

## The Capability Approach: Mainstreaming Gender into Poverty Discourses in Fiji

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### *Abstract*

*This article is concerned with the frequently 'silent' and 'hidden' aspects of women's lives which highlights that there are dimensions beyond the material aspects of engendered hardship and subordination. The paper provides a synopsis of the ways in which poverty analysis and research have been conducted in Fiji. This discussion centres on two objectives. The paper introduces the 'capability approach' as a means to conceptualize and assess gender inequality and women's wellbeing. It is argued that to characterize women as especially 'poor' is to misrepresent gender disadvantage. Rather than mainstreaming gender into poverty by defining women as especially poor within existing poverty concepts, efforts must be made to reformulate the understanding of poverty to reflect the distinctly gendered nature of disadvantages for both women and men. The gendered nature of poverty sharpens poverty discourses by suggesting how the experience of poverty is conditioned by gender identities.*

### Introduction

There has been a great deal of discussion in recent years about growing poverty, vulnerability to poverty and heightening inequalities between different groups in Fiji (Barr 1993a; 1993b; Bryant 1990; 1991; 1992; 1993; HIES 2003; Kanbur 1984; Narsey 2006; Stavenuiter 1983; UNDP 1996). The 2002-03 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) outlines a wide variety of conceptual and empirical approaches to measure poverty and inequality in Fiji using nationwide statistics on income, health, employment, education and the like. The purpose here is not to give a comprehensive critical analysis of the various approaches or concepts used in this survey. It is aimed at providing an outline of an alternative and a complementary approach, which can help to assess the extent of differences in living standards within the household. Poverty in

Fiji has most commonly been defined in terms of exclusion from ordinary life due to lack of resources (UNDP 1996).

In measuring poverty, earlier studies have relied on incomes (or expenditures) to distinguish the poor households from the non-poor ones by establishing a benchmark poverty line where the poverty line is determined using a variety of methods. Reliance on income as a measure of living standards assumes that it is a reliable indicator of the economic resources available to people, and that economic resources largely determine living standards. It remains a standard practice to measure poverty at the level of the household or family, and the resources and needs of individuals within these collective units are not considered separately. Even in the recent 2002-03 HIES, the measurements of poverty remain wedded to a materialist sense of social justice.

The equal sharing assumption has long been questioned and recently the neglected gender dimensions of poverty composition and risk is given great emphasis especially by feminist writers elsewhere (see Brannen and Wilson 1987; Buvinic 1983; Graham 1987; Millar and Glendinning 1987; 1989). Gender disadvantage cannot be understood with unmodified poverty concepts and indicators, which can both misleadingly deny the material subordination of women and entirely fail to reflect the ideological and cultural bedrock of gender inequity. The point is not that women are poor but that poverty is gendered. If different individuals within the household are likely to experience different levels of wellbeing, this could have major implications for our understanding of poverty and gender inequality in Fiji.

Poverty is multidimensional, and hence limiting measures to income or consumption shortfalls at household level masks the true extent of poverty, particularly for the vulnerable groups, like women and children within the household. As noted by Greig et.al., 'poverty lines assume homogeneity of needs when heterogeneity may be the dominant characteristic within a population' (2007: 18). What is less clear in conventional approaches is the relationship between household level poverty and female wellbeing, *that is*, does gender discrimination intensify or diminish with poverty? The factors that make men and women more vulnerable and the different ways in which they are able to move out of poverty have yet to be explored in Fiji's poverty studies. This form of analysis is generally lacking even at global stage. The answer to foregoing question is not easy, as gender and poverty have not been adequately addressed in poverty research and literature in Fiji as much as by ethnicity and *geography* (Bryant 1993; Naidu et.al. 1999; Narsey 2006; UNDP 1996). This neglect

becomes a problem for feminist analyses that argue that the household, irrespective of its location, is a key site of gender discrimination and subordination. Razavi (1999) states that despite long-standing feminist concerns about intra-household resource distribution, it remains 'rare to find standard surveys embarking on a quantitative exploration of intra-household poverty'. Hence, previous poverty studies in Fiji tell us little about the specifics of poverty experienced by women and, in particular, about the poverty experienced by the vast majority of women who are married and/or living with a male partner.

The assumption that resources/incomes are pooled within a household and that all outcomes are equally shared between household members has been frequently scrutinized by feminists for its androcentric biases (see England 1993; Evans 1991; Folbre 1988; Jennings and Waller 1990). Households cannot be viewed as monolithic institutions in which all the members agree on the strategies and means to be used to maximize family and household welfare. The fallacies of aggregation which underpin household analyses of poverty are evident in large part because they are not individualistic enough. They fail to capture the intra-household dynamics of resource allocation and distribution, which may depend on socio-cultural relations of gender, age, kinship, race relations and spatial distribution of resources and opportunities. Therefore, one has to look within the family or household to see how resources are distributed before one can judge whether or not all the members are in poverty.

Previous studies support the view that women are generally poorer than men. Bryant (1993) in her study of urban poverty found that of the 174 household surveyed, 15.5 percent were headed by women, an increase of 5 percent since 1989; the majority of them were living in poverty. UNDP (1996) indicated that '...poor households have a higher proportion of women as their heads than other income groups'. Concern about the 'feminisation of poverty' over time has been an important theme in Fiji's poverty research. Poverty lines may not be able to penetrate the household, but it is theoretically possible to generalise about the types of households in order to depict the extent of poverty among women according to the statements such as: 'A disproportionate number of poor households in Fiji - almost one in every seven - are headed by woman and these households figure prominently among the case records of welfare organisations' (UNDP 1996: 54).

The evidence from published poverty reports in Fiji shows that female-headed households tend to be over-represented among the poor and that lone women are more likely to experience poverty than lone men

(UNDP 1996). It has also been highlighted in the 2002-03 HIES that around 13 percent of households were headed by females (Narsey 2006). The estimation of women living below the poverty line is made on the basis of the number of women assumed to live in poor households including all female-headed households. However, this is problematic because assumptions about female-headed households are an example of neglect of differences between women - a cornerstone of gender analysis - which leads to flawed generalisations about women and poverty.

While feminization of poverty has been a recurrent theme in poverty discourses, using household as a unit for estimating the number of women living below the poverty line is problematic. It is the measure that masks the extent of poverty among women. The measure is cast in a narrow framework of poverty that focuses on income alone and on the household as a unit, a focus that leads to ignoring intra-household disparities. It would be inaccurate, however, to see this as a problem confined to the workings of household (though this is a major element), because the ways in which women and men relate to material resources are grounded in their different social relations and subject positions in communities and societies at large. The idea of poverty as a condition, and the expectation that all resources have the same meanings to all members of the household, needs to be replaced by a more relational concept of poverty which also admits gendered subjects. To understand more than the fact that economic inequality exists and that most often it is women who are economically disadvantaged, it is important to understand the nature and causes of women's poverty as they are constructed and maintained under the system of patriarchal relations of domination. This article argues for recognition of the gendered character of all poverty rather than feminization of poverty which only concentrates on household poverty.

Only when gender relations are factored into the poverty equation can a thorough understanding of women's impoverishment be gained. As far as the uncovering of women's poverty is concerned, the focus of this paper is to understand the structure of relationships within the household and explore how women often are poor within marriage, regardless of the level of income received by the male head of the household. As argued by Greig et.al.:

Rather than looking at the symptoms of inequality (individual opportunities and outcomes) the focus should be the underpinning processes and causes (social structures that foster unequal power relations). Inequalities are not simply carefully constructed measurement scale but complex webs of dynamic social

relations that privilege some while constricting the life-chances of others (2007: 28)

Methodologically, the household model is not conducive to ask, let alone answer, the kind of feminist questions about gender, asymmetric power and intra-household relations that this paper seeks to generate. It is important to know whether or not women experience relative poverty risks and vulnerability when issues of gender, hierarchy and power relations are brought into the analyses of the household.

Gender division is at the heart of social relations within the household because it constitutes the salient constructions of difference and identity, which eventually transforms into power relations and thus the basis of unequal resource allocation (Anthias 1998). It is, therefore, necessary to develop an analytical framework that explains the unequal social outcomes and processes underlying intra-household relations. It is necessary to include gender in the analysis to understand the basic aspects of women's poverty, since class categorisation often ignores the multiplicity of women's positioning within contemporary social life (see Barrett 1991 1992).

Following Smith's (1992) proposal, the discussion starts with women's concrete experiences, recognizing the differences in economic and cultural contexts, and then locating the processes through which these experiences come into existence in wider social relations. Feminist literature and research suggest that economic dependence on man is the starting point for understanding the gender issues that eventuate in the experiences of the economically dependent housewife (see Acker 1999; Anthias 2001; Skeggs 1997). As Acker writes:

Feminist scholars recognized at least 30 years ago that to understand gender it was necessary to study the concrete activities of women and men, activities through which differences were created and inequalities maintained. The conventional approach to class analysis, which emphasises the family or household as the unit of analysis and the feminist perspective which claims the priority of the individual, stand at the opposite poles of the debate (2003: 58).

Here it is argued that women are less likely to gain positions of high economic value because women have less economic opportunities due to cultural boundaries and gender discrimination within the economic system. Social norms that exclude women from realising full potential are

normally reinforced through familial and conjugal relations. These institutional constraints severely affect women's ability to access resources and opportunities both within and outside the household. But even where social norms do not inhibit such access and physical mobility in public spaces, women are often bound by labour demands placed by their male kin, particularly husbands or fathers, making them unable to freely dispose off their obligations to explore or engage in earning opportunities or even enjoy leisure on their own accord. For instance, Narsey (2007) noted that it is expected that women and girls will be responsible for most of the housework, whatever their other contributions at work, on the farm, in the shop or elsewhere. By not doing their fair share of housework, men deny the women the same freedoms and stress relief that they appropriate for themselves. Men often put their feet up after work to relax and enjoy their drinks etc. or visit friends, where such opportunities are often denied to women within the household. Women's kinship roles serve to define relations of production and women become defined more as wives and relate to production only indirectly, often by virtue of their marriage. For instance, many rural Indo-Fijian women remain in their village of origin and share ownership of the means of production with their brothers (Chattier 2005). Yet upon marriage, these women move to their husband's villages and begin to occupy a subordinate position of wife. Women in Fiji claim their access to resources (e.g. property ownership) indirectly, that is, only through productive and reproductive activities for their husband's or the kin. Hence, women do not directly assume the class position of their husbands, although their standard of living and the social expectations they face are obviously results of the husband's position. Such women, who are tied down by their cultural values, are often in much different situations than their husbands within the system of patriarchal relations that constitute gendered processes of resource allocation and ownership. In fact, women's social mobility is represented by marital mobility, that is, from their father's position to their husband's, implying that married women's social status is well represented by their husband's, not by their own. To see this more clearly, the part that gender takes in structuring relations and promoting compelling systems of belief that justify and perpetuate domination, need to be examined. Poverty and welfare analysis, therefore, has to begin at the level of the individual, that is, economic situation of women within the household should be clearly assessed on the basis of allocations to each individual within the household and not the household as a collective unit.

Amartya Sen's capability approach provides a useful evaluative

framework for an engendered understanding of poverty because it shifts the unit of analysis from households to individuals and from a focus on resources themselves to command over commodities.

### **Feminist Concerns and the Capability Approach**

A solution to the concerns raised above is found in a version of the capabilities approach- an approach to quality of life assessment pioneered by Amartya Sen (1980; 1992; 1999). This section evaluates Sen's capability approach through a feminist lens, as an alternative framework to understand the questions of poverty, intra-household relations and gender inequality. Much of Sen's work has focused on inequality and poverty. Different interpretations of the capability approach across academic disciplines have led to several conflicting views.<sup>1</sup> Sen's formulation of the capability approach is an important conceptual advancement for considering en-gendered poverty, because it illustrates how thinking about gender offers a stronger conceptualisation of rules of entitlement for all the poor, not just women.

The capability approach stipulates that an evaluation of individual or social states should focus on the individual's real or substantive freedom to lead the lives which they find valuable (Sen, 1993). This real freedom is called a person's capability. A person's capability reflects a person's potential wellbeing in contrast to the actual wellbeing a person manages to realise (Sen, 1985). The wellbeing of a person is made up by a number of functionings as stated by Sen. For example, being mentally healthy, being physically healthy, being sheltered, being well fed, being educated, having a satisfying job, caring for the children and the elderly, enjoying cultural activities, and being part of the community. These can only be achieved if the individuals are empowered to participate in activities that result in the expected functioning of the individual. All capabilities together correspond to the overall freedom to lead the life that a person has reason to value (Robeyns, 2003). Sen (1993: 33) stresses the importance of 'reason to value' because we need to scrutinise our motivations for valuing specific lifestyles, and not simply value a certain life without re-

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<sup>1</sup> Ingrid Robeyns (2000) has discussed some of those views, and explained at length different interpretations of Sen's capability approach. Nussbaum's version of the capability approach has different aims than Sen's and relies on different concepts, even if their labelling overlaps. For comparisons of the two approaches, see Nussbaum (2000), Sen (1993) and also Gasper (1997), Qizilbash (1998) and Crocker (1995) among others.

flecting upon it. By advocating normative evaluations which should look at people's capabilities, Sen criticises evaluations that focus exclusively on utilities, resources or income. He argues against utility-based evaluations. For example, an income or expenditure method of evaluating welfare at the household level might in fact hide important intra-household dimensions and result in misleading interpersonal or inter-temporal comparisons. According to Sen (1993), resources are only the means to enhance people's wellbeing and advantage, whereas the concern should be with what matters intrinsically and people's abilities to convert these resources into capabilities. Robeyns (2004) argues that a person's capability set depends on three different types of conversion factors (social, environmental and personal) which then enables and influences their capabilities. These relations are described in Figure 1. The social conversion factors are determined by a number of societal aspects, such as social institutions, which include the educational system, political system, the family and other social norms such as gender norms, religious norms, and cultural norms. The environmental conversion factors are determined by the environment in which a person lives and the personal conversion factors are determined by one's mental and physical aspects such as disabilities or bodily vulnerabilities which affect the types and degrees of capabilities one can generate with resources.

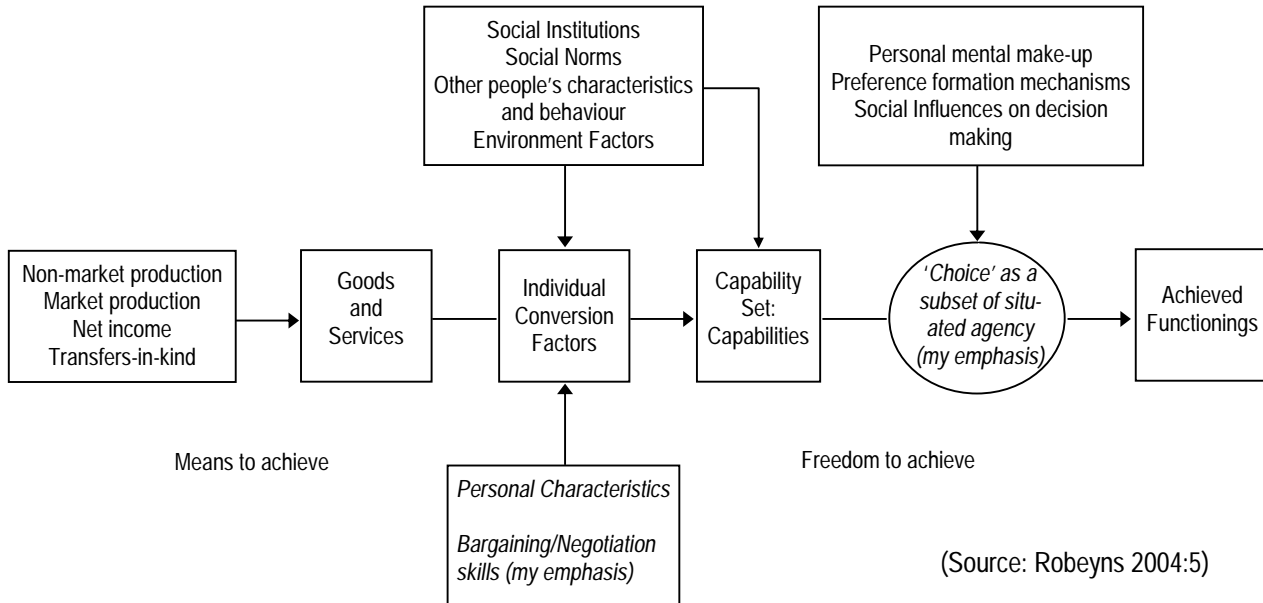
This functioning model helps move away from private consumption concepts of welfare. This approach provides a more complete analysis of gender inequality which not only maps gender equalities in functionings and capabilities but also analyses gender differentials in command over resources. Ultimately, approaches which focus on outcomes rather than processes are only blunt tools for describing gender related advantages or disadvantage, because how capabilities become functionings for individuals depends both on social identities such as age and ethnicity and on social processes such as intra-household relations. For women these conversions are different than that of men. For women many of the achievable capabilities and functionings are constrained as a result of household relations. For example, a woman may have a certain education which equips her for employment, yet the achievement of the functioning of 'being employed' may be prevented by a husband or by a mother-in-law who objects to her acquiring a career path. The capability approach is, therefore, attractive for gender analysis, because it rejects the idea that women's wellbeing can be subsumed under wider entities such as the household or the community, while not denying the importance of social relations and interdependence between family and community members

in wellbeing evaluations.

Three strengths of the capability approach for assessing inequality in general and for gender inequality analysis in particular are as follows. The first advantage is that functionings and capabilities are properties of individuals and hence the capability approach implies ethical individualism. This means that each person will be taken into account in evaluations of poverty rather than households or communities. At the same time, the capability approach is not ontologically individualistic. As discussed earlier, the capability approach does not assume individuals are independent of others, or that our functionings and capabilities are independent of our concern for others or of the actions of others. Social and environmental conversion factors such as gender relations takes into account a number of societal features, such as social norms, traditional values and discriminatory practices (see Figure 1). In sum, the ethically individualistic and ontologically non-individualistic nature of the capability approach is a useful characteristic for wellbeing and inequality analysis (Robeyns 2001). This is also attractive for feminist concerns, because ethical individualism rejects the idea that women's wellbeing can be subsumed under wider entities such as the household or the community, while not denying the impact of care, social relations, and interdependence between family and community members.

The second advantage of the capability approach is that it is not limited to the market, but looks at people's functionings both in the market and non-market settings (Robeyns 2003). The inclusion of non-market dimensions of wellbeing can reveal complexities and ambiguities in evaluations of wellbeing that analyses of income or wealth alone cannot capture. Feminist economists have long been arguing that economics needs to pay attention to the processes and outcomes in both the market economy and the non-market economy (see, for example, Folbre 1994 2001; Himmelweit 2000). Inequality comparisons based only on the market economy, such as comparisons of income, earnings and job-holdings, exclude some important aspects of wellbeing such as care labour, household work, freedom from domestic violence, or the availability of supportive social networks. They also miss the fact that women spend much more time outside the market than men (see also Narsey 2007).

**Figure 1: A Schematic Representation of the Capability Approach**



These aspects matter particularly in gender related assessments of wellbeing and disadvantage. Sen's capability approach, therefore, fulfills this requirement as far as evaluations of women's well-being in non-material settings are concerned.

The third strength of the capability approach is that well-being is measured for the individual across diversities. The neoclassical theory of the family underlying many poverty approaches (such as the income or consumption measure) assume that all persons have the same utility function or are influenced in the same way and to the same extent by the same personal, social and environmental characteristics. The capability approach acknowledges human diversity, such as race, age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and geographical location in evaluations of welfare. As Sen (1992: xi) noted:

Investigations of equality - theoretical as well as practical - that proceed with the assumption of antecedent uniformity...thus miss out on a major aspect of the problem. Human diversity is not a secondary complication (to be ignored or to be introduced 'later on'), it is a fundamental aspect of our interest in equality.

The basic characteristics of the capability approach are important for gender inequality analysis because issues of diversity help understand intra-household inequalities and other related issues. Feminist scholars have argued that many theories of justice claim to address the lives of individuals, but closer scrutiny reveals that men's lives form the standard. Gender inequalities and injustices are assumed away or remain hidden, and are thereby indirectly justified (see Bubeck 1995; Folbre 2001; Okin 1989; Robeyns 2003). Okin (1989: 10-13) calls this 'false gender neutrality' where some theories of justice use gender-neutral language but they ignore the biological differences between the sexes, and the impact that gender has on the circumstances of individuals through gendered social institutions, gender roles, power differences and ideologies. Thus, 'gender-neutral terms frequently obscure the fact that so much of the real experiences of persons' does in fact depend on their gender (Okin 1989: 11). By conceptualising gender inequality and intra-household relations in the space of functionings and capabilities, there is more scope to account for human diversity, including the diversity stemming from people's gender.

The capabilities approach can be applied conceptually and practically in useful ways for evaluations of wellbeing, but leave a need for a finer and more dynamic view of gender related disadvantages. It is evi-

dent that the principal source of disparities in wellbeing may lie not in unequal abilities to convert goods into functionings, but in unequal abilities to establish command over goods. Sen (1985: 174) notes:

There are, of course, cases of joint ownership and even of social ownership. In the case of such jointness and also when the ownership is not joint but the use is (as with a family), there is a further problem of internal division of commodities commanded by the multi-person unit.

Most neoclassical economists are quite content with the concept of households as the basic unit of consumption, implying that all members had congruent interests. Over the last two decades, however, reservations about this unitary perspective have intensified among economists and other analysts. The unitary paradigm has been weakened by its failure to explain systematic household disparities.<sup>1</sup> There is a growing evidence of persistent intra-family inequalities in the distribution of resources and tasks, and of gender differences in expenditure patterns, as well as descriptions of intra-family interactions and decision-making. This indicates the need for a conceptualisation of the household that takes account of multiple actors, with varying and often conflicting preferences and interests, and differential abilities to pursue and realise those interests. Disparities in the command over essential goods and services have been explored by bargaining theories which interpret intra-household allocation of resources as outcomes of bargaining process. A brief outline of the bargaining framework is, therefore, warranted with particular emphasis on its applicability to concerns raised in this paper.

### **The Bargaining Model and Intra-Household Relations**

The nature of intra-household interaction and their command over resources could usefully be derived simultaneously containing elements of both cooperation and conflict.<sup>2</sup> The members of a household cooperate

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the relevant literature, see Alderman, et.al. (1995), Haddad, et.al. (1997) and Behrman (1997). The neoclassical restriction of income pooling was rejected in the pioneer tests of intra-household distribution (Thomas 1992). For other interesting discussions on some of the problems with a unitary conceptualization of the household, also see the writings of economists Amartya Sen (1983 1990), Kabeer (1991), Folbre (1986 1988), and Agarwal (1990); anthropologists Guyer (1981), Moore (1992), Harris (1981) and several others in Guyer and Peters (1987).

<sup>2</sup> The term 'cooperative conflict' to describe these intra-household interactions has been popularized by the writings of Amartya Sen (1983; 1990).

in so far as cooperative arrangements make each of them better-off than non-cooperation. However, many different cooperative outcomes are possible in relation to the distribution of goods and services amongst the members (Agarwal, 1994). These outcomes are beneficial to the negotiating parties relative to non-cooperation. But amongst the set of cooperative outcomes, there is an optimal outcome and some sub-optimal ones. The outcomes depend on the relative bargaining power of household members. A member's bargaining power would be defined by a range of factors, in particular, the strength of the person's fallback position, which is an outside option that determines how well-off s/he would be if cooperation failed (Agarwal 1994).

Folbre (1986) states that women and female children do not voluntarily relinquish leisure, education, food and their share of other commodities and opportunities in favour of others, but do so due to their inherent weak bargaining positions in the household. It is the juxtaposition of women's lack of economic power with the unequal allocation of household resources that lends the bargaining power approach much of its persuasive appeal.<sup>3</sup> While the bargaining literature seeks to unpack the determinants of intra-household inequality by focusing on alternative types of power and their material and non-material foundations, the capability approach is concerned with evaluating opportunities. As Iversen (2003) notes, the bargaining perspective complicates interpretations of market behaviour and intra-household distributions by considering not only individual interests but also the differential abilities to act on those interests, that is, the 'means to achieve'. The focus on domestic power imbalances makes the bargaining perspective particularly attractive as a backdrop for a discussion of the capability approach and its applicability within the context of poverty and gender relations.

To see whether the capability approach can accommodate such discussions on the role of domestic power imbalances, we need to revisit Sen's reasonings on intra-household inequality. Criticising the Nash-bargaining model of marriage, Sen (1990) argues that the proposition that the fallback position alone determines bargaining power is too narrow an informational base to explain a phenomenon as profound as intra-household distribution.<sup>4</sup> A theory that aims to explain intra-household

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Folbre's (1986) statement might suggest that economic power is the only type of power that can be analyzed in a bargaining framework. This conveys too narrow an interpretation of at least some bargaining models in the context of this study.

<sup>4</sup> The Nash-bargaining models of marriage developed by Manser and Brown (1980) and McElroy and Horney (1981) introduced economic power and bargaining into the

inequality should accommodate what he terms as the perceived interest response and the perceived contributions response. For example, Sen argues: Given other things, if the self-interest perception of one of the persons were to attach less value to his or her own wellbeing, then the collusive solution, if different, would be less favourable to that person, in terms of wellbeing (1990: 136).

Sen further notes that this overlap between women's personal and household interests preserves intra-household inequality. If a woman in a bargaining model perceives the welfare of other household members on par with her own, then intra-household distribution would tally with this interest perception. The advantages of using this model for gender inequality and poverty are clear. It presents the societal context of gender bias as setting the terms of intra-household bargaining, since the reality of vulnerability to poverty for men and women is differentiated in legal, economic and cultural ways. To exit from a marriage is more costly for women than for men in most traditional societies like Fiji, a fact which weakens women in intra-household bargaining over division of labour, consumption rights, freedom of movement and freedom from domestic violence (Narsey 2007). A second advantage of the model is that it differentiates between the objective contribution to household livelihoods by the individual and their perceived contributions.

From poverty perspective, the cooperative conflict model suggests how capabilities are converted into functionings since individuals are differently embedded in the social, conjugal, and kinship equation. More significantly, it suggests the possibility of women facing everyday lives in which their work is devalued and face implicit threats of physical violence or curtailment of their physical mobility, where their exit options are limited. As Agarwal (1997) notes, a wide range of factors can define a person's bargaining power, some of which are quantifiable, such as individual economic assets, and institutional support mechanisms like communal, family or legal systems. The existing literature on Fiji suggest that norms and perceptions set limits to women's processes of bargaining

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domestic arena. In a Nash-bargaining model of marriage, the intra-household allocation of resources is determined by what has broadly been termed the bargaining power of the two spouses. I adopt the convention of referring to this as the intra-household allocation of resources. By that I mean the intra-household distribution of goods and services, taken to reflect individual commands over or 'possessions' of the relevant goods. The terms 'commands over' or 'possessions of' will be used interchangeably throughout the paper. In the jargon of Figure 1, these goods are the 'means to achieve' well-being outcomes.



and/or negotiation within the household (see also Harrington 2004; Jalal 1997). Social norms, social perceptions and self-perceptions, can affect subsistence distribution both directly and indirectly. What this paper argues is that women experience gendered vulnerabilities which are revealed through considering their gendered roles and relations, which commands attention in poverty analysis methods.

### **Gendered Inequality in Capabilities and Intra-Household Negotiations**

This section uses the capability framework to indicate a space within which intra-household comparisons of wellbeing are made. A glimpse of how households are socio-culturally situated in relation to gender and generation, gives a more comprehensive picture of how poor households operate on daily basis. The evidence on gender inequality against a selected capability listing presented here is illustrative and not meant to provide a complete assessment of gender inequality within households. The data presented in this paper has been collected through ethnographic research with eighteen women participants of rural Indo-Fijian origin. This survey was done between February and May 2003 and follow-up interviews in August and September 2004. This was conducted in two rural Indo-Fijian settlements in Labasa. It was primarily a qualitative account that contextualises the experiences of participants with historical, socio-economic and comparative literature on Fiji.

Emphasis is placed on the allocations within households from the perspective of socio-cultural entitlements to resource shares expressed in the norms governing 'who gets what and why'. As used here, the term 'entitlement' refers to the socially and culturally recognized rights of specific categories of persons to particular resource shares within the household. The concept of socio-cultural entitlements to resource shares developed here is consistent with Sen's approach (1990). He argues that conflict and cooperation coexist in domestic groups and that individual self-interests are not necessarily submerged by the concern for the domestic group as a whole. The emphasis on social and cultural elements of entitlement here leads directly to consideration of the way in which connotations of gender, age and kinship generate inequality and at the same time mediate opportunities to achieve wellbeing among household members. It is important to point out that this paper concentrates on a few capabilities which include physical health, shelter and environment, and domestic work and non-market care. The empirical evidence is specific to the con-

text of this study though the capability framework could be replicated elsewhere.

### **Physical Health**

The capability of life and physical health concerns the ability of an individual to live long and a healthy life. Gender-based differences in mortality and morbidity, for instance, must be seen as representing systematic differences in healthcare and nutritional intake (see for example, Kynch and Sen 1983; McKee 1984). These differences are often related to socio-economic and cultural factors that affect nutrition, lifestyle, access to health services and the overall health risks that individuals face throughout their lives. This paper concentrates on two dimensions of health: 1) food allocation and distribution and 2) access to health services. The questions raised in this section are whether allocation of food and health appears to favour adults, especially male and/or household heads and whether women are explicitly or implicitly discriminated in food consumption and allocation of health services.

The association between poverty and health is through food access and allocation. Food needs between household members are culturally constructed and partly understood in relation to beliefs about work (its intensity and perceived value) and wellbeing. Participant's perceptions about the relationship between work intensity and intra-household allocations of food consumption using ethnographic evidence are presented below.<sup>5</sup> For example, Maya said 'my husband and son work hard in the farm...so I serve good food to them first before children and women eat'.<sup>6</sup> This may go some way to rationalizing higher consumption of food by men than women whereby male members of the household (son, husband, and son-in-law) have preference in food proportions over female

<sup>5</sup> In order to protect the anonymity of individuals being studied, participant's names and place names have been changed. Out of concern for the privacy of participants, identifying personal details have been omitted and altered. In the following paragraphs attempt is made to incorporate the stories of these eighteen women and about their poverty and well-being situation. But it must be noted that due to word limitation and repetition of similar themes, a selection of participant voices are presented not all eighteen.

<sup>6</sup> The conversations with research participants were conducted in Fiji Hindustani and later translated to English for data analysis and presentation. When transcribing data I made sure that the meaning of the conversation and words used by the research participants did not lose their originality and authenticity. For this reason, these words are in quotation marks.

members and small children. In addition, the need of each individual influences the level of consumption of other individuals. For example, Paaru said, 'my husband does not think about our children...sometimes he brings fish...cleans and cooks it and eats the whole fish'. In fact, the differential distribution of food reflects social divisions and conveys hierarchies of power and status within the household. Practices which lead to inequitable distribution of food in the family include feeding males first, particularly adult males, and giving them the choicest and largest servings. Sangita mentioned that 'I serve big portions of food to my husband and children...and I think about them first. Sometimes I have little or nothing to eat...so I sleep with an empty stomach'. On a similar note, Maya stated 'when my husband is not at home for any meal, then I make sure I leave a special plate of food for him'. These are part of the 'expectations' of being a good wife, mother and daughter-in-law.

Ideas about entitlements to food, as in this instance, are not only culturally sanctioned but also sanctified in spiritual terms, a frequent occurrence in Indian societies where women are charged with greater responsibilities for maintaining a family's social and religious status. The norms and values justifying such dietary practices are subscribed to by both men and women and reflect cultural beliefs about the relative needs and contributions of different household members. These practices are partly reinforced by the fear psychology of the consequences of violating these norms about female altruism and self-sacrifice. Some of these are exemplified as follows:

- When I can, I give my husband and sons more. Men don't understand if food runs short, so I wait till they have eaten. (Kala Wati)
- A good wife is one who makes sure her husband has enough to eat and not having to listen to his complaints about food. (Savita)
- If there is less, I eat less. You have to feed the men more because they work hard. (Jai Raji)
- How can you explain to children that there is not enough food...? When my small daughter cries, I feed her. And I sleep with an empty stomach. (Paaru)

While it is difficult to know how widespread this practice is, it is common for the woman of the household to hold-off eating until the men have had their fill. These protocols around serving and eating a meal enact ideas about social relations such as seniority, hierarchy, femininity

and masculinity. In between female members of the household, age and seniority protocols determine who eats first and who eats last in the family, for example, mother-in-law eats first followed by daughter-in-law and small children. On some occasions these practices were revealed through direct observation of food distribution during the interviews. Not only were there clear disparity in the amounts of food served to male and female members, but male members were also privileged in the distribution of the accompanying items, such as vegetables and lentils. Women and young girls make do with pickles and chutney.

The impact of poor nutrition on health and the gendered allocation of health services are particularly clear-cut in this study. For many women participants, poverty meant going without food in order to provide for others whilst men do not reciprocate. A local health centre nurse confirmed that Indian women in the village have health problems including being underweight, anaemic, diabetes, hypertension and the increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases. Prevailing ideas about self-sacrifice and self-restraint by women also play an important role. For example, Jai Raji said: 'I am an Indian wife and I think about my husband first...sometimes when I get sick, I don't go to hospital because my husband is sick and wants to see a doctor. I don't go because of little money and so my husband can go'. As a result, women like Karuna are less able to take time off in response to ill-health, and try to keep going, sometimes with the help of medicine for her asthma, rather than take time out of her housemaid duties to get better. It should be noted that women have no clearly recognized entitlement to necessary healthcare and women themselves bolster this value system by ignoring their own ill-health, seeing it as their role to continue to work as long as they are physically able to. This clearly shows how gender hierarchies based on a patriarchal system affect entitlements within the household.

It is, however, paradoxical that while gender ideologies express bias in food access and health services, it is found that in terms of outcomes such as longevity and physique, women (of both ethnic groups) feature favourably. On average, eight women in this study had good health status and the rest (ten participants) suffered from various ailments such as general weakness, diabetes, mild stroke or asthma and old age. And on average eight men of these eighteen households had equally good health status while three either suffered from heart disease or had old age ailments and seven others had died at an average age of 55.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Note that the health status measured here is using participant's perceptions on the scale of intensity: Poor health- means physically weak and nearing death; Average-

So the question that arises from this is whether gender discrimination actually exists. Or is it partly a consequence of subservience of women to the stronger gender? Or is it that women simply pretend subservience as a cultural norm? Is it possible that women have unrestricted access to food and often indulge in snack food consumption, by eating during food preparation and by consumption of 'left-overs' or is it because of men's personal social lifestyle activities (like smoking and drinking) that they tend to have shorter lives? These issues need closer examination.

All women participants stated they consume some kind of snack in-between meals, for example, afternoon tea, eating at a friend's place over a chat, or eating at workplace. It is important to highlight local definitions of 'good food' and whether it is healthy enough. When the participants were asked what were their definition of good food, most of them said 'being able to eat generous amounts of vegetables, rice, roti and meat in a week, but it is not healthy because they are not able to eat meat and all kinds of vegetables in a week'. While some of the participants were able to snack in between meals or during preparations, it did not actually count as good food or nutritious because it mostly consists of tea and local savouries and sweets. However, the life expectancy disadvantage of men suggests that in addition to their 'gendered' advantage in food consumption, there are social lifestyle activities (like drinking and smoking) that affect their health status. Geeta's husband died recently and she said: 'I always told my husband that too much *yaqona* and eating hot curry is not good for his health...and he died of a heart attack'. A local health nurse also confirmed that 'Indian men normally suffer from diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and liver failure because they drink too much *kava*, beer and smoke often' (based on personal communication in March 2003). What gender differences in life expectancy tell us is not that most men are discriminated against, but that men and women experience different age-specific mortality risks related to both different physiologies and nutrition and to different divisions of labour, as well as leisure broadly defined. The above discussion suggests that longevity of life alone is not a good measure of wellbeing. Thus, the life expectancy advantages of women do not cancel out the processes of disadvantages and deprivation in other capabilities.

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mild illness like asthma, stroke, diabetes and weakness from old age and good health status means without any illness.

## Shelter and Environment

Being sheltered and enjoying a safe and pleasant environment can be conceptualized as functionings and capabilities, although one would prefer to think of shelter and environment as resources. At the instrumental level, good housing is positively related to good mental health and physical health. But housing also counts intrinsically as 'the physical space that is most intimately associated with one's identity' (Bratt 2002), and thereby has a substantial impact on how one feels about oneself and even about one's personal empowerment and security. The questions to be considered here are whether housing poverty has a gendered aspect, and in what ways, women are disadvantaged in relation to men in their access to living space.

To fully assess gender inequality in shelter, this paper investigates aspects such as the extent to which men and women have ownership or tenancy rights to the house or land, equal decision-making power over construction or furnishing of a house, or whether outside help is provided in its construction and whether 'home' is a place of security or of abuse.

Poverty is often defined commonly in terms of household assets and resource access, for example, land and livestock. But since patriarchy is common in Fiji, women have widely different property relations to men. Both Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian societies are patriarchal, meaning that women's access to ownership of property in practice is subordinate (Jalal 1998). Prasad and Kumar (1998) noted that this subordination arises from the fact that females do not inherit their share in the family property on equal footing with the male progeny. This includes share in land ownership, leased land for farming and ownership of house site. The families of the participants in this study strongly adhere to customary practices and only provide gifts such as household valuables and the immediate needs of the newly wed at the time of their marriage. The custom of 'Kanyadaan' is still practised today at Hindu marriages which further reduces the status of women through their lack of rights over parental properties, particularly, land and house. For example, Geeta and Savita were reluctant to demand their share of properties from their parents due to the fear of creating enmity with their brothers. The male progenies regard their parents' properties as their own and guard them with a sense of ownership (information obtained during interviews in August 2004). In Indo-Fijian society, inheritance is passed through male off-springs often denying women ownership rights and forcing women to be dependent on males for access to land. Women's experience of poverty is different

from that of men as a result of asymmetry in entitlement systems. In fact, women's claims to shelter and support consequently tend to be normative, embedded to a large extent in socially ascribed obligations associated with marriage, family and kinship. There is, therefore, a fundamental asymmetry in the distribution of material and normative entitlements within the household.

Rural Indo-Fijian women are disadvantaged in two ways. The first is through discriminatory land inheritance practices, by which they lose the right of inheritance once married. Participants in this study stated that they had to move into their husband's house and farmland after marriage and as a result lost out completely on any form of inheritance from the family wealth, unless the daughter was the sole inheritor. For example, Nirwani as an only child inherited her father's house and a small piece of land after her marriage, while Geeta, Muniamma, Tara and Sukh Dai inherited their husband's house and farmland only after their deaths. When women like Tara or Nirwani become land lease titleholders of the farm and house site, it is largely by default, as widows or sole inheritors. For married women, strong moral sanctions as well as post-marital residence tend to prevent further claims to joint family property and to the parental home if occupied by a married brother. As noted by Carswell (2003) the institutional structures and dominant social discourses do not encourage women to either inherit farms as their brothers or husbands do, or become registered cane growers in rural Indo-Fijian settlements. A number of participants commented that it would be 'shameful' to ask for a share when large amounts had been spent on their marriages and they were living in their husband's house.

Secondly, rural Indo-Fijian women in this study were mostly married to landless cane-cutters who only had ownership to the house-site because access to land in Fiji has an ethnic dimension. In Fiji, the land property rights of ethnic Fijians are protected by the Constitution, thus restricting availability of land as a source of security to other communities. For many participants their house sites are owned by indigenous Fijian landowners and their greatest fears were that they might be evicted from their farms. For this reason, they do not build any permanent house structures. Some participants even visited the Fijian landowners to request for a grace period to stay on at their house sites, permissions which had to be reciprocated by the Indo-Fijian families in other ways. Savita's story is as follows:

We got a grace period from the Fijian landowner to stay here. It is a friendly arrangement between the landowner and my hus-

band's family. So when the landowner was getting late to send cane to the mill...sugarcane crushing season was about to end, my husband and his brothers helped the Fijian landowner in cutting his cane for free. We help to keep the friendly relationship with the landowner.

While the communal nature of land ownership in Fiji protects the rights of native owners as a group, it restricts land development and women's access to land (Jalal 1998). Women of both Fijian and Indian ethnicity suffer from the traditional practices and norms which are inherently discriminatory. Most rural Indo-Fijian women do not have the ownership of the house and live in poor housing conditions whereby the husband's house provides them with the only source of security and social standing in the community. This is what Paaru had to say:

sometimes I feel like leaving my husband and living somewhere else with my children, but I can't leave. If I go...where will we live and rent will be expensive. Here at least I have a house.

Vulnerability to domestic violence is an aspect of the gendered nature of poverty because poor women, in particular, are least able to remove themselves from violent situations within households. Women may have to live in abusive households because alternatives to a secure shelter other than husband's house are often bleak. Therefore, women's independent access to property, particularly housing, is circumscribed by their perpetual role as 'dependents' of their male kin. In this regard, there is considerable intra-household inequality where women tend to suffer inequality in shelter and property inheritance and ownership. The ownership of land and property by male counterparts leaves little room for women like Paaru to bargain for equality within the household.

This also has implications for distribution of matrimonial property in divorce settlements as the distribution is based on a monetary notion of 'economic' contribution to marriage. Jalal (1997) has noted that wives who have spent years raising children, looking after the home and working on the farm are disqualified from any claim to a share of property if the marriage ends. In Fiji, and most of Pacific Island countries, there are no legal barriers to women owning a property as individuals or as part of a family but the interpretation of the customary law governing the control and management of land gives power over land and property mainly to men (Jalal 1998). Therefore, property rights and entitlements over hous-

ing and environment, including land, have important implications for gender inequality, bargaining and empowerment issues. Agarwal (1994) points out that land rights for women in rural areas are vital for women's welfare, efficiency, equality and empowerment. From the capability perspective, inequality in property ownership and entitlements to housing and other assets, provide women with limited control on the household resources, making it difficult for them to secure credit for investment. This lack of ownership often leads to unequal power relations and weak bargaining position within the household. This lack of empowerment also discourages the participation of women at the higher levels.

### Domestic Work and Non-Market Care

Domestic household chores and taking care of dependents (especially raising children) are highly gendered activities. Women do more non-market care for children as well as for other family members than men do. A large gap exists between the hours of work done by men and women (Narsey, 2007). It is obviously clear that women's additional work in household chores contributes enormously to the quality of life of those benefiting from such labour. These efforts of women are crucially important in enabling the functionings of other members of the household. These extra efforts made by women contributing within the household cut deeply into their own leisure time and functioning, which contributes negatively towards their quality of life. These efforts of women are often not recognized (Narsey 2007).

As noted by Sen (1990), divisions between sexes in general, and specifically those within the household, may be deeply influenced by the pattern of the gender division of work. Much of these assigned division of labour are part of social configuration and gender defined roles. These sexual divisions of labour are part of the social arrangement, and it is important to include them in the context of poverty and capability framework. In this study, the organisation of work within the household is primarily based around the conjugal couple who negotiate tasks that are often separate but also shared. However, in extended family arrangements this may not be so evenly shared. Participants generally talked about two spheres of activity, 'house work' and 'farm work or outside work'. The husband as the head of the household delegates responsibilities to his wife to organize the work women, girls and younger boys are expected to do (Carswell 1998). Generally, in most rural Indo-Fijian households there is a fairly fixed gender division of labour. For example, women work up to

15 hours a day with responsibility for work considered 'domestic' such as preparing and serving food, or organising and processing cooking ingredients and washing clothes, dishes and cleaning the household environment. This may also include fetching firewood, providing childcare, animal care and vegetable gardening in some cases. In many cases women are also engaged in planting and weeding in family farms. Sukh Dai's double shift of farm and domestic work confirm such multiplicity of women's tasks:

- 3am- 4am: wake up, wash face and hands and then enter the kitchen to prepare breakfast;
- 4am- 5am: clean the kitchen area, milk cows and tie herd (goats and cows) in their grazing grounds. Have little bit of breakfast i.e. tea and roti only and leave for the farm;
- 5.30am- 10am: have to be in the farm before dawn and work there till 10am;
- 10.30am to 12noon- reach home, do remainder of the household chores, look after children and prepare lunch;
- 12.30- 3.30pm- take lunch for the male members of the family working in the farm. Work in the farm till afternoon;
- 4pm-6pm: prepare dinner, bathe the kids, and wash clothes, do the remainder of cleaning and have bath last in the family when all the work has been done.

Women did most of the housework and men either worked on their own farm or farm-related tasks on other's farms. Women and unmarried girls would presumably only be doing work on their own family farms alongside other members of their family because of taboos relating to girls.

Along with gender, kinship-based seniority plays a major role in determining tasks and responsibilities. Mothers-in-law, except when very elderly, elder sisters-in-law and elder daughters generally have heavier responsibilities than younger women, particularly in relation to cooking and overall tasks. However, in Muniamma's opinion, changes in both gender and seniority are happening:

When I compare women's work in old days to now...I feel Indian women work very hard in the farm and house...it takes a lot of effort for young brides today to do all this work now. My mother-in-law never helped me in housework but I help my daughters-in-law.

It is expected that men do not generally participate in the daily cooking, food processing, cleaning or washing dishes and clothes or providing child-care. However, this needs to be further qualified by age and circumstances where men may help women in some of these activities. For example, Tara's eldest son who is unmarried and living with Tara, fetches water and firewood and carries the washing from the creek to the house because she is weak at the age of 81 to carry heavy loads. Similarly, Savita commented that:

My husband cooks for the family, looks after children when they are back from school...and does other housework too because I am busy with my tailoring deadlines. At other times he loves to cook on his own because he likes a variety of food...he always makes fresh curry in his meals.

In regards to childcare, older children including boys may look after younger siblings and older men and women spend a lot of time with their grandchildren.

A discussion on child-care can cover a vast range of activities and theoretical perspectives, but this paper focuses on two issues: firstly, family expectations of motherhood and secondly, changes in the domestic life after having children. It is interesting to go back to the wedding ceremonies and remember the emphasis put on fertility and a bride's role as a future mother. A woman's status in the family changes considerably depending on her child-bearing capacity. For example, Jai Raji said:

I am a mother of six children...I had to look after the children but it was good. My mother-in-law was very happy I had three sons. She allowed my husband to farm the 10-acre land. She owns the land after my father-in-law died. When we had the farm, it was good money for us and we build a good house...with cement floor, corrugated iron walls and more rooms in the house now.

On a similar note, Santamma commented:

My mother-in-law got angry because I was not able to become a mother soon after marriage. She wanted to get another wife for my husband but I became pregnant after five years'. On a similar account, Sadhana said: 'I know my mother-in-law does not like me and she did not want me to get pregnant. So she can get another wife for my husband...but I became pregnant with my first child after 4 months. After my first child we moved in a separate house.

The work load also increased considerably for women after their children were born. For Muniamma, even when her children were crying, she could not attend to them if she was in the middle of any task because her mother-in-law wanted the task to be completed first. It is women who predominantly take the responsibility in caring for children, which not only includes physical work but also much of the mental and emotional work that goes towards teaching children and ensuring their health and welfare. Men occasionally help with child-care, particularly with teaching their sons, and they participate in major decision-making processes concerning their children at the village level. It is interesting to note that it is the men who ran the local primary and secondary school committees as far as the management decisions are concerned. Women were not allowed to attend such meetings except when their domestic help was needed for events at the school, for example, preparing lunch for the school children.

The ideology of the gendered roles is still predominant in the organisation of daily life. Empirical evidence shows that men's primary role is breadwinner and decision-maker, and women's primary role is family caretaker (see also Narsey 2007). Women are normally identified as keepers of the family, which is normally self-imposed. In this way concepts of identity are established and the axis of power within the household determines the allocation of labour and resources. Gendered patterns of activities within the household reflect culturally-defined gender roles and expectations.

## Conclusion

Gender disadvantage is frequently represented as a problem of poor women, and much of poverty discourse orients around the one-size-fits-all understanding of gender and well-being. In this article, it is argued that the inclusion of gender perspectives in Fiji's poverty analysis should take place which recognize the analytical strengths of gender analysis. The discussion so far shows that the capability approach can be used to study gender inequality and poverty. Literature on household behaviour within a bargaining framework provides a useful basis for examining intra-household relations and distribution of resources within the household. Such accounting is necessary because individual opportunities of household members to achieve wellbeing are influenced by domestic power relations, which in turn are influenced by each party's material and non-material endowments.

The analysis of intra-household negotiations and gender inequality explore how householders negotiated resources and opportunities. The households are internally differentiated in regards to access, control and allocation of resources and opportunities. Evidences from the participants on intra-household negotiations provide a glimpse of power relations and distribution within households. In other words, inequalities in the capability of outcomes between the genders indicate that opportunities available to them are unequal even when all other things amongst the individuals are the same. In effect, domestic power imbalances restricted opportunities for women. The analysis also show how domestic power imbalances generate inequality in achieving wellbeing within the capabilities framework.

Hence, gender analysis and interventions need to be mainstreamed into poverty reduction policies and practice. The issue of the relationships between gender and poverty is important in policy terms since gender mainstreaming has become the focus of much current effort at engendering development. Two possible approaches to mainstreaming gender within poverty reduction work suggest either arguing a case for inclusion on the grounds that gender identity entails poverty, or alternatively arguing that poverty is gendered, in that women and men often experience poverty in distinctive ways. The problem with the former, which has been the predominant approach, is that, being a woman does not necessarily lead to poverty as defined for a universal subject. Mainstreaming means inclusion of gender in poverty debates which identify gender related needs. This requires conceptual changes at various analytical frameworks, including information in national datasets. Household Income and Expenditure Surveys in the near future could fill some of these gaps in existing poverty and gender analyses by exploring how social norms impinging upon individuals' welfare within the household can be captured. This may mean that data collection procedure should include individualised consumption. Advanced statistical data collection methods and analysis would be required to explore the individuals' welfare dynamics and gender relations.

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