From “Harmony” to “Cooperative Conflicts”

Amartya Sen’s Contribution to Household Theory†

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter provides a historical perspective of the different theoretical models that have attempted to capture how households function, particularly from the perspective of gender relations. First, it examines the notion of the ‘harmonious’ unitary household analysed by neoclassical models, and it provides an overview of the different critiques addressing the shortcomings of these models. Second, it contrasts neoclassical analysis with some of the ‘left-feminist’ approaches that were developed in the 1970s and 1980s, including those that viewed the family as a locus of conflict rather than harmony. Finally, the chapter emphasizes the importance of bargaining models to capture household dynamics and it focuses on Sen’s notion of ‘cooperative conflicts’ as a major contribution to our understanding of bargaining and gender relations further developed by feminist economists.
I. Introduction
I write this chapter as someone who has taught courses on Women and Work and on Gender and Development for many years, and whose research has been close to these topics. My objective is to acknowledge the ways in which Amartya Sen's work has been extremely helpful in the discussions around household analysis in our courses, and in presenting a more realistic view of how families and households function. This chapter is also written as an illustration of the ways in which Sen's work has had an enormous impact on feminist economics—from theory to empirical research and practical implications. He is one of the few prominent economists who has paid serious attention to gender inequality—particularly but not exclusively from a development perspective. From his analysis of “missing women” to his work on women and development in India and his elaboration of bargaining models, his contributions have been not only substantial and well received but also very influential. His popularity among feminist economists is symbolized by the publication of a special issue of the journal Feminist Economics (July/November 2003) focusing on his work, and by the continuous use of his writings in teaching and research having to do with women. His work has also been taken up by women economists beyond the more strictly feminist field, such as his theoretical and empirical contributions to welfare economics and human development.

This chapter concentrates on the nature of the household and of gender relations. For many of us, the publication of Sen's “Gender and Cooperative Conflicts” (1990) represented a very important step forward in our conceptualization of household dynamics. The women's movement of the late 1960s and 1970s had been instrumental in emphasizing the focus on the household as a unit of analysis in order to understand the nature of women's work and gender inequality; it generated some of the 1970s debates on domestic labor and the family that had much influence on the economic analysis of the household. To be sure, the New Household Economics had pioneered this analysis during the 1960s—with roots in Jacob Mincer's work in the 1950s—with the objective of understanding home production, home consumption, and the gender division of labor as well as the factors affecting
women's (and men's) labor force participation. Beginning with Mincer's and Gary Becker's work, many other authors in the 1960s and 1970s developed neoclassical models in different directions. They were used to analyze a variety of topics ranging from explaining time use and the gender division of labor to marriage patterns and fertility rates (see e.g. Lloyd 1975; Lloyd and Niemi 1979). However, parallel to the New Household Economics, other analytical models of the family and the household sprang from non-mainstream feminist perspectives during the same period (e.g. Humphries 1977; Hartmann 1987); although their weight within the economics profession was of course much less significant than that of neoclassical models, they were important from a more interdisciplinary perspective. In what follows, I analyze the differences between these conceptual frameworks in order to provide the background that helps contrast them with Sen's conceptualization of the household as an area of “cooperative conflicts”.
II. The Harmonious Household: Neoclassical Models and their Critics
Much has been written about the extent to which neoclassical models have been built around the notion of the unitary household making decisions based on a single utility function and without differentiating between different household members. In its typical formulation, utility maximization takes place with regard to consumption, production and general time use, having an impact on a wide range of decisions such as those affecting participation in the paid labor market by different household members, their leisure time, fertility rates, and so on. Despite the acceptance and wide use of these models in the profession as powerful tools of analysis, critics have noted a variety of weaknesses: (1) the questionable assumption that family well-being can be efficiently maximized by a “benevolent dictator” who decides altruistically on resource allocation and oversees the processes of “specialization” around the division of labor—in and outside the household; (2) the inability of such conceptualizations to capture differences and tensions among household members around these decisions; (3) the failure of utility maximization analysis in terms of questioning the initial distribution of household members' skills, which are taken as given; (4) the neglect of the negative consequences of specialization in the traditional domestic division of labor for women; (5) the assumption of “given preferences” which are affected by prevailing social norms but also by individual agency and contestation of these norms and by social change; (6) the implication of inevitability of outcomes by neoclassical equilibrium analysis. These and other critiques are well known and have been provided in detail by many authors, particularly feminist economists writing from a concern with gender inequality and women's oppression (Folbre 1988, 2001; Katz 1991; Koopman 1991; England 1993; Benería 1995; Bergman 1995; Nelson 1995). Sen himself (1982, 1983, 1985) has criticized the use of household models based on economic rationality. In what follows, I will focus mostly on the notion of the “harmonious household” as the central concept in neoclassical models characterizing the family and household economic decision-making.

In order to model a functioning, efficient and maximizing household, neoclassical analyses needed to solve the problem of assuming a unitary utility function encompassing various individuals whose tastes and objectives might differ.
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substantially. This was attempted either with the explicit assumption of harmony around household decision-making or, in the case of “rotten kids” who might dissent, with the assumption of an altruistic household head who can arrive at the most efficient way to maximize household welfare (Becker 1981). Harmony then implies either total agreement on decisions affecting household members of different genders and ages, or an authoritarian though altruistic household head who makes decisions despite what other members, even “rotten kids”, might prefer. Given what we know about families and how they function, the high level of harmony required in the first case is a rather unrealistic assumption; in the second case, the benevolent “dictator” reflects the functioning of the traditional patriarchal family, in which gender relations are bound by an authoritarian and patriarchal structure. This is quite different from the achievement of “harmony” and leaves us with the understanding that neoclassical models do not question the unequal gender relations that characterize patriarchal households. In addition, these models can justify, in the name of economic rationality, highly discriminatory behavior against girls and women. Examples of such discrimination abound across cultures, such as dowry systems that result in female infanticide because girls are viewed as generating extra costs associated with the dowry; or in cases when girls’ educational levels are deliberately kept lower than boys’, based on assumptions and social norms concerning male and female responsibilities and what constitutes the “proper” gender division of labor.

Thus, the appearance of “harmony” can result from the acceptance of social norms and regulations that function as “exogenous dictators” and act upon the given “tastes” and “preferences” assumed in neoclassical models. In this sense, maximization might rest on institutions and traditions that are oppressive to women and to other household members, such as young males subject to their father’s authority. This acceptance on the part of those discriminated against might be real and reflect a form of false consciousness, or it may only be apparent and result from fear of the consequences of non-compliance; or it might reflect a lack of agency. In all these cases, the appearance of harmony in household decision-making hides the asymmetries of unequal gender (and age) relations. Building theoretical models on these bases contributes to their legitimization and perpetuation. It is no
wonder that neoclassical models have been criticized by those who object to their implications for gender inequality. To be sure, some economists using these models have become sensitive to the various critiques and have taken them, as well as alternative views, into consideration (Blau, Ferber and Winkler 2006). Yet, a good part of the profession has ignored these critiques and has continued to rely on the assumption of a unitary household. Becker himself paid no attention to this issue in his influential *A Treatise on the Family*, even though the critiques were well known when the book appeared in 1981.

As for the neglect of the importance of social institutions and norms that influence household dynamics, this excludes important factors that can vary significantly across countries. Empirical research has shown that neoclassical models misrepresent the ways in which many households function, particularly in non-Western cultures. For example, Wolf's work in the 1980s on Java and Taiwan showed how decisions related to the labor allocation of family members can vary across cultures. Her empirical work showed that, in Taiwan, parents exercised a strong influence on their daughters' participation in wage work, whereas in Java, daughters contested their parents' decisions to a much greater extent (Wolf 1990). Similarly, Koopman's extensive study of agricultural households in southern Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa led her to argue that, rather than operating as a single unit of production, in most cases the male household head and his wife or wives conducted “separate enterprises”, earned separate incomes, and managed separate budgets. To be sure, men and women did often work together under a “manager who (p.206) mobilizes inputs and controls output”. However, this “managing” took different forms and involved both men and women (Koopman 1991). A different example was provided by Katz's study on rural Guatemala, in which she examined the “complex processes” that characterize the domestic economy. More specifically, she showed the “separateness of the male and female economic spheres and their linkages via transfers of income, land, goods and labor” (Katz 1995: 329). She concluded that this complexity implies both individual autonomy and mutual exchange. Likewise, Bina Agarwal's work has examined extensively the importance of social norms and cultural practices in shaping the ways in which households regularly operate (see below).
Finally, the anthropological literature has added further evidence to the notion that, in many cultures, the unitary household is not the best model of the ways in which they make choices and organize themselves on a daily basis (Guyer 1983; Geisler and Hansen 1994). More importantly, recent conceptualizations of the household extend this notion of a non-unitary household to a more general model applicable to different cultures, including Western countries (Carter and Katz 1992; Jacobsen 2007).

A different but related critique of neoclassical theory results from the contradiction between what England (1993) called the “separative self model” of individual economic rationality and the altruism assumed within the household. As England argued, choices and decisions based on economic rationality assume autonomous individuals without emotional connections to each other such as those resulting from feelings of love, empathy, anger or antagonism. Yet, household theory à la Becker relies on an altruistic patriarch able to make decisions based on a single family utility function—hence the contrast between choices and behavior within the domestic realm and in the labor market. England called the assumptions behind neoclassical household theory “androcentric” or male-centered, biased in favor of men's interests and based on a male-dominated system of gender relations, as I argued above.

III. Left-Feminist Approaches: The Working-Class Family, the Conflictive Household, and Exploitation in the Home

During the 1970s, left-leaning analysis dealt with quite different concepts of the household, much less known among orthodox economists, grounded in Marxian and feminist theory. A variety of authors contributed to the conceptualization of the family from this non-orthodox perspective (Delphy 1976; Humphries 1977; Himmelweit and Mohun 1977; Hartmann 1979, 1987; Molyneux 1979; Folbre 1982). Their views illustrate the tensions between feminism and the more traditional Marxian analysis, which ignores gender differences and inequality within the household. In comparison with neoclassical models, these approaches tended to ask wider and more political questions regarding the nature of the family and the gender division of labor, particularly in terms of the function of these within the capitalist economy. They also pointed to the
household and to women's domestic and reproductive work as a central focus of women's oppression.

An initial effort to understand the economic significance of women's work at the domestic level and also in the larger economy appeared in the late 1960s and 1970s as a result of the questions raised by the second wave of feminism. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a comprehensive list of the different contributions that generated the “domestic labor debate” in the 1970s. Instead, in what follows, I focus on two contrasting positions, typified by Humphries (1977) and Hartmann (1979, 1987), which provide very different notions of the family and are useful to compare with Sen's work. Subsequently, Folbre's analysis (1982), also using a Marxian framework, raised interesting questions with regard to the notion of “gender exploitation”—as opposed to class or capitalist exploitation—and bargaining power among different household members. As in the case of neoclassical models, a retrospective look at this early literature helps us to understand the subsequent contributions of bargaining models and of Sen's notion of cooperative conflicts.

Humphries' 1977 article was a response to a functionalist Marxian view of the family that viewed it as the arena of domestic labor serving the needs of capitalism, particularly through the maintenance and reproduction of the labor force. Her 1987 article was an effort to “redress this bias” by arguing that, in certain periods of capitalist development, working-class families presented a common front—quite apart from the needs of capital and even in conflict with it—as a result of their struggle for survival. Her historical analysis from nineteenth-century England showed how working-class families functioned as a unit in order to preserve family ties that contributed to their ability to face problems of survival. Humphries' objective was to illustrate how “family ties, vitalized by ideology, bind together labouring and non-labouring individuals” (28) because “in nineteenth century British capitalism kinship ties provided a major source of non-bureaucratic support in conditions of chronic uncertainty” (31). Hence she suggested that, at least in nineteenth-century Britain, the endurance of the family and traditional kinship ties among working-class families
persisted, and family loyalties sustained many individuals through the turbulent period of industrialization.

In terms of gender relations, Humphries discussed women's position within the family and as wage laborers. However, she focused on unequal gender relations only when discussing men's and trade unions' defense of the family wage—which resulted in a decrease in women's employment. She added that the campaign for a family wage was not entirely disadvantageous for working women, first because, as also argued by other authors, men were the higher earners in the household while women were at the lower end of the labor hierarchy, and thus their wages were lower. Second, women also benefited from the family wage as members of a household. Although Humphries mentioned the existence of “patterns of dominance relating to age, sex and division of labour”, she argued that they “should not blind observers to the material benefits that the family imparts to the working class in its struggle for a better life” (39). Likewise, although she later explored the ways in which male privilege in the labor market was historically constructed in specific cases (Humphries 1980), she did not focus on gender-related hardships and tensions that family loyalties might have imposed upon some household members, and upon women in particular. To be sure, she did not necessarily assume a “harmonious household” à la neoclassical theory, but her view of the family emphasized class solidarity rather than gender inequality. In this sense, it differed significantly from feminist models focusing on “disharmony” around gender-related tensions (see below). In fact, her argument could be read as a critique of such models, since it was an attempt to explain why “working class women might reject a [women's] movement that, in effect, denies them any semblance of self-determination and dignity” (Humphries 1977: 36).

A different issue is the extent to which it is possible to generalize from Humphries' work, since her empirical analysis relates only to working-class families and to nineteenth-century developments in England. Along these lines, her arguments can be applied to other social settings and periods. An example is provided by the literature that emerged from studies on the impact of structural adjustment policies on household survival strategies during the late 1980s and 1990s. Studies focusing on the social costs of adjustment in developing countries showed the ways in which poor
households in particular had to pool their resources in order to
survive the belt-tightening policies that generated budget cuts,
unemployment, the deterioration of labor conditions, and lack
of social protection for a large proportion of the population.\(^2\)
Some authors used notions such as “privatization of survival”
to refer to the enormous efforts made by households to deal
with these difficult conditions without social protection,\(^3\) thus
echoing Humphries' view of the working-class family and of
kinship ties as a source of endurance through turbulent
periods. However, the literature also documented the extent to
which structural adjustment policies were particularly hard on
women; the multiple gender dimensions were illustrated by
the intensification of their work within the home and in the
labor market as well as their increased need to participate in
community services and other forms of survival.\(^4\)
This research drew attention not only to the existence of gender
inequalities but also to the complexities of household relations.

In contrast with Humphries' analysis, Hartmann's emphasis
centered on the family as a locus of conflict and struggle.
While pointing out that research on families had contributed
ever of conflict within family life", thus limiting its usefulness for
understanding women's situation (Hartmann 1987: 110).
Historians, she argued, had generally seen the family as a
source of dynamic change and as a key actor and agent of
social change, often assuming a unity of interests and
downplaying conflicts among family members. To be sure,
Hartmann also recognized that family historians had
documented tensions between households and the world
outside them, thereby suggesting that, as Humphries showed,
they can act as unified entities; this was partially the result of
the mutual dependency among household members. On the
other hand, Hartmann criticized traditional Marxian analysis
for having failed to follow Engels' project of understanding the
two arenas in “the production and reproduction of immediate
life”, namely, the production of “means of existence” and that
of “human beings themselves”. Their concentration on the
production of “means of existence” outside the household led
them to neglect the area of reproduction of human beings.
Thus, Hartmann's feminist analysis focused on the conflicts
and tensions that result from the nature of the household as
the locus where reproduction, production and distribution take place—mediated by the gender division of labor and by the centrality of domestic work for women.

Hartmann's basic argument was that, as capitalism developed, men's concentration on the sphere of paid production and public life and women's concentration on the household contributed to gender differentiation. Although households continued to make decisions related to issues such as wage work, pooling income, having children and caring for dependent members, men tended to have more power than women. Thus, viewing the household as a unit obscured the reality of unequal gender relations; for Hartmann, the family is the primary arena where "men exercise their power over women's labor". This inequality, she pointed out, can take extreme forms since "mutual dependence by no means precludes the possibility of coercion". Similarly, she pointed out that "women and men are not less mutually dependent in the household than are workers and capitalists or slaves and slave owners" (Hartmann 1987: 117). Her analysis of time spent on housework in the US led her to argue that women of all classes performed household labor for men; despite changes in women's participation in the labor (p.210) force, the prospects for change, she argued, did not point towards equal sharing of housework between men and women. Hence the importance of focusing on unequal gender relations within the household in order to understand gender inequality.

Along these lines, Folbre (1982) reinforced Hartmann's basic argument, with an interesting attempt to apply the Marxian concept of exploitation to the economics of the household. She used a model of household production and distribution to argue that labor exchanges among family members might be unequal to the extent that some family members, such as those concentrating on domestic work, can be "exploited" by those engaged in wage work. At the same time, she argued, access to income in the labor market and the various degrees of economic independence contribute to the differences in bargaining power among family members. Consequently, she added, men may enjoy substantially greater bargaining power than women and children. Folbre applied her theoretical insights to the analysis of demographic transitions, arguing that the cost of children and the increasing importance of education leads to fertility declines and to changes in the relative bargaining power of women and children. Similarly,
increase in women's employment might increase their bargaining power, although its immediate effect is not clear due to the persistence of other forms of gender inequality. In this sense, she emphasized the importance of institutions and patriarchal forms affecting outcomes at the household level. Her analysis, like Hartmann's, tended to emphasize the notion of the family as an institution where exploitation and gender inequality can prevail, but she also pointed to factors tending to generate change in the relative position of household members.

Similarly, and despite Hartmann's emphasis on the family as a locus of conflict based on gender, she recognized that anthropological and historical research focusing on households revealed the family “as an embodiment of both unity and disunity”, a view that contrasts with the main thrust of her analysis. Thus, in the Marxist-feminist theoretical framework of the period, Hartmann's and Folbre's approaches reflected strong feminist views giving first priority to gender divisions. On the other hand, Humphries' view of the family was more influenced by the Marxist's emphasis on class divisions than by the feminist focus on relations of domination/subordination between men and women. The tension between these two approaches has far from disappeared over the years but, as illustrated by the work on the effects of structural adjustment policies mentioned above, the two tended to converge while de-emphasizing the ideological aspects of the earlier period. This is particularly so with the new conceptualizations of gender analysis developed since the mid-1980s. With regard to the concept of family relations, this meant that the household can be both harmonious and conflictive. More recent feminist household theory, including bargaining models, evolved in this direction.
IV. Cooperative Conflicts

The bargaining approach represented a very important step forward in the conceptualization of the family in economic analysis. Given the above critiques of neoclassical models and the shortcomings of early feminist approaches, bargaining models were able to incorporate precisely the notion that households can be both harmonious and conflictive, thus introducing a very useful way of understanding family dynamics (Sen 1983, 1990; Katz 1991, 1997; Lundberg and Polak 1993; Kanbur and Haddad 1994; Agarwal 1994, 1997).

After rejecting the predominant neoclassical theory and finding other models wanting, the challenge was the construction of an alternative way to explain how households make decisions and organize themselves. This is particularly true in terms of the processes involving time use, the gender division of labor, and allocation of income and other resources among household members. As Katz very appropriately pointed out, a feminist household model would “put process in the forefront, while not abandoning the theoretical task of explaining the observed outcomes of household resource allocation” (Katz 1991: 45).

In particular, Sen's notion of the family as a locus of “cooperative conflicts” captures the essence of the contradictions and tensions within households, and was a significant step forward from previous conceptualizations. His 1990 article was very instrumental in the effort to integrate gender into bargaining models. His point of departure was the reluctance on the part of most economists in the standard literature on economic development to include gender. Responding to the calls that many women had voiced since Ester Boserup wrote her pioneer book on Woman's Role in Economic Development (1970), he emphasized the systematic “inferior position of women inside and outside the household in many societies...[which points] to the necessity of treating gender as a force of its own in development analysis” (Sen 1990: 123). The fact that the relative deprivation of women vis-à-vis men is not uniform across countries, he argued, “was an important reason for giving serious attention to the causal antecedents of the contrasting deprivations” (124). The issue of “missing women”, particularly in Asian countries, was another point of departure for considering the importance of gender in development. However, Sen recognized the difficulty of translating this awareness into “an adequate framework for
the use of gender categories and sex-specific information in social analysis” and he found the problem “too complex to be resolved by any kind of simple model” (124). His approach to the problem consisted in integrating development and gender issues into the framework of bargaining models on the basis that they could capture “the coexistence of extensive conflicts and cooperation in household arrangements” (125). For those of us who found the assumptions of either the harmonious or the conflictive household lacking complexity, incomplete or politically questionable, the notion of cooperative conflicts seemed to open up (p.212) a very promising avenue for household theory and gender analysis, for a variety of reasons.

First, Sen’s model began with his analysis of capabilities, well-being, agency and perceptions but also with his understanding of the family and identity as exercising “such a strong influence on our perceptions that we may not find it easy to formulate any clear notion of our own individual welfare” (125). This is of course a theme that Sen had developed in earlier writings (see Sen 1982, 1984) and it is particularly relevant in thinking through bargaining processes. The problem of inadequate perceptions and false consciousness is especially relevant for women, as a result of gender constructions leading to a weak understanding of personal welfare. Sen saw clearly how this understanding is shaped by cultural norms, perceptions of self and of others, ability to articulate personal needs, and even fear of ostracism and of other negative consequences—such as male violence—if prescribed and internalized norms are contested or broken. In fact, Sen saw these problems as applying in a more general way to deprived groups that might be “habituated to inequality”, “unaware of possibilities of social change”, “hopeless” regarding social change, “resigned to fate”, and even “willing to accept the legitimacy of the established order”. Overcoming these problems is the essence of human development and points to the importance of Sen’s capability theory. In addition, his analysis opened the door to an inclusion of cultural factors and of differences across countries in our understanding of gender relations.

Second, by focusing on a “social concept of technology”, Sen emphasized the importance of social organization that “permits the use of specific techniques of production” and applied it to the household, where he saw both cooperation and conflict at work. By doing so, Sen paid attention to the
importance of processes in household dynamics, including the process of negotiation over the division of labor and resource allocation. He saw social technology as reflecting social arrangements regarding production in a broadly defined way, for example incorporating cultural aspects, and not merely maximizing objectives, in the analysis of the gender division of labor and the factors affecting it. This allows the “deeper probing” that is instrumental in clearing away “the fog and ambiguity in which the roles of different types of laboring activities are hidden by stereotyped social perceptions” (129). Similarly, “social technology” shapes gender-related distribution of resources affecting both the economic survival of families and social/cultural distributional parameters.

Third, by building on earlier models of cooperative and non-cooperative bargaining, Sen re-examined the tendency of orthodox economics to ignore the simultaneous existence of cooperation and conflict in households; the more realistic assumption of interaction between the two leads to a focus on the bargaining process. However, his awareness of the ambiguities both of perception of interests and of notions of legitimacy led him not only to examine the bargaining problem itself but also that of the constant interaction and links between perceptions, responses, well-being and agency. Sen’s 1990 article made clear that the relative bargaining power of individuals depends on their breakdown position but also on their perceived interest and perceived contribution responses. These concepts are rich with implications for gender analysis; we were of course aware that women tended to be weak bargainers but Sen’s work took us much closer to understanding why, and to capture the contributing factors with more detail. However, as in the case of other authors who had used game theory to build household models, he did not clearly focus on gender-related power relations even though he laid the basis for further elaboration. It is for this reason that Sen’s work has often not been seen as “feminist”—in the sense of addressing unequal gender relations. However, this is in fact a view that Sen has contested, pointing out the extent to which “power” is directly involved in his various assessments of gender inequality—from his analysis of capabilities to that of cooperative conflicts. Regarding the latter, his response to this question has been to emphasize that
[i]n the emergence of some cooperative solution *among the many that are available*, the powers of the two parties play a crucial part; for example, the more powerful party can obtain more favorable divisions of the family's overall benefits and chores.

(Sen 2003: 324; emphasis mine)

Indeed, Sen's view of the cooperative solution “among the many that are available”, represented a most interesting contrast with the neoclassical “equilibrium” solution, which conveys the notion of inevitability of outcome. Indeed, the importance of power relations for the cooperative outcome in bargaining is implicit in the model. What Sen did not incorporate was the detail in the nature of gender relations, which has been further elaborated by feminist economists (see below).

Fourth, by pointing out that “conflicts of interest between men and women are unlike other conflicts, such as class conflicts” (Sen 1990: 124), Sen reinforced arguments concerning the importance of the “personal” in feminist discourses. He argued that, unlike men and women, “a worker and a capitalist do not typically live together under the same roof...Thus, this aspect of ‘togetherness’ gives the gender conflict some very special characteristics” (Sen 1990: 147). Tensions and conflicts within the household may develop “against the background of pervasive cooperative behavior” (Sen 1990: 127). This opened the door to the inclusion of material interests as well as non-material aspects of gender relations in the bargaining process. Sen emphasized the importance of paying attention to “perception problems about respective interests, contributions and claims” (Sen 1990: 130; emphasis mine). Hence the importance placed on the “breakdown well-being response,” the “perceived interest response” and the “perceived contribution response” in his analysis (Sen 1990: 126–30). Further, this opened the door to understanding the outcome of bargaining processes by considering factors related to gender constructions that form part of individual characteristics—such as self-esteem and feelings of subordination/domination. An emphasis on the role of perceptions also opens the (p.214) door to overcoming the problems derived from England's “separative” household model, since perceptions contribute to understanding the emotional and other links between household members.
Fifth, Sen’s analysis was very conducive to thinking through policy and action that would improve women's bargaining power and consequently their condition. I still remember the first time I assigned his 1990 article in one of my courses; the discussion led very easily to the topic of concrete practical actions and policies in a way that other theoretical models did not. Students saw clearly the connections between, for example, the low self-esteem typical of many women and the possibility of improving it through education, access to income, or other empowering mechanisms. This opened up further discussion on the different possibilities through which educational programs and participation in the paid labor force could function as a way of improving women's “fallback position” or their “perceived interest” responses. Similarly, it was easy to formulate the role that women's organizations and increased agency could play in making development relevant for women. Sen brought up many of these issues in his work on India's economic development (Drèze and Sen 1995), an interesting and very useful book not only for its empirical content but also for its importance in legitimizing gender analysis in development. Further, and beyond his 1987 article, Sen's capabilities approach reinforced the usefulness of his analysis for thinking through gender-aware social policy.

It was no surprise that feminist economists welcomed Sen's work but they also extended it in different ways, insisting particularly on the importance of the wider set of factors affecting gender inequality beyond the narrowly defined economic variables. To illustrate, Elizabeth Katz (1997) built on Sen's work and, more generally, enriched bargaining models in different ways. First, she pointed out that one of the shortcomings of these models is their symmetric treatment of family members as players with regard to “voice”—the right and ability to participate in the household bargaining process. Similarly, this symmetric treatment also applies to “exit”—the ability to perceive and fall back on available alternatives to a cooperative solution. Far from being gender-symmetric, she argued, voice and exit can be very different for men and women. The difference can be related to a variety of factors, ranging from valuation of one's and others’ earnings to social norms and cultural practices, to the existence of alternatives that can replace the prevailing gender-differentiated social sanctions for a partner breaking marriage bonds. Yet, it is worth noting that, although Katz's contribution clearly moved
this type of analysis to a new level, Sen had underlined the importance of some of these factors in determining fallback positions and thread points, and he had provided examples in his 1990 article.

Another illustration of how Sen’s concepts have been elaborated and extended by feminist economists is provided by the work of Bina Agarwal (1994, 1997) on the role of social norms and cultural practices as determinants of intra-household bargaining processes. What determines household members’ bargaining power, she argued, had tended to be too narrowly defined as a result of concentrating on economic factors and not exploring qualitative aspects of power and power relations. She made use of her rich empirical information, mostly from India and other South Asian regions, to analyze different arenas in which household bargaining takes place. Among the relevant factors examined were the subsistence needs within the family, social perceptions of a person’s contribution to family resources, effective command over land property and land rights, and social norms that had mostly been treated as exogenous (except by mostly feminist economists). Agarwal’s work filled the many gaps regarding the specificity of social norms and their functions in different cultural contexts. They can, she argued, (1) set the limits of what can be bargained; (2) determine the constraints on bargaining power; (3) affect how bargaining is conducted; and (4) generate bargaining over social norms themselves when norms are challenged. The detail provided by interdisciplinary empirical information made her analysis particularly rich and thorough. Agarwal also extended her investigation beyond the household and examined the extent to which extra-household parameters impinge upon intra-household bargaining and vice versa. Such is the case with the labor market, the community and the state, all of which she analyzed separately and in their interaction with household bargaining. As she points out, many of the factors affecting household bargaining could be incorporated into formal models, quantified and empirically tested, while some others refer to “qualitative dimensions on which systematic information is often difficult to gather, and/or which cannot be easily integrated into formal models” (Agarwal 1997: 37), as in the case of perceptions.
In sum, Sen's notion of “cooperative conflicts” was instrumental in throwing light on much that had been left unexplored or under-analyzed in the “black box” of the household. As a result, we have learned a great deal about the factors contributing to household bargaining. Prior to this illumination (and even afterward in some cases), feminist analysis of household dynamics had implicitly referred to some form of bargaining process but without an explicit formulation of a model (Pastner 1974; Benería and Roldán 1987; Mencher 1988; González de la Rocha 2000). As argued above, one of Sen’s important contributions is the view of bargaining as a process driven by implicit or explicit strategies leading to a multiplicity of outcomes. Similarly, he opened the door to the inclusion of a wide range of non-economic factors affecting bargaining and the relative power of household members. In doing so, he has been instrumental in clarifying our notions about the nature of the family and in improving our understanding of gender dimensions in household theory. Finally, his analysis has been very conducive to formulating action and policy. To be sure, some aspects of Sen's work were built on existing analysis contributed both by neoclassical and unorthodox economics, including feminist economists, but he moved their work forward and his authority gave it more legitimacy and visibility. Its impact has not diminished with time.

Bibliography references:


From “Harmony” to “Cooperative Conflicts”

Economics (Cheltenham and Northampton, Mass.: Edward Elgar), 687–95.


(1) For a recent textbook example, see Bryant and Zick (2006).

(2) For summaries of this literature, see Benería (1999), González de la Rocha (2000) and Pérez-Sáinz (2005), among others.

(4) In the Andean countries, for example, poor women played a crucial role in organizing *comedores populares* or collective soup kitchens that often fed entire neighborhoods during the economic crises of the 1980s. This intensified their workload along the lines of traditional gender roles.

(5) For an elaboration of this argument, see Benería (2003: ch. 2).