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# SEN'S CAPABILITY APPROACH AND GENDER INEQUALITY: SELECTING RELEVANT CAPABILITIES

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how Amartya Sen's capability approach can be applied to conceptualize and assess gender inequality in Western societies. I first argue against the endorsement of a definitive list of capabilities and instead defend a procedural approach to the selection of capabilities by proposing five criteria. This procedural account is then used to generate a list of capabilities for conceptualizing gender inequality in Western societies. A survey of empirical studies shows that women are worse off than men on some dimensions, better off on a few others, and similarly placed on yet others, while for some dimensions the evaluation is unclear. I then outline why, for group inequalities, inequalities in achieved functionings can be taken to reflect inequalities in capabilities, and how an overall evaluation could be arrived at by weighting the different capabilities.

## KEYWORDS

Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, capability approach, capability lists, gender inequality, well-being

## INTRODUCTION

Much of Amartya Sen's work has focused on inequality and poverty. In his earlier writings, Sen (1973) criticized the existing literature on inequality measurement in welfare economics for being too concerned with complete rankings of different social states. Sen argued that we should not assume away complexities or ambiguities, and that often we can only make partial comparisons. For example, we might be able to say that person 1 (or country 1) is definitely better off than persons 2 and 3, but we might not be able to rank the well-being of 2 and 3. Sen has also criticized the inequality literature in welfare economics for being exclusively focused on income (Amartya Sen 1985, 1987, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1998). Instead, Sen argues, we should focus on the real freedoms that people have for leading a valuable life, that is, on their capabilities to

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undertake activities such as reading, working, or being politically active, or of enjoying positive states of being, such as being healthy or literate. This line of Sen's work, known as the capability approach, postulates that when making normative evaluations, the focus should be on what people are able to be and to do, and not on what they can consume, or on their incomes. The latter are only the means of well-being, whereas evaluations and judgments should focus on those things that matter intrinsically, that is, on a person's capabilities.

It is immediately clear that the capability approach has enormous potential for addressing feminist concerns and questions. Ever since its inception, the women's movement has focused on many issues that are not reducible to financial welfare, such as reproductive health, voting rights, political power, domestic violence, education, and women's social status. In this paper I want to ask how the capability approach can be used to study one core and overarching feminist concern, namely gender inequality. More precisely, I will outline how gender inequality can be conceptualized and assessed from a capability perspective. What precisely do we measure, and how much gender inequality can we observe?

Sen has claimed that ''the question of gender inequality ... can be understood much better by comparing those things that intrinsically matter (such as functionings and capabilities), rather than just the means [to achieve them] like ... resources. The issue of gender inequality is ultimately one of disparate freedoms'' (Sen 1992: 125). However, Sen's capability approach does not provide a ready-made recipe that we can apply to study gender inequality. It only provides a general framework, and not a fully fleshed-out theory. One of the crucial questions that Sen has not answered is which capabilities are relevant for assessing inequality. In other words, Sen has not proposed a well-defined list of capabilities.

It could be argued that there are already a number of studies that measure gender inequality in capabilities. Indeed, some studies on aggregated or macro gender inequality indices effectively assess inequality in capabilities or capability-like dimensions (Jane Humphries 1993; UNDP 1995; A. Geske Dijkstra and Lucia Hanmer 2000). This literature certainly comes close to defining gender-sensitive multidimensional inequality or well-being indices that are in line with Sen's capability approach. However, these indices generally compare countries, not individuals. We need to conduct similar studies that compare individuals within countries instead of average levels between countries. This paper is a step in that direction.

## I. A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF SEN'S CAPABILITY APPROACH

The capability approach advocates that we focus on people's capabilities when making normative evaluations, such as those involved in poverty

measurement, cost-benefit analysis, efficiency evaluations, social justice issues, development ethics, and inequality analysis. What are these capabilities? Capabilities are people's potential functionings. Functionings are beings and doings. Examples are being well fed, taking part in the community, being sheltered, relating to other people, working on the labor market, caring for others, and being healthy. The difference between a functioning and a capability is similar to the difference between an achievement and the freedom to achieve something, or between an outcome and an opportunity. All capabilities together correspond to the overall freedom to lead the life that a person has reason to value. Sen stresses the importance of ''reason to value'' because we need to scrutinize our motivations for valuing specific lifestyles, and not simply value a certain life without reflecting upon it. By advocating that normative evaluations should look at people's capabilities, Sen criticizes evaluations that focus exclusively on utilities, resources, or income. He argues against a utility-based evaluation of individual well-being because such an evaluation might hide important dimensions and lead to misleading interpersonal or intertemporal comparisons. A person may be in a desperate situation and still be contented with life if she has never known differently. A utilitarian evaluation will only assess her satisfaction and will not differentiate between a happy, healthy, well-sheltered person, and an equally happy, but unhealthy and badly sheltered person who has mentally adapted to her situation. This is especially important from a gender perspective because utility seems to have a gendered dimension. For example, Andrew Clark (1997) has shown that British women have a higher job satisfaction or utility from doing paid work than men, even after controlling for personal and job characteristics. Women who are worse off than men in objective terms might still have the same utility level. Clark examined several possible explanations for this gender differential and concluded that women's higher job-related utilities were caused by their lower expectations.

The capability approach also rejects normative evaluations based exclusively on commodities, income, or material resources. Resources are only the *means* to enhance people's well-being and advantage, whereas the concern should be with what matters intrinsically, namely people's functionings and capabilities. Resource-based theories do not acknowledge that people differ in their abilities to convert these resources into capabilities, due to personal, social or environmental factors, such as physical and mental handicaps, talents, traditions, social norms and customs, legal rules, a country's public infrastructure, public goods, climate, and so on. In traditional welfare economics, income (and sometimes expenditure) is the most widely used variable, and there is little discussion on whether other variables should be used (Frank Cowell 1995; Alissa Goodman, Paul Johnson, and Steven Webb 1997; D. G. Champernowne and Frank Cowell 1998). Economic historians have long looked at

other dimensions, such as height, mortality, and political freedoms. Welfare economists who measure individual well-being have also begun to pay more attention to other indicators, but income remains the dominant focus.

The focus on capabilities does not deny the important contribution that resources can make to people's well-being. Indeed, inequalities in resources can be significant causes of inequalities in capabilities and therefore also need to be studied. For example, Bina Agarwal (1994: 1455) has argued that ''the gender gap in the ownership and control of property is the single most critical contributor to the gender gap in economic well-being, social status, and empowerment.'' A complete analysis of gender inequality should not only map the gender inequalities in functionings and capabilities, but also analyze which inequalities in resources cause gender inequalities in capabilities and functionings. This is especially important for assessing which policies can reduce gender inequalities, because intervening in the distribution of resources will be a crucial (although not the only) way of affecting the distribution of capability well-being. This paper has the more limited aim of assessing gender inequality in capabilities, without investigating the corresponding resources that cause these inequalities, or the policies that can rectify them.

One important aspect of Sen's capability approach is its underspecified character. The capability approach is a framework of thought, a normative tool, but it is *not* a fully specified theory that gives us complete answers to all our normative questions. It is not a mathematical algorithm that prescribes how to measure inequality or poverty, nor is it a complete theory of justice. The capability approach, strictly speaking, only advocates that the evaluative space should be that of capabilities. However, it does not stipulate which capabilities should be taken into account, or how different capabilities should be aggregated in an overall assessment. Applying the capability approach implies that we choose the relevant capabilities and indicate how important each will be in an overall judgment. In addition, normative frameworks always depend on explanatory or ontological views of human nature and society, and Sen's capability approach does not defend one particular world-view. If we interpret all of Sen's work as being one integrated body of thought, as Sabina Alkire (2002: 87) does, then many theories of human nature and society would be excluded (e.g., strong libertarian or communitarian theories), but there will still remain a range of theories (e.g., most strands of liberal theories) that are compatible with the capability approach.[1]

## II. SOME STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE CAPABILITY APPROACH

Why make normative assessments in the space of capabilities, and why would this framework be attractive for an analysis of gender inequality? In

this section, I will discuss three strengths and one weakness of the capability approach for normative assessments in general and for gender inequality analysis in particular.

The first advantage is that functionings and capabilities are properties of individuals. Hence the capability approach is an ethically (or normatively) individualistic theory. This means that each person will be taken into account in our normative judgments. Ethical individualism implies that the units of normative judgment are individuals, and not households or communities. At the same time, the capability approach is not ontologically individualistic. It does not assume atomistic individuals, nor that our functionings and capabilities are independent of our concern for others or of the actions of others. The social and environmental conversion factors also allow us to take into account a number of societal features, such as social norms and discriminatory practices. In sum, the ethically individualistic and ontologically nonindividualistic nature of the capability approach is a desirable characteristic for well-being and inequality analysis (Ingrid Robeyns 2001b). This is also attractive for feminist research, because ethical individualism rejects the idea that women's well-being can be subsumed under wider entities such as the household or the community, while not denying the impact of care, social relations, and interdependence between family or community members.

The capability approach is therefore a major improvement over standard well-being approaches in welfare economics or political philosophy. In the latter, accounts of inequality and well-being often use implicit assumptions about gender relations within the family which are unrealistic and deny or ignore intra-household inequalities (Susan Okin 1989; Diemut Bubeck 1995). In welfare economics generally, inequality theories are ethically individualistic, but this principle gets lost in applied work. Individuals and families are often sloppily equated as in assumptions that partners pool their incomes, or that they receive equal shares of the benefits. There is by now a substantial literature on intra-household allocations, but this literature has had little significant impact on inequality measurement in welfare economics.[2] As Frances Woolley and Judith Marshall (1994: 420) have argued: ''standard approaches to inequality measurement presume that there is no inequality within the household.'' But this standard assumption turns out to be unrealistic, as not all partners share the total household income equally (Jan Pahl 1989; Shelley Phipps and Peter Burton 1995; Shelly Lundberg, Robert Pollak, and Terence Wales 1997). Moreover, Woolley and Marshall (1994) and Phipps and Burton (1995) have shown that assumptions about the degree of sharing within the household significantly affect inequality and poverty measurement. And even if household income were shared completely, it is problematic to assume that it does not matter in a well-being assessment whether a person has earned this money herself, or obtained it from her partner. Conceptualizing and

measuring gender inequality in functionings and capabilities helps avoid these problems, since it focuses on the lives that individuals can and do choose to live, and not on their average household income.

The second advantage of the capability approach is that it is not limited to the market, but looks at people's beings and doings in both market and nonmarket settings. The inclusion of nonmarket dimensions of well-being in our normative analysis will reveal complexities and ambiguities in the distribution of well-being that an analysis of income or wealth alone cannot capture. This is especially important for gender inequality research. Feminist economists have long been arguing that economics needs to pay attention to processes and outcomes in both the market economy and the nonmarket economy (e.g., Nancy Folbre 1994, 2001; Susan Himmelweit 2000). Inequality comparisons based only on the market economy, such as comparisons of income, earnings, and job-holdings, exclude some important aspects of well-being such as care labor, household work, freedom from domestic violence, or the availability of supportive social networks. They also miss the fact that women spend much more time outside the market than men. These aspects matter particularly in gender-related assessments of well-being and disadvantage.

The third strength of the capability approach is that it explicitly acknowledges human diversity, such as race, age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and geographical location as well as whether people are handicapped, pregnant, or have caring responsibilities. Sen has criticized inequality approaches that assume that all people have the same utility functions or are influenced in the same way and to the same extent by the same personal, social, and environmental characteristics:

> Investigations of equality – theoretical as well as practical – that proceed with the assumption of antecedent uniformity . . . thus miss out on a major aspect of the problem. Human diversity is not a secondary complication (to be ignored or to be introduced ''later on''); it is a fundamental aspect of our interest in equality.
>
> (Sen 1992: xi)

Again, this characteristic of the capability approach is important for gender inequality analysis. Sen's concern with human diversity contrasts strikingly with the tendency in standard welfare economics to neglect intra-household inequalities in nonmarket labor and total work loads. Equality is ultimately measured in ''male terms'' with an exclusive focus on the market dimensions. Feminist scholars have argued that many theories of justice claim to address the lives of men *and* women, but closer scrutiny reveals that men's lives form the standard and gender inequalities and injustices are assumed away or remain hidden, and are thereby indirectly justified. For example, many theories of justice simply *assume* that families are just social institutions where love, justice, and solidarity are the rule. This assumption

renders these theories inadequate *in their very design* for understanding or analyzing intra-household inequalities. Susan Okin (1989: 10–13) has called this ''false gender neutrality.'' As these theories use gender-neutral language, we might be tempted to see them as including the concerns of both men and women. But they ignore the biological differences between the sexes, and the impact that gender has on our lives through gendered social institutions, gender roles, power differences, and ideologies: ''Thus gender-neutral terms frequently obscure the fact that so much of the real experiences of 'persons,' so long as they live in gender-structured societies, *does* in fact depend on what sex they are'' (Okin 1989: 11). By conceptualizing gender inequality in the space of functionings and capabilities, there is more scope to account for human diversity, including the diversity stemming from people's gender.

However, these positive features notwithstanding, the capability approach also has one major drawback, which stems from its underspecified character. Capability egalitarianism, strictly speaking, only advocates that when making inequality assessments we should focus on capabilities. But every evaluative assessment, implicitly or explicitly, endorses additional social theories, including accounts of the individual, social, and environmental conversion factors, and a normative theory of choice. We get quite divergent normative results, depending on which social theories we add to the capability framework. If the social theories are racist, homophobic, sexist, ageist, Eurocentric, or biased in any other way, the capability evaluation will be accordingly affected. For example, gender discrimination in the market can reduce a person's capability set. Or mechanisms that form gendered preferences, such as socialization, can have an impact on the different choices that women and men make from their capability sets. If someone denies the existence of gender discrimination and gendered preference formation, or claims that they have no normative significance, then she will come to different conclusions about gender inequality in capabilities.[3] Thus, a major concern for feminists is that the capability approach is vulnerable to androcentric interpretations and applications. In the remainder of this paper, I present a feminist capability perspective on gender inequality. This implies that the view of social and human nature that I endorse is one that does not assume away people's interconnectedness, or the importance of care and interpersonal interdependencies, or the gendered nature of society.

However, viewing social and human nature from a feminist perspective is not sufficient for applying the capability approach to gender inequality. Because of its underspecified nature, Sen's capability approach needs at least three additional specifications before we can apply it. First, we have to select which capabilities are important for evaluating gender inequality and should therefore be included in a list of relevant capabilities. Second, we have to take a stand on whether to look at gender inequality in functionings

or in capabilities. Third, to make an overall evaluation, we need to decide how to weight the different functionings or capabilities. In this paper I am concerned mainly with the selection of capabilities, and will discuss the other two issues only briefly.

## III. THE NEED FOR A DEFINITE LIST

Martha Nussbaum (1988: 176; 2003) has argued that Sen should endorse one definite list of valuable capabilities, if he wants to apply the capability approach to social justice and gender inequality. Nussbaum (1995, 2000, 2003) has herself drawn up such a list of capabilities that she defends as universally valid. Although she concedes that her list would need further elaboration and adaptation by context, she argues that such a specification is an essential first step.

I disagree with Nussbaum's claim that Sen should endorse *one definite* list of capabilities. It is crucial to note that Nussbaum's and Sen's versions of the capability approach have different theoretical assertions, and their approaches entail different conceptions of what the list should be doing. As Sabina Alkire (2002: 54) notes: Nussbaum's list is ''a list of normative things-to-do''; it has a highly prescriptive character and she makes strong universalistic claims regarding its scope. Nussbaum has also used the capability approach to develop a universal theory of the good: it applies to all social justice issues, and to the world as a whole. This does not imply, she argues, that her list is insensitive to culture and context. It is formulated at a highly abstract level, and for each country or community it can then be made more specific. Hence, in Nussbaum's theory, there is one universal general list that can be translated into more detailed and specific lists to suit the context (Nussbaum 2000).

Sen's capability approach, by contrast, makes broader and less specified claims. Given the intrinsic underspecification of Sen's capability approach, there cannot be one catch-all list. Instead, each application of the capability approach will require its own list. For Sen, a list of capabilities must be context dependent, where the context is both the geographical area to which it applies, and the sort of evaluation that is to be done. Applications of Sen's capability approach can be very diverse. They can be academic, activist, or policy-oriented. They can be abstract and philosophical, or applied and down-to-earth. They can be theoretical or empirical. They can concern social, political, economic, legal, psychological, or other dimensions of advantage, taken together or individually or in any combination. They can be specified for the global or the local context. And so forth.

The differences in Sen's and Nussbaum's capability approaches, and their different views on the desirability of one definite list can be better understood by keeping in mind their respective academic fields and expertise. Sen's roots lie in the field of social choice, and he therefore

believes that we should search for fair and consistent democratic procedures to draw up the list. Nussbaum, on the other hand, has done a lot of work on the philosophy of the good life and, more recently, on constitutional design, and in this context it is much more important that a scholar proposes and defends a fully-fleshed out list of capabilities. As Fabienne Peter (2003) concludes from her analysis of the relevance of Sen's contribution to social choice theory for gender issues, ''taking people seriously as agents entails giving them a chance to be heard, and to be involved in collective evaluations and decisions.'' For a collective evaluation or for making a decision from a capability perspective, this certainly includes being heard and being involved in the selection of capabilities.

Suppose now that we apply Sen's capability approach to a particular question, and we end up with exactly the same list as Nussbaum's. Would this then confirm that Nussbaum is correct in defending one particular list? I think not. First, even if the actual list drawn up by someone using Sen's capability approach is the same as Nussbaum's, the underlying assumptions of what this list *is*, and what it is supposed to *do*, remain different. The theoretical status of the lists will remain distinct, even if both lists contain exactly the same elements.

Second, the *process* that generates a list is important and this could affect a list's political or academic legitimacy. Amartya Sen has repeatedly emphasized that in matters of social choice and distributive justice, processes matter a great deal. Indeed, we should be concerned not only with culmination outcomes (the outcome narrowly defined, here the items on the list), but also with the comprehensive outcome, which includes aspects of the choice process, including the identity of the chooser (Amartya Sen 1997). Suppose that a social scientist applies the capability approach to gender inequality assessment, or a village council uses the capability approach to decide on priorities for the allocation of its funds, and they end up using Nussbaum's list of capabilities. In terms of the comprehensive outcome, it would still be important that the social scientist or the village council go through a democratic process for drawing up a list of priorities. This will give a legitimacy to the outcome that simply copying Nussbaum's list will lack. In other words, even if the application of Sen's capability approach leads us to a list identical to Nussbaum's, the process by which Nussbaum's list is generated might lack the political legitimacy needed for policy design. Similarly, when the capability approach is applied to particular research questions concerning gender inequality, we might prefer lists that are derived from, embedded in, and engage with the existing literature in that field. In this sense, Nussbaum's list, even when proposing the same dimensions, might lack academic legitimacy.[4]

Summing up, if we want to respect Sen's capability approach as a general framework for normative assessments, then we cannot endorse one definite list of capabilities without narrowing the capability approach.[5] Note that

this does not contradict the claim that to use Sen's capability framework for specified purposes, be they theoretical or empirical, we must select capabilities. I now turn to the question: how can this selection be made without violating the basic tenets of Sen's approach?

## IV. FIVE CRITERIA FOR THE SELECTION OF CAPABILITIES

The fact that the capability approach is not a fully fleshed-out theory means that its further specifications can be diverse. For each such specification, we will need a relevant list of functionings and capabilities. How should this selection be made, and what type of list is appropriate? When drawing up a list of functionings, I suggest that the following five criteria should be met.

1. *The criterion of explicit formulation*: The most basic criterion is that the list should be explicit, discussed, and defended. To political and moral philosophers this might seem an obvious requirement, as can be seen from Nussbaum's (1995, 2000) very careful and elaborate defense of her list. But this is not a common practice in welfare economics. Existing applications in welfare economics operate almost exclusively at the level of quantitative empirical analysis, and use whatever functionings can be found in the available data sets, without defending an *a priori* list of functionings. Moreover, few of the existing applications discuss the capabilities that would have been appropriate, but for which no information is available.

2. *The criterion of methodological justification*: When drawing up a list, we should clarify and scrutinize the method that has generated the list and justify this as appropriate for the issue at hand. I will propose such a method for gender inequality research in Section V.

3. *The criterion of sensitivity to context*: The level of abstraction at which the list is pitched should be appropriate for fulfilling the objectives for which we are seeking to use the capability approach. This criterion thus proposes a pragmatic approach towards drawing up a list by acknowledging that it is important to speak the language of the debate in which we want to get involved. For example, in philosophical discussions the list will be specified at a highly abstract level, whereas for political, social, or economic discussions the list will be less abstract. And even within the latter discussions the level of abstraction can vary: the context of legal rights will require a list at a higher level of abstraction than one measuring socio-economic inequality.

4. *The criterion of different levels of generality*: The fourth criterion is related to, but distinct, from the third. It states that *if* the specification aims at an empirical application, or wants to lead to implementable policy proposals,

then the list should be drawn up in at least two stages. The first stage can involve drawing up a kind of ''ideal'' list, unconstrained by limitations of data or measurement design, or of socio-economic or political feasibility. The second stage would be drawing up a more pragmatic list which takes such constraints into account. Distinguishing between the ideal and the second-best is important, because constraints might change over time, for example as knowledge expands, empirical research methods become more refined, or the reality of political or economic feasibility changes. Care labor is a case in point in the context of gender inequality. Few, if any, empirical data sets have information on capabilities related to care labor; however, listing these capabilities in an ideal list strengthens the case for collecting data on care, which will then alter the analysis and perhaps the policies. Gender biases in the social sciences partly explain why many data sets contain so little information on who provides caring labor, and where, when, how much, why, and under what circumstances. Without this multi-stage procedure, the list could automatically reproduce the existing biases. The use of this procedure could help reduce such biases stemming from the social situatedness of researchers and policy-makers.

5. *The criterion of exhaustion and non reduction*: The last criterion is that the listed capabilities should include all important elements. Moreover, the elements included should not be reducible to other elements. There may be some overlap, provided it is not substantial. This does not exclude the possibility that a subset might have such an important status that it requires being considered on its own, independent of the larger set.

To sum up, the selection of capabilities requires careful attention, as there is a potential danger here of strengthening existing androcentric and other biases. I have defended a procedural approach and provided some selection criteria.

## V. SELECTING CAPABILITIES FOR GENDER INEQUALITY ASSESSMENT

For the conceptualization of gender inequality in post-industrialized Western societies,[6] I propose the following list of capabilities at the ideal level:

1 *Life and physical health*: being able to be physically healthy and enjoy a life of normal length.
2 *Mental well-being*: being able to be mentally healthy.
3 *Bodily integrity and safety*: being able to be protected from violence of any sort.

4 *Social relations*: being able to be part of social networks and to give and receive social support.
5 *Political empowerment*: being able to participate in and have a fair share of influence on political decision-making.
6 *Education and knowledge*: being able to be educated and to use and produce knowledge.
7 *Domestic work and nonmarket care*: being able to raise children and to take care of others.
8 *Paid work and other projects*: being able to work in the labor market or to undertake projects, including artistic ones.
9 *Shelter and environment*: being able to be sheltered and to live in a safe and pleasant environment.
10 *Mobility*: being able to be mobile.
11 *Leisure activities*: being able to engage in leisure activities.
12 *Time-autonomy*: being able to exercise autonomy in allocating one's time.
13 *Respect*: being able to be respected and treated with dignity.
14 *Religion*: being able to choose to live or not to live according to a religion.

Below I will defend these capabilities as important for an evaluation of gender inequality in Western societies, as required by the criterion of explicit formulation. But before doing that, I will justify the method and show how I respect the criterion of context. It is also important to keep in mind that this method might be appropriate for a range of measurement and evaluative problems, but probably not for political or policy decisions. For the latter purpose much more would need to be said on the importance and type of public debate, and hard issues would need to be discussed, such as deciding on the list where deep disagreements exist.

Methodologically, I have followed four steps to generate this list. The first step is unconstrained brainstorming. The second step is to test a draft list by engaging with existing academic, political, and grassroots literature and debates on gender inequality. This step aims to root the list in the local contexts and experiences of those whom the list concerns. Those drafting the list have to be especially careful to include information stemming from groups with whom they are less familiar. Given that the method is much more inductive than deductive, and accesses knowledge in different spheres of life, constructing this list is likely to be a substantial project. The last two steps are more formal. The third step involves engaging with other lists of capabilities (discussed in detail below). And the fourth and last step involves debating the list with other people (an aim toward which this article will hopefully contribute).

Let me now compare my list with the lists of others (the third step of my methodology). My comparison is with the lists proposed by Sabina Alkire

and Rufus Black (1997), Martha Nussbaum (1995, 2000, 2003), and the Swedish approach to the quality of life measurement (Robert Erikson and Rune Åberg 1987; Robert Erikson 1993). Table 1 presents these different lists and their dimensions.

The Swedish approach to welfare, developed since 1965, has generated an important list. This approach stipulates that a person's standard of living is her ''command over resources in the form of money, possessions, knowledge, mental and physical energy, social relations, security, and so on'' (Erikson 1993: 72–3). As can be seen, this approach differs from the capability approach in that it focuses on material and nonmaterial resources, and achieved functionings. In contrast, I deliberately exclude economic resources, as these do not constitute a capability. The Swedish list is also narrower and more directed towards the material dimensions of life. Another difference with the capability approach is that it does not distinguish between real opportunities and achievements. It is also gender-biased, as it does not include care and household work, or time-autonomy. Nevertheless, this list can function as a useful sounding board when the capability approach is applied to general well-being measurements in welfare states. These studies also give detailed guidelines on how the items on the list can be translated into quantitatively measurable variables.

Alkire and Black (1997) argue that the elements on a list should be the most basic reasons that people have for acting, that is, reasons for doing or not doing certain things. They argue that one should compare lists to see whether some of the dimensions overlap. Only those dimensions that cannot be reduced to another dimension should be kept, so as to arrive at a list of completely nonreducible dimensions. By comparing the work of Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle, and John Finnis (1987) with Nussbaum's (1995), Alkire and Black end up with a list that contains the dimensions listed in Table 1: life; knowledge and appreciation of beauty; work and play; friendship; self-integration; coherent self-determination; transcendence; and being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature. But applying the criterion of context makes it immediately clear that this list will not be very helpful in an academic and/or political discussion on gender inequality at the individual level. Many items of this list are too abstract and vague for our purpose. It is a list of very general capabilities, as opposed to the more specific capabilities that I propose for the assessment of gender inequality.

A widely published list of capabilities is that proposed by Nussbaum (1995: 83–5; 2000: 78–86; 2003). Her list has ten dimensions: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; sense, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment. My list overlaps considerably with Nussbaum's. At the same time, there are several differences. First, Nussbaum's interpretation of functionings and capabilities is different from Sen's, and my list follows Sen's conceptualiza-

*Table 1* Comparison of several lists

| *Authors* | *Swedish approach (1987)* | *Alkire and Black (1997)* | *Nussbaum (1995, 2000, 2003)* | *Robeyns (this paper)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Aim/scope of the list* | *Quality of life measurement in Sweden* | *Universal* | *Universal* | *Gender inequality in Western societies* |
| *Level of abstraction* | *Low* | *High* | *High* | *Low* |
| *Dimensions* | 1. Mortality<br>2. Physical and mental health and healthcare use<br>3. Employment and working hours<br>4. Working conditions<br>5. Economic resources<br>6. Educational resources<br>7. Housing conditions<br>8. Political resources<br>9. Family and social integration<br>10. Leisure and recreation | 1. Life<br>2. Knowledge and appreciation of beauty<br>3. Work and play<br>4. Friendship<br>5. Self-integration<br>6. Coherent self-determination<br>7. Transcendence<br>8. Other species | 1. Life<br>2. Bodily health<br>3. Bodily integrity<br>4. Senses, imagination, and thought<br>5. Emotions<br>6. Practical reason<br>7. Affiliation<br>8. Other species<br>9. Play<br>10. Control over one's environment | 1. Life and physical health<br>2. Mental well-being<br>3. Bodily integrity and safety<br>4. Social relations<br>5. Political empowerment<br>6. Education and knowledge<br>7. Domestic work and nonmarket care<br>8. Paid work and other projects<br>9. Shelter and environment<br>10. Mobility<br>11. Leisure activities<br>12. Time-autonomy<br>13. Respect<br>14. Religion |

tion. For Sen, capabilities are real opportunities, but for Nussbaum they also include talents, internal powers, and abilities. This implies that for Nussbaum Sen's conversion factors are integrated in the concept of capability itself. The question then is: should we use Sen's conceptualization of capabilities, or Nussbaum's? For policy-related issues and debates in the social sciences, and especially for the measurement of individual advantage and the design of socio-economic policy proposals, the criterion of context would, in my view, favor the use of Sen's conceptualization. Nussbaum's list will be more appropriate in other discussions, mainly those concerning moral philosophical principles that might result in legal rights and political declarations, or in qualitative analyses of how people can cultivate their capabilities.

The second difference between Nussbaum's list and mine is that, even if we take from Nussbaum's list only those capabilities that are real opportunities, our lists differ in what is included. For instance, I explicitly include the functioning of time-autonomy, which means that my conceptualization of gender inequality includes inequalities in time allocation, leisure time, time-related stress, and so forth. This is an important social issue in some Western societies, and below I discuss some studies of gender inequalities in time use.

Third, the elements that are included in both lists are labeled and categorized differently. The difference here reflects the criterion of context: I have tried to categorize capabilities in a way that links them with the existing (mainly empirical) literature on gender inequalities in the social sciences.

Finally, as highlighted earlier, Nussbaum's list differs *in character* from other lists. In addition, she takes it for granted that the government will have to deliver minimum levels of the capabilities on her list. This belief in the government stands in sharp contrast to some critical theory, which sees the government as part of the problem of injustices (Nivedita Menon 2002). In formulating my list I steer clear of both positions. Rather, my concern is to highlight aspects of gender inequality and disadvantage, without outlining by what process these might be reduced, be it through government policy or otherwise. This is in line with Sen's capability approach, which allows for an analytical distinction between the distribution of well-being on the one hand and policies of redistribution and rectification on the other. Thus, even if some of the same capabilities figure in Nussbaum's list and mine, their character and normative assertions are distinct.

It is interesting to note that even though these lists have been drawn up by scholars from different backgrounds and with different aims, they show considerable overlap. The overlap is especially in the selected dimensions, albeit the levels of abstraction and generality of these dimensions differ substantially. Life, physical and mental health, knowledge/education, work,

play/leisure, and social relations (family/friendship/affiliation) can be found in all the lists, even though they are labeled and grouped differently. All of these capabilities are in some way also included in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which suggests that at a high level of abstraction there is probably a core set of capabilities that will always be considered important. Also, as Mozaffar Qizilbash (2002) concludes, many of the existing lists are reconcilable. I agree with Qizilbash that it is context and strategic reasons that play the major role in determining the length and content of different lists, rather than fundamental differences in the accounts of well-being or advantage. Nevertheless, for the mentioned reasons of agency and legitimacy, it will remain important to involve the affected people in the selection of capabilities and not to impose on them a list they simply have to accept, especially when the capability approach is used in political and policy contexts.

## VI. GENDER INEQUALITY IN CAPABILITIES AND ACHIEVED FUNCTIONINGS

The criterion of explicit formulation and justification of the list requires that I present the list and defend it. So far I have only listed the selected capabilities. In this section I will seek to justify why these capabilities are relevant for gender inequality analysis. I will also present evidence on gender inequality in these capabilities, although the evidence will be illustrative and not meant to provide a complete assessment of gender inequality. I can only scratch the surface of the relevant issues and of the empirical studies. Moreover, much of the evidence is aggregative and rather general in character, thereby obscuring other social differences such as between generations, races, classes, and so forth. For some capabilities there is reliable information; for others there is intense debate on prevalence and incidence as well as their gender dimensions. It therefore cannot be stressed enough that more detailed analysis will be required before any definite conclusions can be drawn. In addition, most of the statistics and figures presented here will be about achieved functionings and not about capabilities. This raises the crucial question of how much actual achievements can reveal about an individual's capabilities, which will be discussed below.

Some capabilities described below could also be interpreted as a resource for other capabilities. For example, belonging to a supportive community or family is a valuable state of being in itself, but it can also be seen as an important resource for mental health. However, as long as a capability is important in its own right, it does not matter if it is also simultaneously a resource for other capabilities.

1. *Life and physical health*: The capability of life and physical health has two dimensions: being able to be born, and once born, being able to live a life

of normal length in good health.[7] As far as I know, there are no indications of a gender bias in the chances of being born in Western societies[8] (in contrast, say, to countries where the net economic benefits of having a son might exceed those of having a daughter and lead to sex-selective abortion).

It is also well known that there is a substantial gender difference in life expectancy at birth. In 1999, in the UK, life expectancy at birth was 74.7 for men relative to 79.7 for women. Data for other Western countries are similar (World Health Organization 2000: 163). Is this gender gap in women's favor an unjust inequality? Amartya Sen (2001) has argued that any discrimination against women in the health system that would level down their life expectancy would violate fairness in the process of redistributing health services. In other words, Sen is not exclusively interested in outcomes (strict equality in achieved functionings) but holds that ''it would be morally unacceptable to suggest that women should receive worse health care than men so that the inequality in the achievement of health and longevity disappears'' (Sen 2001: 8). In addition, we could argue that society should compensate men for their shorter life expectancy *only* insofar as this inequality is reducible to their sex and gender, and not to their own life style choices. But this seems difficult to implement. Also, insofar as this gender gap is reducible to biologically intrinsic differences between men and women that cannot be altered by human intervention, it could be argued that we should regard this inequality as ethically irrelevant. But to the extent that men's lower life expectancy is linked to social causes, such as suicide or high-risk social behavior (excessive drinking, fast driving, participating in armed battles, and so on), we should try to intervene so as to expand men's capability of life. Gender identities might also explain this gender gap. According to Ian Banks (2001), men do care about their health but find it often difficult to express their fears and worries, and therefore often seek no help until a disease has progressed. If hegemonic notions of masculinity make it more difficult for men to go to see a doctor, then there is a case for making health services more accessible to boys and men.[9]

The second major aspect is gender differences in morbidity. Research using general health indicators finds that women experience more ill-health than men. However, some recent research has moved away from overall health indicators and shown that if we look at more specific health indicators, and disaggregate by class and age, gender inequalities are less clear (Kate Hunt and Ellen Anandale 1999; Eero Lahelma, Pekka Martikainen, Ossi Rahkonen, and Karri Silventoinen 1999; Sara Arber and Myriam Khlat 2002.)

2. *Mental well-being*: Mental well-being relates mainly to the absence of any negative mental states of being and doings, such as not being able to sleep,

worrying, or feeling depressed, lonely, or restless.[10] Studies show that women have worse mental health than men (Lahelma *et al.* 1999; R. Fuhrer, S. A. Stansfeld, J. Chemali, and M. J. Shipley 1999). As Lesley Doyal (2000) argues, in most parts of the developed world, anxiety and depression are more common among women than men, but there is no evidence that this is biologically caused. David Goldberg and Paul Williams (1988: 81), for instance, when comparing men and women who live in ''comparable social circumstances'' found no significant differences.[11] Fuhrer *et al.* (1999: 84) argue that ''[w]omen, as opposed to men, are socially and biologically channeled towards nurturing others, part of which includes giving social support. The difficulties implicit in fulfilling demands of support from others as well as the undervaluing of this role may contribute to the greater prevalence of psychological distress in women compared to men.'' Lone mothers may be particularly vulnerable to mental suffering (Myriam Khlat, Catherine Sermet, and Annick Le Pape 2000).

3. *Bodily integrity and safety*: Bodily integrity and safety are important states of being. This capability is adversely affected when people experience all sorts of personal violence, such as attacks on the street, domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, or stalking.[12] This capability also has a gender dimension: studies suggest that women bear a greater incidence of and more severe sexual violence than men, while men experience more physical violence of other kinds. For women, the most common place of violent attacks is their home and the most likely offender is their partner, whereas for men this is not the case (Rosemarie Bruynooghe, Sigrid Noelanders, and Sybille Opdebeeck 2000). Men and women are equally likely to suffer verbal abuse or physical violence within their homes, but women are more likely to be injured (Catriona Mirrlees-Black 1999). In the USA, almost 13 percent of women have experienced rape, compared to 3.3 percent of men (Brian Spitzberg 1999). Women also experience twice as much stalking (Keith Davis and Irene Hanson Frieze 2000).

However, the reporting ratio of these crimes varies, which could bias the estimates of gender inequality. While some criminologists conclude that women are less likely to be victims of violence, others argue that the true victimization rates are unknown because of biases in reporting (William Smith and Marie Torstensson 1997). In addition, domestic violence could be argued to be more devastating for victims than violence outside the home, as it might leave victims without a safe place to live, with no one to trust, and anxieties about the safety of their children. In conclusion, assessing this capability will be difficult, and existing findings remain somewhat inconclusive on the corresponding gender inequality.

4. *Social relations*: Forming, nurturing, and enjoying social relations is an important capability. Social relations, in the limited way I am using the

term, concerns two main aspects: social networks and social support. The social networks dimension relates to the number of people in one's network, the frequency of contacts, group membership, and so forth. The social support dimension focuses on the type and amount of support that one receives. In Western societies, men have more extensive networks in the political, economic, and legal arenas, which they can use to perpetuate their advantages in economic and public life. Women tend to have better informal networks and social support (Allison Munch, J. Miller McPherson, and Lynn Smith-Lovin 1997; Fuhrer *et al.* 1999). In Britain, an analysis based on the data of the British Household Panel Survey showed that women meet their friends more often than men, and they are less likely to have no one to help them if they are depressed, from whom to borrow money, or who can help out in a crisis or provide comfort when they are very upset (Robeyns 2002: 122–6).

5. *Political empowerment*: In all countries fewer women than men hold positions of political power. Data on women in Parliament provide a rough but easily available proxy for this capability. In October 2002, the percentage of women in the lower houses of Western Parliaments ranged from 14 in the USA to 45 in Sweden (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2002). But gender inequality in political power is not limited to dimensions for which statistics are available. For example, female politicians often complain about the masculine culture in politics that includes playing power games, using an aggressive tone in discussions, interrupting one another, talking for longer than needed, and so on. Of course, men who do not conform to dominant masculine identities might feel equally uncomfortable in such an environment.

6. *Education and knowledge*: Girls and boys have equal access to formal education, but gendered social norms and traditions continue to make it more difficult for girls to acquire knowledge and obtain degrees. Some parents are still less likely to encourage their daughters to do well at school and at higher education compared with sons, as many think that a good job is more important for men than for women, and a good education can help young men secure better jobs. And while it has convincingly been argued that we cannot easily generalize for all boys and girls, and that class backgrounds often matter more than gender (Robert Connell 1989), teachers and lecturers pay more attention to the needs and wishes of boys than of girls. Molly Warrington and Michael Younger (2000: 495) conclude for England that ''[girls] still feel alienated from traditionally 'male' subjects such as science. Career aspirations are still highly gendered, and boys are frequently found to be dominating the classroom environment and monopolizing a teacher's time.''

In recent years, less attention has been paid to the gendered character of schools, colleges, and universities, or to the gendered social norms and expectations that are making it more difficult for girls and women to pursue advanced studies or studies in areas that are perceived as men's domain. Instead, most public attention has been paid to the apparent underachievement of boys in schools. However, this alleged underachievement is not unambiguously supported by evidence. A recent study of 15-year-olds in OECD countries found that girls consistently outperformed boys in reading skills. In half of the countries males did better in mathematics (OECD 2001). For science the gender differences were small and balanced out. Large gender differences are not inevitable. They are large in some countries and small or insignificant in others. In any case, a capability analysis of educational equality should go beyond these performances and investigate the gendered hurdles to educational achievements, such as sexist behavior and sometimes even sexual harassment by teachers, gender differences in expectations and encouragement given by parents, a male-dominated class atmosphere, and so forth.

7. *Domestic work and nonmarket care*. This capability involves raising children and taking care of other dependents, especially the elderly, and it is highly gendered: women do more nonmarket care for children as well as for the frail, the elderly, and the sick. But the largest inequality is in household work.

Is domestic work and nonmarket care an important capability? Obviously these activities are crucially important for the receivers; they affect their functionings of life and health, education and knowledge, bodily integrity and safety, social relations, and leisure activities. Thus, analyzing the supply of labor for domestic work and nonmarket care through a capability lens supports the claim that they are extremely important (Folbre 1994, 2001; Himmelweit 2000).

But how do nonmarket care and domestic work affect the caregiver? The answer will be mixed: some aspects of this capability will be valuable, others less so, and still others plainly negative. Some of these functionings will be valuable and enjoyable if done out of choice and for short periods, but could become burdensome and monotonous if they are mandatory and have to be done for extended periods. For example, cooking a meal once a week on a relaxing Sunday is a different experience from cooking meals five days a week, under time pressure, and after a full working day. The same can be said of caring for the ill, the elderly, or children – it becomes a different experience if undertaken every day rather than occasionally.

This capability, together with the capability to undertake paid work, do pose interpretation difficulties because they cannot unambiguously be seen as contributing to the well-being of the worker. This will be discussed below.

8. *Paid work and other projects*: This functioning is again highly gendered and mirrors to a large extent the gender inequality in domestic work and nonmarket care. On average, women are less active in the labor market than men and do worse jobs. To investigate this gender inequality we have to look at labor market participation, employment rates, unemployment rates, annual hours of work, and working conditions – all aspects that have been studied extensively (e.g., Francine Blau 1998; Jill Rubery, Mark Smith, and Colette Fagan 1999). Also, given that the capability approach should not be restricted to the market economy, we also need to include projects that do not necessarily involve paid work, like artistic creations or the organizing of a social or community event. For example, it should not be made more difficult for a female than a male artist to display her paintings or sculptures in an art gallery.

9. *Shelter and environment*: Being sheltered and enjoying a safe and pleasant environment can be conceptualized as functionings and capabilities, although we would probably first think of shelter and environment as resources. Both conceptualizations are possible, but more theorizing is needed for conceptualizing them as functionings and capabilities. Rachel Bratt (2002) argues that housing is important for people's well-being. At the instrumental level, good housing is positively related to good mental and physical health. But housing also counts intrinsically as ''the physical space that is most intimately associated with one's identity'' (Bratt 2002: 19), and thereby has a substantial impact about how one feels about oneself and even about one's personal empowerment. How can shelter and environment be a relevant dimension of gender inequality? Most quantitative empirical studies of housing and neighborhood conditions do not find a significant gender inequality (Sara Lelli 2001; Robeyns 2002), although Enrica Chiappero Martinetti (2000) finds for Italy that on average women live in slightly better housing than men. To fully assess gender inequality in shelter, we have to investigate aspects such as the extent to which men and women have equal access to space within the house they share, or equal decision-making power over constructing or furnishing a house, or whether neighborhoods provide facilities for childcare or spaces for children to play in, and so on.

10. *Mobility*: Relative to other capabilities, being mobile is an instrumental capability. But it can also be valuable in itself, since it enables movement between geographical locations. There are indications that this capability has a gendered dimension. For example, public transport does not always accommodate the needs of people caring for small infants. Many railway stations and train carriages are not designed to accommodate parents (often mothers) traveling with pushchairs. If women are disproportionately responsible for infants (which is the case), or if women have to rely more on

public transport than men, or if they are more responsible for caring for the old and the sick who might be in wheelchairs, then this creates a gender inequality in mobility. Also, in many old European cities sidewalks are sometimes too narrow for a pushchair, making it more difficult for parents of infants to be mobile than for people without small children, again resulting in a gender inequality since typically women are responsible for infants. These direct constraints on women's mobility are in addition to the constraints created by their responsibility for the care of children, the aged, and the ill – a responsibility that tends to keep them more confined to the home than men.

11. *Leisure activities*: Material affluence gives people the opportunity to enjoy leisure activities, such as watching TV, reading, walking, doing physical exercise, playing games, practicing the arts, and so on. These activities are an important means of relaxation, creativity, and pleasure; hence, they are intrinsic aspects of well-being.

Based on 1999 time budget data for Flanders, Ignace Glorieux, Suzanna Koelet and Maarten Moens (2001) find that on a weekly basis men spend 6 hours and 46 minutes longer on leisure activities than women. However, time-inequalities do not tell us the full story. Based on an international comparison, Michael Bittman and Judy Wajcman (2000) argue that on average men and women tend to have similar quantities of free time, but there is a gender gap in how leisure is experienced and enjoyed. On the basis of Australian data, Bittman and Wajcman (2000: 181 – 3) argue that on average men enjoy higher quality leisure than women do because men's leisure is less interrupted by work, or combined with unpaid work or childcare.

12. *Time-autonomy*: The list of capabilities proposed in this paper includes the three main activities on which people spend their time (market work and projects, domestic work and nonmarket care, and leisure activities). But it is still argued that the core of gender inequality is the gender division of labor, in other words the gender division of time and responsibilities for market work, nonmarket work, and leisure. The allocation of time within the household is usually a collective and not an individual decision and is influenced by many individual, household, and community characteristics (Bubeck 1995; Agarwal 1997; Ingrid Robeyns 2001a). Feminist scholars have argued repeatedly that the current gender division of labor is unjust and generally to women's disadvantage.

Another aspect of the quality of time spent on an activity is the way people experience that activity. Shelley Phipps, Peter Burton, and Lars Osberg (2001) have shown that women in dual-career households face more time-pressure than their husbands. Even if their total work hours (paid and unpaid) are equal, the fact that women are more often responsible for

domestic work that cannot be postponed generates more stress for them. The authors also argue that women's time stress tends to increase because they have to cope with different sets of responsibilities and are subject to social norms that lay more responsibilities on them for the way the household is run or family members are publicly presented.

A full assessment of gender inequalities in time autonomy would also have to investigate whether women and men have the same freedom to go where they please, when they please; whether they are subject to the same social restrictions and expectations; and so on. For example, women are often expected to spend more time keeping their elder parents company than their male relatives. Or they are expected to be on a constant stand-by in case a relative needs help or falls ill, or to take care of their grandchildren.

13. *Being respected and treated with dignity*: Another capability that warrants inclusion in our list is being respected and treated with dignity. Some feminists have argued that the root of our gendered society is the fact that women are systematically devalued and not considered fully human. Some radical feminists, for instance, give the example of pornography, prostitution, or other acts that treat women as sexual objects (Catharine MacKinnon 1982). Gender differences in the respect accorded to women and men can also be deduced from the limited individual and public recognition that care and domestic work receives. For example, in some European countries, fathers who took paternity leave have reported that they underestimated the importance and pressures of domestic work, and that due to their paternity leave they now have much more respect for this work (Vincent Duindam 1999). However, fathers who take substantial paternity leave are still few. People who do domestic work still receive little respect for their work, in part because such work is culturally perceived as ''feminine.''

14. *Religion*: Men and women should have the same freedom to practice or not to practice a religion. In addition, men and women should have the same freedom to debate and determine how their religion develops and to shape religious practices. But several religions reserve the right to interpret the holy books and to make religious statements only for men. Also in several religions women cannot become religious leaders, such as Catholic priests or Muslim Imams. Androcentric or misogynist rules are often imposed on women because they are so interpreted by male religious leaders, even if such rules are not an intrinsic part of the religion. Rather they are cultural practices that have become closely intertwined with religion over time. And while it is generally difficult for both men and women to leave a religious community into which they were born, the costs of women-unfriendly religious practices or of rigid religious identities are usually higher for women.

It is difficult to say to what extent there is significant gender inequality in this capability in Western societies, as these societies have become widely secularized. Many people in Western societies do not actively practice any religion, or belong to branches of Christianity (the predominant religion in the West) that have become more women-friendly over time. But other religious groups also exist in the West, and their share is increasing. Today, virtually all Western societies include some conservative-orthodox groups of most religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, all of which are judged to contain some women-unfriendly practices. There is, in fact, a growing scholarly and public debate on the unequal gender implications of religious practices.

Obviously an in-depth analysis of gender inequality in capabilities would have to study this capability in detail, since for some citizens in Western societies their religious capability is important but highly gendered. Such an analysis will need to acknowledge not only religion as a capability in itself (that is, the freedom to practice a religion in the way a person wants, or to not practice it at all), but also as a potential locus of gender inequalities. Moreover, there are important interdependencies between the capability of religious practice and other capabilities. As a result, there can be tradeoffs between practicing a religion and developing other capabilities that women might value, such as having the freedom of reproductive choice, undertaking paid work, or engaging in politics.

## VII. CAPABILITIES OR ACHIEVED FUNCTIONINGS?

Let us now suppose that the empirical evidence discussed in the previous section gives us a reliable picture of the nature and size of gender inequalities in achieved functionings. What does this tell us about gender inequality in capabilities?

One possible answer would be that in Western societies, men and women are equal before the law, and thus have equal opportunities. Women have less favorable outcomes in some dimensions because their preferences are different. For instance, it could be argued that women would have a stronger preference for children than men (Victor Fuchs 1988). Hence, we should not aim at equality of outcomes, but should respect women's choices. As long as women have the same legal rights as men, their capability sets are thus equal and gender inequality is not an issue of ethical concern.

I dispute this position, which is based on implicit assumptions that are by no means obvious. An alternative position would be that for group inequalities (such as those based on race, caste, gender, or nationality) inequality in achieved functionings implies inequality in capabilities, except if one can give a plausible reason why one group would systematically choose different functionings from the same capability set. This is an application of Anne Phillips's (1999, 2003) more general claim that for

group inequalities, equality of opportunities and equality of outcomes converge. In other words, if we observe inequalities in outcomes between men and women, we deduce that they did not have equal opportunities in the first place. Underlying this reasoning is the assumption that the distribution of preferences between groups is identical, that is, we are as likely to find a man as a woman with a given set of preferences. The burden of proof should fall on those who claim that women would *systematically* prefer different options than men, *if they had the same real opportunities*. The observation that given existing social conditions women are more likely than men to choose domestic and care labor over paid work does not mean that this is what they would choose if they had the same capabilities as men, precisely because the real opportunities for women to have a good job under good conditions are fewer than for men.

Ultimately, we are interested in evaluating group inequalities in the space of capabilities, and not in achieved functionings. But given that we have little direct information about people's capability levels, we could start by taking group inequality in achieved functionings as indicative of inequalities in capabilities. This could later be refined and adapted in the face of new evidence or compelling arguments.

It might be helpful to make a distinction between three types of capabilities. Type 1 would include physical and mental health, bodily integrity and safety, shelter and environment, and respect. I think there would be little dispute over the claim that most people would consider these achieved functionings as intrinsically desirable. The fact that there are gender inequalities in some of these dimensions cannot plausibly be attributed to different preferences. No woman wants to be depressed, and no man wants to be attacked on the street.

Type 2 would include education and knowledge, mobility, leisure activities, time-autonomy, and religion. Here people are likely to disagree on what the optimal level of achieved functioning is, due to their different life plans. For example, not everybody wants to study until they are in their late 20s or early 30s to earn a PhD degree. Hence, if there is full equality in educational capability we would expect to see inequalities in achieved educational functioning. But there is no reason to expect that there would be *group-based* inequalities in achieved functionings that are due to innate differences. Gender inequalities in these achieved functionings thus point to gender inequalities in capabilities.

The difficulty lies in the third type of capabilities, which encompass social relations, political empowerment, domestic work and nonmarket care, and paid work. If we believe that these different outcomes in terms of functionings are explained by men's and women's different natures, and intrinsically different choices, then these inequalities are not of ethical concern. At most we could argue that the corresponding material rewards of women's and men's social position are not justified. For example,

housewives should be financially protected and care labor should be better rewarded. According to this view, the fact that men and women are living segregated and gendered lives would not bother us from a justice point of view.[13] Indeed, some have even argued that today an injustice is done against women because they are not sufficiently supported in their traditional domestic roles, which is what they ultimately want (James Tooley 2002). In contrast, if we hold that gender differences are socially constructed and imposed on men and women, then the conclusion would be that the gender inequalities in achieved functionings are unjust, and the main ethical concern would be to abolish gender as we know it. There is no consensus over whether gendered choices are due to nature or to social upbringing. But as long as there is no consensus, we have to conclude, in line with John Stuart Mill (1869), Bubeck (1995) and Phillips (2003), that we do have convincing evidence that coercive social processes restrict and mold us. We do not know what men and women would choose if they were liberated from their gender roles and thus *genuinely* free to choose. But we do know that at the moment our choices are constrained unequally because the constraints on choices are structured along gender lines (Folbre 1994; Robeyns 2001a). Thus, the burden of proof falls on those who claim that women are ''essentially'' different.

## VIII. WEIGHTS, AGGREGATIONS, AND OVERALL JUDGMENTS

How, if at all, should we weight the different capabilities in order to aggregate them into an overall evaluation? Obviously, we gain most insights into the nature and size of gender inequality if we look at inequalities in capabilities at the more disaggregated level. But one cannot conclude that women in general are worse off than men, or vice versa, without aggregating the functionings. In addition, for policy decisions and overall judgments, we need to decide whether all capabilities are equally important or whether we should give them different weights.

Can we draw a tentative and provisional conclusion on the nature and size of gender inequality in achieved functionings and thus, in capabilities? On gender differences in achieved functionings, the evidence on social interaction is inadequate to arrive at a firm conclusion. For life expectancy, housing, and bodily integrity, similarly, there is no strong evidence of gender inequality. For domestic and care work, and paid work, the evaluation is disputed, since both types of work can be either a burden or a pleasure. But for mental health, political empowerment, education and knowledge (except for language skills), leisure, time-autonomy, mobility, respect, and religion, the arguments and studies discussed above suggest that women's well-being is less than men's. This means that we can only conclude that women are equally well off or better off than men if we attach

more weight to the functionings of reading skills and spending time in domestic and care work than we attach to all other functionings. Some people might value these functionings strongly, and therefore might not judge women's well-being to be worse than men's. But most people are unlikely to value domestic work and care as indisputably positive. Indeed, it is quite likely that most people would weight all other functionings taken together as more important than those in which women excel. In other words, my overall judgment would be that women in Western societies are worse off than men, since taken together the dimensions in which women are worse off are more important than those in which men lose out. Ultimately, making an overall judgment implies making a normative choice regarding the weights that should be assigned to different capabilities.

## IX. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have investigated how we can use the capability approach to study gender inequality. After arguing against the view that Sen's capability approach needs one definite list of capabilities, I proposed a methodology to select relevant capabilities. This methodology was applied to generate a list of capabilities for the study of gender inequality in Western societies and consisted of four steps. The first step was unconstrained brainstorming. The second was an engagement with the existing socio-economic literature and debates on gender inequality. Third, the generated list was compared with other lists. Fourth and finally, the list was debated at seminars and conferences, in informal discussions, and in feminist activist networks. In addition I took account of arguments in anti-feminist literature. To illustrate gender inequality in these dimensions, some empirical findings were discussed. Comments on the list and on the empirical findings led to subsequent revisions – a process which is likely to continue into the future.

I also argued that when looking at group inequalities, the default position should be that group inequalities in achieved functionings mirror inequalities in capabilities, unless there is a plausible reason to expect one group to systematically choose different functionings from its capability set relative to another group. Finally, I offered a tentative answer to the question whether in overall terms one can say that on average men are more advantaged than women. As noted, ultimately the answer depends on the weights that one attaches to the different functionings.

It is obvious that this is not a completed research project. There is much work to be done on furthering the capability approach to gender inequality analysis. On the empirical side we need carefully collected micro-data on all these capabilities. On the theoretical side, we need to further our understanding of the gendered nature of preference formation and the constraints on choice. Once we have a deeper analytical understanding of these phenomena, we can ask how we should deal with them in a normative

framework. Progress on this front is especially important since many nonfeminist political philosophers and welfare economists tend to deny or ignore the gendered dimension of capabilities, which affects their normative conclusions.

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## NOTES

[1] A good introduction to these theories can be found in Will Kymlicka (2002).
[2] For references to this literature, see Bina Agarwal (1997).
[3] For a more detailed analysis of this problem, see Robeyns (2001b).
[4] This, of course, does not only hold for Nussbaum's list, but for any list with universal claims.
[5] Scholars who endorse Nussbaum's capability theory instead of Sen's approach, might argue that the fact that Sen only offers an approach and not a fully fleshed-out theory is exactly the problem, as it does not sufficiently inform us about how to apply it. I think such a claim would be unwarranted. Indeed, the application developed by Alkire (2002) on poverty reduction in small-scale NGO projects in Pakistan, and the measurement of gender inequality in achieved functionings for Britain (Ingrid Robeyns 2002: Ch. 7) illustrate that it is perfectly possible to use Sen's framework to address normative questions and come to definite evaluations.
[6] Some of these aspects would be common to developing countries, but to contextualize my discussion I have chosen to concentrate on developed countries and their relevant literature.
[7] This raises the issue of abortion, which lies beyond the scope of this paper.

[8] Over the past few decades, the male-to-female birth ratio declined significantly in some developed countries. But this is attributed to general factors such as chronic exposure to environmental toxins, including those from smoking, rather than to gender bias (Misao Fukuda, Kiyomi Fukuda, Takashi Shimizu, Claus Yding Andersen, and Anne Grete Byskov 2002).

[9] Obviously race is another important determinant of mortality. For example, African-American men have significantly worse age-specific survival rates than white American men, or men from China or parts of India (Sen 1998).

[10] Mental well-being should also include serious mental disorders. However, in the illustrative empirical overview of this article, I do not discuss gender differences in mental disorders.

[11] Goldberg and Williams do not give a precise description of these ''comparable social circumstances,'' but their discussion focuses only on comparing men and women who are holding the same job.

[12] Focusing on capability and not on achieved functionings implies that we do not need to be concerned about persons who have this capability but deliberately put their achieved functioning at risk. Boxers or rugby players are cases in point.

[13] However, from an efficiency point of view it might in that case still be better if highly talented women would work on the labor market instead of staying at home.

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