



REDEFINING LIVELIHOOD- AN ENQUIRY OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF CAPABILITY APPROACH

Manjari Shukla

PhD Research Scholar

Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy
Jawaharlal Nehru University

ABSTRACT

Women poverty in a country like India is a function of more than just economic disempowerment, as is posited by the framework of capability approach introduced by Amartya Sen. The approach ideates that poverty is not only a manifestation of one's material, tangible realities like the 'lack of income' but also of more intangible aspects of 'lack of capability' and should thus be seen as such. The programme of National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) introduced by the Government of India with the goal of empowering poor women in rural areas through the creation of Self-Help Groups, partly functions on the premise that women have innate capabilities and with a little assistance may be able to step out of poverty. The aspect of agency has to play a significant role in the process and definition of empowerment in order for it to sustain itself.

KEYWORDS: *Capability approach; Women Empowerment; Poverty; Human Agency; Self-Help Groups; Livelihood; Rural Development*

INTRODUCTION

It almost stands as a truism that to come out of the clutches of poverty, there needs to be put much emphasis on livelihood generation for it would help in the building of assets that would, in turn, pull one out of poverty. Although the formulation isn't exactly untrue, the process has been made out to be overly linear while in reality, it is much more nuanced and complicated. Over the past few decades, there has been a shift from the income-centric idea of poverty to a more structural and detailed understanding of the same which came about through the introduction of the concept of capability approach by Amartya Sen. The approach relied on a more nuanced lens to look at poverty wherein it tried to go beyond the conventional, tangible signifiers like income, resources¹ and incorporate more intangible measures like capabilities, freedoms etc to talk about poverty.

Thus, the approach highlights the need for literature on poverty and the state initiatives towards poverty reduction by means of livelihood generation, to focus as much on capability enhancement as on the apparent objectives of income generation. On these very lines, there is also a need to redefine livelihood to consolidate these rather important ideals of agency and freedom as well in addition to focusing on material well-being and betterment. This assimilative approach gives a framework that uses subject-centric ideals (of capability approach) to pursue the larger tangible objective of 'not being poor'. This framework sees livelihood as not just instrumental in achieving poverty eradication objective but also intrinsically valuable for it gives one a sense of 'freedom' and 'agency'². In other words, it contributes more than tangible outcomes (income), it imparts one voice and meaning and instils confidence to work towards one's personal growth.

¹ The approach doesn't take away from the significance of these conventional ideas of poverty but proposes their inadequacy towards positing a lasting solution.

² Both of these form two of the very central ideals of the capability approach



CAPABILITY AS A METRIC OF POVERTY

Sen (1979) in his paper titled 'Equality of What?' in the Tanner Series Lecture talked about the concept of Capability Approach for the first time. He elaborated on the three ideas of equality- utilitarian equality, total utility equality and Rawlsian equality. Therein he mentions 'basic capability equality' as an apt way of going about the larger understanding of equality. The approach developed over the years (Sen, 1979, 1985, 1999, 2000) and formed an important part of both academic writings and policies where it also formed the ground for the introduction of Human Development.

The approach emphasizes on the importance of functionings (which he calls 'beings' and 'doings') and one's capabilities and freedoms, over and above such arbitrary measures like utility, resources etc³. However one must keep in mind that the capability approach is not an approach that explains or guarantees an effective solution to the problem of poverty or inequality but one that helps in understanding and conceptualizing these problems. The approach does not focus on the ends per se but whether a person has been put in a situation in which she can freely pursue the functioning that she values i.e. her capabilities.

The approach thus is a *way* towards the solution rather than a solution in itself. For capability theorists, the emphasis on capabilities and functionings rather than income is valued particularly for two important reasons. First, the means would not end up assuming an intrinsic valuation and would remain of instrumental importance only. For instance, income or resources will not end up being valued for their own sake but only in so far as they contribute to the expansion of people's capabilities⁴. Second, starting from ends, one is open to the possibility of more than one means to achieving the end and thus allowing us to not put overarching emphasis on the premise of there being just one (like income), for there are ends that require means over and above financial resources, like a conducive social and/or political environment for the overall well-being of people.

The capability approach generally entails an understanding of crosscutting concepts of 'capability and functioning' and an undermined yet very important understanding of 'agency and well-being'. The following is a simplified table to elaborate on the many key concepts of the approach.

³ Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy;
available at
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach/>

⁴ Ibid.

Table 1 Key concepts of the capability approach

	<u>AGENCY</u>	<u>WELL-BEING</u>
ACHIEVEMENT	Agency achievement	Well-being achievement (Functioning)
FREEDOM	Agency freedom	Well-being freedom (Capability)

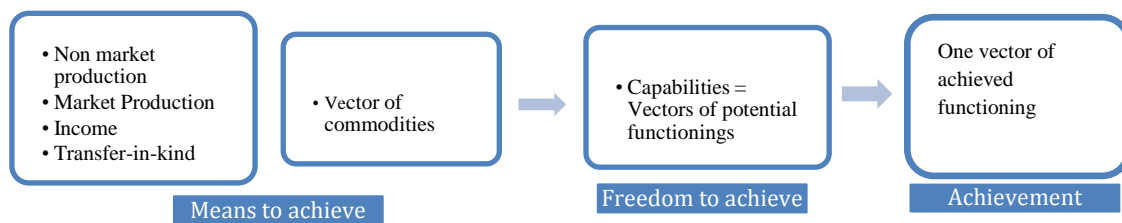
Source- Crocker (2008)

Capability approach in its most basic sense this is a multi-disciplinary approach and by virtue of the fact that it talks about such widely acceptable and applicable aspects like freedoms and capabilities, this approach has a universal appeal. The advent of the approach has lent a new lens through which poverty can be seen. Before the idea attained vogue, poverty was seen in simply material terms, as lack of income, resources, as a result of which the poverty studies focused on such income-centric measures as consumption, household income etc to measure the instance of poverty. The approach criticized this practice of putting over-riding emphasis on such

measures and proposed that income or resources are at best, only a means towards other more valued achievements which he called functionings. According to this approach, it isn't the possession of goods that is important but what these goods enable one to 'do' or 'be' and the freedom to pursue these functionings (beings and doings) is what Sen (1985) terms as capabilities.

The following is a schematic representation of the approach which shows the income and other material aspects as constituting the means to achieving other valued outcomes.

Figure 1 Schematic Representation of the Capability Approach



Source - Based on [Robeyns (2000, 2005)]

Sen (1996) gives precedence to the aspect of capabilities over that of functioning, for the former signifies freedom to choose from an alternate set of functioning vectors which in turn would affect the latter which is the outcome i.e the functionings. This freedom of being able to choose from a set of vectors is what makes the means more valuable than the ends. Inherent within the ideal of capability thus also lies the aspect of agency which makes this approach subject-centric. The very fact that not everybody has the same capabilities (functioning vectors) and one's ability to convert these freedoms into achievements is contingent on various

conversion factors⁵, highlights the differences in the agency of different people. The approach also places great importance on the aspect of agency and proposes to see humans as active agents rather than passive recipients in their own development.

GENDERED NATURE OF POVERTY

The fact that Women in general are, 'over-represented among poor and powerless' presents itself

⁵ Namely personal heterogeneities, environmental diversities, variations in social climate, differences in relational perspectives and distribution within the family



as a self-explanatory reality given the status they hold in the society. The fourth UN conference on women asserted that 70% of the world's poor were women and the objective of eradicating the 'persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women' was adopted as one of the 12 critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action. There was a growing scholarly interest in the direction. This led to the coinage of the phrase 'feminization of poverty', first used by Diana Pearce in 1978 in the context of growing instances of women being the victim of poverty gained currency.⁶

Chant (2006)⁷ notes certain chief characteristics of the feminization of poverty which constitute observations like greater persistence and intensity of poverty among women as compared to men, more barriers to cope for women than men, female-headed household more prone to poverty and is more likely to transmit it to the next generations than its counterpart etc.

The idea forwarded by the term was later used by many scholars (Madeiros and Costa, 2008; Chant, 2006) to study women as the thrust group that require rescue from the clutches of poverty. This concept though is ripe with problems in that it takes poverty chiefly as lack of income and side-lines the more holistic understanding of poverty as capability failures. Also, the fact that the household level studies (focusing obsessively on the monetary, consumption aspect) failed to comprehend the intra-household disparities wherein women unfailingly are poorer in every sense. There indeed is, in a country like India, a need to assess the 'feminization of poverty' in the light of Sen's capability approach. Fukuda-Parr (1999) asserts that feminization of poverty is 'not just the lack of income'. As is also rightly argued by Razavi (1999) and cited in Chant (2006)53,

From a gender perspective, broader concepts of poverty are more useful than a focus purely on household income levels because they allow a better grasp of the multi-dimensional aspects of gender disadvantage, such as lack of power to control important decisions that affect

one's life ... (Razavi 1999 cited in Chant, 2006 pp. 203)

Women are poor in every sense, be it the conventional sense of poverty as income deprivation or the more holistic understanding of poverty as capability failure. The lack of freedom to make important life decisions is one of the prime reasons that render women intrinsically poor. Their position in the social domain as a disadvantaged group is an established fact and so are the implications of this very positioning. These implications include hampered well-being and agency of women; restricted access and control over resources, or even pursue the important functioning that they value in the remotest way possible. The fact that the majority of policy measures working towards eradicating poverty focus on the monetary aspect of it, only reinstates how insufficient our understanding of poverty is and continues to be. Initiating policies that aim at enhancing the well-being of women might well be a step towards 'de-feminization of poverty' but it sure does not discount the importance of taking into account the very crucial role of women as 'participants' and 'agents' in achieving this end.

LIVELIHOOD, WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND THE IDEAL OF AGENCY

Livelihoods, apart from the more tangible ends that they serve like bring in income, helping in 'getting by', they also serve certain intangible ends like empowering people (with an intermediary stage of capability enhancement) to live a more meaningful life. This empowerment if seen through the lens of capability approach incorporates the idea of agency which is defined in terms of 'the ability to make one's own life choices' and in more simple terms enhance one's decision making abilities. Kabeer (1999, 2001, 2008) defines empowerment with agency as the centre-piece as 'women's empowerment as the processes through which women gained the capacity for exercising strategic forms of agency in relation to their own lives as well as in relation to the larger structures of constraint that positioned them as subordinate to men'. This empowerment (intrinsic) is more desired and lasting as compared to the narrow, extrinsic empowerment where one is superficially empowered (through passive agents) but without an understanding of their disadvantaged positioning in the societal structure in the first place.

The view of poverty as capability failure demands a whole new approach towards the formulation of policies and frameworks to curb the menace of poverty. Livelihood generation is one of the chief ways forwarded by both scholars and the state to achieve this end. There is an underlying understanding

⁶ It is noteworthy that poverty at this point of time was still largely the lack of economic resources more than anything else. However, we will use the phrase in relation to poverty as capability deprivation.

⁷ Chant, Sylvia (2006) *Revisiting the 'feminisation of poverty' and the UNDP gender indices: what case for a gendered poverty index?* New series working paper, 18. LSE Gender Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK pp 3-4



that livelihoods would help one build assets and resources which would automatically help them pull themselves out of poverty. The proposed framework should 'bridge the more materialist (cf. World Bank, 1990) and the more hermeneutic and actor-centred (cf. Chambers, 1987; Scoones and Thompson, 1994) notions of poverty and livelihood' (Bebbington, 1999). This led to the introduction of the idea of Sustainable Livelihood by Chambers and Conway (1991) in the paper titled *Sustainable rural livelihoods: practical concepts for the 21st century*. Livelihood thus defined, encapsulates the ideals of the capability approach and beyond, as is clear from the following definition given by Chambers and Conway (1991)

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base. (Chambers & Conway, 1991)

This framework of Sustainable Livelihood promises to forward a more holistic idea of poverty reduction where it sees livelihoods with regards to five capital assets- produced, human, natural, social and economic capital and also takes into account the 'access' aspect of it. The outcome also puts an emphasis on the capability generation. It wouldn't be too far-fetched to see an element of the capability approach in the framework for the latter also centres around the idea of freedom to pursue valued functionings which is contingent upon various factors that decide one's access to the outcome. The framework advanced sees these assets as not mere means towards earning a living but also give meaning to people's lives. Livelihoods thus have an intrinsically valuable nature wherein it lends a sense of agency to people which further has an emancipatory impact. If seen through the lens of the capability approach, livelihood is essentially a means to expand one's freedoms to include more alternate functioning vectors for people to choose from. Access to these capital assets defines one's livelihood strategies which further decide the outcomes in the form of poverty reduction and capability enhancement. There is also the underlying understanding that not everybody has similar access to these capital assets and it would depend on various factors like their positioning in the social arena, and other identity aspects. The differential access to these capitals would lead to varying livelihood strategies which would result in differential outcomes in the form of improved wellbeing and capabilities. For instance, the capital available to women would be very different (and deficient) as compared to those available to men which

would restrict their livelihood strategies and in the end would result in only a limited betterment in their wellbeing and capabilities. This goes on to show how differential access to these capitals can impact the outcomes. This is similar to the dynamics of the capability approach wherein differential entitlements (due to various factors) lead to different and very limited sets of freedom (functioning vectors). Livelihood strategies are influenced by 'access to and control over assets, access to markets, information and organization, effective management of vulnerability and the interaction of these policies at the global, national and local levels' (World Bank et al. 2008). The fact that livelihood strategies of women from the poor strata are contingent on their gender entitlements and their disadvantaged positioning in the (patriarchal) social structure presents itself as a truism as women have the least control over the resources both material and social. (Nazneen, 2012)

National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM): An effective answer?

As is clear from the above discussion, the gendered nature of various institutions (household, society, market etc) restricts the access and control of women to resource, both economic and social, denying them agency to take up various livelihood strategies and as a result disempowering them. The states need to intervene at this level to forward the project of women empowerment. Aajeevika or the National Rural Livelihood Mission is one such state initiative launched by the Ministry of Rural Development in June 2011. It 'aims at creating efficient and effective institutional platforms of the rural poor, enabling them to increase household income through sustainable livelihood enhancements and improved access to financial services.' (official website, Aajeevika). The thrust is on organizing and mobilizing poor women from marginalized sections of the society into Self-help groups and train and motivate them to take up livelihoods to help achieve the objective of poverty reduction.

Following are the NRLM guiding principles⁸:

- Poor have a strong desire to come out of poverty, and they have innate capabilities
- Social mobilization and building strong institutions of the poor is critical for unleashing the innate capabilities of the poor.
- An external dedicated and sensitive support structure is required to induce the social

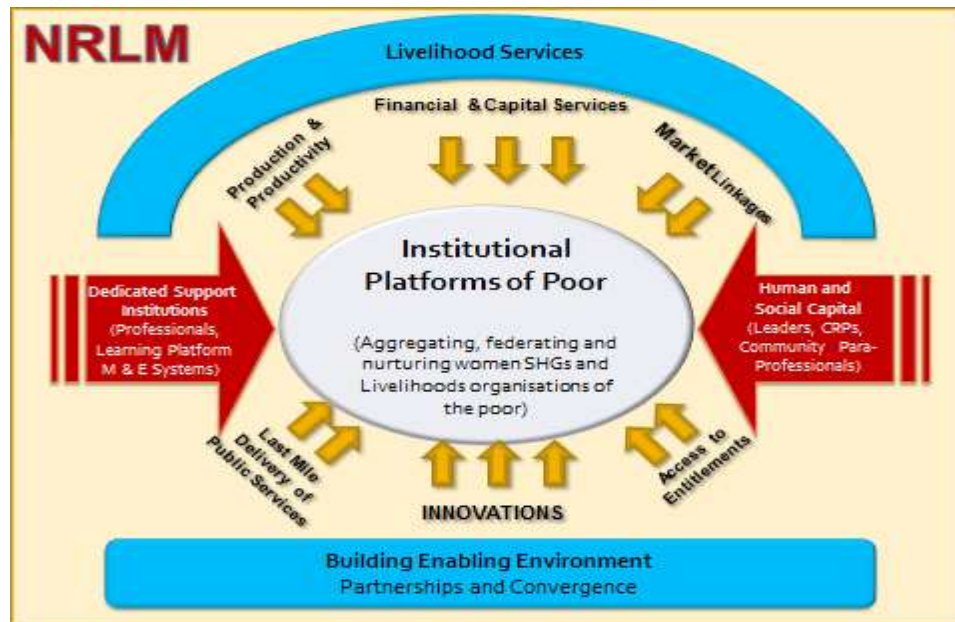
⁸ See <https://aajeevika.gov.in/content/mission>

mobilization, institution building and empowerment process.

- Facilitating knowledge dissemination, skill-building, access to credit, access to marketing,

and access to other livelihoods services underpins this upward mobility.

Figure 2. Process of NRLM



Source- NRLM official website

The various phases of implementation of National Rural Livelihood Mission in a state constitute the division of the districts/Blocks into the following:

- Resource blocks- These would constitute 5-6% of blocks in a state. These would serve as pilot blocks where the key strategies of the mission will be implemented. These would create a 'proof of concept' for other blocks to follow. These are provided with community resource persons⁹ and National resource organizations (NROs) which help states in implementing the strategies of NRLM.
- Intensive blocks- These blocks are directly administered by the SRLMs wherein they designate their own staff members and employ CRPs from the resource blocks
- Partnership blocks- the SRLMs take up implementation in blocks where there is already mobilization and SHG formations through the help of NGOs.

⁹ CRPs are women who have come out of poverty with the help of their SHGs and now serve as cornerstones in helping other women through their experiences.

- Non-Intensive- all the remaining districts/blocks (other than the above mentioned) come under non-intensive blocks. These are provided with limited assistance from SRLMs for the time being but expected to be brought under the ambit of the mission in future.

Key Features of NRLM

- The target groups of the poor people are reached through the means of Participatory Identification of Poor (PIP). This list of poor thus identified, must be confirmed by the Gram Sabha and approved by Gram Panchayat.
- NRLM provides the SHGs with Revolving Fund and Community Investment Funds as 'resources in perpetuity' in order to build their financial management capacity and later attract bank finance
- It focuses on promoting livelihoods of the poor through the three pillars- vulnerability reduction and livelihood enhancement, employment and entrepreneurship

It is apparent from the guiding principles and the key features of NRLM that the initiative is in part inspired by the capability approach and also tries to encapsulate the ideals of sustainable livelihood



approach. It, however, remains to be seen whether the initiative is able to achieve the more intangible and unapparent functionings of empowerment in the sense of agency enhancement. In order to truly implement the ideals of capability approach into such livelihood initiatives, there should be an emphasis on forwarding the more holistic idea of empowerment as agency enhancement where women have the freedom to have their own conceptions of good and be able to work towards achieving them.

The problem that the initiative is likely to face stems from the rather shallow understanding of disempowerment and the gendered ways in which poverty works. In so far that the scheme mobilizes poor women by providing financial support to pursue their own livelihood endeavours, there is some hope that it would help in empowering women economically. However, the initiative doesn't really offer a way to ensure the kind of empowerment that the very ideals that it is based on forward and one that women value. The SHGs are proposed to these women as solely a means of improving their financial status, confirming to the conventional, income-centric notions of poverty without really making them see their poverty as a function of more than their economic deprivation. They need to be made to expect and seek more than just financial support from schemes like these that promise women empowerment. So while NRLM might prove to be an effective way of achieving ends like giving women a platform to earn, it needs a deeper assessment into how holistic the livelihood (generated through NRLM) is in terms of the more desired end of (intrinsic) empowerment. This view of empowerment encompasses not only the aspect of access to resources (which is gendered), but also more hermeneutic aspects of making one's voice heard and presence felt in various walks of life, be it political, interfamilial, society or psychological (in measures like self-efficacy and self-esteem).

WAY FORWARD

While the idea of poverty eradication among women by way of introducing sustainable livelihood measures seems like a well-meaning and effective mode of achieving the said objective, we need to be very cautious as to not mistake symptoms with the disease. While the income-generating capacity of livelihood plays a very instrumental role in poverty reduction, it also has an intrinsic emancipatory value where it imparts agency to women. The success of initiatives like NRLM doesn't merely show in monetary progress of the SHGs but in whether they have found their voices and wield the 'power within'. As Sen (1985) rightly points out that real empowerment is in treating individuals as agents who possess their

own notion of good and bad, and not as mere beneficiaries. Going with the premise the initiative does set out to make these women agents wherein the state only helps them financially at the initial stages of SHG formation leaving them to further the objectives of the SHGs of savings and livelihood promotion by themselves. This only makes them agents in the more superficial sense of the term where they have access to finance through the SHGs but in other more important arenas of life, there is no enhancement of agency.

The practice of agency should be seen as a natural extrapolation of the development of critical consciousness and agency is valued only if it is preceded by this consciousness. Without the presence of this consciousness any practice of agency is going to only reinforce the existing social order and to some extent worsen it. The precondition to empowerment thus is creating consciousness among the women (and its various subcategories) of their disadvantaged position in the society and all that is wrong with it. The realization among women that their exclusion from the social order is the structural cause of their oppression and poverty, needs to be instilled in them.

However, this is also equally difficult a measurement to make, for the agency is not a direct measurable variable and the proxies are difficult to quantify as well and at times inadequate and deceiving. That said, the policymakers and academicians likewise cannot overlook the indispensable character of the concept in livelihood as it offers one of the most holistic ways to make empowerment more informed which furthers the project of poverty reduction.

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