

Centering Women's Well-Being: A Capability Approach-Based Analysis of Rural and Urban Interviews in Alignment with SDGS 3, 4 & 13

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Abstract

This paper examines women's well-being through the lens of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and its alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3, 4, and 13. Based on four qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with women from urban Pune and rural Baramati in Maharashtra, the study explores how resources, social norms, and contextual barriers shape women's real freedoms and life outcomes. The analysis uses the concepts of entitlement, conversion factors, capability sets, and functionings to assess the extent to which education, employment, mobility, health, and climate-related conditions enable or constrain women's agency. The findings indicate that access to formal education and employment does not automatically translate into well-being, as emotional stress, household responsibilities, infrastructure gaps, and limited institutional support continue to restrict women's capabilities. Rural participants, in particular, faced compounded constraints linked to gender norms, financial insecurity, and limited access to services, while urban participants experienced pressures associated with work-life balance and mental strain. The paper concludes that development strategies must move beyond output-oriented measures and instead prioritize women's lived experiences, emotional well-being, and freedom to choose valued lives.

Keywords: Capability Approach, women's well-being, SDG 3, SDG 4, SDG 13, Maharashtra, gender and development

1. Introduction

Sustainable development is commonly understood as development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The present study adopts this broad perspective and asks a more specific question: are women actually able to live the lives they value? This question is central to the Capability Approach, associated with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, which emphasizes individual freedoms, dignity, and the ability to convert resources into meaningful life outcomes. Rather than treating development as a matter of economic growth alone, the Capability Approach shifts attention to what people are actually able to do and be.

This paper focuses on Maharashtra, a state that is economically advanced in many respects yet socially diverse and unequal in others. The study is grounded in the experiences of four women from urban Pune and rural Baramati. Their testimonies provide a grounded understanding of how development is experienced in everyday life, particularly in relation to health, education, climate vulnerability, mobility, and agency. The study is aligned with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 13 (Climate Action), while also drawing on related themes of work, infrastructure, and sustainability.

The purpose of the paper is to examine how women's capabilities are enabled or restricted by personal, social, and environmental factors, and to identify the gaps between formal development schemes and lived realities.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis is based on the Capability Approach, which distinguishes between resources, conversion factors, capability sets, and functionings. Entitlement refers to the bundle of goods and services a person can access given their social position and resources. Conversion factors are the personal, social, and environmental conditions that affect how effectively resources are transformed into actual achievements. Capability sets refer to the range of possible functionings available to a person, while functionings are the realized states of being and doing that reflect a valued life.

This framework is useful because it highlights that access alone is insufficient. A woman may have education, income, or formal employment, yet still face stress, exclusion, or lack of autonomy that limits her real freedom. The Capability Approach therefore offers a more complete way to assess women's well-being than income-based or outcome-only indicators.

The SDGs provide the complementary policy framework for this study. SDG 3 emphasizes health and well-being, SDG 4 addresses inclusive and equitable quality education, and SDG 13 focuses on urgent action to address climate change and its impacts. The study examines how these goals intersect with women's everyday lives in both urban and rural settings.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design based on four semi-structured, in-depth interviews with women from Pune and Baramati in Maharashtra. The sample includes two urban participants and two rural participants. The interviews were conducted in a manner intended to capture open-ended reflections on education, employment, decision-making, health, family roles, mobility, and aspirations. The data were organized thematically using a qualitative analysis process supported by Taguette. The analysis involved familiarization with the transcripts, initial coding, thematic grouping, and interpretation in relation to the Capability Approach and selected SDG themes. The interview material was examined through the categories of entitlement, conversion factors, capability sets, and functioning.

The study's qualitative design is appropriate because it allows the researcher to explore complex experiences that are often invisible in quantitative indicators, including emotional stress, social stigma, unpaid labor, and the influence of household responsibilities.

4. Data and Discussion

4.1 Urban Participant 1: Pallavi Suryawanshi

Pallavi is an urban working woman with postgraduate education in Economics and stable employment in an administrative role at Gokhale Institute. Her entitlements include education, a job, family support, medical insurance, and access to a government benefit scheme. Her achieved functionings include education, employment, financial literacy, and a degree of decision-making autonomy. She also uses yoga and breathing exercises as coping mechanisms and identifies mental calmness as important for balancing her responsibilities.

At the same time, her narrative reveals significant constraints. Despite educational and occupational success, she experiences mental stress due to workplace politics and the pressure of managing multiple responsibilities. Her experience demonstrates that formal achievement does not eliminate emotional strain.

In capability terms, her resources are present, but her conversion factors — particularly work environment pressures and gendered expectations — limit the expansion of well-being.

4.2 Urban Participant 2: Samruddhi Ghadge

Samruddhi is an urban computer engineer employed as an ERP Implementation Specialist at Gokhale Institute. Her educational trajectory was supported by family stability and proximity to educational institutions. She is employed, professionally skilled, and able to manage certain household responsibilities, while also maintaining a routine that reflects discipline and time management. However, her interview also shows how professional achievement can coexist with stress. Long commuting time, deadlines, learning demands, and workplace friction create pressure. She must wake early, travel long distances, and balance work with household responsibilities. Her case highlights the emotional burden that accompanies formal employment and illustrates that mobility and time constraints can significantly reduce well-being.

From a capability perspective, Samruddhi has a strong set of entitlements and functionings, but the pressures of modern work and travel reduce her freedom to pursue learning, rest, and personal development. Her experience is particularly relevant to SDG 3 and SDG 13 because it shows how daily mobility, time stress, and sustainability concerns intersect with women's lived realities.

4.3 Rural Participant 1: Benjira Sheikh

Benjira is a rural laborer whose daily life is shaped by hardship, domestic strain, and limited opportunity. She lives in Malegaon and works as a laborer, walking seven kilometers daily to reach work. Her routine includes early waking, long travel, full-day labor, household chores, and evening domestic responsibilities. She reports enduring an alcoholic husband's behavior, family tension, and mental distress. She also faces negative social judgment and limited opportunities for advancement.

Her entitlements are minimal and unstable, consisting mainly of labor income, family ties, and support from friends. Her conversion factors are heavily constrained by mental distress, social stigma, domestic violence, corruption, and poor infrastructure. As a result, her capability set remains narrow, focused largely on basic survival rather than meaningful expansion of choices.

Benjira's case strongly reflects the importance of SDG 3 because mental health and safety are central concerns in her life. It also reflects SDG 13 through the hardship created by poor infrastructure and long daily walking distance, which increase vulnerability. Her aspiration for her daughter to become a police officer shows resilience and intergenerational hope, even under constrained conditions.

4.4 Rural Participant 2: Kanchan Jadhav

Kanchan is a rural entrepreneur who completed education up to the 12th standard but was denied further study because of gender bias and family decisions. After marriage, she pursued a tailoring course, received a sewing machine from the gram panchayat, and later took a bank loan to continue her work after the original machine was damaged. She now runs a home-based tailoring business, supports household finances, and is respected in her community.

Her functionings include skill development, self-employment, resilience, and a degree of independence. She also expresses a desire to expand her business and to start tailoring classes. However, her aspirations remain limited by financial constraints, domestic responsibilities, and the practical difficulties of home-based work. Guests interrupt her work, customers often delay payments, and the lack of a larger workspace restricts growth. She also reports that she would have liked to pursue nursing, but was not allowed to do so.

Kanchan's case illustrates both capability expansion and capability deprivation. She has transformed limited resources into a functioning livelihood, yet her possibilities remain structurally constrained. Her story is especially relevant to SDG 4 because it shows how educational exclusion shapes life chances, and to SDG 3 because unpaid care responsibilities and household interruptions affect her well-being.

5. Cross-Cutting Themes

5.1 Mental Health and Emotional Stress

Mental health emerged as a central concern across both rural and urban interviews. Pallavi and Samruddhi both reported stress linked to work demands, while Benjira's situation reflects psychological distress arising from domestic violence and social neglect. The interviews indicate that emotional well-being is not an auxiliary issue but a core dimension of women's development.

A key insight from the analysis is that success is often accompanied by hidden strain. Women may be educated, employed, or economically active, yet still experience burnout, fear, or exhaustion. This finding aligns with the Capability Approach, which emphasizes that well-being should be judged by actual lived experience rather than by formal status alone.

5.2 Educational Access and Unequal Opportunity

Education clearly enabled greater opportunities for Pallavi and Samruddhi, both of whom benefited from educational schemes and institutional access. In contrast, Benjira and Kanchan were constrained by gender norms and financial hardship, which limited their formal educational trajectories. Kanchan's later skill acquisition through tailoring demonstrates that informal learning can create capabilities, but it does not fully substitute for equal access to education.

The interviews suggest that educational schemes are valuable, but their reach and cultural responsiveness remain uneven. Gender, location, and household expectations continue to shape who can benefit from education and how far that education can be translated into long-term opportunity.

5.3 Employment, Economic Agency, and Vulnerability

The interviews reveal wide differences in economic agency. Pallavi and Samruddhi have formal jobs and financial stability, while Kanchan manages a home-based enterprise, and Benjira remains in low-paid labor with little upward mobility. Even where economic participation exists, the ability to convert work into security or long-term advancement is uneven.

The analysis shows that employment alone does not guarantee autonomy. Confidence, time, transport, market access, and social support all affect whether women can build sustainable livelihoods. Rural women in particular face structural barriers that limit enterprise growth and economic resilience.

5.4 Mobility, Infrastructure, and Daily Burden

Mobility emerged as a significant obstacle in both contexts. Benjira walks long distances to work because transportation is unavailable, while Samruddhi spends substantial time commuting and must manage traffic and deadlines. Kanchan faces market constraints that limit the expansion of her home business. These findings show that infrastructure is not merely a technical issue but a gendered one. Poor transport and weak access reduce functioning by increasing fatigue, restricting time, and limiting access to opportunities. In

capability terms, physical infrastructure is a crucial conversion factor that shapes what women can actually do.

5.5 Climate and Environmental Resilience

Although climate issues were not the most dominant theme in the interviews, the data still reveal important environmental dimensions. Kanchan's home-based business is low-energy and relatively climate-resilient by necessity, while Benjira's long commute exposes her to weather-related hardship and reflects the burden of poor infrastructure. These experiences suggest that climate vulnerability intersects with poverty, gender, and locality.

The study therefore treats climate action not as a distant environmental goal but as part of the everyday conditions that influence women's capabilities. SDG 13 is relevant insofar as climate-resilient infrastructure, energy access, and localized environmental planning can reduce burden and expand freedom.

6. Literature-Linked Interpretation

The interview findings are consistent with the literature reviewed in the source material. Frediani's participatory understanding of development supports the argument that marginalized voices must shape policy, not merely be recipients of it. This aligns with the rural respondents' experiences, in which structural exclusion limits participation and recognition.

Rauschmayer and Lessmann's discussion of sustainability and functioning constraints is also relevant, particularly in relation to time pressure, care burdens, and the trade-offs women make between work and personal well-being. Their perspective supports the idea that sustainability must include emotional and social dimensions, not only environmental ones.

Hák and colleagues' critique of SDG measurement further strengthens the study's argument. The interviews show that indicators may fail to capture stress, unpaid labor, and contextual barriers. The findings therefore support a capability-informed approach to assessing SDG progress, one that measures opportunity, dignity, and agency rather than only outputs.

7. Policy Implications

Drawing from the interview evidence and the Capability Approach, the study identifies several policy directions. First, mental health must be integrated into public health and workplace systems through community wellness hubs, counseling, and anti-stigma campaigns. Second, educational access should be expanded through more inclusive schemes and localized support for women who face financial or gender-based barriers. Third, mobility and infrastructure need to be made safer and more flexible, especially for women who travel long distances or combine paid work with household responsibilities. Fourth, climate-resilient and resource-efficient support should be extended to rural women through localized infrastructure and low-energy livelihood options.

These measures are not simply service additions; they are capability-enhancing interventions intended to increase women's real freedoms.

Conclusion

This paper has examined women's well-being in Maharashtra through the Capability Approach and its alignment with SDGs 3, 4, and 13. Based on four qualitative interviews from urban Pune and rural Baramati, the study demonstrates that women's development cannot be understood through income, education, or employment alone. Emotional stress, domestic burden, limited mobility, uneven infrastructure, and social norms continue to constrain the conversion of resources into actual well-being. The interviews show both deprivation and resilience. Urban women may appear more advantaged in terms of education and employment, yet they continue to face time pressure, workplace stress, and emotional exhaustion. Rural women experience more severe structural constraints, but they also display strong agency, adaptability, and aspiration.

The central conclusion is that development must be judged by what women are actually able to do and be. A capability-oriented approach offers a more humane and accurate framework for policy because it centers freedom, dignity, and lived experience. If development is to be truly sustainable and inclusive, it must address the visible and invisible barriers that shape women's everyday lives.

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