



**Evaluating Gendered Poverty Through Amartya Sen's  
Capability Approach:  
An Analytical Study of SDG 1 and SDG 5 in India**

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## Abstract

There is something deeply contradictory about India's development record. Between 2005 and 2021, over 415 million people were lifted out of multidimensional poverty, a feat remarkable by any global standard, and yet India continues to sit near the bottom of international rankings on female economic participation, safety, and autonomy. This paper investigates that contradiction. The central research problem is not simply that gender equality lags behind poverty reduction; it is that the metrics used to track poverty reduction are structurally incapable of detecting women's individual capability deprivations because they measure at the household level rather than at the level of the person.

Through Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Martha Nussbaum's articulation of Central Human Capabilities, this paper argues that India's patriarchal social structure acts as a dominant negative conversion factor, meaning a structural barrier that systematically prevents household-level resources from becoming individual freedoms for women. Drawing on NFHS-5, the NSSO Time Use Survey (2019), NITI Aayog MPI reports, World Bank poverty estimates, and Oxfam India's labour data, the study finds that across four domains of economic capability, asset control, political agency, and bodily safety, women's combined capabilities remain severely constrained even within technically non-poor households. Spousal violence affects 29.3% of ever-married women. Female land ownership stands at 18.7%. Labour force participation hovers between 25 and 30%. These are not residual problems but structural features of how gender inequality persists beneath an apparently successful poverty reduction story. The paper concludes with specific, actor-directed policy recommendations and calls for a reorientation of national data collection toward individual-level capability measurement.

**Keywords:** *Gender Inequality, Multidimensional Poverty, Capability Approach, Sustainable Development Goals, Women's Empowerment, Intra-Household Inequality, Development Measurement*

## 1. Introduction

India's development journey in the 21st century contains a paradox that deserves more analytical scrutiny than it typically receives. On the one hand, the country's poverty reduction record is



genuinely impressive. NITI Aayog and UNDP data confirm that more than 415 million Indians exited multidimensional poverty between 2005 and 2021, and World Bank estimates show extreme poverty falling from 16.22% to 2.35% in just over a decade. On the other hand, India remains near the bottom of every major global index on female economic participation, health outcomes, and personal safety. Somewhere between these two facts lies the problem this paper addresses.

Three research questions orient the analysis. The first asks why household-level poverty reduction consistently fails to produce parallel improvements in women's individual capabilities. The second examines which specific domains, spanning the economic, political, and bodily spheres, see Indian women remain capability-deprived despite aggregate household income gains. The third investigates what kinds of policy interventions would address those specific deprivations rather than simply adding to household resource provision.

The central argument, stated plainly, is that the SDG 1/SDG 5 gap in India is not a measurement accident or a temporary lag. It is a structural consequence of using the household as the unit of poverty analysis. A household can exit multidimensional poverty by gaining access to a toilet, a bank account, or a clean cooking fuel connection, and the woman within that household may simultaneously be unable to use the bank account independently, be responsible for all the cooking regardless of the cleaner fuel, and be subject to violence that restricts her from leaving the house at all. The household is non-poor. The woman is not free. Standard poverty metrics cannot see the difference.

To explain this gap, the paper applies Sen's Capability Approach (1999), a framework that measures not resources but real freedoms, asking what people are actually able to be and do. Nussbaum's (2000) extension of the framework into ten Central Human Capabilities, including Bodily Integrity, Practical Reason, and Control over One's Environment, provides the specific normative categories against which India's data are assessed. Section 2 reviews the literature. Section 3 critiques traditional measurement approaches. Section 4 presents the theoretical framework. Section 5 outlines the methodology and operationalisation of capabilities. Sections 6 through 9 present data analysis across SDG 1 and the three SDG 5 domains. Section 10 synthesises the findings. Section 11 offers a state-level grounded illustration. Section 12 presents policy recommendations. Section 13 concludes.



## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Growth, Poverty, and the Gender Gap in India**

The claim that India's economic growth has not automatically translated into gender equity is not new. Dreze and Sen's (2013) extensive examination of India's human development record makes precisely this point, arguing that economic expansion has accelerated opportunities at an unequal rate and that women remain structurally behind in education, health, and labour market access. Kabeer's (1999) influential work on women's agency goes further, showing that autonomy and empowerment remain limited even in households that have escaped monetary poverty by conventional measures. What these analyses share is the recognition that rising household income does not translate automatically into rising individual freedoms for women, and this becomes the analytical foundation of the present study.

Alkire and colleagues' work on the MPI reinforces this through data, demonstrating that household-level improvements coexist with persistent gaps among women and girls in education access, safety, and decision-making authority. UN Women and World Bank reports covering the same period consistently note that countries posting rapid GDP growth, with India among the most prominent, show slow progress on indicators tied to individual freedoms rather than aggregate household assets.

### **2.2 Three Thematic Strands: Care Work, Assets, and Safety**

Research on gendered poverty in India converges around three interlocking themes. On unpaid care work, studies confirm what the NSSO (2019) Time Use data later quantified, showing that women bear a grossly disproportionate share of domestic and caregiving labour, consuming time that would otherwise be available for paid employment, civic participation, or education. Researchers have come to call this time poverty, a form of deprivation that is entirely invisible to income-based metrics.

On asset ownership, the evidence is unambiguous. Limited access to land, property, and financial instruments directly curtails women's bargaining power and their capacity to negotiate within and outside the household. NFHS-5 data showing only 18.7% female land ownership makes this concrete. On safety, studies document that women's mobility is constrained by the pervasive threat of violence and harassment, not only in public spaces but within the home itself, where



NFHS-5 reports nearly 30% of ever-married women experiencing spousal physical or sexual violence.

These three strands are not separate problems to be addressed sequentially. They form an interlocking structure in which each deprivation reinforces the others. Inadequate safety constrains mobility, constrained mobility limits labour market access, and limited economic independence reduces the capacity to leave unsafe situations.

### **2.3 The Intra-Household Gap in Existing Research**

Despite the richness of this literature, a significant methodological gap persists. Most large-scale empirical studies on poverty in India, including those using the Alkire-Foster MPI methodology, assign deprivation scores to households rather than to individuals within them. The result is that a household can register as non-poor while one of its members, typically the woman, remains profoundly capability-deprived. This study directly addresses that gap by applying the Capability Approach as an interpretive lens on existing gender-disaggregated data, thereby making visible the intra-household deprivations that conventional poverty measurement cannot detect.

## **3. The Inadequacy of Conventional Development Metrics**

### **3.1 What GNP and Income Measures Miss**

The dominant tradition in development economics has been to treat GNP per capita, or more recently household income and consumption, as the primary indicators of wellbeing. This tradition carries a deceptively simple assumption that more resources means better lives. But as Dickens' Sissy Jupe observed in *Hard Times* as far back as 1854, aggregate prosperity statistics do not tell you who has got the money, and in the context of gender, that is precisely the question that matters. India's national income may have tripled, but whether any increment of that income reaches a rural woman's hands, or whether she can freely decide how to use it, is a question no income aggregate can answer.

There is a second, less-discussed problem with resource-based approaches in that individuals convert resources into functionings at different rates depending on personal and social circumstances. A pregnant woman needs more nutritional resources to achieve the same health outcome as a non-pregnant man. A girl facing discriminatory school enrolment norms needs more educational investment to achieve the same literacy outcome as a boy in a more supportive



environment. An index of resources applied uniformly across these different situations does not measure equality; it reproduces the inequalities already embedded in social structures.

### **3.2 The Adaptive Preferences Problem**

Preference-based approaches, often proposed as a corrective to resource metrics, run into a different but related problem. Preferences are not formed in a vacuum. They emerge from the social environments people inhabit, including environments structured by subordination and deprivation. A woman who has never encountered the possibility of economic independence may report no preference for it, not because she is genuinely indifferent, but because the option has never been available or imaginable. Nussbaum calls these adaptive preferences, meaning desires shaped by constrained circumstances rather than by genuine free choice. Taking such preferences at face value and building policy around them tends to entrench the very inequalities that policy should address.

### **3.3 Why the Capability Approach Is Necessary**

Both the resource and preference frameworks, despite their differences, share a common flaw in that they measure the wrong thing. Resources are means, not ends. Preferences shaped by deprivation are not reliable guides to what people actually value under fair conditions. What is needed is a framework that asks directly what people are genuinely able to be and do, and that insists on the individual rather than the household as the relevant unit of analysis. The Capability Approach, developed by Sen and extended by Nussbaum, provides exactly that.

## **4. The Capability Approach as Analytical Framework**

### **4.1 Functionings, Capabilities, and Agency**

Sen's (1999) central move is to shift the evaluative space from primary goods such as income, wealth, and legal rights to substantive freedoms, which he defines as what people can actually do and be. The key distinction is between functionings (the actual beings and doings a person realises, including being nourished, educated, safe, and respected) and capabilities (the real freedoms to achieve those functionings if one chooses). A person who voluntarily fasts has the capability to eat. A person who starves does not. Poverty, on this view, is the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than simply low income.



The word agency matters considerably here. Capability poverty is not only about what people lack but also about the degree to which they can set and pursue goals of their own choosing. When patriarchal norms, domestic violence, or the compulsion of unpaid care work removes that agency, the deprivation is real regardless of what the household income statistics indicate.

## **4.2 Nussbaum's Ten Central Human Capabilities**

Nussbaum's (2000) contribution is to give the capability framework a specific feminist content and to propose it as a normative basis for constitutional design. She argues that there is a threshold of ten Central Human Capabilities below which a life cannot be considered a fully human one, regardless of how the household it belongs to is classified in poverty surveys. The ten are Life (surviving to a natural end), Bodily Health (including reproductive health and adequate nutrition), Bodily Integrity (freedom of movement and security from violence, including domestic violence), Senses and Imagination, Emotions (the capacity to love and grieve free from fear), Practical Reason (the ability to plan one's own life), Affiliation (social participation and the social bases of self-respect), relationship with Other Species, Play, and Control over One's Environment in both its political and material dimensions. Of these, Bodily Integrity, Practical Reason, and Control over One's Environment are the capability domains most directly at stake in India's gendered poverty paradox.

Nussbaum further distinguishes between basic capabilities (innate human potentials), internal capabilities (developed personal capacities), and combined capabilities (the product of internal capacities and enabling external conditions). This distinction is analytically critical for policy. A woman may have the internal capability for political participation, but if she faces threats of violence at polling stations, or if her vote is exercised by a male relative by proxy, the combined capability to actually participate does not exist. Policy must secure combined capabilities, not merely formal rights.

## **4.3 Freedom as Both Means and End**

Sen (1999) insists that development is, fundamentally, the expansion of human freedom, and that freedom is both the goal and the instrument of that expansion. He identifies five interrelated instrumental freedoms that together enable development, including political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities particularly in education and healthcare, transparency guarantees, and protective security. In the Indian context, each of these freedoms is unequally distributed



along gender lines, and each deprivation in one domain amplifies deprivations in others. This is the theoretical grounding for understanding why the SDG 1/SDG 5 paradox is not a simple lag but a structural system of interlocking unfreedoms.

## **5. Methodology**

### **5.1 Research Design**

The study adopts a qualitative-interpretive approach applied to large-scale quantitative datasets. No new primary data are generated. The method involves the critical re-reading of existing national and international datasets through the analytical lens of the Capability Approach, asking not what these datasets confirm about household-level progress, but what they reveal and conceal about individual women's real freedoms. The analytical process proceeds in two stages. The first documents India's measurable SDG 1 progress to establish the official baseline. The second disaggregates available gender-specific data by capability domain and interprets it against the normative standard of combined capabilities.

### **5.2 Data Sources**

The analysis draws on the following datasets, selected for national representativeness and temporal comparability.

- National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21): covers 636,699 households across all Indian states and union territories, with individual-level modules on domestic violence, asset ownership, financial access, and women's decision-making authority.
- NSSO Time Use Survey (2019): India's first nationally representative time-use survey, covering approximately 446,000 individuals and recording daily time allocation across paid and unpaid activities by gender.
- Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES 2023-24): large-scale national survey on monthly per-capita expenditure and consumption inequality, using the Modified Mixed Recall Period methodology.
- NITI Aayog Multidimensional Poverty Index Reports (2021 and 2023): based on the Alkire-Foster methodology applied to NFHS-4 and NFHS-5 data, tracking ten deprivation indicators across nutrition, health, education, and living standards.
- National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) Annual Reports: administrative records of registered crimes against women, used as a lower-bound estimate of violence prevalence given known under-reporting.
- World Bank Poverty Estimates (2022-23) and Oxfam India Labour Force Reports: for international poverty line comparisons and gender-disaggregated labour market data.



### 5.3 Operationalisation of Capabilities

A persistent criticism of capability-based analyses is that they remain abstract. To address this, Table 1 maps each capability domain used in this study to its Sen/Nussbaum conceptual source, the corresponding SDG target, and the specific measurable indicator drawn from the datasets listed above. This operationalisation ensures that the application of the framework remains empirically grounded throughout the analysis rather than rhetorical.

*Table 1: Operationalisation of Capability Domains and Indicators*

Capability Domain	Sen / Nussbaum Concept	SDG Target	Indicator Used in This Study
Economic Independence	Control over material environment	SDG 5.a, 5.4	Female LFPR 25-30%; wage gap 60-75%; land ownership 18.7% (NFHS-5)
Bodily Integrity	Freedom from violence and physical harm	SDG 5.2	Spousal violence: 29.3% of ever-married women aged 18-49 (NFHS-5)
Political Agency	Participation in public life	SDG 5.5	Women in Lok Sabha: 15.2%; Sarpanch Pati phenomenon in panchayats
Time and Practical Reason	Freedom from time-poverty to plan one's life	SDG 5.4	Women: 299 min/day unpaid domestic work vs. men: 97 min (NSSO Time Use Survey 2019)
Life and Health	Capability to live a full, healthy life	SDG 1.2, 5.1	MPI decline 24.85% to 14.96% (NFHS-4 to NFHS-5); Missing Women phenomenon (Sen 1999)
Household Resource Access	Baseline provision of primary goods	SDG 1.1, 1.2	Extreme poverty: 16.22% to 2.35%; 248 million exited MPI poverty since 2013-14

Sources: NFHS-5 (2019-21); NSSO Time Use Survey (2019); NITI Aayog MPI (2021, 2023); World Bank (2022-23).

### 5.4 Limitations

Three limitations shape the scope of this study's claims. The first concerns the household-level orientation of most source data. The MPI and HCES collect poverty and asset information at the household rather than the individual level, making intra-household inequality a matter of inference rather than direct measurement. This is addressed by triangulating household-level data with individual-level NFHS-5 modules on violence exposure, decision-making, and asset control, but the limitation remains significant. The second limitation concerns the measurement of agency itself. NFHS-5 questions on women's decision-making and freedom of movement serve as proxies, but these are self-reported and susceptible to adaptive preference bias, since



women who have internalised restricted expectations may report higher agency than they effectively exercise. Third, the study does not claim causal direction among the capability domains discussed. The relationship between violence, labour force participation, and asset control is treated as an interlocking structural pattern rather than a simple causal chain because the data do not support causal inference.

## **6. Data Analysis A: India's Progress on SDG 1**

### **6.1 Monetary Poverty Reduction**

The scale of India's income poverty reduction over the past decade is, by any standard, striking. Extreme poverty at the \$2.15 PPP international poverty line fell from 16.22% in 2011-12 to just 2.35% in 2022-23 according to World Bank estimates, a drop that translates to roughly 172 million fewer people living in extreme poverty. At the \$3.00 PPP lower-middle-income threshold, the reduction was from 27.1% to 5.25%, representing a fall of 22 percentage points.

### **6.2 Multidimensional Poverty**

The NITI Aayog MPI, which tracks deprivation across nutrition, health, education, and living standards using the Alkire-Foster methodology, tells a broadly consistent story. The multidimensional poverty headcount ratio declined from 24.85% to 14.96% between NFHS-4 (2015-16) and NFHS-5 (2019-21), with rural poverty falling faster still from 32.6% to 19.3%. Projected 2022-23 estimates put the figure at 11.3%, implying that approximately 248 million people have exited multidimensional poverty since 2013-14. Gains in sanitation coverage, up by 21.8 percentage points, and in clean cooking fuel access, up by 14.6 percentage points, were major contributors. These are real improvements in living conditions, and they form the necessary baseline against which the gendered data in subsequent sections must be read.

### **6.3 Consumption and Inequality**

HCES 2023-24 data show average monthly per-capita expenditure of Rs. 4,122 in rural areas and Rs. 6,996 in urban areas, which represents nearly three times the 2011-12 figures. The rural-urban consumption gap narrowed by 14 percentage points, and the Gini coefficient of consumption inequality fell from 0.288 to 0.255. Taken together, these indicators describe a country that has achieved one of the fastest rates of poverty reduction in modern economic



history. They also describe a country whose official poverty statistics are almost entirely blind to what happens to individual women within those better-resourced households.

## **7. Data Analysis B: Women's Economic Capabilities (SDG 5.4, 5.a)**

The official poverty narrative fragments as soon as data are disaggregated by gender. What emerges is a pattern that scholars of South Asian development have termed the feminisation of poverty, not in the narrow sense that women are always poorer than men by income, but in the structural sense that social and economic arrangements subject women to forms of capability deprivation that income measures cannot detect. Three interconnected deprivations are documented in the subsections below.

### **7.1 Labour Force Exclusion (Capability: Control over Material Environment)**

Household income growth has not pulled women into formal economic participation. The Female Labour Force Participation Rate in India remains stubbornly low, ranging between 25 and 30% depending on the data source, which places it among the lowest for any major economy and significantly below the global average for comparable income groups. The capability at stake here is Nussbaum's Control over One's Material Environment, meaning the ability to earn independently, to own and control property, and to hold employment on an equal basis. For the majority of Indian women, this combined capability does not exist, not because they lack the internal capacity to work, but because the external conditions that would make participation possible, including available childcare, safe commuting, and social permission, are not in place.

### **7.2 The Wage Gap**

For women who do enter the labour market, a substantial wage gap persists. Oxfam India data show women earning on average between 60 and 75% of male wages for comparable work. This gap is not only a labour market injustice. In capability terms, it represents a structural undervaluation of women's economic functioning that compounds over time, limiting the independent asset accumulation that would provide the economic foundation for genuine agency.

### **7.3 The Time-Poverty Trap (Capability: Practical Reason)**

Perhaps the most revealing single dataset in this study is the NSSO Time Use Survey (2019), which documents something that no income or consumption survey can capture, specifically how



time is actually allocated and by whom. Women in India spend an average of 299 minutes per day, nearly five hours, on unpaid domestic work, and a further 134 minutes on unpaid caregiving. Men spend 97 and 76 minutes respectively on these tasks. The gap is not a matter of individual preference but is structurally imposed by the social organisation of domestic responsibility. The consequence is direct in that time spent on compulsory, unpaid labour is time unavailable for education, paid employment, political participation, or rest. In Nussbaum's terms, time poverty constrains the capability of Practical Reason, which is the freedom to form a conception of the good and plan one's own life accordingly. No figure in the household poverty data captures this constraint.

## **8. Data Analysis C: Asset Control and Political Agency (SDG 5.a, 5.5)**

The economic capability deprivations documented in Section 7 compound into a broader deficit in women's agency over both material resources and public life. These correspond to the two dimensions of what Nussbaum identifies as Control over One's Environment, and they connect directly to Sen's insistence that intra-household power imbalances must be accounted for independently of household-level resource levels.

### **8.1 Asset Ownership and Material Agency (SDG 5.a)**

The NFHS-5 figures on women's asset control are stark. Only 18.7% of women in India own land either solely or jointly. While 78.6% have a bank account, a figure commonly cited as a marker of financial inclusion, the same survey reports that only 59.4% of currently married employed women actually receive their cash earnings directly. The gap between nominal access and effective control illustrates exactly what the Capability Approach means by the difference between a formal right and a combined capability. A household may possess land and a bank account, both of which contribute to its poverty score. Yet if the woman in that household has no legal title to the land and no independent access to the account, those household assets do not constitute her capabilities.

### **8.2 Political Representation and Agency (SDG 5.5)**

The exclusion from economic agency maps onto exclusion from formal political power. Women hold only 15.2% of seats in the Lok Sabha. At the local level, India's panchayat reservation



system has increased women's nominal political representation significantly, with 33% to 50% reservation depending on the state. However, field research has extensively documented the Sarpanch Pati phenomenon, in which the male relatives of elected women attend meetings, sign documents, and exercise decision-making authority on their behalf. What should be a combined capability, namely the right to hold office and to actually govern, is hollowed out into a formal right without the social conditions that would make it real. The right exists in law. The combined capability does not exist in practice.

## **9. Data Analysis D: Safety and Health (SDG 5.2)**

The most foundational capabilities in both Sen's and Nussbaum's frameworks are those of Life, meaning surviving to a natural end, and Bodily Integrity, meaning freedom from physical harm and the threat of violence. The evidence under these two headings is the most disturbing in the study.

### **9.1 The "Missing Women" and the Capability of Life**

Sen's (1999) concept of missing women, referring to the estimated 100 million women globally whose absence from population statistics reflects excess female mortality attributable to neglect, is not merely a historical concern. In India, the systematic under-provisioning of healthcare, nutrition, and survival resources to female children, documented by NFHS surveys across multiple rounds, represents a capability deprivation that begins at birth. The household may be non-poor by MPI standards, and the girl child within it may still be receiving less food, less medical care, and less of the household's attention than her male sibling.

### **9.2 Spousal Violence and Bodily Integrity (SDG 5.2)**

NFHS-5 reports that 29.3% of ever-married women aged 18 to 49 have experienced spousal physical or sexual violence. That is nearly one in three. Nussbaum defines Bodily Integrity as the capability to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence. The fact that nearly a third of married Indian women cannot exercise this capability in their own homes is not, on any reading, consistent with a development success story, regardless of what the household MPI score indicates.

### **9.3 Violence and Economic Capability**



The relationship between domestic violence and economic capability is not a one-directional social welfare problem but a self-reinforcing cycle. Violence directly impairs a woman's capacity to seek and maintain employment because physical injuries, PTSD, anxiety, and depression are well-documented occupational barriers. Economic abuse, which involves the deliberate sabotage of a woman's attempts to earn independently through harassment at the workplace, destruction of clothing, restriction of transport access, or control over bank accounts, is a documented mechanism through which physical violence becomes economic incapacity. Many women remain in violent households precisely because they lack the independent income to leave. Absence of economic capability sustains exposure to violence, and exposure to violence sustains absence of economic capability. The household poverty metrics are blind to both sides of this cycle.

## **10. Synthesis: Why Income Is Not Freedom**

The juxtaposition of data from Sections 6 through 9 makes the central argument concrete. How does a country lift 415 million people out of multidimensional poverty while nearly one in three of its married women experiences domestic violence, female labour force participation sits among the world's lowest, and barely 18.7% of women own any land? The Capability Approach provides a precise answer organised around three mechanisms.

The first is the unit-of-analysis problem. The MPI and allied SDG 1 metrics measure the household. A household gains a gas cylinder, and the MPI cooking fuel indicator improves. But the Time Use Survey data in Section 7.3 show that the time saved by cleaner cooking fuel is typically absorbed into other domestic tasks rather than redirected into paid employment or education. The household has progressed. The woman's combined capabilities have not. The metric cannot see the difference because it does not look inside the household.

The second mechanism concerns what Sen calls conversion factors. Resources do not become capabilities automatically but must be converted, through personal, social, and environmental conditions, into real freedoms. In India, the dominant negative conversion factor is the patriarchal social structure. It converts a bank account into a resource the husband manages. It converts a panchayat reservation seat into a role exercised by proxy. It converts time saved by



clean fuel into more housework. The household gets the resource, and the patriarchal structure prevents it from becoming the woman's freedom.

The third mechanism is interlocking deprivation. The failures across SDG 5's economic, political, and safety domains are not parallel but mutually reinforcing. A woman's lack of Bodily Integrity and her crushing burden of unpaid care work directly impede her ability to exercise control over material and political environments. Cash transfers to the household frequently fail to empower the woman within it for exactly this reason. The structural conditions that would allow her to claim the resource as hers, including safety, time, social permission, and independent legal title, are absent. The resources arrive. The combined capabilities do not follow.

## **11. A Grounded Illustration: Rajasthan and Bihar**

Abstract argument benefits from concrete illustration. Rajasthan and Bihar are two Indian states that recorded among the most significant MPI declines between NFHS-4 and NFHS-5, representing genuine and measurable improvements in household-level living standards. Yet both states simultaneously record female labour force participation rates below 25%, some of the country's highest rates of spousal violence, and female land ownership rates well below the already-low national figure of 18.7%.

A woman in a rural district of Rajasthan living in a household that has recently gained access to a toilet, an improvement that raises the household's MPI score, may at the same time be unable to visit a health centre unaccompanied, subject to purdah norms that restrict her mobility outside the home, and without legal title to the land on which her house stands. The household is statistically non-poor. Her combined capabilities are profoundly constrained. This is not an exceptional individual story but a structural pattern visible at the district level, replicated across rural India, and entirely invisible in the national poverty headcount ratio. The SDG 1/SDG 5 paradox is not a data artefact. It is what happens when development is measured at the wrong level.

## **12. Policy Recommendations**

Sen's framework is sometimes criticised for remaining theoretical. Pyles (2008) made this point explicitly, noting that capability theorists have often failed to articulate how the approach should



translate into practical action. The recommendations below are directed at that concern. Each is tied to a specific capability failure, names the responsible actor, and specifies the mechanism through which it would expand combined capabilities rather than simply adding to household resource levels.

### **12.1 Mandate Individual-Level Data Collection**

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, NSSO, and NITI Aayog should redesign national surveys, including HCES and the MPI methodology, to capture individual-level data on control over assets, receipt of income, decision-making authority, and time use. At present, almost all poverty data in India are collected and reported at the household level. Until intra-household inequality is measurable, it cannot be politically visible or policy-accountable. This is the single most important structural change required because without it, every subsequent progress report on SDG 1 will continue to conceal gendered capability gaps beneath household aggregates.

### **12.2 Mandatory Asset Titling in Women's Names (SDG 5.a)**

The Ministry of Rural Development and all state governments administering housing and land redistribution schemes, including PM Awas Yojana and state-level land reform programmes, should mandate that all assets be titled solely or jointly in the woman's name. Land title is not a symbolic gesture. It is a direct conversion of a household resource into individual agency. Evidence from comparable programmes in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and other South Asian contexts shows that women with formal land title exercise greater bargaining power within the household, experience lower rates of domestic violence, and participate more actively in labour markets.

### **12.3 Public Investment in Care Infrastructure (SDG 5.4)**

Time poverty is not a personal problem. It is a structural imposition sustained by the absence of public care infrastructure. The Ministry of Women and Child Development, state governments, and urban local bodies should substantially expand the capacity and quality of anganwadi childcare centres, develop affordable elder care facilities, and provide safe hostels and transit accommodation for women entering paid employment. International evidence is consistent in showing that public childcare investment generates high economic returns through increased female labour force participation and is more cost-effective than wage subsidies or cash transfers



for expanding women's economic capabilities. Every rupee invested in public childcare is an investment in women's combined capability of Practical Reason, which is the freedom to plan and pursue a life of their own.

### **12.4 Strengthening Safety as the Foundational Capability (SDG 5.2)**

Bodily Integrity is not one capability among many of equal weight. In Nussbaum's framework it is foundational, because a woman who cannot be safe in her own home cannot exercise economic, political, or practical capabilities regardless of what other resources she has access to. The Ministry of Home Affairs, state police commissions, and the judiciary should prioritise full staffing and funding of one-stop crisis centres under the Nirbhaya Fund, rigorous monitoring of Protection Officers under the Domestic Violence Act (2005), expansion of legal aid for survivors, and fast-track courts for gender-based violence cases. Implementation of existing law, rather than new legislation, is what is most urgently needed.

### **12.5 A Research Agenda Centred on Capabilities**

Following Pyles (2008), the scholarly and policy research community should move beyond income and consumption as the primary metrics of women's wellbeing. Priority areas include developing and validating individual-level capability indices that can be tracked alongside the MPI, conducting qualitative and quantitative investigation of how violence shapes specific capabilities such as the capacity to vote or seek healthcare, and performing district-level analysis comparing social context variables with capability outcomes to identify which local conditions function as positive conversion factors.

## **13. Conclusion**

India's development story is simultaneously a genuine success and a profound limitation. The success is real: hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of income and multidimensional poverty, and the household-level gains in sanitation, nutrition, and consumption are not trivial. The limitation is equally real. These gains have been measured at the household level, and in doing so they have made the capability deprivations of individual women in the areas of economic participation, asset control, political agency, and bodily safety statistically invisible.



The central contribution of this paper is to demonstrate that the gap between SDG 1 and SDG 5 is not a development lag that economic growth will eventually close. It is a structural consequence of measuring development at the wrong unit of analysis, through metrics that cannot see intra-household distribution, and without accounting for the conversion factors that prevent household resources from becoming individual capabilities for women. India's patriarchal social structure is the dominant such conversion factor. It prevents a bank account from becoming financial agency, a reservation seat from becoming political power, and a cleaner cooking fuel connection from becoming free time. The resources arrive. The freedoms do not follow automatically.

The practical implication is direct. Development policy and data collection must shift their unit of analysis from the household to the individual. Until India's national surveys systematically measure individual-level capability, including who controls assets, who receives earnings, who is safe, and who has time, no poverty report will be able to tell the whole truth about whether development is reaching the people it claims to serve. A statistical victory over household poverty that coexists with domestic violence, time poverty, land-lessness, and political marginalisation is not the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda. It is a partial achievement that has mistaken the container for the thing it was supposed to hold.

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