

SERENE KHADER
(BROOKLYN COLLEGE)
ON
ADAPTIVE PREFERENCES
AND WOMEN IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Jayamma, a poor Indian woman described in Martha Nussbaum's *Women and Human Development*, worked in a brick kiln where women were paid less for heavier work than men. She also had a husband who squandered his own earnings, requiring her to support the family and do all of the housework. She did not complain or protest, because "she knew that was how things were and would be." Nussbaum's narrative about Jayamma, relatively typical of the narratives about women in the global South that currently have a grip on the American imagination is that, Jayamma "lacked a concept of herself as a person whose rights could be violated" (113).

In this presentation, I explain what is wrong with conceptualizing such "adaptive preferences" primarily as autonomy deficits—that is, as deficits in self-worth or the capacity for critical reflection—and offer an alternative view. I argue that there are two types of problems with such views of adaptive preferences. The first type of problem is definitional. Characterizing adaptive preferences as autonomy deficits does not capture the range of cases that intuitively seem adaptive and captures many preferences that do not seem morally problematic at all. The second type of problem stems from a moral imperative to respect the agency of oppressed and deprived people. Characterizing adaptive preferences as autonomy deficits often misplaces defects in agents what are really defects in the world. It denies the extent to which adaptive preferences are sometimes formed through normal mechanisms of socialization, compatible with cognitively and evaluatively complex life-plans, extend only to certain arenas of agents' values and/or are welfare-maximizing responses to structural obstacles.

I do not think it follows from the view that adaptive preferences are compatible with autonomy, however, that they are not morally objectionable or politically actionable. Instead, they are problematic because they are not compatible with the basic welfare of the people who hold them. Recognizing this shifts the types of strategies that should be used to eradicate adaptive preferences—toward emphasizing the importance of structural change and involving the deprived in deciding the courses of their own lives. I also explain how it is possible to design a welfare-based view that gets what many people want out of the autonomy-based view—the idea that changing adaptive preferences does not involve foisting a culturally specific conception of the good life onto others. This presentation draws on my book, *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment* (Oxford, 2011).

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