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Erasmo, Valentina

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Self-sacrifice: an analysis of female economic behaviour in less developed countries through the lenses of Amartya Sen's thought [1]

Valentina Erasmo[2]

"Poverty is a social phenomenon"
(Hegel)

0. Abstract

This paper shows how Sen admitted self-sacrifice, as opposite motive compared to self-interest, for describing female behaviour in less developed countries. During the Nineties, Sen referred specifically to some anthropological studies about women conditions (Kapur, 1999) in less developed countries: when these scholars had asked them whether they felt deprived, they said 'no'. These women identify themselves with their family, in turn, their privileged economic motive is self-sacrifice at the goal of maximizing family welfare. In those cases only, Sen advocates selfishness as the ideal route for improving women's well-being. These elements offer a more complex understanding of economic behaviour and an alternative compared to rational choice theory prevailing in those years, considering also those diversities deriving from gender specificities and geographical influences on decision-making. The main result of this paper is to have provided an extended reading of Sen's analysis of economic behaviour where self-sacrifice and its related maximization of family welfare which might be considered typical *female* and *"eastern" categories*. These categories represent rural India's women behaviour, while are absent in "Western" decision-making where gender specificities and geographic differences are not considered because they are not so stark.

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[2] PhD in "Ethics and Economics" and "History of Economic Thought", Università degli Studi G. d'Annunzio, Chieti Pescara, Italy. Comments and suggestions might be addressed to: valentina.erasmo@unich.it.

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1. Introduction

Firstly, it is important to carefully distinguish self-interest and self-sacrifice motives in philosophy of welfare: according to Overvold (1980), these two concepts seems to be opposite each other but their borders are enough nuanced. At first glance, self-interest implies an improvement of individual welfare, while self-sacrifice implies a significant loss in individual welfare. However, this worsening of individual welfare is not a satisfactory condition alone for supporting that a certain behaviour is arisen from self-sacrifice. Rather self-sacrifice is generally defined by the following conditions:

> "I. the loss of welfare is expected or anticipated (…); II. the act is voluntary (…) III. There is at least one other alternative open to the agent at the time of the act which is such that (a) if the consequences of the alternative had been as the agent expected them to be, then the alternative would have been more in the agent's self-interest than the act he actually did perform, and (b) if the agent had chosen to perform the alternative act, then his act would have been more in his self-interest, objectively, than the act which he actually did perform." (Overvold, 1980, pp. 113-114)

Overvold supported that is logically impossible to satisfy simultaneously all these conditions. In particular, he argued how any act which satisfies conditions I and II is in accordance with Brandt (1972) definition of self-interest. In turn, when these two conditions are satisfied, condition III cannot be simultaneously satisfied, given a standard and unrestricted preferentist theory of welfare: self-sacrifice is one more time conceptually impossible. Since these arguments, several authors supported that genuine self-sacrifice behaviour does not exist, like Brandt (1982), Griffin (1986), Carson (2000) and Darwall (2002). Among these authors, Sumner (1996) quoted Sen (1977) when he pointed that this latter has forerun Overvold in charging the desire theory with "definitional

egoism"(Heathwood, 2011). All these theories had in common the idea that self-sacrifice is conceptually impossible, including Sen (1977). The aim of this paper is to show how Sen admitted self-sacrifice, as opposite motive compared to self-interest, for describing female behaviour in less developed countries. But we have to proceed gradually.

During the Nineties, Sen referred specifically to some anthropological studies about women conditions (Kapur, 1999) in less developed countries: when these scholars had asked them whether they felt deprived, they said 'no'. These women identify themselves with their family, in turn, their privileged economic motive is self-sacrifice at the goal of maximizing family welfare. In those cases only, Sen advocates selfishness as the ideal route for improving women's well-being. This is the same economic motive he criticizes in rational choice theory and its mainstream homo economicus (Giovanola, 2009). These elements offer a more complex understanding of economic behaviour and an alternative compared to rational choice theory prevailing in those years, considering also those diversities deriving from gender specificities and geographical influences on decision-making.

The paper will be composed as follow: in Section 2, I will deepen Sen's understanding of economic motive, especially sympathy and commitment, explaining how they can influence individual privateness; then, in Section 3, I will proceed with an analysis of self-sacrifice for better understanding women's economic behaviour in less developed countries where self-interest represent the ideal route for improving their well-being; in Section 4, I will show how Sen's consideration of self-sacrifice offer an evaluable alternative to rational choice theory for considering gender specificities and geographic differences on economic behaviour exactly during the Nineties, such as when several economic geographers were criticizing rational choice theory for its excessive generality; it will follow final considerations.

The main result of this paper is to have provided an extended reading of Sen's analysis of economic decision-making. Firstly, his distinction between self-sacrifice and self-interest

contradicts Sumner (1996) understanding of Sen's analysis of economic behaviour. Furthermore, Sen's account for gender specificities in decision-making which derive from geographic and socio-economic differences justify why he has supported something apparently opposite compared to his "standard" analysis of economic-making. Rather those elements represent only a more complex understanding of economic behaviour.

Finally, I argue how self-sacrifice and its related maximization of family welfare might be considered typical *female and "eastern" categories*. These elements represent rural India's women behaviour, while are absent in "Western" decision-making where gender specificities and geographic differences are not considered because they are not so stark. All these elements show how Sen is a seminal author for an analysis of diversity in the history of economic thought.

2. An overview on Sen's understanding of economic behaviour

Between the Seventies and the Eighties, Sen (1977, 1985) considered three rational motives in economic decision-making, namely self-interest, sympathy and commitment. These two latter motives were a significant extension compared to his contemporary rational choice theory. Sen defined sympathy and commitment as follows:" The former corresponds to the case in which the concern for others directly affects one's own welfare. If the knowledge of torture of others makes you sick, it is a case of sympathy; if it does not make you feel personally worse off, but you think it is wrong and you are ready to do something to stop it, it is a case of commitment. "(Sen, 1977, p. 326)

According to Sen, sympathy acquires mainly a psychological and egoistic connotation: indeed, on the one hand, "when a person's sense of well-being is psychologically dependent from someone else's welfare, it is a case of sympathy" (Sen, 1977, p. 328); on the other, "behaviour based on sympathy is in an important sense egoistic, for one is oneself pleased at others' pleasure and pained at others' pain, and the pursuit of one's own utility may thus be helped by sympathetic action. (Sen, 1977, p. 326)

This latter element explains why Sen believes that sympathy is an intermediate motive between neoclassical selfish and unselfish altruism. In particular, sympathy leads to a maximization of individual utility, disguised behind apparently unselfish preferences, in order to improve individual well-being. In a certain way, sympathy might be considered close to Kant (1785) hypothetical imperative, given that its nature is conditioned by someone else welfare.

Commitment is a very complex notion for Sen (1977, 1985): in a nutshell, this motive has an ethical and political value because, on the one hand, this is a form of recognition of the injustice underlying certain behaviour; on the other, in turn, this is a sense of duty to stop this injustice. In particular, Sen defined commitment "in terms of a person choosing an act that he believes will yield a lower level of personal welfare to him than an alternative that is also available to him" (Sen, 1977, p. 327). On account of this individual freedom from someone else welfare, without losing his/her rationality, the other goes back to be an end in himself/herself and not just a tool for improving individual well-being, rejecting *homo economicus'* heterogeneity of ends. If sympathy is close to Kant's hypothetical imperative, I argue how commitment is inspired by Kant's categorical imperative (1785) where moral principles are more important than individual welfare itself.

Economic motives have significant consequences on individual decision-making. By the way, Sen (1985) analysed how economic motives may influence which he defined as "three different kinds of 'privateness' for an agent's preference ordering", such as "*self-centered welfare*, *self-welfare goal* and *self-goal choice*" (Hédoin, 2016, p.6). Sen (1985) respectively defined these latter in these terms: "*self-centered welfare*: a person's welfare depends only on her own consumption and other features of the richness of her life (without any sympathy or antipathy toward others, and without any procedural concern). *Self-welfare goal*: a person's only goal is to maximize her own welfare. *Self-goal choice:* a person's choices must be based entirely on the pursuit of her own goals" (Sen 2002, pp. 33-4). These kinds of privateness are simultaneously three aspects of the self (Davis, 2007).

In individual economic behaviour, these kinds of privateness may be mixed in different ways, given that they are independent to each other. When self-interested and self-regarding motives are adopted, these three criteria are all satisfied (Hédoin, 2016): this behaviour equals with the maximum of privateness where individual forgets any public and/or social dimensions. In this case, individual is totally focused on the maximization of his/her welfare. According to Sen, sympathy violates self-centered welfare because the former refers to how individual welfare is affected by the position of others. In contrast, commitment might violate self-welfare goal and/or self-goals choice because takes into account of others' goals and/or choices which causes a change in individual preferences.

Although commitment might cause a worsening of individual welfare, Sen (1985) supported how individuals adopted it anyway without losing their rationality, differently from his contemporary rational choice theory. This latter element has been strongly criticized by Sen who desired to contrast, in turn, self-interested behaviour in order to promote social well-being. But I will come back on this element with further details in Section 4.

I claim it is important to emphasize how commitment erases individual privateness and has a reflexive value which leads to self-scrutiny which Davis (2007) defined the fourth aspect of the self. Self-scrutiny is a reflexive activity which leads individuals to a virtuous dialogue between the three abovementioned aspects of the self and a proper development of personal identity. In particular, self-scrutiny is that individual ability to reflect on his/her self and his/her life with others (Kant, 1798). This is a typical human ability, given that other creatures are not able to reflect on what they desire to do or to be in their lives (Mahieu, 2016) This reflexivity would have been considered irrational in rational choice theory not for the activity itself, rather for its consequences on his individual decision-making, namely modify the ranking of individual preferences, accepting also a worsening of his/her own welfare. According to Sen's thought, when commitment does not prevail, there is a breaking

down compared to a proper development of personal identity, because there is a lack in terms of reflexivity (Davis, 2007).

3. Self-sacrifice: an analysis of women's economic behaviour in less developed countries

Sen has written several works about female conditions in less developed countries, especially in the field of development economics. These economic realities are very complex because they are characterized by poverty, high fertility rates and socially backward about basic education (especially, female ones), health care systems and life expectancy (Sen, 1997). In this regard, between the Eighties and the Nineties, Sen provided decisive contributions to the earliest literature about gender bias in South Asia (Klasen and Wink, 2003): he deepened questions like the allocation of resources, health outcomes and nutrition with significant empirical and theoretical results (Sen 1990a; Sen and Sengupta 1983; Kynch and Sen 1983); the abnormally high sex ratios and their worsening in India, as well as gender bias in mortality and high sex ratios in developing countries (like China, the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia).

This is why Sen introduced the concept of "missing women" at the beginning of the Nineties: in particular, he supported how more than 100 million of women were missing (Sen, 1990b), especially in China, South Asian and West Asia. The ratio of women to men is lower than expected compared to European and North America's data. This phenomenon might be explained through those gender inequalities concerning the allocation of survival-related goods which cause serious difficulties for women's survival (Erasmo, 2021b). These earlier works about women's conditions are representative about Sen's deep insight about diversity questions. I will not enter in further details about these questions because the available literature is still very rich, preferring to focus on Sen's self-sacrifice.

In 1998, in an interview granted after had been awarded with the Nobel Prize, Sen accidentally referred to this economic motive in decision-making. In these realities, Sen claimed how: "there was a sense for a while that development was a very hard process, and

that people had to sacrifice. There was a lot of blood, sweat, and tears involved", despite "the early, classical writings in development you find that it was always assumed that economic development was a benign process, in the interest of the people" (Kapur, 1999). In these countries, development is certainly a bloody process. Over the years, Sen continued, "development is not quite as harsh as it used to be" (Kapur, 1999), although significant problems remained, especially those related to gender inequalities. Rural Indian's women, for example, are still dreadfully deprived.

At a certain point of the interview, Sen mentioned anthropological studies about their conditions: oddly enough, when the interviewers asked them whether they feel deprived, they said 'no'. The reason why for their answer is that they identify themselves with their family, they have none sense of personal or social identity. This result has important consequences on decision-making because their behaviours are principally inspired to *self-sacrifice*. Probably, Sen has not assigned so much importance to this statement and I regret he has not further developed this motive in his successive works. But we may try to develop this concept following his thought.

Self-sacrifice differs from all the other Sen's economic motives: on the one hand, it is not oriented to individual welfare, like self-interest and sympathy; on the other, it is not oriented to collective welfare, like commitment. Rather, self-sacrifice has the goal to *maximize family welfare*, namely a third dimension compared to individual or collective welfare. This maximization of family welfare leads these women to worsen their individual welfare, differently from sympathetic and self-interested behaviours, although they do not recognize their deprivations. Equally they do not neither participate nor have decisiveness in public field in order to stop injustice, like commitment. On the contrary, they suffer injustice.

This missed understanding of their deprivations among women in less developed countries might be explained through another difference between commitment and self-sacrifice compared to personal identity: indeed, as abovementioned, the first enables a

virtuous dialogue between the four constitutive aspects of the self and a proper development of personal identity; backwards, the second produces a female self-identification with their family group only causing, in turn, an unproper development of personal identity. This self-identification is really dangerous because leads these women to establish mainly which might be defined "strong ties": according to Granovetter (1973, 1983), these are those relationship which exists *within groups,* like family, friendship and love. These are the most intensive relationships an individual can establish with others. On the contrary, weak ties are those relationships which exists *between groups*. I refer to Granovetter because he emphasized how weak ties are better than strong ties because the former favour the exchange of instrumental resources, for example, useful in labour markets, while the latter strengthen individual vulnerability and worsen individual welfare. These elements might be explained through these bad cultural, economic, environmental and social contexts where strong ties usually set (Erasmo, 2020). Less developed countries embody an evaluable example for this purpose.

According to Granovetter (1973, 1983), the risk of strengthening individual vulnerability can be avoided through weak ties which enables to create bridges with different home communities. In less developed countries, women have mainly strong ties, while like those with society are totally hindered. This example is suitable for explaining how strong ties may become extremely dangerous for female individual welfare. These women identify with their families. All these elements lead to an unproper building of their personal identity which might be explained through the abovementioned absence of a female understanding as "individual" and "member of a wider, social community".

This idea of female self-sacrificing has been idealized, idolized and praised by Indian culture but this heroism is not at all helped these women to improve their well-being, inhibiting them to achieve an acceptable threshold of basic capabilities. Hence, Sen argued how "this one of those contexts in which being more self-interested may do the world a lot more good" (Kapur, 1999). In this quotation, Sen significantly suggested selfish motives as

the ideal route for improving women's conditions in less developed countries until they achieve a more human condition: oddly enough, this is the same economic motive he criticized in mainstream homo economicus (Giovanola, 2009) prevailing in rational choice theory. All these elements, in turn, contradict Sumner (1996) perspective according to which Sen considered all self-sacrifice behaviours as selfish. Rather, he has distinguished them.

4. Self-sacrifice as alternative to rational choice theory for considering gender and geographic influences on economic behaviour

Self-sacrifice might be considered as the fourth economic motive in Sen's analysis of decision-making: not only is this motive different from self-interest but can better represent those diversities concerning female economic behaviour in less developed countries. This implicit consideration about how geographic and socio-economic context influence economic behaviour was very relevant just during the Nineties when Sen referred to this concept in that interview. In those years, some economic geographers showed a certain criticism towards rational choice theory because it does not take into account of individual heterogeneity which derives from similar elements. Since the Eighties, rational choice theory widely circulate among disciplines like anthropology, history, political science and sociology in order to represent several forms of collective actions (altruism, the growth of organizations, protest behaviour, state formation and voting behaviour, just to mention a few).

Among economic geographers, several accepted rational choice theory (Miller, 1992): many others, however, manifested a certain criticism towards its mainstream homo economicus (Barnes 1988; 1989; Barnes and Sheppard, 1992) and its methodological individualism (Sayer 1984). This criticism is addressed to their omission of the influences of interactions, place and space on human behaviour: this is why rational choice theory seemed to be ineffective for representing the complexity of individual behaviours in certain

economic realities which are so different compared to the most developed countries. In this reductionistic scenery, economic geographers refused also homo economicus' focus on strategic rationality. Since this latter, collective action is understood through a singular economic motive, namely self-interest[3].

During those years, there were different approaches to decision-making (Miller, 1992): on the one hand, there existed both strong and weak variations of rational choice analysis. Among the main features of rational choice theory, there is that to be part of a wider project to elaborate a universal theory for social phenomena (Hodgson, 2012). The main problem of this theory is its excessive generality which forgets the impact of history and geography on socio-economic systems. In particular, strong variations of rational choice theory considered institutional and social constraints as products of rational action (DeNardo, 1985; Hector, 1990; Olson, 1965), subsumed in an analytic framework, which are interesting for rational choice theory. In contrast, weak variations to rational choice theory approached institutional and social constraints like they were a given framework where rational agents maximize benefits and minimize costs (Elster, 1989; Przeworski 1985; Taylor 1982, 1987, 1988). On the other, there were alternatives to this analysis which were careful to temporal and geographical differences (Habermas, 1984): his communitarian understanding of collective action was appreciated both from weak rational choice theorists and feminist perspectives.

Sen was offering an evaluable alternative compared to rational choice theory through his social conception of individual (Davis, 2009, 2012; Erasmo, 2021a; Gasper, 2020) where alternative motives, like commitment and sympathy, exist. In turn, through the recognition of self-sacrifice, it is possible to better represent gender differences in economic behaviour

[3] I will not enter into further details on homo economicus' rationality: a similar analysis would become very wide and complex. Thus, I prefer to deepen this criticism towards a rational choice theory exclusively based on self-interest.

and take into account of geographical and socio-economic influences on decision-making in very complex realities. In less developed countries, gender differences become source of gender inequalities. These specificities justify why Sen has decided: on the one hand, to recognize self-sacrifice as a different motive compared to self-interest; on the other, to admit simultaneously the importance of self-interested behaviour for those women who live a deprived existence. This latter is a significant exception to his "standard" analysis of economic behaviour: self-interest might be useful for improve women's well-being in less developed countries, while is dangerous in more developed countries where gender inequalities are not so pronounced. Thus, gender inequalities mirrors on different economic behaviours between men and women, highlighting diversity in decision-making.

This is the strength of Sen's analysis of economic decision-making which is able to criticize rational choice theory for its emphasis on maximizing behaviours but admits exceptions to this criticism supporting self-interest behaviour in well-defined context. Furthermore, I would emphasize how Sen supported self-interested behaviour in a very different framework compared to rational choice theory: his female economic agent will never behave like mainstream homo economicus. Indeed, Sen's women are not maximizing economic agents since they are deprived human being in their initial positions. Their aim is not to maximize their individual well-being but to achieve those functionings and capabilities which enable them to lead a dignified existence. Gender inequalities and the specific context of less developed countries justify why Sen supported something apparently opposite compared to his standard analysis of economic decision-making. I claim how all these elements represent an extension of this latter.

Finally, how might this "female revolution" concretely realize since self-interest? Firstly, fertility rate ought to be reduced. Sen (1996) advocated to increase female education: for example, higher fertility rate are common where female literacy and employment are lower. Especially, increasing female education enables to enhance employment opportunities and

encourage smaller families. In turn, fertility rate ought to be reduced, given that children are considered like an economic security (Abrams, 1997). In particular, voluntary birth control might be encouraged (Sen, 1994), pointing out the positive relationship between women capacity to make decisions about fertility and their well-being.

Since a decline in fertility rate, development will improve women's conditions (as occurred in Kerala), expanding their capabilities thanks to higher employment rate and smaller family size, for example: in turn, gender gap progressively reduces. This perspective about the consequences of the population growth is partially borrowed by Condorcet (1795): high birth rate leads to a diminution of happiness, because of worst living standards, not only for food scarcity, as Malthus (1798) claimed. Vice versa, when birth rates fall down, female quality of life improves thanks to the greater opportunities deriving from higher education level, greater participation in employment and political actions. In addition, a decline in birth rate causes a reduction of death rate (in particular, of children) and an improvement in economic security (especially for the elders). Finally, lower fertility rate, deriving from higher female literacy rate, could be considered as a product of "selfish" behaviour, rather than of self-sacrifice, improving female well-being.

5. Conclusions

This paper have provided an extended reading of Sen's analysis of economic decision-making. Firstly, his distinction between self-sacrifice and self-interest contradicts Sumner (1996) understanding of Sen's analysis of economic behaviour. Furthermore, Sen's account for gender specificities in decision-making which derive from geographic and socio-economic differences justify why he has supported something apparently opposite compared to his "standard" analysis of economic-making. Rather, these elements represent only a more complex understanding of economic behaviour.

Finally, I argue how self-sacrifice and its related maximization of family welfare might be considered typical *female and "eastern" categories*. These categories represent rural India's

women behaviour, while are absent in "Western" decision-making where gender specificities and geographic differences are not considered because they are not so stark. All these elements show how Sen is a seminal author for an analysis of diversity in the history of economic thought.

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