

# Understanding Gender Justice through the Lenses of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

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## Abstract

Human beings are the real wealth of every society, thus, it is important to provide them the environment in which they have the freedom to achieve the things they reason to value. Amartya Sen offers his "capability approach" in this context, which contends that the degree of freedom people have to advance and carry out duties they value should be the primary criterion for evaluating social systems. This paper first seeks to comprehend the theoretical underpinnings of Sen's capability approach before exploring how it might be used to understand gender justice. The capabilities approach directly addresses the level of life quality that individuals can reasonably attain. These ideas of "functioning" and "capability," are used as the core concepts to analyze the quality of life. It seems ironic that women's rights are violated because of their sex. Many women around the world experience unequal treatment when it comes to employment, physical integrity and safety, access to basic healthcare and nutrition, education, and political voice. Sen's capability approach is notable for producing gender justice by emphasizing women's independence, which enables them to live a dignified life.

**Keywords:** Amartya Sen, gender justice, capability approach.

## Introduction

Approaches to social development, welfare laws, and anti-poverty programmes frequently rest on the concept that raising household wealth or income is the most effective way to eradicate poverty and is therefore social development's main objective. The idea that how individuals live their lives and the institutions and facilities they have access to may be equally as significant as and linked to their annual income is one that is often overlooked in approaches to social development. Individuals with low incomes are at risk and function poorly not because they lack money, but rather because they might not have certain freedoms or "capabilities".

The **Capabilities Approach** pioneered by Amartya Sen provides an alternative to development theories and policies that are typically based on the kinds of materialism. Amartya Sen is the most admired Nobel award winning Economist, writer and philosopher. He was awarded with the Nobel Prize in 1998 for his contribution to Welfare Economics and Social Choice Theory. Sen's capabilities approach asserts that

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processes and human relationships are, in end of themselves, valuable and valuable insofar as they have a positive impact on material well-being outcomes. The basic capabilities advocated for by Sen are, “the ability to be well nourished, to avoid escapable morbidity or mortality, to read and to write and communicate, to take part in the life of the community, and to appear in public without shame”<sup>i</sup>.

It is argued that Sen’s capability approach provides a comprehensive perspective regarding women’s freedoms and opportunities by establishing a link between freedom, capability and gender justice. Sen considers the empowerment of women to be the axis of development. Gender justice is fundamental to human development and the realization of peaceful, just and inclusive societies. It involves ending inequalities between men and women in law and practice and providing redress for those inequalities. UNDP applies a holistic approach to promote gender justice with the assistance of our national partners in advancing women’s rights through policy and legislative reforms that address biased norms and detrimental gender stereotypes, prejudices and practices.

### **Sen’s Capability Approach in a Nutshell**

Capability approach is one of the most considerable offerings of Amartya Sen to political philosophy and social sciences. He first articulated this approach in his *Tanner Lectures* (1979) and continuously contributed for its theoretical and technical development for the next two decades. The **Development as Freedom (1999)** is the most comprehensive and influential account of this approach.

The capability approach is a comprehensive normative framework that evaluates individual well-being, social welfare, social and political arrangement in terms of person’s actual beings and doings’. In **Inequality Re-examined** (1992), Sen writes: “A person’s capability to achieve functioning that he or she has reason to value provides a general approach to the evaluation of social arrangements, and this yields a particular way of viewing the assessment of equality and inequality”<sup>ii</sup>. The principal idea of the capability approach is that the socio-political arrangements should focus on expanding people’s freedoms rather than the achievement or command over goods.

The capability approach can be understood according to **David Crocker** and **Ingrid Robeyns**, in both narrower as well as broader ways. In the narrower way capability approach tells us ‘What details should we consider in order to assess how well someone’s life is going or has gone’. The capability approach aids in these interpersonal comparisons of wellbeing and frequently places a strong emphasis on evaluating each person’s level of functioning or on both functioning and capabilities. In its more general use, the capability is a profound evaluative exercise that frequently takes agency and other unequivocally normative factors into account. The normative or evaluative role examines the extent and expansion of the capabilities of the people that a good society or polity should ideally work for. The capability approach values various freedoms in the form of capabilities and selects the ‘evaluative space in the form of functioning and capabilities to function’<sup>iii</sup>.

“The capability approach used in this study is much concerned with the opportunities that people have to improve the quality of their lives. It is essentially a ‘people-

centered' approach, which puts human agency (rather than organizations such as markets or governments) at centre of the stage. The crucial role of social opportunities is to expand the realm of human agency and freedom, both as an end in itself and as a means of further expansion of freedom."<sup>iv</sup>

### **Gender Justice and Capability Approach**

Amartya Sen in an interview stated that, "Gender inequality is not a natural human condition. But the idea that somehow women have to be in inferior positions or not quit such dominant positions is really artificial thought which could be banished."

The capability approach has contributed to a new approach to philosophy which regards the human beings and their standard of living as the central focus of policy. It advocates the enhancement in individual freedom and dignity regardless their class, gender, race, ethnicity etc. Capability approach has immense potential to be applied in evaluating the concept of gender justice or gender equality. The basic features of capability approach to evaluate gender justice are:

- **Human Beings as Ends**

For Sen, the income maximization or economic growth must not be the only indicators of development. Income or resources are not 'ends' in themselves but 'means' to enhance the quality of life of the individuals. In their evaluation of **India, Development and Participation (2002)**, Amartya Sen & Jean Dreze establish the 'centrality' of human agency and expansion of freedom both as 'an end in itself' and also simultaneously as 'means of further expansion of freedoms'. Sen advocates freedom of women to participate in political, economic and social life to lead a dignified life.

- **Individual freedoms at the centre of Capability Approach**

Sen believes that people lose capabilities when they are deficient in freedom. Having freedom provides the room to build up capabilities. Therefore, according to Sen, all development is development of individual capabilities in the 'enabling environment' of human freedom. Sen is of the opinion that extension of individual freedom is the purpose of development, and freedom is also means eradicating the major sources of restraint such as all forms of discrimination- racial, religious, gender or community based, social exclusion and political marginalization, policies restricting women human rights and so on.

Freedom creates the required space to make choices to make one's life better the way one wanted. It is predominantly relevant for the women for their enabling and empowering impact and therefore to bring gender equality.

- **Capability Approach and well being of women**

The standard of living and the quality of life are multidimensional concepts and core determinants to capture the well being of a country and its citizens. The term "standard of living" typically refers to the material foundation of well-being represented in an individual's level of consumption, or the average person's material wellbeing in a given

population. The term "quality of life" refers to a broader concept that encompasses both tangible and intangible elements that contribute to human existence and envisions overall welfare.

Sen's capability approach ultimately focuses on how people might live fulfilling lives and realize their potential. According to the capabilities approach, there are three main components to wellbeing. The first is an individual's functioning, which is determined by the resources they have access to and their capacity to transform those resources into worthwhile activities. The second component is made up of the person's subjective experience, which is influenced by their actions and the emotional states they are experiencing. The third and final component includes all of the individual's options to act in various spheres of life, given their resources and conversion skills.

There can be significant gender-based disparities in a variety of health outcomes. Although they differ between different nations and areas of the world, these gender inequalities are widespread. While girls and women in less developed nations experience unequal access to resources, education, and basic healthcare, gender inequality still exists in the majority of developed nations in the form of prejudiced social institutions and ideas about gender roles that restrict women's opportunities, prevent them from fully participating in economic, social, and political activities, and consequently lower their quality of life. Sen contends that empowering women and enhancing their wellness are essential for the growth of their families and society as a whole.

- **Capabilities and Women's Education**

Women's education offers worth beyond the accumulation of human capital, according to the capabilities perspective. Promoting women's education is a wise course of action because it increases women's potential. What is a woman capable of doing and being? is a question we ask because capabilities indicate that women are aware of their options and free to take them. The abilities to live a long life, to have physical health, to develop one's senses, creativity, and thought, to develop one's practical reason, to enjoy association with others, and to have influence over one's environment are those that are most closely associated with education. Compared to less educated women, educated women typically live longer and have better health. Basic literacy and numeracy are categorized by **Martha Nussbaum** under the categories of senses, imagination, and thought. Women can exert more control over their surroundings when they are able to earn more money and have stronger bargaining positions, both of which are facilitated by education.

### **Applicability of Sen's Capability Approach**

The capabilities method has been tried out in many different contexts. It has been used, for example, to assess gender inequality, poverty, wellbeing, social justice, social exclusion, health, disability, as well as for policy creation. Human needs, rights, and securities have all been touched upon, along with growth in general. Applying the capability approach to assess gender disparity, poverty, and health has been attempted

on multiple occasions.

In Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, "people" are viewed as actual human beings with emotional and psychological needs. Development is viewed as an increase in people's capabilities and is a preposition that enables (empowers) individuals. By increasing people's skills, which are linked to freedom of choice, it seeks to improve people's wellbeing. It expressly acknowledges the diversity that exists and the multifaceted nature of human well-being. Capability is, thus, an expression of freedom dazzling person's opportunities of well being. In Sen's philosophy it has both intrinsic importance as well as instrumental value. In the latter case, freedom is significant in judging how good a agreement a person has in the society and in the former case, it is fundamentally essential for a good social structure. "A good society, in this view, is also a society of freedom."<sup>v</sup>

According to **Ingrid Robeyns**, Sen's preoccupation with a broad framework of evaluation would be irreconcilable with any attempt to create a single all-purpose list of capabilities. Instead she proposes a list of capabilities for the conceptualization of gender inequality in post industrialized societies. The list includes; "Life and physical health, Mental wellbeing, Bodily integrity and safety, Social relations, Political empowerment, Education & knowledge, Domestic work and non market care, Paid work and other projects, Shelter and environment, Mobility, Leisure activities, Time autonomy, Respect, and Religion"<sup>vi</sup>.

The **Human Development Index (HDI)**, which was developed by the United Nations Development Program in 1990 to assess a country's level of human development or populace well-being, is likely most known for having been inspired by this strategy. Health, education, and material well-being are all included by the HDI.

Furthermore, capability approach can be considered as an approach to understand gender justice. Gender inequality is a barrier in individual freedom and their dignity. Capability approach focuses on improving the quality of life and individual well being. Recent **Global Gender Gap Report, 2022** released by **World Economic Forum** states that gender parity is not covering, it will take another 132 years to close the global gender gap. India ranks 135 out of 146 countries in Global Gender Gap Report, 2022 which is very disappointing. To reduce this gender gap government needs to frame inclusive policies which focus on women's well being, their education and political participation. Equal access to healthcare facilities and education can make a difference in women's life.

### Conclusion

The capability approach brings the idea of effective freedoms as the end to the evaluation of standard of lives, development and measuring social justice. From the examination of individual advantage to assessment of poverty, deprivation, and various kinds of unfreedoms, this approach remains centrally focused on the quality-of-life humans have rather than the mere command over goods such as income, wealth and resources. Amartya Sen has been at the forefront of developing this capacious approach

taking influences from philosophers like Aristotle, Smith, and Marx.

Amartya Sen's Capability Theory has had a significant influence on recent discussions of progress and development. Sen's capability approach places an emphasis on people and their capabilities rather than products and resources. Additionally, it offers an alternate and more thorough viewpoint on problems that the economic perspective seldom touches, such as poverty, inequality, gender bias, and social exclusion.

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