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Women's Running as Freedom: Development and Choice

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Abstract:

To what extent does increasing African women's freedom in one domain, distance running, help to foster other economic, social or political freedoms? This study addresses this question by focusing on the ways in which elite-level female runners in Kenya have influenced the lives of non-athletes who live and work around them locally. Studies of Kenyan running have helped to explain the rationale for elite Kenyan running success; however, this is the first attempt to analyse its impact on the lives of market women for whom running has helped to foster certain economic and social changes. Primary source data obtained from fieldwork during 2010 and 2011 is situated within Amartya Sen's framework of freedom as development and supports Sen's critique of the preference framework aspect of social choice theory. The implications of this study contribute to development theory and policy, emphasising the Kenyan case but also offering comments that may apply more generally.

Introduction

In the Rift Valley of Kenya, the sport of distance running exerts considerable influence over the political economy of the region. The sport pervades communities across the high-altitude plateau, and in this area, running has potential to improve the lives of some.¹ Interest in how sport affects society, and in issues of gender, agency and development, raises questions related to the relationship between women's access to sport and development. To what extent does increasing women's freedom in one domain, distance running, help to foster other economic, social or political freedoms?² This paper is a qualitative empirical study of the possibilities for sport to expand the range of choice open to women as well as a conceptual study of the limitations of the

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preferences framework for interpreting the decisions of vulnerable groups whose agency is restricted.

The central argument presented here is that Sen's critique of the preferences framework of social choice theory is not only convincing, but as with the with the capability approach, his efforts to explore alternatives are particularly constructive for analyses of sport, gender and development. This result is derived from a wider study of women's running in Iten, a village in the Rift Valley highlands of Kenya. In this community, women's increasing success in the domain of sports has led to a handful of female runners, born and raised in Iten, returning to their rural village home with Olympic medals and prize money totalling more than \$1,000,000. This paper shows how, albeit indirectly, the visibility of their success exerted influence on other women's freedoms in domains outside of sports, which complements Sen's ideas on freedom as development. This result provides evidence for subsequent discussion of the limitations of the 'revealed preferences' element of social choice theory.

The analysis brings together different strands of literature related to economic theory, East African running and Sen's approach to development. For a number of reasons, the paper engages mainly with Sen's body of writing rather than with Nussbaum's (and others') definite list of capabilities.³ Although there is much common ground amongst these approaches, Qizilbash has aptly described the poles of recent debates as being 'between "excessive incompleteness" (Nussbaum's complaint about Sen) and "excessive specification" (Sen's complaint about Nussbaum)'.⁴ Sen has been criticised for inadequately elaborating his conception of freedom while disagreement with Nussbaum comes from how her list does not take into account individual and cultural differences. While Nussbaum's approach is commendable for its strong voice on behalf of women, as Feldman and Gellert argue, her universalism

inadequately appreciates the historical roots that shape development and the contextualised institutional changes that may be required to achieve social justice.⁵ The conclusions of this paper are heavily informed by a particular set of discursive and historical material that reflects current ideas of Kalenjin womanhood. Sen has defended the fact that he does not give a definitive list of capabilities in part because ‘pure theory cannot “freeze” a list of capabilities for all societies for all time to come, irrespective of what the citizens come to understand and value’.⁶ This nod to the salience of historical specificity, and its implicit recognition of the political economy of dependency and global inequality, is why his approach frames the empirical data presented within this paper. Furthermore, the study of sport and gender within the capabilities approach has received scant scholarly attention.⁷ Since this is an exploratory application, Sen’s less rigid ‘perspective of freedom’ proved most conducive; its very ‘incompleteness’ makes it powerful. Finally, Sen contrasts with Nussbaum in that he gives fundamental emphasis to the role of ‘agency’ – which involves a concern with people realising their values or objectives through their own efforts.⁸ Nussbaum understands agency as important, but nonetheless conditional upon a given set of capabilities.⁹ This paper follows Sen’s interpretation but it is hoped that future studies will engage further with this literature by considering the challenges to it, including Nussbaum’s contention that Sen should take a more definite stand on which capabilities are important and how his work on freedom should be made more specific.¹⁰

Emerging paradigm: ‘development as freedom’

Amartya Sen has proposed a powerful perspective for understanding social and economic change: focus on individual freedom as the means and ends of

development. In his words, the vision of how development ought to be reconceptualised is that:

Human beings are the real end of all activities, and development must be centered on enhancing their achievements, freedoms, and capabilities. It is the lives they lead that is of intrinsic importance, not the commodities or income that they happen to possess.¹¹

Sen advocates focusing on human freedoms broadly conceived rather than concentrating on strictly economic measurements of development, such as GDP growth, personal incomes or industrialisation.¹² The number of things that a person has and the feeling that these provide should not measure development but rather who a person is, or can be, and what she or he actually does or can do.¹³ Equally, lack of substantive freedom is not just a lack of money; it can relate to poverty but it can also result from a violation of civil liberties and from restrictions on full participation in the social and political life of one's community.¹⁴

Sen and co-author Sudhir Anand are well aware that wealth has instrumental importance in people's lives and that for policy-makers, income-based poverty measures offer the advantage of simplicity. However, they argue that concentrating exclusively on one variable does not constitute a direct measure of living standard.¹⁵ Sen instead builds a case for the interconnectedness of various kinds of freedoms, noting that '[e]conomic unfreedom can breed social unfreedom, just as social or political unfreedom can also foster economic unfreedom'.¹⁶ Although increasing wealth can expand the freedoms that people enjoy, freedom also depends crucially on the interlocking nature of other domains such as politics, healthcare, education, control over one's body, and social life.¹⁷

Like Sen, some economists have also been critical of the tendency in economics to focus on 'negative freedom' and accord value to the absence of

interference by others, notably the absence of government involvement in the market.¹⁸ Often gauged by measurements of real income, the prominence of this conception of freedom derives from a belief in its capacity to promote wellbeing through individual choice, well-functioning markets and GDP growth. On the other hand, if for instance, a woman is free from legal constraints to work in public but restrained by her commitment to care for old and young family members, the claim that the woman is 'free' to participate reflects a view that there are no other ethically significant constraints on her agency.¹⁹

Sen's theory of freedom as 'both the primary end and as the principal means of development' challenges the idea of a single measure of development and links the outcomes of development to the range of elements that an individual has reason to value.²⁰ The approach broadens the information relevant for evaluating wellbeing and implies a process of individual decision-making (agency) combined with the societal imposition of constraints (structure). As Gasper and van Staveren note, Sen's notion of freedom helps scholars by emphasising not only people's income, assets and utility maximisation but also the extent to which people have the freedom to choose how they want to live.²¹ Evaluation of utility - the observance of preference fulfilment - can have a role to play; however, it is secondary in importance to measuring a person's freedom, conceptualised as the set of life options from which a person is able to choose.

At this point, it is important to note that African women's access to sports constitutes an important development 'end' in and of itself. Practices that result in a systematic denial of rights and access for women relative to men should be renegotiated, not only in sports but also in politics, economic institutions and other social opportunities. While recognising the importance of culture and context, and that in this case, it is vital to place at the heart of the study what Kalenjin women

themselves want, establishing women's equality with men in this regard would eliminate a source of 'unfreedom': a term Sen defines as poverty, systematic neglect, or any element that 'leaves people with little choice...of exercising their reasoned agency'.²²

Yet despite considerable economic empowerment of some female runners, Kenyan women remain far less likely to pursue running as a career than Kenyan men. A detailed analysis of why this is the case lies beyond the scope of this paper, however, it is worth highlighting several barriers in both formal and informal spheres that tend to inhibit women.²³ Girls are less likely than boys to attend primary and secondary school, which has ramifications for sports in that a person who does not go to school is more likely to be denied the very forum through which participation is afforded. Girls who do not attend primary school also miss the opportunity to connect with a coach as a young athlete. Secondly, in later life, some Kenyan women fear reprimand from their partners or husbands if they continue to pursue athletics after marriage.²⁴ Thirdly, poverty and limited resources often restrict women. Many women in the Rift Valley are stymied in their efforts to pursue running because of the interconnected obstacles of a heavy workload, the economic invisibility of their domestic contribution and discrimination in formal employment opportunities that would more easily allow them to train and earn a living. Framed within Sen's approach, this explanation for the gender gap between men and women in Kenyan Athletics offers evidence of some the gendered 'unfreedoms' that Kalenjin women face.

Iten: 'home to spectacular views, booming agriculture and world-beating athletes'²⁵

While setting women's range of choices and opportunities on a par with men's in sports and other domains remains an unfinished process, perhaps there are subtle ways in which female runners' outstanding achievements operate as a principal 'means' of development. To address this question, oral testimonies were collected from 51 people who live and work in Iten, referred to as a 'remote town, widely acclaimed for the marathon talent it produces'.²⁶ Most of the interviewees were market-women who produced and sold the agricultural products like mangoes and papayas for which the region is renowned.²⁷ The majority could communicate in English but to converse with those who did not, two Kenyan research assistants were employed as interpreters, both of whom are fluent in English, Swahili and Kalenjin dialects. The interviews took place outdoors, in the public market areas, and all conversations were recorded and have been transcribed.

Located in a rural region of Kenya and comprised of some 4000 residents who live in *shambas* [farms] scattered widely around the city centre, Iten might at first glance appear little different from many other villages within the expansive highlands of the Rift Valley Province. Agricultural activities including dairy farming, horticulture and cereals production account for a large portion of the surrounding economy.²⁸ At its heart is a central marketplace and commercial sections, ringed by and interspersed with apartments, small kiosks, churches and a handful of hotels. Although Iten proper is compactly settled, in 2000, the population density throughout the rest of the district was relatively thin, estimated at 200 people per square kilometre.²⁹

Perched at the edge of the Kerio Valley escarpment, Iten serves as the headquarters of Keiyo District, one of seventeen districts that together comprise the Rift Valley Province of Kenya.³⁰ Yet the town is best known as an important training

site for both aspiring Kenyan runners as well as international athletes.³¹ The most recent report for Keiyo District calls attention to conditions that are ‘ideal for sports in the form of athletics training in the district’ and also notes that ‘there is a need to develop new training facilities since the district is increasingly becoming an athletics training destination for athletes from all over the world’.³² Situated at 2385 metres (8000 feet), the environment is conducive for endurance training. In addition to high altitude, Iten offers a vast network of clay trails, a temperate climate and close proximity to Eldoret, the fourth-largest city in Kenya that also boasts an airport. Iten has been described as ‘nurtur[ing] the endless supply of new talent arriving from across the country, drawn to this hub of success, with its long dusty trails and energy-sapping altitude’.³³

Many of Kenya’s elite female runners have adopted the village as a key training site, including 2008 Olympic Champion Nancy Lagat, talented road racer Lineth Chepkurui and World record-holder and London Marathon winner, Mary Keitany. Champions from previous generations who also trained in this community are Sally Barsosio, the first woman from Kenya to win a title at the World Athletics Championships, and Mary Chemweno, the first woman in Africa to break two minutes for the 800 metres. These older athletes ran over the same clay track within Iten’s Kaminary Stadium that hundreds of athletes currently use. Today, runners both male and female train intensely in Iten; each morning and evening, large groups of runners stride along the forest trails, navigate through the fields adjacent to the city centre or race along the dirt path that parallels the tarmac road to Eldoret.

The significant extent to which runners are embedded in the social fabric of Iten and other nearby communities is a historical continuity of this region that has accelerated in recent years. Although it was not until September of 2008 that Pamela

Jelimo returned to her Rift Valley home of Kaptamok as Kenya's first female Olympic gold medal winner, Tecla Chembawai Sang was one of the first female athletes to compete for the Kenyan Olympic team, which she did in 1968.³⁴ Tecla Sang still lives a short distance from Iten and she now teaches physical education at nearby Moi University. Her emergence as an internationally competitive runner followed in the wake of a number of successful male Kalenjin runners, such as Olympian Kipchoge Keino, who was among the first Kenyans from this region to compete abroad and gain international fame. Other high-profile elite female runners who grew up in the area include Sebini Chebici, the first Kenyan woman to win an international Commonwealth Games medal when she took bronze in the 800 metres at the 1974 Commonwealth Games in Christchurch, New Zealand, Helen Chepng'eno who won the World Cross-Country Championship in 1994 and Lornah Kiplagat who repeated this victory by winning the World Cross-Country Championships in 2008. At her High Altitude Training Centre in Iten, Kiplagat now hosts the only road race in Kenya that is exclusively open to women.

Freedom as both 'end' and 'means': women's running in the Rift Valley

Charity Choge, a life-long resident of Iten who now sells vegetables each day in the village's central market, provides the first glimpse into how development – understood as the freedom to attain what one has reason to value - occurs through a process in which various components of freedom are interrelated. When asked whether female runners were of significance, Charity went so far as to defer her success in business as happening:

[t]hrough them...Women runners also struggle to get that recognition in running. They ran and they struggle for that. So it also motivated us – if they could get that freedom to do what they wanted, why not us? ... Because [Pamela Jelimo] came from a poor background, she inspired me.³⁵

The emergence of Kenya's female runners, an 'end' in terms of achieving equality between men and women, also in this way functioned as a 'means' through which other women's freedom to work outside the home expanded. For Charity, the 'struggle' of female runners for recognition and acceptance contributed to her own motivation to earn an independent income by selling vegetables in the market. Moreover, the idea that poverty had not prevented Pamela Jelimo from 'changing [her] family' was inspiring to Charity and widened her conception of herself and what she could be.³⁶

Harnessing the female runners' example as means through which to exert greater agency over her actions has also been important for Monica Cheruiyot. She says that:

Through the women runners, I also got the strength to fight for my freedom. And this is how I convinced the man that 'I also want to go out and get money. You also go out and get the money and we bring together'.

And how did seeing these women runners help you to do this?

I got the strength. Looked at their example. This is why I am here now. Before, the husband would fight. Like 'why do you want to go? You are meant to stay in the house'. If I am going to Eldoret – 'No'. Only the man could go but not women. But now I can go and even to Nairobi.³⁷

Monica attributes her increased mobility 'even to Nairobi' to the freedom of female runners, which in turn contributes to expanding her capabilities overall. She also cites their example as central to enhancing her ability to bargain with her partner. She used their example to expand her power to negotiate with her husband, and presumably, the undeniable prominence of female runners may have had an impact on his acquiescence. As Iversen has noted in his examination of the capability approach, interdependence between people also affects individual wellbeing. Women's preference satisfaction depends not only on her own capabilities but also on those of

her spouse.³⁸ In short, by explicitly linking her ‘freedom’ with the enhancement of the political freedom of female runners – ‘through the women runners, I also got the strength to fight for my freedom’ – Monica offers valuable insight into the extent to which change in one sphere can affect women’s bargaining power within the household, a space particularly difficult to measure but also of fundamental importance for the analysis of sport in society. This empirical evidence supports Sen’s writing that ‘freedom in one area seems to help foster freedom in others’.³⁹ Female runners’ ability to train outside the home and earn money from their athletic talent induced some other women to form, pursue and remain attentive to goals according to their own interests and skills.

Perceptions of female Runners: thrifty and generous

To determine the strength of people’s regard for female runners, each person was asked whether, and why, they would like their daughter (if they had one) to become a runner. Of the 47 people who were asked about this, all 47 responded affirmatively. One example is Constantine Jebiwatt, who said, ‘Yes, I have a daughter but her body isn’t small. But I would be very happy if she wanted to run’.⁴⁰ Flomena Jepkoech’s reply was much the same: ‘I will be happy when my child is a runner. She is a girl’.⁴¹ Joyce Kiprono was emphatic, saying ‘*Sana* [Of course] I would like my daughter to become a runner’.⁴² It is Kathleen Chekurui’s answer that is emblematic of many responses. She highlighted what Pamela Jelimo has accomplished as her reason to support her daughters should they decide to become runners:

But when I saw Pamela Jelimo, I said ‘I will support my children’. They can all be runners – my daughters. So I would like my daughters to be runners.⁴³

In addition to becoming the first female Olympic gold medal winner from Kenya, Pamela Jelimo also earned over \$1,000,000 on the athletics circuit in her first year as

a professional runner. Villagers' widespread support for their daughters' participation in athletics were motivated by the potential personal income achievements like Jelimo's and by how successful female runners distribute their money around Iten.

For instance, according to Caroline Jeptoo:

Female athletes help Iten to grow more...Building schools, churches. Piping water to those places. And especially helping the needy people in society to pay fees, food.⁴⁴

Others approved of how female runners supported the local economy by purchasing shoes, clothes and food from them. Many appreciated how 'they come here to promote the business'.⁴⁵ It was common to hear that runners have 'helped Iten to grow. They build rental houses, houses, some of them have built the village and helped those in need – especially girls'.⁴⁶ People appreciate the many benefits that the runners' economic success confers and tended to give credit to female runners in particular for their generous conduct. For instance Margaret Korir elaborated that:

I love women athletes especially because they have improved Iten and where they come from. Even if they are not relatives, you can go for the help and they are there with help. And when they see those children who don't have parents – orphans – they give them uniforms for school, they pay their school fees, and take care of them. They also help with building churches, especially those places in the village where there is no church, where people have to walk all the way from 10 kilometres just to go to church. Or a school.⁴⁷

It is evident that people in Iten recognise the economic power of female athletes. Many have benefitted from the influx of runners into Iten from abroad who pursue training through sport camps and the high altitude environment, all the while spending money in the community. For the majority of the interviewees, neither the migration into Iten nor the greater purchasing power of female runners has yet turned to a source of envy or discontent; rather, the presence of these runners was deemed a source of empowerment for them as a reliable customer base and for the village of Iten as a whole.⁴⁸

In general, women are perceived as practicing greater thrift than men, and women are characterised by their generosity above all. Compared to men, female athletes are believed to give more generously and freely to their parents and siblings.

For instance, Judith Korir commented that:

Ladies, they have that heart. Motherly heart. So whenever you go to them, they sympathise with your situation. So they don't have to be pushed; just get in touch and they help you. But for men, no. Maybe they will give you but with something in return. Or they will misuse you. But for ladies, they help, they just help you. No connections, nothing.⁴⁹

For Lina Maiyo, the difference came down to vision and planning.

Ladies, compared to men, they see far. They don't just see here. They look beyond. For example, if she has started something like that one [points to her bag of vegetables], she won't say this is enough. She wants to go far in terms of her investments. Whereas men, they buy and they think 'we are here, that is all'...Mostly, men – they run one race or two races – their career is very short. Because they think they have reached where they wanted. That's it, they stop. But that is why ladies don't stop. They push even when they get all this, they still want to run.⁵⁰

Given near unanimity among the interviewees on this point, the perception of women's thriftiness is another striking result. However, regardless of whether women truly are better investors and more generous donors, or whether in fact men give more readily to their parents and extended families, most revealing is how this perception of women worked to legitimise the institution of women's paid work outside the home, particularly for married women.

From this body of evidence, expanding the capabilities of female runners fosters freedom in other domains and this takes place through two channels. The first is the visibility of the female runners who achieve global success in athletics, acquire accompanying financial resources, and then insert their income directly into the local economy. The second pathway is the subjective perception that the female athlete is always a generous donor and dependable investor. This belief is partly founded on fact, as several community projects have been financed by female runners and partly

on faith, as many men and women justified their position in favour of women's running with the logic that by virtue of being a woman, the female athlete can be relied upon to redistribute her wealth generously to her extended family and the community. Non-runners in Iten believe that income earned by a *woman* through success in athletics would certainly extend to a wide network of people and that women's running was very much to be supported as well as encouraged for one's daughters. According to Sen, resources certainly matter but so does how people perceive what they can do with these resources to improve their lives. The perception of female runners as prudent businesswomen and generous donors has contributed to enabling other women to expand their capabilities and to exert greater agency in their day-to-day lives.

Revealed preferences and 'committed action'

The final section draws from the evidence and discussion above to critique the framework of 'revealed preferences' in social choice theory.⁵¹ It seeks not to condemn the formal study of economics but rather to apply the qualitative data described in the preceding section to the focused critique of one area of concern within social choice theory. As Strassmann notes:

exposing the limitations of [formal modelling] analyses and developing alternative forms of data must be integral to feminist efforts to construct an economics that is more representative and useful for all humans.⁵²

Theory matters for the practice of researching gender and economic development.⁵³

Yet equally important are critical approaches that seek to expose the gaps and widen the array of acceptable evidence within the discipline.⁵⁴

The concept of preference extends across modern economic theories of individual behaviour, welfare and rationality.⁵⁵ Preferences are usually held to be inviolate, given the assumption that people act rationally to maximise their personal

welfare. In turn, a person's welfare can be reduced to a single value, encompassing his or her 'utility'.⁵⁶ This premise implicitly assumes that measures of wellbeing can be collapsed into a single metric, not unlike measuring development only in terms of GDP. Defined variously as pleasure and 'desire fulfilment',⁵⁷ utility is increased both when people obtain that which gives them pleasure and when they avoid those things that give them pain.⁵⁸ Ranking preferences into a series of most preferred alternatives, as a set of utility functions, makes it possible to draw comparisons of personal welfare.⁵⁹ As Anderson has pointed out, the standard structure of utility maximisation and framing problems in terms of an individual's preferences is now so entrenched that other alternatives are rarely entertained.⁶⁰

Yet there are also substantial literatures making clear that this conception of utility-maximising economic agents misses critical elements. A brief overview of the gender-based critiques would include Paula England's work, which criticises major assumptions of neoclassical theory on the grounds that the way that gender has been socially organised has much to do with which parts of the human experience have been left out of the models.⁶¹ Janet Seiz has been vocal in calling for the incorporation of feminist questions and insights into economics and economic history, noting the 'androcentrism' of three basic components of the neoclassical model: rationality, individualism and power.⁶² Writing during the 1990s, Strassmann agrees, noting that economic theorists form 'conceptual representatives in their own image: autonomous individuals, privileged and free to choose', which would represent only a small and an advantaged subset of people.⁶³ Her earlier challenge to the principles of human rationality and to the alleged consistency of preferences has proved prescient as studies on 'bounded understanding' now proliferate, particularly in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008.⁶⁴ Jane Humphries has also done much to show how

mainstream economic analysis should take account of the social division of labour as a whole, including domestic labour and children's labour.⁶⁵ Moreover, scholars researching at the intersection of race, gender and class continue to point out the many ways in which assumptions built into economic models privilege certain social groups' experiences and positions.⁶⁶

While Sen does not denounce the discipline of economics, describing the use of axiomatic methods as a 'mixed pattern of virtues and vices'⁶⁷, he has mounted a critique of the notion that revealed preferences can serve as a proxy for wellbeing, or utility.⁶⁸ His observation is that self-imposed constraints operate as part of the 'rules' of choice and in this he draws upon Adam Smith who says that behaviour is partly based on norms.⁶⁹ It is worth revisiting Sen's words to describe how overtly revealed preferences can grossly mischaracterise wellbeing in social evaluation.⁷⁰ He writes that:

The extent of a person's deprivation... may not at all show up in the metric of desire-fulfilment, even though he or she may be quite unable to be adequately nourished, decently clothed, minimally educated, and properly sheltered.⁷¹

Moreover, people who adapt their 'self-interested preferences' according to their limited opportunities or perceptions are entirely precluded from finding out what their potential welfare can be. In *Development as Freedom*, Sen presents the case of a woman who has internalised her role as subordinate to her husband and sons. If she cannot imagine that an alternative to the status quo is possible, she will remain content with what she has.⁷² As Ramazzotti notes, in such instances, people 'are unaware that they are unaware'.⁷³

To provide space for these situations and other values, Sen rejects taking individual preferences alone as the foundation for evaluating wellbeing and instead, he contributes the notions of 'committed action' as distinct from 'sympathy'. The

term ‘sympathy’ he means to indicate the case when an individual’s decision has been predicated upon and leads to an increase on another person’s wellbeing, and his or her satisfaction is also affected favourably.⁷⁴ ‘Committed’ actions are also those that occur when an individual makes choices on behalf of others but at the sacrifice of his or her own interests.⁷⁵ As Sen puts it, ‘the presence of non-gains-maximising [decisions]...immediately brings in commitment as a part of behavior’.⁷⁶ Anderson has elaborated on this, describing committed action as a decision made on principles that are rational for any group of people to adopt, and thus rational for any individual who identifies as a member of that group, yet leading ultimately to a revealed preference for a choice that does not maximise individual utility.⁷⁷ Using the example of the Prisoner’s Dilemma and voting preferences, she argues that incorporating committed action into social choice evaluation is fundamental because it takes into account how people sometimes act on a principle of choice other than the maximum satisfaction of their preferences.⁷⁸ While the theory makes intuitive sense, to some extent the problem lies in sourcing the empirical evidence for such a situation. As Sen describes, it cannot be sought ‘in the mere observation of actual choices, and must involve other sources of information, including introspection and discussion’.⁷⁹ Iversen has also noted that the ‘circumstances that prompt adaptation’ of one’s preferences, whether out of sympathy or commitment, are not always ‘transparent’. He suggests that it may be necessary, for example, to gain greater ‘in-depth knowledge about...aspects of female agency that enable women to mediate intra-household power relations’.⁸⁰

Returning to the interviews with the Kalenjin women of Iten, the reflections that were presented above lend empirical support of this kind to the notion of ‘committed action’. Monica Cheruiyot and Charity Choge epitomise this for the

many years that they worked from home and did not stray beyond Iten. Noting the runners, they became aware that it was possible for them to work outside the home and to travel more widely as well. Then, by drawing ‘strength’ from the female runners who ‘struggle[d]’ for their freedom, they used the runners’ example to their advantage. The prominence of women who had become wealthy and successful while engaging in an activity previously reserved for men helped other women to win their partners’ support for their own increased capacity to work and to travel.

Within Sen’s framework, this case can be considered more carefully than through a strictly ‘outcome-orientated’ approach of ‘utility’. By observing incrementally how these women made their decisions and how their perceptions changed subsequent to the arrival of the female runners, it is evident that their interests and agency were restricted initially. Prior to witnessing the success of female runners, Iten townswomen made their choices according to their perception of and commitment to the norms of the collective social group to which they belonged. Such concern for individual agency is important for evaluating a woman’s freedom as choices as well as to identify the constraints imposed on that freedom.

Ann Jepkosgei is another case that reinforces the salience of taking into account the constraints that can impinge on freedoms. She has five children, three boys and two girls, and her interview had to be conducted while she walked home, carrying a large load of firewood on her head. This was because, as she explained, ‘there are the children. And they are waiting for me to cook and everything else, washing them, many things in my home’.⁸¹ When asked about female runners and running, her reply was emphatic:

I dream that people celebrate for me. I get the first one – number one! I win! Everywhere I am going, everywhere, I run. I see that it is very nice. I run on the soot. I go even to the forest. I run.

Yet when asked to elaborate further on what stopped her from attaining this dream, she replied:

I ask [my husband]. When he tells me ‘Yes go and run’, I tell him just, ‘Thank you’. I pray for him to tell me yes. I like running! I love to join them – women runners! But because he says no, I stay. I will not force him because I am in the house. I am married. But if I am free, I will run!

In deferring to her husband rather than advancing her strongly expressed preference to train as a runner, Ann has articulated a striking example of Sen’s notion of commitment. Her wellbeing is unfavourably affected in order that the satisfaction of her husband and children might be increased. Based on traditional gender norms related to marriage – ‘I am in the house. I am married’ – Ann accepts the role of caregiver for her children at the exclusion of her running dream despite her unequivocal and repeated statement that her preference would be to focus on running and to train ‘to win’. This example dovetails with work on household behaviour in developing countries, which some scholars have argued provides valuable guidance to evaluating wellbeing more precisely by uncovering exactly these sorts of examples of the foundations of power and inequality.⁸²

Contrary to assumptions about rational choice, people cannot always formulate decisions on the basis of their preferences alone; the decision that is made may not be better than (or as good as) the others for the person choosing it.⁸³ Defining welfare only through outwardly revealed preferences thus risks systematically misjudging the social choices of vulnerable groups. For this to be avoided, qualitative research methods of discourse and introspection are useful, if not essential, for elucidating the differences between women’s (and other disadvantaged and underrepresented groups’) ability to attain what they find reason to value.

Conclusion

This paper moves beyond thinking about East African running from an elite perspective to include how running in the Rift Valley has influenced the capabilities and opportunities for some of the women who live and work there. The visibility of female runners' success has played a role in giving some women the opportunity to express a wider range of choices, notably to work outside the home and to travel beyond the village of Iten. Taking advantage of the prominence of the female athletes who ran daily through the village of Iten and other parts of the Rift Valley highlands, a number of Kalenjin market-women were able to exert greater agency of their own, act in new and different ways, and express outwardly the values that they wanted to attain. In this case, increasing women's access to sport operated as a 'means' and an 'end' through which certain social and economic development objectives have been achieved. While the social status of women in this society is not yet commensurate with their increasing economic empowerment, the evidence presented here nonetheless supports Sen's view that various kinds of freedoms are indeed inextricably interconnected and mutually reinforcing.⁸⁴

Yet the question remains is it possible to make sense of this within the preferences framework of social choice. Sen's theorising also highlights how perceptions and commitments matter. In previous decades, for instance, if a married woman were to have pursued a career in running, her decision would have elicited widespread disapproval from family and community. Today, if a married woman wins a World Championship or merely a local-level track meet she is much more likely to receive support from her community.⁸⁵ The perception that the female runner is racing to provide for her family alters the interpretation of running and in turn, of women working in the market in Iten. Both are becoming acceptable activities for women of all ages.

What people believe they can do given limited exposure to the full range of potential choices must be taken into account within social choice theory and welfare economics. The results imply that relying on axioms to frame human behaviour can be useful but a narrowly defined theory of rational choice has limitations that can be improved. The informational constraints on neoclassical ideas of utility do not allow for evaluation that is responsive and sensitive to the interests of those whose agency is restricted. Instead of relying solely on revealed preferences, other sources of data on welfare should be incorporated within a more complicated structure. Placing greater weight on elements powerful enough to constrain people's perceptions, preferences and ultimately behaviour in major aspects of their lives would strengthen the social choice element of economic theory. Solutions lies in using qualitative data to address economic issues like individual versus family choices, utility maximisation and the extent to which economic decisions are shaped by institutional and social constraints, and in incorporating more widely the notion of 'committed action'.

Women's perception of many opportunities heretofore never recognised have indeed widened through the expansion of women's freedom to run, and for some this means their preferences that are now being realised and 'revealed'. Although radical social change has not accompanied the economic empowerment of women through running, their success in sport has induced certain positive changes. Sen's alternative informational framework for social evaluation is a promising way to interpret cases in which women and other vulnerable groups have limited agency, and it could provide a means through which understanding their participation can be further enhanced.

Notes

¹ Jarvie and Sikes, 'Voices from Eldoret'.

² Amartya Sen received the Nobel Prize in Economic Science in 1998. His foundation for understanding economic development forms the basis for the UN Human Development Index. See Sen, *Development as Freedom*.

³ Nussbaum in 'Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements' and in *Women and Human Development* outlines a list of fundamental capabilities, which consists of ten interrelated components: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play; and control over one's environment. It is beyond the scope of this paper to undertake a thorough review of her approach but for further discussion of the specifics of the list, its values and content see notably Robeyns, 'Sen's Capability Approach' and Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*.

⁴ Qizilbash, 'Development, Common Foes', 471. For alternative lists, see Finnis' list of 'basic goods' in *Natural Law and Natural Rights* and Griffin's work in *Value Judgment*.

⁵ For a comparison of the two approaches see Feldman and Gellert, 'The Seductive Quality' and Qizilbash, 'Development, Common Foes'; See most famously, Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* and Sen, *Development as Freedom*.

⁶ Sen, 'Elements of a Theory', 78.

⁷ Searching keywords 'Sen' and 'sports' in journals that with the highest impact factor in the ISI Web of Knowledge's fields of gender, area studies, and economics revealed, respectively, that *Gender & Society* has published one article in the last eighteen years matching these criteria as has the *Journal of Economic Literature*. *The Journal of Sport and Social Issues* produced seventeen results; however, none of these focused on economic theories of utility or Sen's critique of revealed preferences.

⁸ See, for instance, Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 57-60, and Qizilbash, 'Development, Common Foes', 469.

⁹ Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 14; Peter, 'Review of Martha Nussbaum'.

¹⁰ For instance see Nussbaum, 'Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements'.

¹¹ Anand and Sen, 'Sustainable Human Development', 1.

¹² Sen, *Development as Freedom*.

¹³ Todaro and Smith, *Economic Development*, 17. For more, see Chapter One, 'The Perspective of Freedom' in Sen, *Development as Freedom*.

¹⁴ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 4.

¹⁵ Anand and Sen, 'Concepts of Human Development', 5.

¹⁶ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 8.

¹⁷ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 3-4 explains that '[d]evelopment requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states. Despite unprecedented increases in overall opulence, the contemporary world denies elementary freedoms to vast numbers of people'.

¹⁸ See for instance: Nelson, 'Value Free of Valueless?'; Hewitson, *Feminist Economics*; Dawson and Hatt, *Market, State and Feminism*; and Gasper and von Staveren, 'Development as Freedom'.

¹⁹ Gasper and van Staveren, 'Development as Freedom', 139.

²⁰ Sen, *Development*, xii.

²¹ Gasper and von Staveren, 'Development as Freedom', 140.

²² Sen, *Development*, xii.

²³ A detailed analysis of why this is the case lies beyond the scope of this paper; however, the gender gap in Kenyan running is analysed in Sikes' doctoral thesis (forthcoming, 2013).

²⁴ Sikes, 'The Standard', 66.

²⁵ Cheserek, 'Home of Spectacular Views'.

²⁶ Dabbs, 'Paths to the Marathon'.

²⁷ Cheserek, 'Home of Spectacular Views'.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Chebet and Dietz, *Climbing the Cliff*, 3.

³⁰ Chebet, and Dietz, *Climbing the Cliff*, 2. The Keiyo people are one of seven sub-groups that together comprise the Kalenjin, and the Kalenjin represents the largest ethnic community within Kenya's western highlands.

³¹ Nearman, 'Kenya's Rudisha'; Rosen, 'Journey'; Dabbs 'Paths to the Marathon'.

³² Keiyo District Annual Report, 11.

³³ *Athletics Weekly*, 24.

³⁴ Makori. 'Kenya Comes Together to Celebrate Jelimo's Triumphant Home Coming'.

³⁵ C. Choge, Interview. 10 Feb. 2011.

³⁶ Although there is not space here to develop the concept, it is important to note that this situation could be read through the Marxian concept of 'false consciousness', referring to thinking that prevents workers, or in this case poor Kenyan women, from understanding the nature of their oppression and the possibilities of its transformation.

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- ³⁷ M. Cheruiyot, Interview. 10 Feb. 2011.
- ³⁸ Iversen, 'Intra-household Inequality'.
- ³⁹ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 194.
- ⁴⁰ C. Jebiwatt, Interview. 10 Feb. 2011.
- ⁴¹ F Jepkoech. Interview. 10 Feb. 2011.
- ⁴² J. Kiprono. Interview. 10 Feb. 2011.
- ⁴³ K. Chepkurui, Interview. 15 Feb. 2011.
- ⁴⁴ C. Jeptoo, Interview. 11 Feb. 2011.
- ⁴⁵ S. Koech, Interview. 8 Feb. 2011; M. Chebii. 8 Feb. 2011; J. Kiprono. Interview. 10 Feb. 2011.
- ⁴⁶ N. Chepkurui, Interview. 11 Feb 2011; R. Kibet, Interview. 11 Feb. 2011.
- ⁴⁷ M. Korir, Interview. 10 Feb. 2011.
- ⁴⁸ Bryceson and Jonsson, 'Miners' Magic: Artisanal Mining'.
- ⁴⁹ J. Korir, Interview. 8 Feb 2011.
- ⁵⁰ L. Maiyo, Interview. 10 Feb 2011.
- ⁵¹ The argument that follows introduces a range of concepts and terms and to aid the reader, certain points will be clarified.
- ⁵² Strassman, 'Editorial', viii.
- ⁵³ Gender is not the only relevant analytical distinction. Assumptions about race, class and sexuality have also influenced the development of neoclassical theory.
- ⁵⁴ Shaffer, 'Poverty Naturalized', 56.
- ⁵⁵ Anderson, 'Symposium', 21.
- ⁵⁶ In the language of economics, utility is a term that signifies individual wellbeing. For an overview of conventional economy theory, see Bade and Parkin, *Foundations of Economics*.
- ⁵⁷ Sen has used the phrase 'desire fulfilment' to describe the concept in Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 55.
- ⁵⁸ Pindyck and Rubinfeld, *Microeconomics*, 75-6.
- ⁵⁹ This convention has been criticised, notably by both Samuelson, *Foundations of Economic Analysis*, 205 and Sen, 'Symposium', 61.
- ⁶⁰ Anderson, 'Symposium', 21.
- ⁶¹ England, 'The Separate Self', 154.
- ⁶² Seiz, 'Feminism', 185.
- ⁶³ Straussman, 'Not a Free Market', 62.
- ⁶⁴ Herbert Simon was a pioneer in the tradition of bounded rationality. See for instance Simon, *Models of Man* and Simon, 'Rational Choice'. See also authoritative work by Akerlof and Yellen, *Efficiency Wage Models*; Rubinstein *Modeling Bounded Rationality*; Kahneman and Tversky, *Choices, Values and Frames*; and Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*. Rabin, 'Psychology and Economics' is an early survey of behavioral economics while Dellavigna, 'Psychology and Economics' provides a survey of more recent empirical work.
- ⁶⁵ See for instance Humphries, 'Towards a Family-friendly Economics'; Bina, Humphries and Robeyns, *The Work and Ideas*; and Humphries, *Through the Mill*.
- ⁶⁶ Olmsted, 'Telling Palestinian Women's Economic Stories', 142; see also Straussman, 'Not a Free Market' and England, 'The Separate Self'.
- ⁶⁷ Sen, *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*, 15.
- ⁶⁸ Sen, 'Behavior', 40. See also Sen, *Choice, Welfare and Measurement* and Sen, 'Maximisation and the Act of Choice'.
- ⁶⁹ Smith writes that rules governing choices requiring self-sacrifice are 'not so much founded upon [their] utility' but rather 'the great, the noble, and the exalted property of such actions' in Sen, 'Rational Fools', 771.
- ⁷⁰ Sen, in Anderson, 'Symposium', 23.
- ⁷¹ Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 55.
- ⁷² Sen, *Development as Freedom*.
- ⁷³ Ramazzotti, 'Social Costs and Normative Economics'.
- ⁷⁴ Gasper, 'Development', 147.
- ⁷⁵ Sen, 'Act of Choice', 760.
- ⁷⁶ Sen, 'Rational Fools', 332.
- ⁷⁷ Anderson, 'Symposium', 24.
- ⁷⁸ Sen, 'Act of Choice', 769-71; Anderson, 'Symposium', 27.
- ⁷⁹ Sen, 'Rational Fools', 342.
- ⁸⁰ Iversen, 'Intra-household', 98.
- ⁸¹ A. Jepkosgei, Interview. 10 Feb. 2011.

⁸² Iversen, 'Intra-household', 95; Olmsted, 'Telling Palestinian Women's Economic Stories'.

⁸³ Ramazzotti, 'Social Costs', 8.

⁸⁴ Sen, *Development as Freedom*.

⁸⁵ R. Waithera, Interview, 18 Feb 2011.

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