Growth without Development?
A Reflection on Rising Gender Inequality in India

Deepanshu Mohan

Economic well-being secured without expanded means to social justice exacerbates levels of social inequality in any developing economy. Ensuring basic entitlements of well-being goes beyond the achievement of any pre-identified threshold of income accumulation or material well-being, lying within the scope of opportunities and capabilities created for sovereigns of a developing economy. The need to put well-being of human beings (women and men) at the centre of development policy and social intervention in modern economics was conceptually developed by Sen in his work on “capability approach” (Sen 1985, 1992, 1999, 2001).

While Sen developed a multidimensional understanding of well-being (seeing it beyond an accumulation of income, consumption, wealth) in a freedom-based developmental approach (Mohan 2017), this essay seeks to contextualise Sen’s own framework in understanding and addressing the exacerbating nature of gender inequality in India today. In theorising the nature of social policy-related intervention needed by the state (and non-state actors), I review Sen’s freedom-based developmental approach to emphasise both the well-being and agency aspect of women freedom. The essay, further reflects on the current status of rising gender inequality in India, highlighting some key causal factors: a fall in female-male labour-force participation rate; rise in intra-household inequality; rise in crime against women; etc.

Reflecting on Gender Development beyond statistical inferences

Issues on women’s safety linked to the existing social deprivation of women’s well-being today emerge as exigent areas of concern for the state of governance across states in India. It is abhorrent to see how the Indian political class consistently fails to publicly engage or actively promote
discussion on vital women-canted developmental issues. While development of people (men and women) can be seen in the process of expanding real freedoms that people may enjoy, the focus on human freedoms expands a wider understanding linked to the goal of achieving development for all (as discussed here).

**Women’s Agency and Well-Being**

In promoting gender development as a functional component of economic development, one must note that a lack of substantive freedoms relate directly with the social, economic deprivation of the well-being of women affecting the free agency of women and their freedoms. The importance of freedom in the developmental discourse involves both, an evaluative reasoning (i.e. an assessment of individual/collective well-being seen in the enhancement of basic freedoms) and an effectiveness reasoning (i.e. where the achievement of development is dependent on the free agency of people).

But, what do we mean by the ‘agency’ and ‘well-being’ aspects of freedom? Or how are they relevant in the case of women rights and development for all?

Free agency is a “constitutive” part of an individual's overall development and is connected to the strengthening of free agencies of other kinds. Social investments made by the state through institutional arrangements in the creation of economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, good health, basic education etc. measured by various socio-economic indicators are critical in the overall development of the agency of people (women and men). An exclusive focus on any of these attributes say, economic opportunities or political liberties or good health and good education may enhance the well-being of people in a limited way. There is a need to ensure a “constitutive connection” between all the attributes of well-being and the agency development of social arrangements and institutions in which people live.

The present-day focus on promoting the well-being of women and in empowering the agency of women in social arrangements remains entrenched in a process of ensuring and safeguarding access to basic freedoms and entitlements to women, regardless of traditional orientation and family value systems predominant in a given society.

For example, woman A may have access to primary and higher education; access to basic healthcare; an employment position of her choice etc.; all of which qualify as essential socio-economic indicators promoting her overall well-being and self-development. However, if in the society that A lives in, socio-institutional arrangements demand A to have secondary rights after marriage (or is treated
differently) i.e. she may have a lesser say in the intra-household decision making set up; or is expected to solely manage household work along with her employment position; or have lesser/inequitable ownership rights than males in the distribution of economic resources within the family (say, property rights) etc.; against A’s willingness here, the agency freedom of A (as well as other women in the social set up) remains significantly compromised, even though her well-being may be identified to reach a certain level (via the achievement of certain socio-economic attributes).

While promotion of well-being and agency aspects of a woman’s freedom may inevitably see a substantial intersection and correlation with one another (i.e. any discussion on the active agency of a woman cannot ignore concerns of social inequalities affecting the well-being of the same woman and vice-versa), there is a need to independently weight the importance of these aspects.

In Mary Wollstonecraft’s classic book (published in 1792) titled *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she offered various distinct claims within the general program of ‘vindication’ for women. The rights she writes about in the book not only include basic rights (i.e. for safeguarding basic entitlements, access to social resources) but also invoke a wider discussion on rights aimed at promoting the free agency of women to empower themselves.

Similarly, the individual freedom of women in any society remain quintessentially a social product. A two-way relation between the well-being and agency aspects of freedom warrants a reflection in a) the social arrangements present to expand individual freedom (through well-being socio-economic indicators) and b) use of individual freedoms in making social arrangements (in the above case within A’s family) more effective. To see individual women as entities that have well-being (measured in terms of a higher level of income, employment positions, access to other social benefits etc.) is vital, but would still qualify as a circumscribed view of “the personhood of women”. One can similarly discuss the application of such interdependence (between agency and well-being aspects) for any human being in a state of social deprivation.

Thus, any discussion on a process of development must seek to draw independent social relevance to both the well-being and agency aspects of freedom. In the Indian socio-economic context, a bridging of this distinction (i.e. between an exclusive focus on well-being while promoting free agency of women) remains vital for policy considerations and safeguarding development for all. I now look at the nature of gender inequality currently present in India (in its various forms), reflected through trends in key socio-economic indicators.
Rising Gender Inequality in India: A Few Observations

1. Low Female-Male Labour Force Participation Rate

In a time when we are witnessing a perpetual slowdown in the job creation process across India in various formally organised sectors, a declining rate in the female-male labour force participation rate (evident from Figure 1), presents an alarming policy challenge for both government and private sector. There is a persistent fall in the female-male labour participation rate, from a rate of 45% in 2003 to a lower rate of less than 34% in 2015. The exacerbating effect of gender-divide in the employment situation presents significant spill overs on declining aggregate labour productivity levels hampering the realisation of potential economic growth levels.

[Figure 1: Ratio of female to male labor force participation rate (%)]

Source: Author’s Calculations from World Bank Database

2. Stagnating Trends in Female Literacy Rates and Fertility Rate

A common statistical observation drawn while studying gender inequality (in India and elsewhere) is to test the statistical significance of socio-economic data on total female literacy and female fertility with female-male labour force participation rate/employment rates (refer to Mamta Murthi, Anne-Catherine Guio and Jean Drèze, 1995)). For India, if we look at Figure 2 and Figure 3, we see that the total female
literacy rate improved significantly after 2000, bearing a strong correlation with the fall in female fertility rate (rural-urban combined). Until 2003, one could see this happening in the Indian context (if we compare trends in female literacy and fertility rates with female-male labour force participation rate).

Initial research evidence in this regard (studied by Dreze and Sen in their 2002 book titled *India: Development and Participation*) was observed at state level across India highlighting how fertility rates tend to go down, when greater empowerment of women is achieved through enhancement of literacy and employment opportunities. However, most such statistical inferences by economists ignore the effect and impact of various sociological factors that affect the rate of female-male labour force participation rate (captured below under the section on Intra-Household Inequality).

---

1 The numbers here indicate total numbers. Studies by Sengupta (2016), Rustagi (2000) provide a district wise breakdown across states in these indicators to give a closer spatial picture on gender inequality.

---

**SADF Comment N.90**

5
The interdependence of the above socio-economic indicators (identified as well-being variables) with other indicators such as women’s independent income, freedom to choose an economic role outside/inside the family, equitable access to property rights, education etc. in the household (identified as agency variables) show a mutually positive relation between a woman’s well-being with a free agency (safeguarding more independence and empowerment). However, freedom in an intra-household decision making set up in the Indian context remains shaped by established, traditional social norms and value systems affecting the interdependence of both agency and well-being variables in a freedom-based development discourse (Sengupta 2016, Rustagi 2000).

3. Rising Intra-Household Inequality: A Problem of Social Perception?

A deep-rooted problem in social perception predominant in communitarian groups across Indian society and contributing towards the affliction in the overall well-being of women relates to identifying a woman in the family as a ‘less significant’ other (particularly in Northern, Central parts of the country). This notion of “the other” stems from a distorted, conventional prevalence of patriarchal
family systems (as a social arrangement within households) where the relative dominance of man as the “breadwinner” fails to acknowledge or appreciate the equal social position of woman in the family.

The arrangements for sharing within the family are structured to a great extent by such established conventions or value systems characterising the communities. When observing the evolution of such value systems and conventions and their explanation of intra-household allocation and distribution of resources (i.e. food, health care, property rights or other social provisions etc.), an anti-female perception bias becomes clear. While one can observationally see a change in this social attitude towards women (particularly in the metropolis) within intra-household set ups to a certain extent, this rate of social transformation and its penetration across the country (rural-urban areas) still remains slow and disproportionate.

After gathering research evidence on young women earning income outside the household or after considering the imputed value of unpaid work (not effectively captured in accounting data and GDP metric), one sees that the relative position of working women in the household is significantly higher and helps to overcome the entrenched perception bias against women at the intra-household level (Agarwal 1997). The freedom to seek and hold an employment position as well as score financial independence may contribute significantly to the reduction in relative deprivation of a woman’s well-being within the family and beyond.

It is difficult to change traditionally established social perceptions and norms in a modern social landscape that often triggers a conflict between “the preservation of tradition” and “advantages of modernity”. Nevertheless, there is a need for a participatory resolution to face this conflict through public reasoning and open deliberation, instead of choking off participatory freedom on grounds of traditional values (reflected by religious fundamentalism, so-called Asian family values or political customs etc.)

4. Rising Crime Against Women

The constant deterioration seen in statistics on reported cases of crime against women across most states in India signals a social crisis of national magnitude (see Figure 4). A closer look at the National Crime Records Bureau data from 2015 shows a percentage increase of 2.5% in sexual offences against women (covered under crimes against women) from 2014 to 2015. Within categories of “assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty” (including offences such as sexual harassment, assault or use of criminal force against women), the year 2015 alone saw 84,222 cases being reported against 82,235 cases registered in 2014. Cases of kidnapping and abduction of women also increased to 59,277
in 2015 from 57,311 in 2014. However, the statistical proliferation seen in crimes and violence against women suffers from a gross underreporting and undercounting of facts.

**Figure 4: Crime Against Women (2010-14)**

![Bar chart showing the number of crimes against women from 2010 to 2014](chart)

- **Total IPC Crimes against women**
- **Cruelty by husbands or his relatives**
- **Insult to the modesty of women**
- **Assault on Women with intent to outrage their modesty**
- **Dowry Deaths**
- **Kidnapping and Abduction of Women**
- **Rape**

**Source:** National Crime Records Bureau Report
The statistical projections released by the National Crime Records Bureau often reflects gross-underreporting of crimes against women, particularly in states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, etc. where there is a low willingness amongst victims of sexual violence to report cases of violence against them. The problem of gross under-reporting and underestimation of gender-based crime is further compounded by failure of the local justice system in securing convictions. Moreover, crimes such as gang rapes, stalking and acid attacks on women (included in official statistics of crime against women only after February 2013) take only the principal offence of the formal complaint (via First Information Report) into account. Which means that in cases such as the recent gang-rape-murder case in Haryana or in the Nirbhaya gang-rape case that resulted in the death of the rape victim, the rape itself would remain unaccounted for in the official statistics. Thus, there remains a high degree of incidence of violence against women which statistically remains undercounted; failing to depict the actual scale of gender violence across states in India. This, in some way hinders a wider understanding and reflection on the state of rising gender inequality and respect for women freedom in the social landscape of India.

5. Cross-Country Evidence on Gender Inequality

One may ask then whether a high degree of intra-household gender inequality (or gender inequality) is considered to be primarily a “third-world problem”? The answer is a clear No.

Comparative research done on the family-level economics for even developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and developing countries like China, Afghanistan, Thailand etc. (say, in Stefan Svallfors’ 2006 book on The Moral Economy of Class) reflects a rising inequality in the social relationships between men and women (within the household). This inequality is prevalent in different ways of organising care services; financial interdependence; social insurance; all these in turn affecting the power structure and autonomy of women within the family.

However, it must be cautiously observed (as evident in Figure 5 and Figure 6) that the disproportionality seen in the level of intra-household gender inequality (measured via different indicators) between other regions and within South Asia remains invariably huge and different in its nature. India’s performance in indicators like maternal mortality ratio, female population with secondary education, female labour force participation rate etc. (seen in Figure 1) is still quite dismal in comparison to China, Thailand and Bangladesh.
Source: Author Calculations from Gender Inequality Index (Human Development 2016 Report)

SADF Comment N.90

10
Illustrative cases often cited in Bangladesh on the successful role of women in developing micro-credit institutions are clear within the feat of Muhammad Yunus’ Grameen Bank to Fazle Hasan’s BRAC. Similarly, the reduction in fertility rates across Bangladesh (including rural areas) in recent times seems to have clear connections with an increasing involvement of women in social and economic affairs. Social investments by the state aimed at increasing economic participation of women in organised labour force, business classes, micro-credit markets etc., which is evident across countries like Bangladesh, Thailand, China, etc., created a major influence in social change dynamics observed in these countries, in addition to reducing gender inequality.

**Conclusion: Case for Social Policy Interventions**

Tackling a deep, socially embedded problem like gender inequality requires coordinated social policy and long-term measures by any developing state. China achieved this through years of social investments in human capital (education, healthcare) as well as pushing for a higher female-male labour force participation rate in its manufacturing policy in order to increase labour-intensive modes of production. This in turn allowed for an inclusive process of economic growth with a parity in gender development across provinces. Unfortunately, India’s current macro-economic plan to economic growth remains prioritised on promoting capital accumulation (through higher foreign direct investment) without giving adequate inclusion to safeguarding freedom and safety of women in the process.

Apart from the need to study patterns in intra-household gender inequality through distributional patterns of economic and social resources between women and men across India, there is a strong need for the visible hand of the state to prioritise gender inequality as a critical developmental issue and take measures for social investment in the free agency of women (safeguarding their freedom in the family and overall safety) along with their well-being (via basic freedoms and economic opportunities).
References

Agarwal, Bima. 1997. “‘Bargaining’ and Gender Relations: Within and Beyond the Household”. Feminist Economics, 3(1)


Mohan, Deepanshu. 2016. “Reinvoking a notion of freedomhood in developmental discourse.” World Commerce Review

