

Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach applied to education as a means of women's empowerment in community development

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Introduction

Nobel-prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, changed the development conversation with his theory of development as the expansion of capabilities, or freedoms, that may be exercised to achieve the life that people value for themselves. Sen classifies these freedoms into five types, "political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security" (Sen, 1999, p. 10). These freedoms interact with each other and may guide policy and justice reforms. Significantly, freedoms are both the means and the goal of development. Freedom is central to the process of community development both to the extent that the "achievement" of development is dependent on the free agency of the people (the means) and the enhancement of people's freedom (the end)(Sen, 1999).

Sen conceived of poverty as unfreedoms, or lack of capabilities that people have available to them. This perspective of poverty may include a lack of political rights and choice, vulnerability to coercive relations, and/or exclusion from economic choices and protections. Factors such as low income or lack of education make people bound, as does lack of freedom in the form of restrictions on political and civil liberties and participation. Therefore, according to Sen, development can be seen as a movement towards individuals having more choice and more freedom, removing major sources of unfreedom. (Sen, 1999). This theory was a fundamental shift away from the prevailing perception of poverty and development as tied solely to economic growth and the market (Myers, 2011). It shifts the focus from traditional development measures such as GDP to the ability of individuals to pursue real opportunities and choose to do what they value in life (Sen, 1999). Rather, it requires a broader, more holistic movement towards growing an individual's range of freedoms. Sen understands that people have varying needs, values, and goals and focuses on enhancing their ability or capability to pursue what they deem necessary or valuable. Sen's capabilities approach provides a holistic and human-centered perspective on development, emphasizing the importance of enhancing individual freedoms and capabilities as a fundamental goal.

Sen conceived of human well-being as moving beyond what people can purchase to the capacity people have to *be* and *do* in ways that are meaningful to them. Sen examines 'functionings,' or the things people do, and uses these as development markers. These functionings include being literate, healthy, economically active, and participating in communities and are the evidence of freedoms. Choice and the means to act on that choice are key to well-being as people exercise functions (Myers, 2011). From a Christian perspective, Myers affirms the focus on human agency in Sen's theory, noting God's desire for humans to have agency and choice. Moreover, the freedoms identified by Sen underscore human dignity, which is rooted in God creating humanity in God's image (Myers, 2011).

In this review, we explore the implications of Sen's capabilities approach in the context of education and women's empowerment as a means of fostering community development. By examining how this approach redefines community development, empowerment and education become vital tools for enhancing human freedoms and have the potential to bring about transformative change, ultimately contributing to the betterment of communities. Thus, Amartya Sen's capabilities approach advocates for a paradigm shift in how we approach education and women's empowerment. It leads us to step away from simple economic growth as a measurement of development and to consider what the capability approach offers to the role of education and empowerment of women in developing a community.

Education and Women's Empowerment

Gender inequality in capabilities may be found globally. Humphries (2005) details a list of capabilities to assess gender equality, going on to present evidence of gender inequality in these capabilities and how the capabilities approach can impact community development through education and empowerment of women. Humphries explains that women experience greater incidence of sexual and physical abuse and hold far less political power, while girls are less likely to receive an education. Even when there is equal access to education, gender roles, and social norms still make it increasingly difficult for girls and women to acquire jobs and obtain degrees. Humphries details the lack of power in work and other projects, the lack of control over one's own time due to the need to care for the family and home, and the lack of respect and dignity (Humphries, 2005).

In light of this reality, the implications of Sen's capabilities approach in the context of education and women's empowerment as a means of fostering community development are varied. Education is considered a fundamental means of empowerment in Sen's framework (Sen, 1999). It is not just about acquiring skills or knowledge; it is about providing individuals, particularly women, with the capabilities to make informed choices, participate in society, and have a voice in decision-making processes. Sen asserts that women often face unique challenges and barriers to education and empowerment; therefore, special attention is needed to remove these obstacles to ensure women have equal opportunities to develop their capabilities. Women who feel empowered, can contribute to economic growth, social cohesion, and improved public health. Their involvement in decision-making processes can lead to more inclusive and equitable development. Moreover, Saito (2003) asserts that education and its influence on female autonomy significantly impact life expectancy as they enhance child survival. Education supports mothers to make healthier decisions for their children in seeking medical care and nutrition and often improves socio-economic status. Education supports autonomy, which supports women's empowerment as they have agency to expand their capabilities and act on them (Saito, 2003).

Development efforts focusing on women's education can draw significantly from Sen's work. Education enhances capabilities that may be exercised in meaningful ways. Women who gain a sense of empowerment through education may have greater means to enact their education

in ways that enrich their well-being. However, empowerment in itself is not the end goal; instead, it is manifested in freedoms that lead to ways of being and doing that a woman values. The functionings are evidence of empowerment. Conversely, education may augment capabilities, but if a woman cannot choose to exercise those capabilities, then the development process is short-circuited.

The core of Sen's capabilities approach lies in individual freedoms. Robeyns' (2003) analysis of Sen's theory applied to gender inequalities highlights its strength in individual application, recognizing, like Myers (2011), that personal agency is at the heart of freedom. Mormina (2019) agrees that perceiving individual empowerment through equal opportunities is the foundation to societal well-being. In exploring the capability approach as applied to migration, Eichsteller (2021) affirms that an individual's well-being is tied to their ability to choose and attain opportunities that they value. Ultimately, however, Robeyns, Mormina, and Eichsteller all view the individual in the context of a larger society. Social factors impact individual freedoms, and individual freedoms lived out influence communities and broader society (Robeyns, 2003). Lagarde (2014) prioritizes an economic response to poverty alleviation but identifies education as a critical component of individual empowerment. Women's education enhances agency and impacts employability and significantly effects economic advancement for individuals and communities.

Sen's theory provides a means to come to the empowerment of women through education. Yet, it does not detail the specific capabilities of individual women that may be used as markers in the process of development. While some view the lack of specification as a weakness, others perceive this as underscoring the personal agency at the center of the theory (Velástegui, 2020). While many freedoms may find near universal relevance, freedoms must be identified and exercised by the individual because people want or have reason to value different things. Robeyns (2003) and Robertson (2015) affirm the strength of broad application to diverse individuals, cultures, and contexts. As such, capabilities resulting from women's education are not universally dictated but may be defined and enacted according to the values of individuals and societies. O'Hearn (2009) agrees that education supports development by increasing freedoms and choice but suggests that greater attention must be given to the impact of social institutions and culture in shaping individual values. Mormina (2019) acknowledges the same and underlines the necessity of strong social institutions as a condition for individual empowerment. Conceptions of what freedoms are valued and how people exercise them do not arise in a vacuum. Perceptions of women's empowerment through education may look very different to different women.

Criticism

Sen's theory and application have drawn criticisms from capabilities theorists, philosophers, and others. Liberalism, under-theorization, excessive individualism, and the challenges in operationalizing the capabilities approach have undergirded these controversies. Many scholars agree that his theory lacks a well-defined list of capabilities (Robeyns, 2003; Garcés

Velástegui, 2020; Alkire, 2002; Gasper, 2007). This under-theorization reflects an intentional lack of specificity and causes results to vary widely depending upon which theories or perspectives are applied to Sen's framework (Robeyns, 2003). The lack of specificity in the approach risks making the ideas less persuasive, more challenging to communicate, and open to misuse (Gasper, 2007). Similarly, while Garcés Velástegui (2020) identifies the same gap, he interprets it as helpful in implementing the theory by allowing those directly affected agency (freedoms) to choose what is valuable to them. Garcés Velástegui (2020) suggests that programs and implementing governments must incorporate the reality of human plurality into the development design. Additionally, he stresses the importance of recognizing that similar outcomes may require different amounts and different degrees of quality of resources for different people.

Nussbaum (2011) takes a more universal approach in response to Sen. Nussbaum notes that the capabilities approach is generally applied in international development as a means of improving the quality of life in less developed nations and through assessment tools such as the Human Development Index. In contrast, Nussbaum argues for a definitive list of select foundational capabilities that are the basic foundation of human well-being and provide for agency and dignity. As such, the capabilities approach may be applied globally as all nations see the struggle for "a fully adequate quality of life and for minimal justice" (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 16). While arguing for a proposed list of ten foundational capabilities for human thriving, Nussbaum (2011) agrees that rigid adherence to the list is counterproductive, affirming plurality as a core factor in capabilities assessment and welcoming debate.

In addition to critiques of Sen's theory in general, other scholars critique the specific application of the capabilities approach to education and women's empowerment initiatives. Saito (2003) asserts that the capabilities approach as applied to education needs more examination. While affirming much of Sen's theory, Saito questions the implications of unchecked freedoms. Saito applies education as a means of building capacities and potential opportunities but insists that education must also instill values. People may gain capabilities and opportunities to apply those capabilities, but values formation is important for growing discernment in exercising capabilities (Saito, 2003). To this end, Saito disagrees with Sen that capabilities are good in and of themselves but only bad in implementation when used for negative purposes. Rather, like Nussbaum (2001), Saito argues for neutral capabilities, underscoring the need for values education that supports the positive use of these freedoms (Saito, 2003). In a robust critique, O'Hearn (2009) asserts that Sen's entire theory is flawed for reasons including "individualism, microeconomic foundations to the exclusion of macroeconomics, localism, and the lack of historical understanding" (O'Hearn, 2009, p. 11). O'Hearn highlights the impact of culture on the development of individual capabilities. Sen would argue that the capabilities approach is an evaluation of effective freedom, with the primary concern being the capability of people to achieve the lives they value rather than to aspire to the premise of equality for all (Sen, 1999). However, while implemented at the individual level, freedoms are often socially determined. Recognizing capitalism's ethical

flaws, O'Hearn (2009) questions Sen's perception of capabilities through a primarily capitalist framework. Saito's (2003) assessment of education as a means to instill values may offer an important middle ground as it would account for social and cultural influences while forming individuals in critical thinking about their growing capabilities and the moral use of their freedoms.

In a more pointed assessment of equity in women's education, Esther Duflo (2012) takes a controversial stance when suggesting approaching development work based on gender. She posits that there is an interconnectedness of women's empowerment and economic development as they depend on one another. Further, she suggests that policy decisions should favor women at the expense of men, arguing that by solely focusing on women, the pendulum of empowerment will be forced to swing in favor of women. Unterhalter (2009) proposes an alternative perspective on equity in education. Rather than framing equity in gendered terms, Unterhalter considers that enhancing capabilities through education requires combined and inner capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011). In Unterhalter's framework, capabilities from access to education require equity on three levels: from below, the middle, and above. In the case of female education, equity from below reflects women's inner capabilities, including personal agency, critical thinking, and personal decision-making. Equity from above requires national and international policies and regulations, often with the weight of law, that protect and enhance female access to education on an equal level with men. Equity from the middle is the processes and operations that connect the levels above and below, such as the distribution of resources and the nature of curricula. Each level informs the other and is necessary for developing capabilities and ultimately empowering women for greater agency (Unterhalter, 2009). This assessment exceeds Sen's primary focus on the individual within poorer societies, emphasizing the heavy influence of social, political, and community realms—equity from the middle and above or combined capabilities—on individual well-being and empowerment.

A final critique questions the feasibility of practically implementing the capabilities approach for accurate widescale measurements. When operationalizing Sen's approach in an educational setting of low-income communities and with rudimentarily educated parents with limited skills in mind, he cautions that his proposed educational investments for early childhood care and development should be applied in households that are most likely to improve. The consequence of this approach would be that this investment would not be applied equally. Although this strategy will skew the success rate when measuring and evaluating the outcomes and impact of each investment, he explains that because of limited resources and political constraints within Latin America, it is unrealistic to administer this extensive investment across the board (Sen, 2003). Garcés Velástegui agrees that assessing capabilities is time-consuming and resource-intensive. When considering practical application, he suggests focusing more on function than capability, as they are more measurable for evaluation.

Conclusion and Further Research

Sen's capabilities approach introduced the link between capabilities and quality of life appraisal, pivoting the direction of the development debate from simple economic growth as a measurement of development to the ability of individuals to pursue real opportunities and choose to do what they value in life. As a result, the literature broadly focuses on using the capabilities approach in many different contexts. Empowerment, especially for women, and education have become vital tools for enhancing human freedoms and have the potential to bring about transformative change, ultimately contributing to the betterment of communities. However, there are only a few attempts to convey the concepts to development practice by concretizing them and offering a tool or framework to implement into development practice. Nussbaum (2011) has made the first step by defining a list of capabilities. This research direction helps expand how this theory is applied in assessment, design, monitoring, and evaluation.

Further research into how the concept can be utilized will make the concept stronger and strengthen the understanding of the work in the field. For example, the capabilities approach is foremost qualitatively focused. Further inquiry is needed on how it can serve quantitative research. Additionally, the literature lacks a comparative evaluation between the capabilities approach of personhood versus community capabilities. Sen's approach is primarily focused on individual capabilities. However, there is little evidence of the value of such an approach in a more community-focused culture. Lastly, further research would be beneficial in evaluating the capabilities approach in various circumstances and fields. Multidisciplinary research would give opportunities to learn the versatility of the theory, how the concept may be utilized, and how the benefits can be transferred to other disciplines.

It has been 24 years since Sen introduced this groundbreaking work. His foundational theory, focusing on individual capabilities and freedoms, has spurred much creative thinking and transformed the optics in development theory, leading to more effective development work by humanitarian actors.

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