Philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s latest monograph continues the development of what she, working much of the time with economist Amartya Sen, has come to call “the capabilities approach” to issues of economic development, policy-making and social justice in developing countries. Specifically, Women and Human Development articulates the ethical foundations of a universalist humanism, a morally justified political vision stressing the equal, uncontestable and fundamental worth of all persons as individuals. When anchored in the context of the daily struggles of poor women in India, this results in a compelling feminist conception of justice. Nussbaum’s synthesis of philosophical and legal analysis, personal narrative, statistics, and historical and cultural sensitivity attests to her deep commitment to theory that has interdisciplinary appeal, cross-cultural relevance and actual transformative potential.

“Women in much of the world,” Nussbaum begins, “lack support for fundamental functions of a human life” in ways most men in such countries do not, at least not systematically, and women suffer concrete hardships as a consequence (1). Vividly illustrated by the different stories of Vasanti and Jayamma, two poor Indian women, this claim grounds and launches Nussbaum’s discussion of what she sees as a non-negotiable normative goal of any political order, namely the cultivation and assurance of space within which fundamental human capacities might flourish. At the heart of this discussion, one influenced by an Aristotelian/Marxist conception of human flourishing, lies the “basic intuition…that certain human abilities exert a moral claim that they should be developed” (83). These objective and universal capabilities define who we are as humans. Further, the flourishing of these capabilities indicates a person’s well-being and the chance for their minimal functioning demarcates the lower threshold of what any human being requires and deserves in order to live a truly human life. Thus Nussbaum argues that “in certain core areas of human functioning a necessary condition of justice for a public political arrangement is that it deliver to citizens a basic level of capability” (71). Though an individual might choose not to develop one or more of these core capacities to a level some may consider necessary for a good life, the political order remains under ethical obligation to provide the opportunity for such development.

Much of this argument will sound familiar to those acquainted with Nussbaum’s work, especially “Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings” in her co-edited Women, Culture and Development (1995). Women and Human Development, however, develops and defends these claims more fully, making clear, for example, the way in which her work on capabilities differs from that of Sen as well as her engagement with the work of John Rawls. Furthermore,
Nussbaum develops admirably the conclusion that attention to core human capabilities entails certain political commitments to all individuals, independent of their gender, caste, economic status, religious affiliation and so on.

In the first half of the book, Nussbaum describes and justifies those intrinsically valuable capabilities at the core of any human (and certainly any good human) life, including things like being able to move about freely, to form emotional attachments and to participate in personally relevant political choices. Second, she advances a compelling defence against cultural relativism (and hence argues for the kind of universalism to which she is committed) and against charges that her work has Westernizing and colonizing tendencies. Nussbaum also provides a convincing case for the effectiveness of the capabilities approach over several versions of preference-based welfarism and utilitarian approaches to determining the overall well-being of a country or culture’s people. Here, the key insight Nussbaum presses is the phenomenon John Stuart Mill describes as so disturbing in The Subjection of Women, namely that persons systematically oppressed often come to desire the conditions that make their oppression possible and, in fact, voice preference for those conditions when asked.

New and stimulating discussion emerges in the second half of Women and Human Development. Here Nussbaum applies her capabilities approach to specific areas of Indian life, namely religion and family, where deeply entrenched beliefs and practices have contributed to the severe constriction of many aspects of women’s well-being. In the Rawlsian liberal tradition she so clearly endorses, Nussbaum acknowledges the political necessity of respecting a culture’s or an individual’s religious and affective choices. With this in mind, she focuses on three legal cases involving Indian women in which religious principles pull against the ethical core of the capabilities approach, a core Nussbaum sees as grounding the fundamentally liberal, “women-friendly” Indian constitution.

So, too, does she carefully assess the ways in which the capabilities approach points out as ethically problematic the vision of women as selfless caregivers, as naturally dependent, and as inevitable, economically draining dowry-bearers that is at the core of many traditional portraits of the Indian family. By virtue of its ethical force, the capabilities approach justifies political “interference” in the “private” realm of the family when women or girls (or individual men, for that matter) are harmed in areas prioritized in the capabilities approach. Of particular concern would be laws concerning marriage, divorce, rape, inheritance, education, child labour, and the ways in which these laws take (or fail to take) effect in actual families. Not only does the capabilities approach justify political intervention in certain cases, it also calls for the establishment of governmental efforts to provide women and girls with the skills and knowledge to develop their core capabilities to the extent they ultimately choose for themselves.

Nussbaum believes that a particular version of political liberalism best
captures the normative requirements of the capabilities approach. Given the Indian Constitution’s fundamental commitment to liberal democracy, the changes in Indian law and cultural traditions that Nussbaum suggests, changes, she notes, that Indian women themselves appreciate when given the chance to understand and experience them, seem to be logical extensions of already endorsed political commitments. Although one can imagine strong Indian resistance to the abolition of child marriage, a practice the capabilities approach critiques because of the way it provides reasons to deny girls education, one can also see how a government already committed to rejecting sex discrimination and to providing women with equal protection of the laws would be conceptually primed for the normative argument Nussbaum advances. Though her sole focus on India and its poor women provides her discussion with an admirable unity, it fails to acknowledge the strong opposition with which her suggestions would be met in cultures with radically different political assumptions and fundamental moral intuitions.

Nussbaum’s discussion also suggests moral grounds for the political intervention of one country into the affairs of another. There are, she argues, universal ethical imperatives binding any particular country to provide a space in which individuals might flourish, and these obligations justify a degree of governmental paternalism and intervention for the good of the citizens. Don’t these universal moral imperatives imply that the global political community has similar obligations to the citizens of the world? It seems as if Nussbaum’s capabilities approach justifies one political body’s intervening in the “private” political life of another just in case that latter’s citizens are suffering in ways deemed morally outrageous by the capabilities approach. Obviously, this is dangerous territory. Perhaps this is just the terrain that Nussbaum’s next work will traverse.

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When attempting to describe this collection of twenty-two women’s stories it would be easy to refer to clichés like inspiring, celebratory, and sometimes even intimidating. But Carrying the Banner: Women, Leadership and Activism in Australia is worthy of a more detailed analysis. The book provides a fascinating insight into the challenges that face women as leaders and activists in the local, national and international arena, and in diverse fields such as politics, sport, the professions and community service. However, the reader is