

# Three faces of agency in feminist economics: capabilities, empowerment and citizenship

Naila Kabeer

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## 1. Social provisioning, livelihoods and agency

The concept of social provisioning is intended to capture the intertwined relationships between the institutional arrangements and purposive activities through which people seek to reproduce themselves on a daily and intergenerational basis (Power 2013). The institutional arrangements that govern people's livelihood strategies are constituted by the "structures of constraint" in different contexts (Folbre 1994). These embody the unequal distribution of rules, norms, resources and identities within societies and determine how different groups of people are positioned within their social hierarchies by virtue of their cross-cutting identities of class, gender, race, caste and so on. In the process, structures set limits on the capacity of different groups to engage in purposive activity. Unlike neo-classical understandings of agency as the free-floating capacity for rational choice, therefore, feminist approaches conceptualize agency as inextricably bound up with structure.

The concept of human agency is central to a feminist analysis of livelihoods for two reasons. First, it is central to the analysis of social inequality because it draws attention to the ways in which structural constraints shape the distribution of livelihood options available to differently positioned groups of men and women. And second, it is central to the social justice agenda because it is the human capacity for agency that drives the processes of structural transformation.

In this chapter, I review three inter-related ways in which agency has been conceptualized in feminist economics. First, I draw on the concept of capabilities and consider its contribution to the analysis of livelihoods. Second, I draw on conceptualizations of empowerment which link capabilities directly to questions of power. Finally, I turn to ideas about citizenship to consider agency as collective action and how it might be mobilized to promote women's rights and gender justice.

## 2. Capabilities

Capabilities refer to people's ability to achieve various ways of "being and doing" which they have reason to value (Sen 1999; Robeyns, this volume). They reflect the interaction between the resources at their disposal and their ability to translate these resources into valued goals. Across the world, patriarchal structures serve to constrain women's capabilities relative to those of men. While these constraints take different forms across the world, they have certain commonalities: gender inequalities in the distribution of critical resources; a socially ascribed gender division of labor which gives women disproportionate responsibility for unpaid reproductive work in domestic domain; the resulting curtailment of opportunities to participate in the economy and political life; and finally, hegemonic gender ideologies which construct women as inferior to men, undermining their sense of self and social worth.

Capabilities are a way of talking about the capacity for purposive agency that goes beyond a focus on the *actual* choices people make to an assessment of the range of alternatives available to them. It allows us to appreciate the micro-level forms of agency exercised by those with limited

alternatives, the different ways that oppressed groups seek “to turn things to their advantage and make the best of the options available to them” (Carswell and De Neve 2013: 67).

For instance, men and women from some of the poorest tribal communities in India who migrate seasonally to work as casual wage labor in brick kilns in more prosperous locations (Shah 2006). This is among the worst paid and most exploitative forms of labor in the economy. But these migrants do not regard brick kiln migration merely as a means of survival nor do they view it as the irredeemable torture and drudgery that is portrayed in much of the literature (Shah 2006). Rather they view it as an escape from problems at home, an opportunity to explore new places, gain independence from parents and live out prohibited amorous relationships while being fully aware that they are regarded as a devalued and dispensable form of labor by wealthy industrialists who exploit them.

Other examples can be found in Gilardone, Guérin and Palier (2014) which examined the impacts of women’s access to microfinance in different contexts in Africa and Asia. Among the achievements that these women valued were their ability settle former debts with local moneylender, ending relations of quasi-exploitation, their ability to “manage better,” to “beg” less and thereby gain greater respect in their communities. One of the women they interviewed in India described the feeling of security that access to loans had produced for her: “[she] told us that for the first time in her life she had the feeling of holding in her hand bank notes which actually belonged to her” (254).

### 3. Empowerment

There are different ways of defining empowerment. What unifies them is that they shift the analysis of power from the perspective of dominant groups (“the power over”) to forms of agency exercised by the oppressed (Allen 1999). This is power in the positive sense of bringing about change: the power to transform the self (“the power within”); to achieve valued goals (“the power to”); and the new forms of power that come into existence through acting collectively with others, the “power with” (Kabeer 1994; Rowlands 1995).

My own concept of empowerment builds on the capability approach but makes the interaction between agency and power structures more explicit (Kabeer 1999). It takes the idea of choice as its starting point, defining power as the capacity to make choices. It points out that while people who have always exercised a great deal of choice in their lives, to the extent of being able to impose their choices on others (Dahl 1957), are clearly powerful, they are not empowered in the sense in which I understand the term because they were not disempowered in the first place. Empowerment is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the capacity to make choices gain this capacity. However, the notion of choice must be qualified to make it relevant to the analysis of empowerment.

#### *The consequences of choice*

The first qualification refers to the consequences of choice. It distinguishes between the choices that we routinely make in the course of everyday life, choices which reflect our socially ascribed roles, and more strategic choices which signify some shift in the power relations that underpin social inequalities. Empowerment takes the question of capabilities beyond the goals that people may have reason to value to ask whether their exercise of agency is seeking to question power relations or merely accommodate and hence reproduce them. Empowerment is thus concerned with the meanings and motivations that people bring to their choices, their recognition of injustice as well as with what they are actually able to achieve.

This has important implications for how we evaluate choice from an empowerment perspective. A sizeable body of research shows that women use resources at their disposal to invest in the wellbeing of their children, achievements that they have good reason to value (Doepke and Tertilt 2011). This explains why cash transfer programs around the world seeking to promote children's health and education target women as their recipients. However, these manifestations of agency on the part of women remain within the socially sanctioned reproductive roles assigned to them in most societies. They signify the enhancement of valued practical capabilities but do little to challenge the social restrictions on women's life choices and life chances.

Yet we can also find evidence of a more critical consciousness on the part of some of the women involved in these programs. For instance, women who participated in a cash transfer program in Mexico expressed their dissatisfaction with the single-minded focus on their reproductive roles in the training sessions that they were required to attend (Adato and Mindek 2000). They wanted greater attention to livelihoods training in order to expand the very limited productive opportunities available to them. And significantly, they wanted the program to include a training component for men to discuss how they should treat women in their families, the problem of domestic violence and the importance of health for all family members. Such attitudes and actions can be seen as expressing a nascent critique of the gender asymmetries of family life.

Finally, the meaning and consequences of choice are likely reflect the structures of constraint prevailing in different contexts. The same choices can have different implications. A woman who chooses to take up paid work, to marry someone of her own choosing or not to marry at all is making a strategic choice in contexts where such choices are customarily denied to women. These choices will not carry the same consequential weight in contexts where they are taken for granted. There is therefore a certain degree of path-dependence to the pathways of women's empowerment because the structural constraints that women have to negotiate vary across contexts.

### *The conditions of choice*

The second qualification refers to the conditions under which people make choices: for choice to be meaningful, it should have been possible to have chosen otherwise. While the choices available to people are clearly bound up with the resources they have at their disposal, a concern with empowerment focuses on the transformative potential of these resources.

We see the importance of differentiating between different kinds of resources in Kabeer et al. (2013) that sought to quantify the association between different categories of economic activity and a range of indicators of empowerment in Egypt, Ghana and Bangladesh. These indicators included decision-making within the home, purchase of assets, voting behavior and sense of agency and control over one's own life. In all three contexts, formal waged employment was more consistently associated with these indicators than informal wage, self-employment or economic inactivity. In addition, ownership of land and housing also proved important predictors of these forms of agency.

Qualitative analysis from the Dominican Republic found that women who took up wage labor on neighboring flower-growing farms while also working as unpaid family labor on their own farms began to claim part of the proceeds from the family farm as a form of wage as they came to realize the market value of their labor (Raynolds 2002). Similar claims were not made by women who worked only as unpaid family labor.

However, while the material resources available to women shape the range of possibilities available to them, power relations can also operate through dominant ideologies which rule out certain possibilities or even render them inconceivable (Scott 1990). They can, for instance, rule out the possibility of protest in the face of gender injustice. It may be that women recognize the injustice of the social order but find the costs of protest to be too high if, for instance, it exposes them to violence by partners. Of course, this does not rule out more hidden forms of protest, what Scott terms the “weapons of the weak.” For instance, rural women in South Asia often use covert means to gain access to cash that they can control by undertaking income-earning activities without their husbands’ knowledge or by getting neighbors to raise livestock on their behalf (Agarwal 1997).

Alternatively, the failure to protest may reflect women’s internalization of the inferior status ascribed to them by society so that they simply do not perceive it to be unjust. As Sen has remarked: “There is much evidence in history that acute inequalities often survive precisely by making allies out of the deprived. The underdog comes to accept the legitimacy of the unequal order and becomes an implicit accomplice” (1990: 126). In such contexts, processes of empowerment must encompass “the power within” by challenging these internalized structures of constraint.

Such challenges can happen in unintended ways. For instance, migration by Bangladeshi women to take factory jobs in Malaysia provided them with the opportunity to critically evaluate the more restrictive interpretations of Islam prevalent in Bangladesh in the light of the greater freedoms permitted to women in a different Muslim country (Dannecker 2005). It opened their eyes to the fact that religion lent itself to multiple interpretations, some more oppressive than others. But, as discussed in the next section, challenges to internalized constraints can also occur as a result of purposive effort.

#### **4. Citizenship and collective action**

Individual agency, however strategically deployed, rarely destabilizes wider structural inequalities. Individual women refusing to pay dowry for their daughters or to accept lower wages than men may be striking a blow against practices of gender inequality, but they do not change institutionalized gender injustice in marriage or in the market. They do not extend the social limits on what is possible for women in general (Hayward 1998).

We therefore turn to collective forms of agency that set out to tackle the structures of gender injustice. The concept of citizenship provides an important framework for analyzing these efforts. Citizenship can be defined in passive terms as the legal definition of personhood in a society, the rights and responsibilities its members enjoy by virtue of their membership of that society (Lister 1997). It can also be defined in more active terms as the social practices through which members of a society interpret, enact and seek to expand legal definitions. While the status of citizenship spells out some of the constraints and possibilities that define membership of a society, citizenship as practice places the question of agency at the heart of contestations around citizenship.

Contestations over citizenship have entailed contestations over who is included as a citizen and on what terms. Those whose privileges are upheld and reinforced by the rights and responsibilities inscribed in existing definitions can rely on the smooth operation of the status quo to continue enjoying their privileged status. For the rest, the important lesson from history has been that individual action generally has limited impact on entrenched privilege. Rather, it has been the collective struggles of marginalized groups that has helped to win them the rights of citizenship (Bowles and Gintis 1987).

### *The organization of collective action*

Patriarchal constraints have made the possibility of collective action to challenge economic injustice more challenging for women relative to men. Furthermore, the nature of this challenge varies between different groups of women, depending on where they are positioned in the economy and the possibilities for collective action associated with their position.

It has been easier for women to engage in organized collective action in those sectors of the economy which have a strong trade union presence, but they have had to deal with historically entrenched male dominance in many of these unions. Where working women have found such dominance too difficult deal with, they have sometimes set up their own autonomous organizations. In Nicaragua, for instance, the failure of the male leadership of the main trade union federation to take women's concerns seriously led its Women's Secretariat to break away and set up the María Elena Cuadra (MEC), an autonomous movement for working and unemployed women in the country's Free Trade Zones (Bickham-Mendez 2005).

A different set of challenges face women who are engaged in informal livelihood activities, running their own enterprises and farms or working as casual wage labor. While they make up the majority of working women in the global South, there are few trade unions. Moreover, the dispersed nature of their activities, the irregularity of their earnings, their location at the intersection of multiple inequalities, the social and self-devaluation of their work and, very frequently, their lack of awareness of any rights they might enjoy, make the spontaneous emergence of self-organized collective action unlikely.

A range of external organizations—women's groups, development NGOs, legal and human rights organizations, church-groups, national and international advocacy networks—have facilitated these workers' organization. These organizations have often been registered as trade unions in order to emphasize the worker identity of their women members who are largely seen, and see themselves, purely in terms of their socially ascribed familial identities as mothers, wives, daughters. But they represent a different kind of organization than traditional trade unions.

An early precedent for this course of action is found in the Self-Employed Women's Association in India which was set up in 1971 by the women's wing of the Textile Labour Association (TLA) to compensate for its failure to represent women workers who worked on a casual waged and self-employed basis within the industry (Hill 2010). Its attempt to register the new organization as a trade union was challenged by government officials on the grounds that trade unions were defined by collective bargaining between workers and employers; self-employed women, by definition, had no employer. SEWA argued successfully that self-employed women needed a union precisely in order to engage in collective bargaining but with a wider range of actors, including employers, local government officials, police and middlemen. One of its first actions as a registered union was to lobby for state-certified identity cards to give formal recognition to its members' status as workers.

In Brazil, organizations of domestic workers transformed themselves from associations into unions once their right to do so was recognized by their country's constitution (Cornwall 2013). In South Africa, the Women in Farms Project first organized the country's agricultural workers, mainly "colored" women, but subsequently registered them as a trade union, Sikhula Sonke, so that they could represent themselves in the country's labor courts (Solomon 2013).

Organizations of informal workers can take other forms as well. In rural areas of South Asia, where there is very little history of unionism, development NGOs have organized women into savings-based self-help groups as vehicles for collective action (Sanyal 2014; Kabeer 2012). Waste pickers in different parts of the world organize themselves into unions, co-operatives,

companies or associations depending on whether they prioritize mobilizing for collective rights or see themselves as service providers (Samson 2009).

*Collective agency and “repertoires of contention”*

Organizations of informal women workers tend to eschew what they regard as the adversarial tactics associated with mainstream unions: closed shops, strikes, pickets and collective bargaining. This reflects their fear that confrontational politics could jeopardize the livelihoods of women who lack the structural power of the traditional trade union movement, are generally crowded into poorly paid and precarious work and have few resources to fall back on should they lose this work (Bhowmik and Patel 1997; Bickham-Mendez 2005; Narayan and Chikarmane 2013).

Instead the “repertoires of contention” (Tilly 1978) associated with social movements have proved better suited to defending and promoting the rights of precarious workers. These include the politics of information, symbols, leverage and accountability with a strong emphasis on negotiation, influence, persuasion and alliance building (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Despite the diversity of forms, contexts and conditions of work that characterizes these organizations, certain common elements can be found in their efforts to promote the collective action of their membership.

First, there is the central role given to building “the power within”: raising the awareness of members about the value of the work they do, building their sense of self-worth and educating them about their rights as women, as workers and as citizens. In rural South Asia, for instance, the regular meetings of self-help groups are partly devoted to livelihood matters, but they also provide members the opportunity to narrate their life stories, to share experiences of oppression and to forge ‘chosen’ relationships of solidarity beyond the social ascribed relations of family and kinship that have defined their lives (Kabeer 2012; Sanyal 2014).

In Nicaragua, the MEC conducts community-based workshops to discuss issues of domestic violence and reproductive health and to raise members’ awareness of the rights and entitlements guaranteed by the country’s constitution and laws. In South Africa, the early class orientation of the Women on Farms Project had led it to prioritize work-based rights in its training activities with agricultural workers. Over time, its close relationship with its membership led to a gradual broadening of its strategy to include an explicitly feminist agenda which tackled private aspects of their members’ lives (Solomon 2013).

These organizations pursue claims on behalf their membership, which combine the traditional bread-and-butter issues prioritized by mainstream unions with domestic and reproductive concerns which they generally overlooked. Sikhula Sonke addresses workplace issues faced by its members such as unfair dismissal, unsafe working conditions, violation of minimum wage provisions, illegal deduction from wages and intimidation of worker leaders. It is also active on the social issues that concern its members, such as housing insecurity, high levels of school drop-outs among their children, violence against women and the legacy of male alcoholism (Schiphorst 2011). It takes a strong stand on domestic violence which is rampant on farms: union members agree to intervene in their communities whenever such violence occurred while men who want to join the union must sign a commitment to refrain from violence against women.

A third common element in the strategies of these organizations is that their claims are often addressed to the state. This is because their membership is either self-employed or, if in wage employment, has indirect or informal relations with employers. Also, despite the flawed nature of the state in many countries, the state is seen as the only institution which has the mandate to address the claims of all its citizens, regardless of their status in the economy.

An important effort has been to demonstrate the value of the work of their membership, since a great deal of informal work done by women, is excluded from national level statistics and denied recognition by policy makers. SEWA ran an extended campaign to gain official recognition for the size and contribution of its members to India's economy. It explained Indian census questions to its membership so that they could report their work status accurately. It collaborated with national research institutes, leading to the establishment of an Expert Group on Defining the Informal Sector by the Indian government and later to the ILO's International Expert Group on Informal Sector Statistics. These efforts have led to redefinitions of work by the ILO to better capture informal activities.

In some cases, the re-valuation of women's work has occurred through broader movements for change. In South Africa, one result of women's organizations' efforts to "engender" democracy (Seidman 2007) was legislation passed by the post-apartheid state which recognized the social value of domestic work and recoded domestic workers as employees. This legislation has been described as most extensive formalization and professionalization of paid domestic work anywhere in the world (Ally 2009).

A final element in the strategies of these organizations is the significance they attach to claims to social security. As workers who have been largely overlooked by the state, the struggle for social security represents a struggle to gain recognition for their status as working citizens. In India, for instance, SEWA joined with the National Centre for Labour and other organizations to lobby for a universal system of social security to cover workers in the informal economy. The adoption of the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Bill, 2008, went some way towards meeting this demand by providing health insurance, life insurance and old age pension benefits to informal workers.

For those in precarious forms of work, with no guarantee of a regular flow of income, access to basic social protection may be a necessary precondition for taking the risks associated with the pursuit of longer-term structural change. Autonomous women's organizations in Brazil came together in the 1980s to try to form a unified movement of rural women in order to take on the politically controversial struggle for women's land rights (Deere 2003). They found that the right to social security was a unifying concern for all rural women, regardless of work status. They therefore organized to incorporate rural women into unions and to extend social security benefits, including paid maternity leave and retirement, to these women. Although women's land rights had been formally incorporated in the 1988 Constitution, it was only in 2000 that the rural women's movement began to actively lobby for these rights at the national level.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter has discussed different ways of conceptualizing agency within feminist economics, drawing on the perspectives of working women from the global South. Feminist economics locates agency firmly within a structural understanding of constraints but simultaneously explores how it can be exercised to act on these structures. Each concept touches on valued forms of change in women's lives. They are potentially, but not inevitably, inter-related and the direction of causality is not unidirectional. In some circumstances, progress on basic capabilities may enhance individual empowerment; in other circumstances, the willingness to take collective action might lead to improvements in basic capabilities; and in yet others, individual empowerment may help to build the courage to fight for social justice.

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