Women’s Economic Empowerment: A Sustainable Path to Food Security

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Abstract: There is more than enough food in the world to feed everyone, but the number of people affected by hunger and malnutrition is still ‘unacceptably high’ (FAO 2014), with disproportionate impacts on women and girls. Due to unequal and subordinate gender roles, women face lack of access to and control over critical livelihood and productive resources. This asymmetric power relation severely constrained the capacity to participate and “capability” to build their “assets” and rise out of poverty, hunger, malnutrition, exploitation, dependency, discrimination, marginalization and deprivation. The paper is based on the contention that women’s economic empowerment is a key to unlock the way to ‘Smart economics’. Based on the premise of the gender dimensions of food security, the paper contextualizes the ‘structural constraints’ of rural women in India, makes an attempt to provide a way for transforming the gender-specific constraints into opportunities, and put forth a gender-inclusive policy paradigm for the post-2015 development agenda.

Keywords: empowerment, economic empowerment, assets, capability, smart economics, food security
Introduction

In a society with deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and feudal customs, the women community has not only suffered but is still suffering due to unequal and subordinate gender roles which manifests in the form of lack of access to and control over productive resources. This also led to deprivations of livelihood opportunities in multiple forms, resulting into inequitable development of society with under- or non-utilization of capacities of women, representing about half of the Indian society. The preconceived gender roles deprive women even minimal opportunities of developing their abilities. Confronted with unequal power relations, women are unable to influence or negotiate better terms for them. This severely constrained their capacity to participate and “capability” to build their “assets” and rise out of poverty, exploitation, subordination, dependency, discrimination, marginalization and deprivation. Due to lack of voice and power and deeply entrenched social barriers, this disadvantaged and underprivileged community is often unable to take advantage of livelihood opportunities to invest in their assets or exercise their individual rights.

As a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept, empowerment is the action and interaction of various factors – socio-economic, cultural, political, physical, mental, psychological (emotional), and attitudinal. The concept of empowerment is related to terms such as agency, autonomy, self-direction, self-determination, liberation, freedom, participation, inclusion, mobilization, self-confidence and self-worth. Empowerment is defined as a group’s or individual’s capacity to make effective choices, that is, to make choices and then to transform those choices into desired actions and outcome. In other words, expanding the rights, resources, and capacity to make decisions and act independently in social, economic and political spheres. World Bank identified empowerment as “the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. “Assets” refers to material assets, both physical and financial; such as land, housing, livestock, credit, savings, jewelry, which enable people to withstand shocks and expand their horizon of choices and decreases their vulnerability. “Capabilities” are inherent in people and enable them to use their assets in different ways to increase their well-being. Human capabilities include good health, education and production or other life enhancing skills. Social capabilities include social belonging, leadership, relations of trust, a sense of identity, values that give meaning to life, and the capacity to organize. Political capability includes the capacity to represent oneself
or others, access to information, form associations, and participate in the political life of a community.

**Conceptualizing Women’s (Economic) Empowerment**

Economic empowerment comprises the notions of empowerment and economic advancement. Economic empowerment is about making the economic institutions like markets work for women (at the policy level) and empowering women to compete in markets (at the agency level). Markets – like land, labour, product, and financial – has the potential to produce rapid and sustained increases in women’s productivity and incomes. At the individual, agency level, support for self-help groups (SHGs), rural cooperatives, microfinance institutions (MFIs), various saving and credit associations, and the provision of financial intermediation services can empower women to compete in financial markets. For participation in all markets, interventions which increase the compatibility between women’s productive and reproductive roles are vital, such as access to quality child care, reproductive health services and education.

Approaches to economic empowerment concentrate on factors that help women succeed and advance in the marketplace. This includes increasing skills and access to and control over critical economic resources and opportunities, elimination of structural gender inequalities in the labour market including a better sharing of unpaid care work at household level, improving the enabling and institutional environments, ability to transform resources into valuable activities, and assisting women in their ability to make and act upon decisions in order to benefit from economic growth and development. Approaches must also recognize that economic empowerment is intertwined with social and political empowerment.

While it can be seen that definitions of women’s empowerment have, from the outset, encompassed an economic dimension, this dimension has become increasingly visible within the international policy discourse in recent years. The Beijing Platform for Action spoke of the need to promote women’s economic independence, including employment, and ‘ensuring equal access for all women... to productive resources, opportunities and public services’. The Millennium Development Goals, particularly MDG-3, on gender equality and women’s empowerment adopted an increase in women’s share of non-agricultural employment as one of its indicators of women’s empowerment. ‘Full and productive employment and decent work for all, including for women and young people’ were later added as a target in relation to the overarching MDG on halving extreme poverty. While neither of these documents attempted to define women’s economic...
empowerment, their formulation paved the way for a greater equation between women’s economic empowerment and their access to productive resources, including paid work.

Recent studies have shown that inequalities, particularly in the distribution of “assets”, influenced growth outcomes. Those who enter the market, without assets, are seldom in a position to negotiate the price of their labour. However, merely increasing access to markets does not necessarily address the terms on which poor women and men enter different market arenas or their ability to negotiate a fairer deal for themselves. Market forces cannot on their own dissolve the ‘durable inequalities’ in rules, norms, assets and choices that perpetuate the historically established disadvantages of certain social groups (World Bank, 2006). Rather, in the absence of offsetting forces, they tend to reproduce these deep-seated structural inequalities, rewarding the powerful and penalizing the weak. Market inequalities reproduce themselves because they are manifestations of underlying inequalities of power. Thus, historically established inequalities in resources and opportunities persist into the present because they are reinforced by the actions of those who hold power within a society, with deeply entrenched gender stratification of economic structures, continued gender inequalities in access to paid work and the over-representation of working women in lower-paid, casual, part-time, irregular and informal market activities. For feminist economists, therefore, gender inequality in the market place was structured into market forces by discriminatory practices inherited from the past as well as by the bargaining power exercised in the present by powerful market actors pursuing their own self-interest.

Benefits of women’s economic empowerment

Women make enormous contributions to economies, whether in businesses, on farms, as entrepreneurs or employees, or by doing unpaid care work at home. Many international commitments support women’s economic empowerment, including the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and a series of International Labour Organization conventions on gender equality. UN Women supports women’s economic empowerment in line with these, and with the growing body of evidence that shows that gender equality significantly contributes to advancing economies and sustainable development.

- Women’s economic empowerment is fundamentally an issue of human rights, social justice as well as sustainable development. It is also important for poverty reduction, shared growth and ensuring food security. Policies and interventions aimed at promoting women’s economic
empowerment work towards the full recognition and realization of women’s economic rights. In addition, promoting women’s economic empowerment facilitates the achievement of other important public policy goals such as more inclusive growth, improving human development indicators (like health, education and decent living standard), reducing violence and promoting social well-being.

- Greater economic autonomy improves the bargaining position of women within the household and increases their voice in public decision making. Empowerment, in turn, can accelerate the elimination of obstacles to expansion of their opportunities for self-employment and in the labour market.
- Economically empowering enhances women’s capacity to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways that recognize the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth. In other words, it enhances the ability of women, particularly rural poor, to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth.
- The World Bank also finds that if discrimination against women workers and managers was eliminated, productivity per worker would increase by between 25-40 per cent. Increasing women’s economic opportunity and gender equality has been linked to higher gross domestic product growth, higher income per capita, and greater competitiveness.
- The development effects of putting more money in the hands of women are also significant because women tend to spend a greater portion of their incomes on their families. Increasing women’s income and their control over family spending can lead to improvements in child nutrition, health, and education, and work to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.
- Higher levels of gender equality are also associated with lower rates of poverty and food insecurity in the general population, higher standing in the Human Development Index (HDI), and less environmental degradation.
- As the benefits of neo-liberal free market economic growth model has failed to ‘trickle down’ to the women belonging to marginalized and deprived sections, therefore, economic empowerment is considered as a potent mean to strengthen women’s rights and attain equitable growth process.

The dividends from women’s economic empowerment will lead to “Smart economics”. Smart economics integrated the gender concerns in the economic institutions. The calculations show that investments in gender equality can substantially reduce costs over time. When more
women work, economies grow. An increase in female labour force participation—or a reduction in the gap between women’s and men’s labour force participation—results in faster economic growth. If women’s paid employment rates were raised to the same level as men’s, the USA gross domestic product would be an estimated 9 per cent higher, the Euro zone’s would climb by 13 per cent and Japan’s would be boosted by 16 per cent. In 15 major developing economies, per capita income would rise by 14 per cent by 2020, 20 per cent by 2030. Further, evidence from a range of countries shows that increasing the share of household income controlled by women, either through their own earnings or cash transfers, changes spending in ways that benefit children. According to UND Report—“Gender equality...... is also smart economics. Greater gender equality can enhance productivity, improve development outcomes for the next generation, and make institutions more representative”. As per World Bank study, “Gender equality is smart economics”, countries that create better opportunities for women and girls tend to raise productivity, improve outcomes for children and advance development prospects for everyone. It found that gross domestic product per capita and gender equality are positively correlated. Boosting women’s status and giving them the same access to education and economic opportunities increases productivity and the economic efficiency of a country. Women now make up more than 40 per cent of the global labour force. In Malawi, the study found, ensuring equal access and treatment for female farmers would increase maize yields by 11 to 16 per cent, and raise it by 17 per cent in Ghana. Household agricultural production would grow by 6 per cent in Burkina Faso if women’s property rights were improved and resources such as fertilizer reallocated from men to women. Thus, sharing the fruits of growth and globalization equally between men and women is essential to meeting key development goals.

**Conceptualizing Food Security**

There is more than enough food in the world to feed everyone, but the number of people affected by hunger and malnutrition is still ‘unacceptably high’ (FAO 2014), with disproportionate impacts on vulnerable and marginalized sections. The latest FAO estimates indicate that about 805 million people are estimated to be chronically undernourished in 2012–14. Since 1990–92, the prevalence of undernourishment has fallen from 18.7 to 11.3 percent in 2012–14 for the world as a whole, and from 23.4 to 13.5 percent for the developing regions. The hunger target of the Millennium Development Goal 1c (MDG 1c) – of halving the proportion of undernourished people in developing countries by 2015 – is within reach. However these figures fail to reflect the micronutrient deficiency, or ‘hidden hunger’ (FAO 2012) that affects 2 billion or more than 30
percent of the world’s population, contributing to child stunting and increased rates of illness and death. According to UNICEF, malnutrition is more common in India than in Sub-Saharan Africa, and one in every three malnourished children in the world lives in India. Further, the 2014 Global Hunger Index (GHI) ranked India at 55 among 76 emerging economies, but is still trailing behind countries like Thailand, China, Ghana, Iraq, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

Concerns over food security have existed throughout human history. The World Food Summit (WFS) of 1996 defined food security as existing “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life”. Broadly, food security is defined as a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Based on this definition, four food security dimensions can be identified: food availability, economic and physical access to food, food utilization and stability over time.

**Contextualizing Gender dimensions of Food security**

Globally, and with only a few exceptions, rural women fare worse than rural men and urban women and men. As per Census 2011, women comprise 48.5 per cent of the total Indian population, while the rural population in India comprises 68.84 per cent of the total population. Patriarchal norms and customs guides the rural way of life, and determine the access to and/ control over productive resources on gender lines as well as choices and decision-making tend to occur through the mediation of men. Rural women continue to struggle under the double burden of production and domestic responsibilities. Also, the gendered aspects of food security are visible along the four pillars of food security: availability, access, utilization and stability. Yet her contributions to food security are bring undervalued and undermined by implicit and explicit forms of gender discrimination at household, community, national and global levels, thereby making them the ‘invisible marginal’ in our food security system.

The discriminatory laws based on the traditional feudal customs and cultural norms, and the consequences of such constraints for food and nutrition security manifest in the forms of limited access to economic and educational opportunities. This in turn, restricts their economic autonomy and independence, reducing their access to adequate, safe and nutritious food. Women’s lower economic autonomy also results in a weaker bargaining position within the family. Differential feeding and care-giving practices may favour boys over girls, thus leading to poorer
nutritional outcomes for women and girls. The cost of this to society is considerable, both in lost productivity, and worse, in health and nutritional outcomes.

Challenging the constraints women and girls face and enlarging their access to opportunities is an essential component of the fight against hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity. Empowerment—an increased role for women in decision making, at all levels, including the household, local communities, national and global platforms—is indispensable for a sustainable strategy for reducing food insecurity. Inclusive and participatory efforts are essential in reshaping inequitable social structures.

Gender inequality both lead to and is a result of food insecurity. Women face discrimination both in terms of access to livelihood opportunities outside the household as well as within the household, where their bargaining power is lower. Women tend to be responsible for food preparation and childcare within the family and are more likely to spend their income on food and their children’s needs. Women produce 60 to 80 percent of food in most developing countries and half of the world’s food supply (Momensen, 1991; Mehra and Rojas, 2008). According to estimates women and girls make up 60 per cent of the world’s chronically hungry and little progress has been made in ensuring the equal right to food for women enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The World Food Programme (WFP, 2009) reported that women are shouldering the heaviest burdens in the food crisis. For example, they are the first to sacrifice their food intake to ensure the nutrition of their children and male head of household when food is unavailable.

In addition to differences in male and female labour participation rates, there are also major gender differences in labour markers and livelihood chances. They typically confront a narrower range of labour markets than men due to restrictions on mobility, lower wage rates and harsh working conditions. Most importantly, as a result of household and child-rearing responsibilities, women are not only much less likely to participate in the labour force, those who do are also much more likely to engage in self-employment activities rather than higher-paying wage employment. According to the CSO’s latest publication “Women and Men in India 2014”, in the rural sector, 59.3 per cent females were self-employed, 5.6 per cent females had regular wage/salaried employment and 35.1 per cent females were casual labours compared with 54.5 per cent, 10.0 per cent and 35.5 per cent males in the same categories respectively in 2011-12. Further, as a result of time constraints women are also more likely to work in part time jobs and in informal arrangements.
that pay less, provide fewer benefits, but more flexibility. Rural women typically work longer hours than men, when one takes into account both paid productive and unpaid reproductive or domestic and care responsibilities. In Benin and Tanzania, for example, women work, respectively, 17.4 and 14 hours more than men per week, while rural Indian women work almost 11 hours more than urban women and 12 hours more than urban men. In addition, limitations which women face in the market leads to underinvestment by parents in girls, making a vicious cycle.

Although 70 per cent of India’s population continues to depend on agriculture as its primary source of livelihood, 83 per cent of farmers operate holdings of < 2 ha in size, majority of which are women. As an important source of livelihoods for the poorest, agriculture is a means to eradicate extreme poverty, especially for rural women. In traditional rural society, commercial agricultural is almost always a male domain, which makes the food insecurity as a gender equality issue. With the higher proportion of female labour as compared to male labour, we are witnessing ‘feminization of agriculture’. For instance, in India women comprises about 30 per cent of the agricultural workforce. But the stark reality is that the poor rural men are outmigrating in search of better employment alternatives or undertaking non-farm activities, which leaves women with sole responsibility for managing the unprofitable family land, food and crop production, as well as raising children and caring aged and sick, thus forcing feminization of agriculture.

Women also play an important role in food production, processing, distribution and marketing. They often work as unpaid family workers, are involved in subsistence farming and represent about 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries. However, there is lack of access to and control over critical productive resources or assets. Empirical studies suggest that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, women could boost their yields by 20–30 per cent, raising the overall agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 to 4 per cent, in turn reducing the number of hungry people in the world by 12 to 17 percent, lifting 150 million people out of hunger (FAO, 2011). Thus, improving rural women’s access to productive resources is central to addressing hunger and food insecurity.

Women and men farmers have different roles related to crop production. Cultural definitions of ‘men’s’ and ‘women’s’ crops may be the outcome of gender inequalities in productive resources, where men have more control over the sale of cash crops while women are expected to look after the subsistence crops.
For rural women, land is perhaps the most important household asset to support production and provide for food, nutrition and income security. Most own tiny plots of land, often in fragments and unirrigated, and many are entirely landless, although agriculture is the main source of livelihood. As a result, they are unable to take advantage of economies of scale, or invest in lumpy inputs such as irrigation, technology or machinery, or favourable agri-business opportunities. More importantly, on individual basis, they lack bargaining power to deal effectively with government institutions or emerging market linkages. Few women own land in their own right due to male bias in transfer of land by families, the state and in the functioning of markets (Agarwal, 1994, 2003). Even in families with land, they typically own none, and what they might own is seldom in their control. As per CSO (2014), 41.1 per cent of female main and marginal workers are agricultural labourers, while 24.0 per cent are cultivators. More so, few women have the financial resources for leasing in land on their own. Women workers who are counted as “cultivators” in national statistics tend to be largely unpaid workers in family farms. In 2004-05, 36 per cent of women farmers overall, and 39 per cent among marginal landholding households, were so counted (NCEUS, 2008). This situation is further compounded by the social disadvantages of caste and tribe.

In the context of hunger and malnutrition, women and girls are overrepresented among those who are food-insecure. Worldwide, an estimated 60 per cent of undernourished people are women or girls (United Nations Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC] 2007; World Food Programme [WFP] 2009a). In rural India, 57.4 per cent women suffered from anaemia during 2005-06 (NFHS-III). Various studies have confirmed the positive association between the education of women and children’s health outcomes such as height, weight, or immunization. A large body of research indicates that putting more income in the hands of women translates into improved child nutrition, health and education (FAO, 2011). Recent data illustrate the strong correlation between higher levels of the gender equality index and lower child mortality. A study using data from 219 countries from 1970 to 2009 found that, for every one additional year of education for women of reproductive age, child mortality decreased by 9.5 per cent.

While having concern over the sustainability of economic growth, rural and indigenous (tribal) women and men often have different roles, responsibilities and knowledge in managing natural resources. Socio-cultural and institutional norms often prevent women’s adequate access to, and control over natural resources, such as land and water, and in the context of deteriorating natural resources, women’s access may become more insecure. Where women have fewer
productive resources than men, this increases their vulnerability to and constrains their capacity to cope with an increasingly stressed environment. Further, environmental degradation has a great impact on natural resources, which rural women rely on for their livelihoods. For example, evidence suggests that reduced quality and availability of land, forests, and genetic and aquatic resources increase rural women’s time burden, reduce their capacities to cope with shocks and climate change, affect where they live and provoke conflict (UNDP, 2011).

Therefore, food security and gender (economic) empowerment are among the top priorities on the international agenda today in view of the impact of global economic crises, food price spikes, and climate change on agricultural productivity. The extent to which gender inequalities in general, and the gender gaps in agriculture in particular, thwart attainment of these twin priority goals is a key concern given the vital role of women smallholders in household and community food and nutrition security. Thus, rural women’s poor access to and lack of control over “assets” limits their “capabilities” to reduce poverty, hunger and food insecurity.

Thus, the economic empowerment of rural women is considered as key to unlock the post-2015 development agenda for ensuring sustainable food security and realizing the right to food. For this, her access to and control over critical livelihood resources – like land, livestock, finance (credit and crop insurance), agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilizers, equipments etc.), technologies, information, training and extension services and marketing services – are indispensable.

Gender-inclusive Global Partnership for Post-2015 Development Agenda

The key question is that how can be these gender-specific constraints be transformed into opportunities? Can the disadvantaged women farmers, particularly the marginal and smallholders, attain sustainable livelihoods and become India’s advantage for both higher growth and more inclusive development?

Women play an important role in ensuring food security and realizing the right to food for her family, community, nation as well as global society. Rural women play an indispensable role in supporting their households and communities in achieving food and nutrition security, generating income, and improving rural livelihoods and overall well-being. They contribute to agriculture and rural enterprises and fuel local and global economies. As such, they are active players in achieving the MDGs as well as the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Yet, around the
world, rural women and girls face persistent structural constraints that prevent them from fully realizing their capacities to make effective choices, and constraints their potential to improve and empower their lives as well as those of others around them. The Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) measures the roles and extent of women’s engagement in the agriculture sector in five domains: (1) decisions about agricultural production, (2) access to and decision-making power over productive resources, (3) control over use of income, (4) leadership in the community, and (5) time use. Such gender-sensitive indexes are intended to aid governments, scholars, and organizations to make informed and capacity based decisions regarding food and gender policy in regionally specific agendas.

The gender-inclusive food security policy paradigm requires rights-based development approach of empowerment rather than the traditional need-based development approach of charity. While there is increasing donor recognition of rural women’s important contributions to overall well-being in communities, there remains a lack of data on the actual impact of aid on rural women’s empowerment and gender equality. The ‘smart economics’ demands an urgent need to invest in rural women and to develop more comprehensive and nuanced metrics and related measurement systems to assess the different impacts of agriculture and rural development policies and programmes, together with contributing aid allocations, on rural women and men.

Traditional policies and decisions neglected women and undermine their abilities and roles. Therefore, State policies should be framed to provide legal as well as socio-economic support and instill confidence in women. Programmes should be developed exclusively for women: to build leadership skills for managing agricultural community based development activities; access to and control over critical livelihood and productive assets like land, credit, water, technology, inputs and market information has to be ensured predominantly through women extension workers. They should be trained in farm management skills and made capable of taking even complex decisions like shifting from subsistence farming to diversified agriculture, withstand competition from market forces, improvement in work or farm efficiency, enhancing their capabilities to reap the benefits from emerging agri-business opportunities in rural economy etc. This will also influence the extent of participation in the decision-making activities in household and agriculture related and other socio-culture affairs reflects the status of women in the family as well as society.

The agrarian mode of production should recognize substantial involvement of rural women, primarily as unpaid or contributing family workers, thereby addressing the needs, interests
and constraints of women which were missed by earlier gender-blind policies and programmes. This also includes revamping and restructuring the traditional structure (based on unequal and unjust power relations) towards more sustainable and inclusive growth.

Further, we should also recognize that women did not form a homogenous group. Gender inequalities and practical gender needs intersected with other forms of socio-economic inequality, including class, caste, race, religion, ethnicity, location and so on, frequently exacerbating the injustices associated with them. Thus, investing in women and girls is generally articulated in terms of: (i) Human rights – gender equality and empowerment is a basic human right issue so we need to improve the equity and distribution of opportunities for men, women, boys and girls; (ii) Smart economics – improving economic participation can contribute to productivity, efficiency and more inclusive growth; and (iii) Sustainable resource use – requires more equitable engagement of women and men.

Conclusion

As we work towards the Post-2015 development agenda, better indicators are needed to monitor progress as well as understand in greater depth the opportunities and constraints in rural women’s lives. Indicators and data collected must be disaggregated, at the very least, by sex and rural/urban location. Although the MDG guidelines also addressed this concern but this was implemented in practice only occasionally. In addition, rural power dynamics and gender roles sometimes require different types of indicators to characterize and monitor progress than those commonly used. For example, data to capture rural women’s multiple job holding and seasonal work are particularly difficult to obtain with existing systems.

To transform the gender-blind (top–down, technocratically driven) policies into gender-inclusive policies (bottom–up, participatory), the economic empowerment of women must be accompanied by the social and political dimensions, especially in a society with deeply entrenched in feudal customs and patriarchal norms.

Thus, the gender dimensions of food security should be given importance in realizing the right to food. Women’s empowerment not only improves intra-household power dynamics for ensuring food security and health related matters but also paves a way for an equitable, inclusive and sustainable economic development.
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