Famine, Widowhood and Paid Work

Seeking Gender Justice in South Asia

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter examines what Amartya Sen has written and argued about gender injustice in three seemingly distinct, but related contexts in South Asia: famine, widowhood, and paid work. The chapter is divided into four parts: one part for each issue and a conclusion linking all three. In parts 1-3, the chapter summarizes what Sen has written about each issue and then, based on research, highlighting certain factors that serve to illuminate or complicate the issue. In the conclusion, the chapter reflects on Sen's entitlement and capability theories and the normative concepts that they offer to those who seek gender justice in South Asia.

Keywords: gender justice, gender injustice, famine, drought, widowhood, paid work, employment status, missing women, entitlements, capabilities

IN the fall of 1987, I heard Amartya Sen speak for the first time. He gave a talk on human development at the Harvard Institute for International Development (HIID), which I had joined earlier that year. The small conference room was jammed with students and faculty. After Sen's talk, an HIID
colleague opened the discussion with the following question: “Amartya, aren't you being a little hard on GDP as a measure of development?” Sen replied: “I am not questioning whether GDP can be used as a measure of development but whether it should be used.” This was my first experience of Amartya Sen in person—his remarkable combination of intelligence, wit and compassion.

At the time, I knew Amartya Sen only by reputation. Little did I know that my husband Lincoln and I would become close friends and colleagues of Amartya-da. What I did know was that his approach to economics appealed to me. Since joining (p.220) HIID, I had been struggling for some months with many of the assumptions of my neo-classical economic colleagues. In Amartya-da, I found not just a friend but a mentor from whom I learned that there are alternative approaches to economics—more normative and justice-based—and who took great interest in what interested me: the livelihood and coping strategies of poor households—and especially of the women in those households—in South Asia.

In this chapter, I will explore gender injustice in three seemingly distinct, but related, contexts in South Asia: famine, widowhood and paid work. Amartya Sen has written extensively on these three issues, often from a gender perspective. I have carried out field studies on these three issues, also with a gender perspective: on the 1974 famine in Bangladesh and the 1985–7 drought in western India; widowhood in rural India; and paid work, especially of working poor women, in both India and Bangladesh. This chapter is in four sections, one for each issue and a conclusion linking all three. In sections I–III, I briefly introduce what Sen has written on each issue, summarize the findings of my research on the topic, and then highlight certain factors that serve to illuminate or complicate the issue. In the conclusion, I reflect on Sen’s entitlement and capability theories and the normative concepts that they offer to those who seek gender justice in South Asia.

Before I begin, a major caveat is in order. I have read Sen selectively, not systematically. Sen has most likely addressed somewhere at some time many of the issues or questions that I will raise. But I trust that these issues or questions are worth raising nonetheless. My intent in writing this paper is to use my research to illuminate, nuance or, in some cases,
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I should also note that my research focuses on those who live and work at the edge of subsistence. Over three decades in Bangladesh and India, I have interviewed thousands of women and hundreds of men from poor households and disadvantaged communities. Such persons often have few choices; they often face a trade-off between physical survival and other capabilities. For such persons to secure their physical survival, their labor power is often their only economic resource. Yet prevailing social norms often restrict the physical mobility of women—and thereby their ability to seek paid work—and the occupational mobility of both men and women. Further, these social norms are often reflected in official and public norms that determine the quantity and quality of paid work available to women in particular. My perspective on Amartya Sen and development issues more generally is informed by the daily struggle of women from poor households and disadvantaged communities in South Asia (and elsewhere) to seek paid work or otherwise secure a livelihood for themselves and their families.

(p.221) I. Famine
I.1 Famine in Bangladesh

In 1974, Bangladesh suffered a major famine. From the end of June to early September that year, Bangladesh also suffered severe floods. Starvation began immediately after the floods, and grew in severity. The government of Bangladesh officially declared famine in late September. From early October to late November, the government operated *langarkhanas* (gruel kitchens) to provide free cooked food to destitute people (Sen 1981). At the peak of this relief effort, some 6,000 *langarkhanas* were providing free cooked food to 4.35 million people (more than 6% of the total population of the country) (Sen 1981: 131). Estimates of how many people died in the famine vary greatly, from the official estimate of 26,000 deaths to a private estimate of 80,000–100,000 deaths in one district alone (Rangpur) (ibid.). What is clear is that, without the massive relief effort, mortality would have been higher.

In Bangladesh at the time, it was widely assumed that the following series of events had taken place: severe flooding; decline in rice production; rise in rice prices; deaths by
starvation. Amartya Sen did not accept this standard storyline. He reviewed data on rice production throughout 1974 and on the occupations of the destitute being fed at the langarkhanas in late 1974—and came up with a different storyline. According to the evidence analyzed by Sen, 1974 was a peak year in terms of both total and per capita output of rice in Bangladesh; the so-called famine districts (with high starvation mortality) had relatively high availability of food grains per capita, but wages had decreased relative to rice prices in those districts; and landless laborers, not small farmers or share-croppers, were over-represented among the destitute being fed at the langarkhanas.

The 1974 Bangladesh famine is one of four famines, together with the 1943 Great Bengal famine, the 1972–4 Ethiopian famine, and the 1968–73 Sahelian famine, analyzed by Sen in his 1981 book *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Through his empirical analysis of these historical famines, Sen found that famines have occurred even when there was no decline in or shortage of per capita food output. He therefore criticizes the then dominant view that famines are caused by a shortage in per capita food availability—what he calls the Food Availability Decline (FAD) view. Rather, Sen argues, starvation should be understood as a function of the distribution of food, of purchasing power over food, not just of food availability per se. It is important, he emphasizes, to distinguish between decline in food availability and decline in purchasing power (what he calls “entitlement to” or command over food). In Sen’s entitlement theory, a person’s ability to command food depends on what she owns, what she earns, what is given to her free, and what is taken away from her. What she can earn depends on what she can sell and at what price. Her income can drop sharply for a number of reasons: loss of work, failure of production, or change in relative prices. During the 1974 Bangladesh famine, after the monsoon floods disrupted normal employment opportunities, the wages paid to landless laborers fell as the price of rice rose: hence, landless laborers (and their families) comprised the major share of those who were fed at the langarkhanas or died of starvation.

In late November 1974, the government of Bangladesh declared that the famine was over and closed the langarkhanas. But the effects of the famine dragged on. As one symptom of the lingering crisis, women continued to beg on
the streets of towns and cities across the country. When the
government (with international support) introduced food-for-
work schemes throughout the country in late 1975 to provide
additional relief, women came forward in record numbers.
Women begging on the streets and seeking paid work outside
their homes was uncommon in Bangladesh, where social
norms have traditionally confined women to their homesteads
or, if they need to seek paid work, to the homesteads of others
in their villages.

In mid-1975, I began working for BRAC, today a very large and
world-renowned Bangladeshi NGO, as head of its women's
program. Shortly thereafter, with food aid from the World Food
Programme and other agencies, the government of
Bangladesh started the nationwide food-for-work program. In
November 1975, on a field trip to a rural area west of Dhaka
city, I met a group of women sitting under the shade of a tree
near a food-for-work site. The women had just been refused
work at that site. Local officials turned them back, saying:
“Women in Bangladesh should not work outside their homes.
We have never hired women at food-for-work sites.”

Bangladesh has a long history of food-for-work programs in
lean employment seasons and after floods, drought or other
crises, but the participation of women was a new phenomenon.
The government was simply not prepared to accept women
into its rural works programs. Conditioned by tradition to
believe that women should not seek paid work outside their
homes, local officials regularly turned women back. Troubled
by the situation, activist women friends and I began to meet
and interview women informally at food-for-work sites in
different parts of the country. We found that the women faced
two main problems: many were denied work and those who
were allowed to work were paid less than men. This was
because payments were tied to the amount of earth moved and
women were able to lift and carry less earth than men in a
given day, as they had no tradition of doing heavy manual
labor, even agricultural field work. We began to discuss these
problems with responsible government officials and food aid
donors.

In March 1976, the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation
requested advice on the integration of women into its food-for-
work activities. Our ad hoc group was formalized into an
Advisory Committee on Women's Participation in Food-for-
Work, with a mandate to advise the government and food aid donors on how to integrate women fully into the food-for-work activities. After a number of field visits and numerous interviews with women workers, the Advisory Committee met with then President Zia-ur-Rahman and his cabinet. We made two recommendations: namely, women should be recruited in equal numbers to men and be paid the same as men (by means of a separate work-payment norm for women).

The President and his cabinet endorsed our recommendations. However, some of the food aid donors resisted the notion of a separate work norm for women, arguing that women workers were generally supplementary, not primary, earners; that women should be able to lift and carry as much earth as men in a given time period; and that separate norms would encourage false entries in the work registers (i.e. would create a perverse incentive for officials to list men workers as women workers in order to be allotted larger amounts of wheat to complete specific food-for-work schemes).

In order to be able to respond to these objections, the Advisory Committee asked two of its members to undertake a research study to determine the marital status, dependency ratio, work output, and energy requirements of women workers at food-for-work sites. With a team of investigators, we interviewed 303 women at 11 food-for-work sites in nine districts of Bangladesh. We found that women of all age groups worked at the sites, although most were between 20 and 50 years old. Only one-third were married, and many of their husbands were either unable to work or did not earn enough to feed their families; another third were widowed, and many of their sons were unwilling or unable to take care of them; and the remaining third were unmarried, deserted or divorced. All came from households with male earnings insufficient to meet subsistence needs. Just under half (47%) were the primary income earners for their families; they had, on average, 3.7 dependents each (Chen and Ghuznavi 1979, 1980).

As part of our research, we commissioned a time-motion study to investigate the work effort and output at food-for-work sites. This study found that, on average, women moved 40 cubic feet of earth per day while men moved 70 cubic feet per day. To move these respective amounts of earth, given the average female and male body weight in Bangladesh, the researchers estimated that women would require 2,100
calories and men 3,000 calories. A payment system for both sexes, based upon the male work norm, would therefore result in women receiving little more than half (57%) of the wheat payment that men received. Yet women's nutritional requirement for a day of lifting and carrying earth was estimated to be over two-thirds (70%) that of men (Chen and Ghuznavi 1979).

In sum, our study found that the women who sought food for work were from very poor households and were often the primary earners in those households, and that the work-payment norm of the food-for-work program was unfair to women. This evidence served to legitimize the Advisory Committee's policy recommendations. Meanwhile, a special food-for-work scheme for women piloted by UNICEF in northern Bangladesh had demonstrated that women were willing and able to do work for food. Since 1976, the government of Bangladesh and food aid donors have promoted women's participation in food-for-work by recruiting women more actively, by reserving separate areas or tasks at all sites for women, by adopting separate work-payment norms for women, and by operating all-women sites. In addition, special food-for-work schemes for women that involve less heavy lifting, notably roadside tree-planting and road maintenance schemes, were introduced. Also, the World Food Programme and BRAC developed a program that used food aid to subsidize the start-up phase of poultry-rearing by women from poor households (Chen 1983, 1995). Thirty years later, these programs are still in operation. Over the past three decades, hundreds of thousands of women have participated in special women-only food-for-work schemes and the food-subsidized poultry scheme.

Our study also showed that in rural Bangladesh, where women traditionally have been barred from paid work outside their homes, there were large numbers of landless women—in addition to the (mainly male) landless laborers whom Sen wrote about—who were destitute and needed to work to survive. Our evidence also showed that the social norms which prevented women from seeking paid work outside their homes were reflected in the attitudes of local officials who denied the women the right to participate in food-for-work schemes and that a more generalized “male bread-winner” bias was reflected in the attitudes of some food aid donors and in the official norms of the food-for-work program. As noted earlier,
the 1974 famine and its lingering aftermath forced thousands of women in Bangladesh to break with tradition and begin begging on the streets and seeking work at food-for-work sites. But it took specially targeted publicity and evidence to prove to the central government—and food aid donors—that the social norms being evoked by some local officials and food aid donors, and the official norms of the food-for-work program, needed to be challenged and changed if women were to be fully and fairly integrated into the food-for-work schemes.

In a male-dominated society in which women are secluded, such as Bangladesh in the 1970s, the landless rural women who sought paid work to earn food were largely invisible. In the relief effort at the height of the famine, they were considered destitute and therefore eligible for free food. In the relief effort after the famine, they were not considered workers, and therefore, were not considered eligible for food-for-work schemes. The fact that they remained invisible as eligible workers in the food-for-work schemes was due to the fact that official norms—local, national and international—reflected not only culture-specific norms of female seclusion but also a more generalized “male bread-winner” bias. In this context, it took informed women activists—not the free press or general public—to highlight the fact that countless invisible destitute women needed paid work to survive.
I.2 Drought in India

Since Poverty and Famines, in which he elaborated his entitlement theory, Amartya Sen has also made the case that famines do not occur in democratic countries (p.225) because the free media publicize scarcity or starvation, thus triggering relief programs by the government and/or private sources (Sen 1982; Drèze and Sen 1989). To illustrate his point, Sen contrasts democratic India, which has not suffered any famines since it gained independence from the British, with autocratic communist China, which suffered a major famine. The last famine in India—the 1943 Great Bengal famine—took place before independence in 1947. Since then, the government of India has been induced by the free media and a vocal public to adopt relief measures—either free food or food-for-work—to those who face a shortfall in food, either seasonally or during crises. By contrast, China experienced a devastating famine in 1959/60 in which between 16 and 30 million people died. As Sen observed, the communist party officials assigned to agriculture exaggerated agricultural output. Neither the media nor the public were free to report on starvation in remote districts (Drèze and Sen 1989). What was lacking when famine threatened China, Sen concludes, was a system of political opposition and adversarial journalism (Sen 1982; Drèze and Sen 1989).

In 1987, I studied the coping strategies of households in a village in Gujarat state, India (Chen 1991). That village and countless others in western India were experiencing the third year of a widespread drought. Although there were many signs of stress, including forced migration in search of food, work and fodder, no one in the village starved to death. Each year of the prolonged drought, the state government implemented local food-for-work schemes during the winter months. The presence of food-for-work during the lean winter months helped the most desperate households and individuals in that village avoid starvation.

During my stay in that village, I observed the quiet suffering and growing despair of a pair of widows. Kamla (the mother-in-law) and Lakshmi (her daughter-in-law) shared a single room of a two-room mud hut with Lakshmi’s young children. Kamla’s remaining son and his family lived next door. In normal years, following the Hindu norms of widow maintenance, that son cultivated his own land and the land that had belonged to his late father and brother, giving each of
the widows their harvest share. During the 1987 drought, when there was no harvest to share, he provided no support to his sister-in-law or even his mother. As the drought wore on, Lakshmi felt she could no longer maintain Kamla on her meager salary as a part-time attendant in a government day-care center. Reluctantly, with tears in her eyes, Lakshmi asked Kamla to manage on her own. The two widows continued to live together in the same room and use the same stove but began to cook and eat separately. What appeared to be joint living, the Hindu ideal, had broken down into two, and then three, separate cooking units within a single two-room mud hut. Kamla's situation became quite dire, as she was too old and frail to engage in food-for-work. As a gesture of joint concern for Kamla and for the migrant cattle herders passing by the village in search of greener pastures for their cattle, the village elders hired Kamla to sit near the cattle trough at the edge of the village and provide drinking water to the migrant cattle herders (Chen 1991).

(p.226) In September 1987, in the neighboring state of Rajasthan, a young widow named Roop Kanwar was burnt on her husband's cremation pyre. The news of her suttee spread quickly and unleashed a flood of response. Although troubled by the news, I found myself more disturbed that so much attention should be focused on one case of suttee while there was so little public concern for—or media attention on—the economic hardships experienced by countless widows during the prolonged drought in the same region at the same time.

The special predicament of Lakshmi and Kamla in a village that had been spared death by starvation illustrates the second (often overlooked) part of Sen's China–India comparison. In making the case that democracies avoid famines because their media and public can freely draw attention to starvation or deprivation, Sen also makes the important observation that democratic India has done less well than communist China in dealing with chronic deprivation. Until its recent market reforms, China had taken a large and decisive lead over India in terms of education, health and other social indicators. This was because, unlike democratic India, communist China had placed a high priority on improving basic education and health (Sen 1982). What Sen had noted in regard to chronic deprivation was being played
out in the lives of Lakshmi and Kamla. The attention of the free media and general public in India tends to be drawn to dramatic events—starvation and suttee—not to the quiet deprivation that millions suffer on a daily basis.

The lack of public and media attention to the quiet desperation of widows, such as Lakshmi and Kamla, motivated me to undertake a field study of the social and economic conditions of widows around the country. Amartya Sen encouraged me and helped raise funds for the study.

II. Widowhood

In several of their joint volumes on India’s economic and human development, Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze have included a discussion of widowhood as a prime example of social disadvantage, gender inequality, and women's lack of agency (Dreze and Sen 1995). According to the 1990 census of India, there were about 33 million widows in India, representing 8% of the female population. The proportion of widows in the female population rises sharply with age, reaching 63% among women aged 60 and above, and close to 80% among women aged (p.227) 70 and above (Government of India 1991). As Drèze and Sen note, given this striking incidence of widowhood in India, especially among older women, the “prospect of widowhood reduces the quality of life of most Indian women” (Drèze and Sen 1995: 172).

Motivated by the plight of Kamla and Lakshmi and encouraged by Sen and Drèze, I undertook a study in the early 1990s of all ever-widowed women in 14 villages of India: two villages in each of seven states. Because I had observed Lakshmi and Kamla living on their own, despite the semblance of joint living, I wanted to test the notion that the joint family provides economic security to widows in rural India. Drèze had recently completed a field study of widowhood in one village in each of three states of India, so my research design was informed and guided by his analysis (Drèze 1990).

Although the circumstances of widows vary a great deal between different regions, religious communities, castes and age groups, there are certain basic factors that influence the disadvantage and insecurity experienced by many Indian widows today: strong norms of patrilocal residence, an important cause of the social isolation of many widows; strong traditions of patrilineal ownership of property, which limit the
inheritance rights of widows and which modern legislation has only begun to challenge; limited freedom to remarry; and a gender division of labor and an ideal of female seclusion which in combination severely restrict employment opportunities for widows and other women. Around the world, a common gender division of labor places the primary responsibility for unpaid domestic and care activities on women, thus restricting the time women have to engage in paid work. Among Muslim and Hindu upper-caste communities in India, especially in northern India, the ideal of female seclusion restricts women's mobility in the public or market domains (Drèze 1990; Chen 2000).

These factors leave most widows in need of economic support from their family or community. It is widely acknowledged across India that one function of extended kinship ties is to look after the widows and children of dead relatives. The projected ideal is that Hinduism provides the widow a secure place—at least physically and economically—within the joint family. Yet, it remains unclear who exactly—which joint family or who within the joint family—is supposed to look after the widow, in what ways, or how well. The one clear norm is that daughters, once they are married into another family, should not provide support to parents, even if they are widowed and elderly (Chen 2000). The overarching question driving my research was whether widows receive economic support from their late husband's family, their parents or siblings, or their children and, if so, in what form.

What follows is a summary of my research findings on the situation of all ever-widowed women (562 in total) in 14 villages of India in the early 1990s: Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttaranchal and West Bengal in northern India; and Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu in southern India (Chen 2000).

(p.228) Residence—Of the 510 widows who did not remarry, two-thirds (67%) lived in their late husband's village, 27% in their natal village, and 6% in a third village. The vast majority (nearly 90%) lived in the same village in which they lived when their husband died: that is, strikingly few widows moved from one village to another after the death of their husband. Of those living in their natal village, only one-fourth had moved back after their husband's death. And of those living in a
village other than their natal or marital village, most had been living there when their husband died.

**Inheritance**—Only half of the widows whose husband owned land exercised use rights over a share of that land. Of those who did, only half exercised use rights on their own: about 40% exercised use rights with sons, and the others shared rights with their daughters or other relatives. Only 9% of the widows whose father owned land exercised use rights over a share of their father’s land. Not unexpectedly, widows who were married in their natal village or returned home after their husband’s death were more likely than other widows to exercise use rights over their father’s (or mother’s) land. Finally, those widows who did inherit land often had their rights challenged or violated: those who had adult sons faced the fewest challenges while those who were childless faced the greatest challenges. In regard to housing, just over three-fourths of the widows who did not remarry lived in the same house they lived in when their husband died, and two-thirds of them owned the house.

**Remarriage**—Only one in ten of the ever-widowed women had remarried: 13% of the ever-widowed women in northern India, where junior levirate marriage (marrying the late husband’s younger brother) is practiced, and 6% of the ever-widowed women in southern India. In both regions, lower-caste widows were more likely to remarry than upper-caste widows. Among all the ever-widowed women, 5% of Upper Caste widows remarried, 14% of Other Backward Caste widows, and 29% of Scheduled Caste widows.2

**Gender Norms**—Less than two fifths (38%) of all the widows were engaged in paid work: 8% of Upper Caste widows, 37% of the Backward Caste widows, and 56% of Scheduled Caste widows. Among those who worked outside the home, there was a decreased reliance on self-employment and increased reliance on wage employment: 6% of the widows had to give up farming and 4% had to take up manual wage employment after their husband died.

**Economic Support**—Less than half of the widows were maintained by their own or their husband’s male kin: less than 3% lived with in-laws, less than 4% lived with (p.229) parents or brothers, and just over 40% lived with married sons. It should be noted that some of the widows who lived
with married sons faced a situation similar to that of Kamla: namely, they lived adjacent to their married sons and received a harvest share but cooked and ate separately and could not rely on support when there was no harvest to share. What about the other half? They lived in what I call “female households” without adult male earners: 30% lived with unmarried children, 16% lived alone, and 4% lived with other single women (mainly other widows). Some of the last group lived with once-married daughters who had themselves been widowed, divorced or deserted.

Within this general picture, it is important to note that how these factors played themselves out in the daily lives of individual widows depended on which caste and which region of the country they were from: as a general rule, upper-caste widows, especially in northern India, face the strictest social norms and constraints (see Chen 2000 for more details).

In sum, whether widows receive economic support depends on who they live with (and where) and their bargaining power within the household which, in turn, depends on what they own and what they earn. The widow who owns land or a house—or who has an independent source of income—is more likely to be able to command support from her husband's family, her own family, or her children. However, even if she owns property and earns an income, a widow is likely to have less agency within the household than married women in that same household because of the social stigma and taboos surrounding widowhood.

What do these findings suggest about intra-household dynamics and women's agency in India? First of all, it is important to identify the religious or caste community a woman is from, the region of the country she lives in, the type and composition of household she lives in, and who is the head of the household. Second, it is important to compare her to other members of her household in terms of employment status, marital status, sex and age. Third, to gauge her bargaining power it is important to determine her fallback position. In contexts where a woman cannot depend on support from male kin, her fallback position depends on what she owns and what she earns. In sum, women's agency depends on a set of context-specific factors and understanding
women's agency requires an in-depth knowledge of these factors.

My field study of widows grew into a larger project which included a workshop for widows followed by a conference on widowhood. It also generated two publications (a book on my research findings, an edited volume of the conference proceedings: Chen 2000 and Chen 1998, respectively) and a network of nongovernmental organizations committed to working with widows. The three-day workshop, in which 25 widows and ten activists from the seven study states as well as Gujarat and Karnataka participated, served to place the personal experiences and common concerns of the widows at the center of the conference that followed. Their shared priorities were to have a house in their own name, a secure job or source of livelihood, education for their children, and—last but not least—a positive social image. The workshop also stimulated interest in the creation of a network of activists and widows concerned with the problems of widowhood.

The conference that followed brought together 65 activists, scholars and policymakers who have worked on issues relating to widows. The conference focused on four major issues: property rights, social protection, employment opportunities and the status of widows in society. For the conference, Jean Drèze and I asked P. N. Mari Bhat, a well-known demographer, to study the mortality rates of widows compared to married women. Comparing data from the 1961, 1971 and 1981 censuses of India, Bhat estimated mortality rates among widows and married women of the same older age group (above 45). He found that, on average across India, mortality rates are 85% higher among elderly widows than among married women of the same age (Bhat 1998).

Before Bhat's pioneering study, we knew that the loss of a husband often leads to a sharp decline of household income and an increase in social isolation and psychological hardship. We also knew that some widows are hounded out of their village— and even killed—by in-laws who want to reclaim the property of the late husband, and we knew that a few widows are still burned to death on their husband’s funeral pyre.3 However, until Bhat's study, we did not know the cumulative toll of social neglect of widows and social norms of widowhood in India on the life expectancy of widows. In brief, we did not
fully appreciate that the consequences of widowhood for women in India are, quite simply and starkly, a matter of survival.  

This cumulative toll on widows has been disguised because the incidence of widowhood in India is so much higher among women (over 8% in 1991) than among men (3% in 1991). This is because the consequences of widowhood in India are very different for women and men. First, practices of patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence, which have the effect of dispossessing and isolating women, have the opposite effect on men. Secondly, there are no social rules dictating whether, when, or to whom a widower can remarry. As a result, there is a much higher rate of remarriage among widowed men than among widowed women, especially in the older age groups. Thirdly, men face few (if any) restrictions in seeking paid work by reason of their sex or their marital status, although their religion, caste and class may influence their employment opportunities. Fourthly, the social stigma, restrictions and taboos associated with widows do not extend to widowers. (p. 231) There are, for instance, few (if any) dress, behavior, diet or other social codes for widowers. Finally, it should be noted that men are not expected to commit suttee.

In his article entitled “More than 100 Million Women are Missing”, which was published in the New York Review of Books in 1990, Sen focused international attention on the fact that in a large part of the developing world there are fewer females than males, not because of natural causes but because of major bias against females leading to excess female mortality (Sen 1990a). Sen compared actual female–male ratios in the populations of different countries with the ratios that would be expected if there was no gender bias in mortality (including female feticide) (Sen 1992, 2003). Since Sen's pioneering article, there have been debates about the appropriate method for arriving at exact estimates of missing women and what factors account for the missing women. The causal debate has focused on differences in the health care, medical treatment and nutrition of boys and girls, high maternal mortality rates among women of reproductive age, and, more recently with the spread of technology, sex-selective abortions. Mari Bhat's pioneering demographic analysis suggests that we need to consider excess mortality across the
female life cycle, including “missing widows”, particularly among older women.

III. Paid Work
Amartya Sen’s doctoral dissertation at Cambridge University was on what, in its published version, he called *Choice of Techniques* (Sen 1968). In this prize-winning thesis, he made the case for choosing labor-intensive technology in poor and populous countries. His other writings on employment and technological choice are found in his monograph *Employment, Technology and Development* (Sen 1975).

More recently, Sen has drawn attention to the importance of female participation in paid work as a determinant not only of women’s well-being but also of their agency, especially their bargaining power within their families. In their book *Hunger and Public Action*, Drèze and Sen point out that “there is considerable evidence that greater involvement with outside work and paid employment tend to go with less anti-female bias in intra-family distribution” (Drèze and Sen 1989: 58). They base this statement on, among other evidence, their comparative analysis of economic activity and life expectancy ratios between men and women across different regions of India (using 1980 data): the ranking of different regions in terms of economic activity and life expectancy ratios is almost the same (ibid.).

However, given the gender division of labor and the ideal of female seclusion discussed earlier, the female labor force participation rate in India is still quite low: 29% compared to the male rate of 56% (NCEUS 2007). Further, conditions of work often limit the ability of paid work to increase women’s well-being and agency (Koggel 2005). My research has largely focused on the paid work of working poor women in Bangladesh and India and has taken various forms: village studies, case studies, sub-sector analysis, policy analysis and impact assessments. More recently, with colleagues in the global research network WIEGO, I have overseen analysis of national data on employment status and employment outcomes in several countries, including India (ILO 2002; Chen *et al.* 2004, Chen *et al.* 2005). We have found that place of work and employment status are two key variables in determining the outcomes of paid work.
Each place of work—factory, firm, street, home, field, waterway, forest, construction site, or open area—is associated with specific risks, costs and opportunities. Thus, “place of work” is a key determinant of the outcomes of work, including the ability to exercise agency in the marketplace or at home. The dimensions of place of work which influence the agency outcomes of paid work include: for the self-employed, ownership and security of tenure of the site as well as access to customers and suppliers; for all workers, relationships of control at the work site (with fellow workers, with the equivalent of an employer, with other vested interest groups, with public authorities, or with family members) as well as the ability of workers to organize at the site—or away from it—in order to secure representation of their interests (Chen et al. 2005). Arguably, in regard to agency within the family, the key variable is whether the place of work is at home or outside the home, as interacting with fellow-workers and negotiating with vested interests in the marketplace are more likely to enhance a women’s sense of identity, solidarity and bargaining power than working in isolation at home.

“Employment status” is a conceptual framework used by labor statisticians to refer to two key dimensions of the contractual arrangements under which economically active persons work, namely the allocation of the authority over the work situation and the outcome of the work done; and the allocation of the economic risks involved. As such, it is a key variable in understanding the agency inherent in different paid work arrangements. With colleagues in the WIEGO network, I have analyzed evidence from a number of countries where data are available on the composition of the labor force by employment status (Chen et al. 2004, 2005). Our analysis suggests a hierarchy of earnings across different employment statuses within the informal economy, ranked in descending order as follows: informal employers; informal employees; own-account operators; casual day laborers; and industrial outworkers. Because women tend to be under-represented among informal employers and over-represented among industrial outworkers, there is a significant gender gap in average earnings within the informal workforce. Although data are not available to test this hypothesis, I would surmise that there is a similar hierarchy (p. 233) of agency across the different employment
statuses, contributing to a similar gender gap in the degree of agency from paid work.\textsuperscript{6}

The Government of India constituted a National Commission For Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector in September 2004. The mandate of the Commission was to examine the conditions of work and livelihood opportunities of informal workers, who represent 92\% of the total workforce in India. The Commission carried out detailed analysis of the 2004/5 National Sample Survey of India and other data sources and produced its report in mid-2007. This report provides a wealth of telling data on employment rates and employment patterns across India by place of work, employment status, economic sector, and by sex.

The Commission reports that the percentage of total workers who are informally employed (i.e. without social protection) is 96\% for women compared to 91\% for men. What follows is a summary of the key findings of the Commission regarding women’s informal employment outside of agriculture:

- The percentage of informal workers outside of agriculture who work from their own homes is 54\% for women and 16\% for men.
- The percentage of informal enterprises outside of agriculture located at home is 74\% for women and 31\% for men.
- Among informal women workers outside of agriculture, 21\% are industrial outworkers/home workers, 50\% are self-employed, and 29\% are wage-employed.
- Among informal women wage workers outside of agriculture, just over half (53\%) are regular wage workers, of which over half are domestic servants, and just under half (47\%) are casual wage workers (NCEUS 2007).

Working from their own or other people's homes, whether as self-employed, industrial outworkers, or domestic workers, tends to isolate women from fellow-workers in the same trade. This isolation undermines their ability to bargain for higher wages, better working conditions, higher prices and greater market access. This isolation is particularly hard on the industrial outworkers (also called home workers), who are dependent on the subcontractor for the supply of work and
raw materials and the sale of finished goods. Their lack of bargaining power has contributed to the fact that most home workers are paid very low piece rates, receive no overtime pay, often endure delayed payments, and often have their finished goods rejected arbitrarily by the contractor (ILO 2002; Chen et al. 2004).

In sum, whether women gain agency from paid work—and how much—depends on what they do, what employment arrangements they work under, and where they work. In his theory of entitlement, as noted earlier, Sen argues that the food a person commands depends on what she earns, which in turn depends on what she owns, what she sells, and at what price. A similar case can and should be made for the agency associated with different types of paid work. Admittedly, Sen focuses on paid work outside the home as a way of strengthening women’s agency. This is an important distinction, given that the majority of women in India who are gainfully employed work from their own or others’ homes and their isolation undermines their scope for agency. However, in discussing women’s agency through paid work, Sen does not pay as much attention to the structure of labor market opportunities and the possibility of labor market failures as he does when discussing command over food.
IV. Gender Justice in South Asia

Most recently, Sen has made a major theoretical case that capabilities—what people are able to do and to be—provide the best basis for understanding and promoting social justice, including gender justice, or development more generally. Among other capabilities, such as political liberties and freedom of association, Sen mentions “the free choice of occupation” or being able to seek employment on an equal basis with others. But, in his theorization of capabilities, Sen stops short of endorsing a specific list of core human capabilities (Nussbaum 2005). Also, he does not fully integrate the structure of opportunities that determines whether or not persons can translate their capabilities into actual functionings.

On the basis of my research and experience in South Asia for over three decades, I would argue that gender segmentation in the structure of employment opportunities and the gender gap in access to employment opportunities are key contributors to gender inequality in well-being and social justice. This is because for poor persons, especially women, their labor power is often their only economic resource. This was true of the destitute women who were denied the right to food-for-work in Bangladesh in 1975. This was true of the widows I met in India who were denied use rights to their husband’s share of land and did not receive economic support from male kin. This is true of millions of working poor women today in Bangladesh, India and other countries in South Asia.

What does Amartya Sen have to say about the structure of employment opportunities and access to employment opportunities? From my admittedly selective reading of Sen, it strikes me that his entitlement theory provides a structural perspective on opportunities while his capability theory does not (Sen 1985, 1999). Yet opportunities or the lack of them are what facilitate or constrain the ability of capabilities to become actual functionings. It also strikes me that Sen puts more emphasis on earned income and physical survival in his entitlement theory and more emphasis on non-material functionings in his capability theory. It also strikes me (p.235) that Sen puts more emphasis on groups or classes of individuals in his entitlement theory and more emphasis on individuals qua individuals in his capability theory.
To achieve gender justice in South Asia—especially for destitute women, for widows, for working poor women—will require, I believe, the promotion of labor-intensive technologies to increase employment opportunities (which, as we have seen, Sen made the case for in his Ph.D. thesis), addressing the structural constraints that limit women's access to these opportunities (as Sen argues in his entitlement theory), and increasing women's freedom and agency (as Sen calls for in his capabilities theory). It will require a focus on the basic material as well as non-material capabilities needed by women, on the structure of economic opportunities available to women, on the social and official norms that constrain certain women from accessing these opportunities, and on the collective as well as individual agency of women.

In closing, those seeking gender justice in South Asia and elsewhere remain indebted to Amartya Sen for putting famine, widowhood and paid work—and related analytical concepts and normative standards—on the mainstream development agenda.

Bibliography references:


—— (1991), Coping with Seasonality and Drought in Western India (New Delhi: Sage Publications).


—— (1985), Commodities and Capabilities (Amsterdam: North-Holland).


Notes:
(1) Amartya Sen raised some of the funds for this research from the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER).

(2) Caste in India has been defined as a “closed” social group characterized by the obligation to marry within the group (Dumont 1980). The four main broad caste groups are the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The first three are considered the Upper Castes. In the early twentieth century, the British introduced the term “Other Backward Classes” for the Shudras and the terms “Scheduled Castes” and “Scheduled Tribes” for various groups that fall outside the main caste hierarchy.

(3) In the recent past, in many areas and social groups where suttee was once practiced—notably West Bengal—no case of suttee has been reported for several generations. However, the practice has continued in some areas—notably Rajasthan—albeit in limited numbers. Whereas only stray cases were reported throughout India from 1950 to 1980, the number of reported cases increased to as many as three a year during the 1980s, mainly in Rajasthan but also in Madhya Pradesh (Chen 2000).

(4) P. N. Mari Bhat died suddenly on 30 July 2007 at the age of 56. At the time, he was director of the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) in Mumbai. Considered among the finest demographers of his generation in the world, an intellectual tribute to his work appears in the 8 September 2007 issue of the Indian journal Economic and Political Weekly (Das Gupta et al. 2007).

(5) Some informal employers earn more than some formal wage workers, especially low-end wage workers in the private sector.

(6) With the ILO Statistics Bureau, the WIEGO network has developed an indicator on the “structure of the labor force by employment status and sex” for measuring progress at the national level towards gender equality under Millennium Development Goal no. 3.
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