inhibit well-being. Nussbaum offers a more nuanced interpretation whereby they are negative when they generate resignation to adversity but may be positive when they arise from the recognition of individual limitations that may otherwise impair human flourishing. There are, though, potential difficulties with both these perspectives: Sen’s interpretation can be problematic when applied to less fundamental capabilities in non-extreme circumstances (particularly, here, those relating to higher education rather than education in general) and there is a thin line between Nussbaum’s acknowledgement of unrealistic aspirations and the ‘social discipline’ (Sen, 1992, p. 149) exerted by social structures.

Education can challenge adaptations but people can also learn to adapt their preferences. A lack of appropriate resources, classroom denigration, cultural mores and social sanctions can all produce and reproduce the conditions under which educational preferences are deformed and educational aspirations ground down (Bridges, 2006; Walker, 2006, 2007; Comim, 2007; Unterhalter, 2007, 2008, 2009; Watts, 2007; Burchardt, 2009). As Unterhalter explains, this may lead to subjective expressions of satisfaction with one’s education if it is what is expected but ‘there is something disconcerting about this type of conclusion, which ultimately suggests the problem of ‘adaptive preference’’ (2009, p. 219). However, in linking this to different socio-cultural and economic groups, she calls attention to an on-going difficulty in identifying adaptive preferences: there is a significant difference between adapting one’s preferences to education in general and to particular forms of education such as, here, higher education (Watts & Bridges, 2006; Watts, 2009, 2011). From a capability perspective, then, it is important to consider the adaptive preference problem in terms of self-abnegation rather than sour grapes: the latter can erase the distinction between decisive preferences (Pettit, 2001) and adaptive preferences; and, if it rides roughshod over the respect of human diversity that is central to the capability approach, it can also lead to the false identification of adaptations (Bonvin & Farvaque, 2005; Bridges, 2006; Watts & Bridges, 2006; Clark, 2009; Watts, 2009, 2011).

Sen provides a means of engaging with both decisive and adaptive preferences when he writes of what individuals would do if they had control of the ‘levers of power’ (1992, pp. 64-69): people might adapt their educational preferences by downgrading higher education as inaccessible according to Elster’s taxonomy of preference deformation but would not necessarily value it for themselves even if they were able to strip away the social constraints operating upon them. This distinction, which demands attention to the counterfactual nature of capabilities, enables capability assessments to account for and respect human diversity without reproducing the normative power of social hierarchies based upon the mere accumulation of goods.

The following case study engages with these complexities through a consideration of the adaptive preferences of women studying at higher education institutions in India. Located within the wider context of recent policy changes intended to empower women, it is concerned with the valued ‘doings and beings’ achieved through higher education and subsequently downgraded through marriage. That is, rather than address higher education directly, our concern is to show how the weight of orthodox social and domestic pressures can deform preferences.

### The education and women students in India

Although India has one of the largest higher education sectors in the world, only about 6% of the country’s 18-23 age cohort attend university (University Grants Commission Annual Report 2003)

There are currently over 600 universities (42 central universities, 275 state universities, 130 deemed universities, 90 private universities and 65 autonomous institutes) and about 16,000 colleges affiliated to the universities. A small number of high-prestige universities (the central universities) are funded by the Union Government but the majority of non-private universities are funded by the state governments. There are also some affiliated colleges in states like Bihar funded by none, where teachers and other employees are expected to work without being paid for their work.

India’s higher education policies are framed by the 1986 National Policy on Education and the 1992 Programmes of Action. These draw upon two landmark reports: the University Education Commission, 1948-49 (the Radhakrishnan Commission); and the Education Commission, 1964-66 (the Kothari Commission). The Radhakrishnan Commission articulated the goals for Indian higher education, stating that:

The most important and urgent reform needed in education is to transform it, to endeavour to relate it to the life, needs and aspirations of the people and thereby make it the powerful instrument of social, economic and cultural transformation necessary for the realization of the national goals. For this purpose, education should be developed so as to increase productivity, achieve social and national integration, accelerate the process of modernization and cultivate social, moral and spiritual values (Report of the Education Commission, 1964-66, p. 41).

In order to realise the vision of the Radhakrishnan and Kothari Commissions, the 1986 National Policy on Higher Education laid down five principle goals: greater access, equal access (or equity), quality and excellence, relevance and the promotion of social values. However, although some of the country’s higher education institutions rank amongst the best in the world, others lack even basic infrastructures. Problems of fair access and equity are rooted in socio-economic, cultural and political issues and include poverty (which leads to high drop-out rates from primary schooling onwards), the culturally entrenched lower status of women, the failure to implement existing programmes and utilize available resources and the absence of political will. Investment in higher education institutions by the separate states is irregular and poor resourcing, including the failure to properly invest in teaching staff, inevitably has a negative impact upon the quality of provision. The state of the nation’s universities was recently summed up by Manmohan Singh, the Prime Minister and a former university professor, who acknowledged that:

Our university system is, in many parts, in a state of disrepair... In almost half the districts in the country, higher education enrolments are abysmally low, almost two-thirds of our universities and 90 per cent of our colleges are rated as below average on quality parameters... I am concerned that in many states university appointments, including that of vice-chancellors, have been politicized and have become subject to caste and communal considerations, there are complaints of favouritism and corruption (quoted by Kapur & Mehta, 2007).

However, there has been a national policy shift emphasizing the importance of women’s education at all sectoral levels (e.g. through expansion of women only institutions of learning) and in the north-eastern state of Bihar, where the following study was conducted, a series of educational initiatives driven forward by Nitish Kumār, the current Chief Minister of Bihar, has emphasised the importance of girls’ education. Yet the determined effort to increase the empowerment of women (BBC, 2007) has taken place against the backdrop of the very historical socio-cultural structures necessitating that drive and these structures continue to exert their influence upon the women these policies seek to empower.

**The aspirations of women graduates in Bihar (India)**

The old saying ‘Caring for a daughter is like watering another’s tree’ reflects the historic view of many Indian families that investing in the education of girls is a waste of resources because she will be lost to another family through marriage. This study [of four higher education institutions in Darbhangā in Bihar, north eastern India] suggests that this situation is changing in Bihar with contemporary views of girls’ education varying from the traditional belief that it is a luxury to its being a need and a right. It is generally accepted that education facilitates the employability of women (although this is a view that is more pronounced amongst the more economically advantaged families) but women and men typically have different interpretations of what it enables beyond this. Women tend to talk of education and employment as a way of escaping the bonds of tradition and leading to greater independence, confidence and self-worth. However, men typically see the greater employability of women generated through investment in their education in terms of financial benefits, particularly as a supplement to household income, and a means of reifying traditional domestic structures.

Moreover, whilst women and men tend to express the view that educating girls will make them better wives and mothers and benefit society as a whole, there is considerably less emphasis on the individual benefits to women and a clear sense from men that greater employability should not lead to greater empowerment. Some men (and some women, too) perceive girls’ education as a threat to traditional ways of life. The study shows that women do want to make use of their higher education to secure greater independence, including financial independence, but that they are willing to forsake this within traditional domestic structures. That is, marriage marks the adaptation of their preferences.

The traditional ways of life can be apprehended in reported comments such as ‘Educating girls will cause problems for their husbands,’ ‘Adolescent girls should stay at home’ and ‘Secondary education is wasted on girls.’ Even these more traditional views do not wholly exclude some sort of education for girls but there is still a general belief that whereas it is necessary for boys, it is a luxury for girls. As one father said: ‘I suppose it’s a good idea, girls getting education, but a boy’s need for education is bigger than a girl’s. The boys will be the breadwinners.’ Relatively few respondents were explicit in their rejection of the value of girls’ education and the interview data suggests a broad acceptance of it. However, cultural bias and the reproduction of domestic and social hierarchies lurk below the surface as indicated in this statement which captures many of the contradictions concerning attitudes to girls’ education:

It’s okay if she’s educated to the same level as me, but I don’t want [my future wife] to work. I want her to stay at home. Most parents feel their daughters are going to get married when they grow up and they’ll be housewives, so there’s no need for them to get educated. It’s a waste of money if they’re going to spend all their time at home. But if they’re educated, then maybe they can stand on their own feet, and can get jobs.

This instrumental approach to education locates its benefits in domestic arrangements that remain clearly gendered and discriminatory. On the one hand, he is saying that the only point of education is to get a job; on the other, that he wants an educated wife but not one who will go out to work. He is in favour of women receiving an education but would deny his own wife the opportunity to make use of it as he understands it. There is explicit support for girls’ education but an implicit rejection of it: education is seen as something to enhance employability (and so enhance capability) but that employability is not something to be shared across the gender divide. Another respondent explained:

I want my wife to be educated to university level and good at all sorts of housework, and I would definitely like her to work outside the house to contribute to the family’s income. But it’s important that I am more educated than my wife.

He expects a lot from his wife, but not equality. Views such as these, which link education to employment and use both to assert male dominance, were most evident from the male respondents but could be discerned in the responses from many women, too. They were more vocal when expressed by the younger generation and there is clear evidence of a generational difference with the younger respondents (both male and female) typically expressing more conservative views – perhaps because the potential empowerment enabled by education is seen as a threat to traditional roles. However, it appears that the situation is changing. Let us report one woman explaining:

I can see the change already, especially a significant change in the neighbourhood, seeing so many women who were destined to be housewives, but got an education and now have jobs. It’s a revolution. After a girl is educated, why shouldn’t she work for a better future? Why should anyone have anything negative to say about it? We all need to be independent. When they won’t feed us, why not let each individual take care of themselves and make their own decisions?

Women’s attitudes to traditional subservience appear to be changing with a slight majority of those surveyed in the four colleges suggesting that they should not have to move to the family homes of their husbands upon getting married and a slight minority suggesting that gendered displays of marital status (such as the *sindur* and *mangal sutra* worn by women) are wrong. Significantly, a clear majority of these women indicated that they were not prepared to keep producing children until the arrival of a son and many believed that their husbands should help with domestic chores. These responses indicate a desire for less servitude (c.f. Nussbaum, 2000) but it should not be automatically presumed that this also indicates a desire for more independence.

A majority of these women (and nine out of ten women in the medical and engineering colleges) suggested that they would be unwilling to give up professional employment simply to become housewives. Yet a majority (including all of those at the medical college) also stated that they would put their marriage before their job. Furthermore, a majority of these women also stated that they would put the well-being of their family ahead of their own (c.f. Sen – and note not well-being in terms of CA). That is, whilst women claim they want to work, and recognise that this is more likely with education, they tend to delimit their aspirations when they are located within domestic contexts. A clear and significant majority of the students (including all those at three of the four institutions) stated a preference for economic independence rather than dependence on their future husbands. However, almost all these women rejected the idea that they should have a say in the financial running of their future households rather than merely contributing their incomes. The preference for independence, including financial independence, typically ceases at the point of marriage when these women become complicit in the reproduction of unequal domestic arrangements that are made acceptable through being cast in the light of traditional cultural values linked to constructions of the national good.

**Future adaptations to a reduced life**

This study highlights the insidious nature of the adaptive preference problem. These women acknowledge and value the benefits – particularly the satisfying employment and financial independence – that can be obtained from their higher education, but they are happily resigned to surrendering them when married. That is, they are complicit accomplices in their own subservience to the dominant social and domestic arrangements. These arrangements are sketched out here by the men in this study who may say that they favour women’s education but typically do not want it intruding into their own households. Importantly, the women do not resist the reduction of their well-being but accept it: for all their talk of the importance of pre-marital independence, they remain willing to accept the subservient marital roles allocated to them by the weight of cultural history. Policy changes may have enabled them to overcome the history of adaptation to higher education but socio-cultural pressures continue to deform their preferences. Moreover, whereas policy statements are explicit, the historical structures they claim to challenge retain the power of tacit authority: there is no need for them to be made explicit because their orthodoxy is known.

The grinding drudgery of Tagore’s ‘Wife’ (2011) – who is a central character in Nussbaum’s discussion of adaptive preferences (2000) – is absent from these accounts. However, although they have higher levels of education than the ‘Wife’ and they are set to realise particular capabilities, these are prepared to accept a subservient position in marriage and deny the possibility of the better life they aspired to before their marriage. That is, whilst there is not the lifelong habituation to reduced circumstances – evidenced by their desire for satisfying employment and financial independence – there is a lifelong habituation to the role of married women in this society that demands they surrender these benefits. Under such circumstances, the benefits of their higher education are likely to be undone by the external social structures that they internalise and that limit their well-being. There is no need for the external structures to enforce the compliance of these women because they accept those structures and express their role within them as a preference.

Education can challenge the conditions that generate adaptive preferences but this study emphasises the salience of social structures. The drive to educate and empower women in Bihar means that women are less likely to adapt their educational preferences: attitudes that may have caused earlier generations of women to accept – and perhaps to be grateful for – a relatively impoverished education are changing. Significantly, the women in this study recognised the value of what a higher education can enable. However, they typically anticipated that these aspects of well-being would be subsumed by marriage and they tended to accept, and even express satisfaction at, this prospect. Interpreting this as an example of the adaptive preference problem is not to derogate the notion of marriage but to acknowledge the insidious nature of the self-abnegation that generates utilities such as happiness, pleasure and satisfaction through a resigned accommodation of aspirations to experience.

Educational structures can generate adaptations but this is clearly not the case here as these women valued and had reason to value their higher education. Yet they anticipated and accepted that the benefits of their education would not continue in the marital home. That is, they were resigned to the limitations imposed on their well-being by the social and domestic structures relegating them to subservient positions. However, this was not expressed as resignation but as a preference. These delimiting structures are indicated here by the comments from men on the role of women in marriage: the men talked of the importance of education but, on the whole, they did not want it disrupting their future households. Although there is a trend in Bihar towards the empowerment of women, those same women are typically complicit in the social arrangements that frame their adaptive preferences by reducing them to second-rate partners in marriage. This highlights the problems of the adaptive preference problem that Sen and Nussbaum use as a central justification for the capability approach. These women are not only resigned to the reduced levels of well-being demanded of marriage but believe that they are preferable and articulate these preferences through expressions of satisfaction and happiness.

The change of preferences that is contingent upon marriage suggests that Elster’s interpretation of the adaptive preference problem, illustrated by the fable of *The Fox and the Grapes*, may be pertinent here. However, within Elster’s taxonomy, adaptive preferences are subconscious preference changes taking place ‘behind the back’ of individuals that are characterised by self-deception. Here, though, there is no real change of preferences: the strength of the social and domestic structures mean that martial subservience is the expected norm no matter what promises are held out by educational and other policies. These women have consciously acknowledged the conditions of marriage and rationalised the demands of the dominant social structures. This is still an instance of preference deformation but, because it is rationalised, it is outside the narrow limits of Elster’s technical definition (although, to be fair to Elster, he acknowledges that his interpretation of adaptive preferences and the rationalisation of circumstances can be easily confused). This does not mean that his definition of adaptive preferences is irrelevant to the capability approach. For example, women seeking to improve their lives through education may consider higher education to be out of reach and therefore downgrade it as inaccessible.

From a capability perspective, though, there are conceptual problems concerning distinctions between whether the individual has reason to value that which is out of reach. The self-abnegation that is the key feature of adaptive preferences from a capability perspective must acknowledge the multiple realisability of capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000; Comim, 2008b; Watts, 2009, 2011) and the potential for the same ends to be met through different means (Bonvin & Farvaque, 2005; Watts, & Bridges, 2006; Clark, 2009; Watts, 2009, 2011). Respect for human diversity is fundamental to the ethos of the capability approach. The ‘evaluation of [opportunity] sets from the point of view of opportunity and freedom must be sensitive to the person’s preferences and reasons for them’ (Sen, 2002, p. 14; Bonvin & Farvaque, 2005, p. 282) and the imposition of interpretative frameworks that merely replicate dominant structures should be avoided (Clark, 2009). Yet respect for human diversity cannot be used to gloss over gendered inequalities.

These women are resigned to the socially accepted conditions of marriage that require them to give up those things they had previously valued. They have internalised the dominant social structures that deny the co-existence of marriage and the benefits of higher education. That they value the greater autonomy achieved through higher education is clear from their responses. However, although they express a preference for this greater autonomy in the period between graduation and marriage, they also express a preference for giving up that autonomy when married. Their circumstances are less extreme than those typically described by Sen and Nussbaum but they do echo their concerns about the reduction in well-being within marriage.

**Counterfactuals**

The adaptive preference problem arises from attempts to lessen the frustration caused by the dissonance between ‘what people really prefer and what they are made to prefer’ (Teschl & Comin, 2005, p. 236). To identify adaptive preferences, it is therefore necessary to understand what they would value if they were not limited by the circumstances of their adaptations. The fundamental importance of some capabilities means that their devaluation or the acceptance of their absence should be considered as adaptations. For example, basic education is recognised as being constitutive of the truly human life and resignation to its absence would be an instance of the adaptive preference problem. However, identifying adaptations becomes more problematic when moving beyond the thresholds of these capabilities. Downgrading higher education because it appears out of reach, for example, may have the appearance of an adaptive preference but respect for human diversity and the multiple realisability of capabilities mean that it may be a decisive rather than an adaptive preference. To identify these more complex capabilities demands consideration of the counterfactual nature of the capability approach.

Counterfactuality allows the analyst to take into account what the case might have been if the circumstances had been different. Here, for example, it enables consideration of what these women might choose to do with their higher education if they were not constrained by the social and domestic structures relegating women to subservient positions in the household. Counterfactuals demand ‘different ways of imagining the world [that] are contrary to what we know the facts actually to be’ (Everitt & Fisher, 1995, p. 35). However, although central to the notion of capability, counterfactuals are all too often overlooked (Comim, 2008b; Watts, 2009) because of their epistemologically complex and puzzling nature – how can we know what people would do under other circumstances? Interpersonal comparisons can help but respect for human diversity means that counterfactuals (what would be the case if the circumstances were different) should not be confused with counteridenticals (what would be the case if the person were different).

Sen neatly untangles this complexity when he suggests asking what people would do if they controlled the levers of power (1992, pp. 64-69). That is, what would they prefer if they could control that which controls them? What would these women prefer to do with their higher education if they could strip away the historic traditions demanding subservience in the marital home? It is clear that they value their higher education for the satisfying employment and greater autonomy it enables but they also express satisfaction with the social demands to give them up when married. What, though, if they could take on the role of wife and mother without adapting these pre-marital preferences for employment and autonomy? Would they then choose subservience?

The data shows that they placed a high value on the benefits of their higher education. However, their preferences change dramatically when looking ahead to married life and the acceptance of the social and domestic structures indicated here by the comments of the men taking part in the study and elsewhere in other studies (Sen, 1990, 1999; Drèze & Sen, 1996; Nussbaum, 2000). That is, those aspects of the truly human life they desire prior to marriage are downgraded in order to satisfy the social discipline attendant upon marriage. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that they would retain these pre-marital preferences if they could strip away that social discipline that allocates unequal measures of freedom and constraint to men and women. In other words, their resignation to a reduced life – one in which they accept the absence of the employment and autonomy obtained through their higher education – is an instance of adaptive preferences.

**Conclusion**

Adaptive preferences reduce well-being by inhibiting the individual’s desire to lead what Nussbaum terms a truly human life. From a capability perspective, they should be seen as the self-abnegation that leaves individuals resigned to the limitations of their impoverished circumstances. This has been illustrated here with reference to the future preferences of women graduates in four higher education institutions in the Indian state of Bihar. Policy changes seek to promote women’s empowerment but their impact is typically subsumed by historic traditions and structures that relegate women to second class citizens within the marital home. These women expressed preferences for satisfying employment and financial autonomy on graduating and these preferences articulate with important capabilities. Yet they are resigned to giving up these aspects of the good life on marrying and express that resignation as a preference for reduced freedoms. However, when the counterfactuals are considered – that is, what they would prefer if they were not limited by the historic discipline of social and domestic structures – a defensible case can be made that they would prefer to have the option of satisfying employment and financial autonomy within the marital home. This situation hinders opportunities of women for human capital formation In other words; their stated desire for domestic servitude is an adaptive preference where as men avail full opportunities for human capital formation.

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