

# Development with Freedom: Exploring the ‘Five Pillars of Development’ among the Women Tea Workers of Sylhet District in Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

*The main objective of the study is to explore the current development status of women tea workers in some selected areas of Sylhet district in Bangladesh. The study examines the ‘capability approach’ developed by Amartya Sen (1999) to reveal the study objectives central to the research questions. The study employed non-random, convenient sampling to select the study informants. In doing so, it selected 30 women tea workers to carry out in-depth interviews. Employing an interview guide, the study revealed that development does not merely depend on economic growth or increasing purchasing capacity. Instead, the informants argue that the five pillars of development, as stated by Sen, appropriately resemble the true sense of development that they aim to achieve while working at the tea garden. The study, moreover, shows that social security, political freedom, rights to perform religious activities, transparency guarantees, and economic growth are essential elements to ensure their development. The results point out that two factors out of five development elements, such as social security and religious activities, have so far been achieved over the last few years. It recommends that political freedom, economic growth, and safeguarding transparency at all levels should be given more attention by the Government of Bangladesh to achieve their development.*

## KEY WORDS

Capability approach, Development as freedom, Tea workers, Sylhet, Bangladesh

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## 1. Introduction

We are living in a world that has largely experienced enormous economic growth as well as massive deprivation, exploitation, and destitution. People work hard to live a good life for themselves and to contribute towards the development

of society (Sen, 1999). Women’s share of economic growth in the world is increasing. However, they lack a considerably decent standard of living, particularly in developing countries (Heinz, 2014). Approximately 75 percent of tea plantation workers in Bangladesh are

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women (Chowdhury et al., 2011), who are not of local origin but are descendants of immigrants who migrated from several provinces of India during the British regime (Ahmed & Hossain 2016; Haque, 2013). They live a very poor life (Amin et al., 2017) and have limited opportunities to find alternative jobs outside the garden, as they are bound to work only in the tea garden with some sort faith that they would be cared for by the garden authorities (Ahmed & Hossain, 2016). The paper uses the concept of 'captive laborer' in the sense that female tea workers are confined within the garden, completely cut off from the surrounding community (Haque, 2013). They are born in the garden, and end up working all their life in the tea garden (Haque, 2013) and are identified as 'children of the garden' (Amin et al., 2017).

The lack of freedom to choose any other work than working in the tea garden is a violation of their civic right. This is reflected in the capability deprivation of women, which in turn prevents them from achieving other aspects of freedom. Though the female tea workers work hard and significantly contribute to the growth of the industry, they are not able to make their own choice to lead a good life. This paper attempts to examine and answer the question of how their daily activities in the tea garden hinder

female tea workers from achieving freedom in the five pillars stated by Sen (1999). The study sets specific objectives in order to fully explore the research question: these are: (i) to find out the level of economic and political freedoms that the women tea workers enjoy; (ii) to unearth social opportunities and protective security among the informants; and (iii) to reveal the transparency guarantee among the women tea workers in the study area. The study examines Sen's (1999) capability approach, which deals with the concept of overall freedom among the marginalized community in some selected areas of the Sylhet district.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: The Capability Approach**

The Capability Approach offers a unique framework for a better understanding of human well-being and development that concentrates mainly on substantive human freedom (Clark, 2005; Robeyns, 2006). This approach is strongly connected with Adam Smith's (1776) analysis of 'necessities' and 'living conditions', Karl Marx's (1884) concern with 'human freedom and emancipation', and Aristotle's analysis of 'human flourishing' (Nussbaum, 1988; 1990). The approach contrasts with narrower views of human well-being and development, which mainly concentrate on either people's pulence or utility (Sen, 1999; Clark, 2005).

Sen (1999) argues that human well-being cannot be measured only by the conventional view of economic factors, as many people across the world suffer from a lack of a range of freedoms, e.g., freedom to choose work, inadequate education, insufficient health services, etc. Human well-being is seen as an expansion of real freedom that people have reason to enjoy and that cannot but address a range of deprivations (Sen, 1999). Capability (Dreze, & Sen, 2002) refers to the integral combinations of alternative functioning from which a person can choose and to freedom, which involves processes and opportunities that a person has in deciding the possible life to lead. Greater freedom helps people take initiative and improve social effectiveness, which is vital for enriching human well-being and social development (Sen, 1999). Deprivation of basic capabilities can be reflected in inadequate education, premature mortality, significant undernourishment, persistent morbidity, a lack of transparency guarantees and social safety net arrangements, and other failures (Sen, 1999). Removal of the deprivation of basic capabilities plays a significant role in understanding human well-being and social development (Sen, 1999).

Sen's (1999) view is that extensive freedom is also essential for

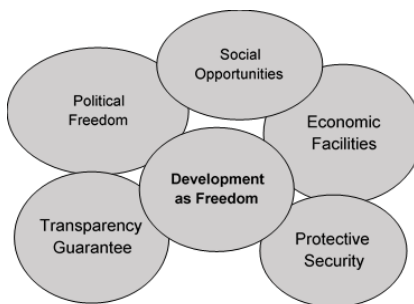
individual responsibility, which brings both well-being for herself and others. Women's active agency has a significant role in achieving their responsibilities to consider whether to do something or not, which is possible through substantive freedom (Sen, 1999). Capability refers to substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning, meaning the freedom to achieve various lifestyles (Sen, 1999). Therefore, chosen functioning is central to understanding real freedom (Sen, 1999), which allows a person to choose the work and life she has reason to value.

Sen claims that instrumental freedom promotes the enhancement of human freedom and thereby leads to human well-being. Different kinds of freedom, such as rights, opportunities, entitlements, and social safety net programs, are interconnected. Five distinct kinds of freedom are seen as instrumental perspectives that can play a crucial role in human well-being. These are (i) *political freedoms*, which involve the possibility to scrutinize and criticize authorities, freedom of political expression and an uncensored press, liberty to choose different political parties, and so on; (ii) *economic facilities*, which include the utilization of economic resources for consumption, production, and distribution; (iii) *social opportunities*, which refer to the society's

arrangements of education, health, etc.; (iv) *transparency guarantees* refer to the freedom to deal with one another under guarantees of disclosure and lucidity; and (v) *protective security* indicates the social safety net, which includes fixed institutional and *ad hoc* arrangements. Several commentators, however, have criticized his approach for failing to provide his framework with a substantial list of important capabilities (Williams, 1987; Nussbaum, 1988). However, the criticism is a crucial strength of his approach in a sense, avoiding the charge of paternalism (Clark, 2005). Nussbaum also develops a concrete list of human capabilities based on Aristotelian notions of functioning (Nussbaum, 1990). However, her list received substantial criticism as it does not include fruitful public participation, public discussion, and reasoning (Sen, 2004). The present case is well-matched with the capability set provided by Sen (1999), as it can accommodate divergent views of a good life.

The Conceptual Framework has been constructed examining Sen's concept of the 'Capability approach'. The framework has been designed to explore research-specific objectives.

**Figure: 1 Five Pillars of Development**



(Source: Author's generated framework, 2023)

### 3. Methods, Procedures, and Sampling Techniques

**3.1 Research Design:** This study aims at exploring the current situation of development among women tea workers and their well-being in some selected areas of Sylhet district. This research has applied a range of tools of the qualitative method to unearth the research objectives. The qualitative research method makes it possible to investigate and accumulate the data, presenting a detailed understanding of social processes and informants' perceptions and experiences. Applying an interview guide and checklist techniques of the qualitative method, the study explores the reality of women's well-being, considering their various types of freedom. As a result, *primary data have been collected* by using Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), while secondary data were collected from relevant literature. In doing so, I prepared two sets of interview guides

(one for in-depth interviews and the other for FGDs) with open-ended questions, keeping in mind the research-specific objectives for the in-depth interviews and FGDs. While preparing the interview guide and checklist, I considered a few factors, for instance, a field visit during the pre-testing of the interview guide, selecting indicators by examining the Capability Approach, and a systematic literature review on women's well-being and freedom. The study has employed open-ended questions to obtain better insights and meaningful data from the informants, which is crucial for critically exploring and answering the study objectives. It allowed informants to provide their thoughts, and opinions based on their knowledge, experience, and feelings instead of limiting their answers to a predetermined set of replying options. Afterwards, I translated them into the native language, Bangla, for better understanding and to ensure the effective participation of the informants. I, moreover, pre-tested the open-ended interview guide. The informants were not questioned during the in-depth interview. Instead, I guided them in line with the interview guide and the checklist, which facilitated the informants to keep track of the questions that have not been either asked or answered, enabling them to phrase the questions properly. This strategy motivated the

interviewees to provide detailed, in-depth, and elaborate answers. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed for the preservation of the data. The data were collected between 12 January 2023 and 26 March 2023.

**3.2 Selection of Study Area:** Sylhet is a district of tea production. Due to its geographical location and land use, the area is the hub of tea plantations. Considering the number of tea plantations in the area, the study has selected it for this research. I have purposefully selected three gardens in Sylhet for choosing study informants. I was persuaded to choose those gardens for mainly two reasons: such as, (i) the gardens have mostly women workers with a population of 28,921 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022), and they produce a higher quantity of tea than does any other garden of the area; and (ii) the research site is located just close to the researcher's area of residence.

**3.3. In-depth Interviews (IDIs):** For conducting in-depth interviews, the study chose a total of 35 key informant interviews (KIIs). I chose the informants based on the purposive sampling process who lived in the study region and had a lot of knowledge about their well-being and job freedom. Before deciding on the interview schedule, I tried three interviewing procedures with informants who resided outside the research area to see that they

understood and to determine whether any revisions or additions to the procedures were required. With the participants' full permission, I tape-recorded every interview. To preserve the data, all of the interviews were taped and afterwards transcriptions were made. The information was gathered during the period between 12 July 2022 and 22 August 2022.

### **3.4 Focus Group Discussions (FGD):**

The study carried out four FGDs consisting of 30 participants in total, and these informants came from different socio-economic backgrounds. Before running the FGDs, I consulted with the research informants and organized the place and time based on their preference for in-depth discussion. Prior to conducting the FGDs, the study confirmed that the group of people attending a specific session of FGDs were homogenous, and one of the co-researchers took necessary notes and tape-recorded the FGD sessions. The first FGD was carried out in the *Muniara* community with seven informants from the tea garden, while the second one was conducted in the *Chapang* block area with eight informants. The third FGD was administered with seven participants from the *Hazong* area. Finally, the last FGD was conducted in the *Besong* area with eight participants.

### **3.5 Data Analysis Techniques**

It appeared quite challenging to employ a qualitative strategy for

analyzing a great volume of collected data. Therefore, I carefully sorted out the data, as all the collected information was not appropriate to the study objectives. Thus, I filtered the data based on the checklists, which I prepared by illustrating the 'Capability Model' developed by Sen (1991). At first, I took the major concepts relevant to the research objectives and prepared a list of them. Afterwards, I identified incomplete, inaccurate, or irrelevant data that had been modified and thus deleted. Finally, I checked all the information to see if they harmonized with the key concepts or not.

If any information was found not to align itself with the main concepts, I attempted to rewrite the information keeping in mind the particular concepts or main words and then I analyzed the collected data thematically by sorting out the salient themes and patterns from the narratives that emerged in the interviews. Conducting the thematic analysis, the patterns of similarities and dissimilarities among the collected data were shown. Then, the data were segmented, coded, and presented followed by the Coding was done followed by the ideas of interpretive and narrative analysis. The study allowed the informants to explore their knowledge, perceptions, and expertise through their own experiences, allowing the informants' sense-

making, which is central to the area of interest. By sharing the summary of the major findings with the research informants, I employed the "member checking" technique which was used to confirm the validity and dependability of the collected data.

#### **4. Data Analysis and Findings**

**4.1 Political Freedom:** The study reveals that the women tea workers did not directly participate in any political program. The political parties treated them just as vote banks that could be used during different local and national elections. Regarding collective bargaining with the garden authorities and local government, the tea workers have an association called *Panchayet*, an ancient organization (Ahmmed and Hossain, 2016). As they remain absent in *Panchayet* meetings, women cannot put forward constructive ideas supportive of their well-being. This explains why women do not get equal opportunities to participate in decision-making, added another informant.

Hossain (2016) argues that women tea workers significantly fail to play their active agency role. One informant argued that due to the lack of an active agency role, workers cannot raise their voices for any legal issues and thus have to work as per the order of management as captive laborers (Ahmmed & Hossain, 2016). Unfreedom to go outside the tea garden restricts their ability to

participate in any local and national political discussions and debates.

**4.2 Economic Facilities:** The study reveals that women tea workers do not own any land—neither inside nor outside of the garden—for agricultural or accommodation purposes, though they have been living since time immemorial in the garden. Several informants argued that they work only for the authorities of the garden, and they have no freedom to work other than in the tea garden as they substantially lack property rights. One FGD informant stated that "this restricts them to involve in gainful employment and limits their empowerment". Sen (1999) argues that the unfreedom to earn from outside sources and lack of empowerment prohibit raising women's voices and agency. Thereby, women cannot play any influential role in the decision-making of their respective families; they can participate in *Panchayet* only ornamentally (Rahman et al., 2014; Ahmmed & Hossain, 2016).

Another informant commented that when there is no work, they remain unemployed or underemployed as they live in an isolated community or as captive laborers and learn no other trade. One of the FGD participants stated that the landless 'captive laborers' no longer find a reason to cherish life or to lead a responsible life for others because they lack significant

means of earnings any revenue. One FGD participant said that they do not have much control over their income, as their husbands and elder brothers grab money from them and use it for buying alcohol. They cannot play active agency roles to generate income for themselves as well as social benefits; such as finance for state insurance and active public intervention. Sometimes they receive credit as loans from NGOs but cannot make any change in their lives as they lack the freedom to invest the money in income-generating activities.

**4.3 Social Opportunities:** Education facilities and health care services play a crucial role not only in an individual's well-being but also in the development of society (Sen, 1999, Rahman, et. al., 2021). This study finds that most of the women tea workers are illiterate, and only a few of them have some primary level education. One informant said that unavailability of secondary schools close to their living places, lack of qualified teachers in the primary school, and the limited scope to attend classes outside school are considerably responsible for being illiterate (Amin et al., 2017; Ahmmed & Hossain, 2016). One of the FGD participants argued that inadequate education and a lack of skills limit their freedom to move outside and get employment other than tea gardening. It prevents them from leading satisfactory lives. Moreover, illiteracy perpetuates their

language deficiency, limits their confidence, increases their diffidence and seriously hinder their ability to communicate with outside society. These restrict their freedom to choose a life they value, as one informant opined. In addition, a lack of functional education fails to strengthen their active agency role in taking initiatives to improve their lives. According to Sen (1999), there is a strong connection between female education and fertility behavior. We can see the reason in the present case why every worker has up to seven children. It limits their freedom substantially to work outside for extra income as they need to spend more time on childrearing (Ahmmed & Hossain, 2016). Limited income tends to discourage them to take a responsible role in sending their children to high school (Das and Islam, 2006).

One of the FGD participants stated that as they are "captive laborers," living and working solely for the tea plantation, the authorities are morally obligated to provide them with all medical facilities, which they do not get in reality. However, according to one source, women do not have enough access to maternity services such as prenatal care, delivery services, and special benefits. This limits their capacity to live normal lives, a claim backed by one FGD participant. The employees are provided with lower-quality



medication and practically all illnesses are treated with the same medication (Ahmed & Hossain, 2016; Haque, 2013). They are, therefore, denied the chance to live a healthy life and are unable to prevent serious illness.

The study reveals that the authorities have been reluctant to build hygienic and durable toilets for the 'captive workers. During the dry season, they collect drinking water from ponds and canals, which is not clean and safe. One informant reported that workers are not provided with safety equipment during work, such as safety kits, gloves, and boots. They are also susceptible to chemical poisoning and snakebites. These heighten the risk of endemic diseases like dysentery, diarrhea, jaundice, hookworm, asthma, etc. (Haque, 2013). In addition, due to the lack of a sufficient living room, they have to sleep in the same room with their livestock (Kamruzzaman et al., 2013; Philip, 2009), which causes serious health hazards by affecting sleep and working capacity (Ahmed & Hossain, 2016). Thus, the unhealthy condition prohibits them from leading a life they value. The study argues that poor health conditions and a lack of good housing impede individuals' ability to achieve social and psychological functions such as privacy, self-respect, and peace of mind.

**4.4 Protective Security:** The study finds that women tea workers get minimum government support even in the event of natural disasters and/or any other emergencies because of their status as plantation workers, who are supposed to get facilities from the garden authorities. In this connection, one informant stated that the garden authorities do not have such schemes would help them out in emergencies. According to one FGD participant, the Panchayet (workers' association) also does not provide them with financial assistance, putting their lives in danger in the event of any crisis. It is revealed that workers contribute regularly to the *Panchayat* fund, but it does nothing for them. In times of any emergency, workers do not get any help from the association. It nevertheless collects the weekly subscriptions/donations even if employees are unable to work on a certain day owing to unforeseen circumstances. But the panchayat never comes forward to assist workers in times of financial need. Working women are consequently denied genuine opportunities that could facilitate them to live their lives appropriately in the event of emergencies.

**Table 1: Key factors associated with 'Five Pillars' of Development**

<p><b>(i) Political Freedom:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Concerned about their collective bargaining power</li> <li>● Lacked their active agency role</li> </ul> <p><b>(ii) Economic Facilities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lacked property rights</li> <li>● finance for state insurance and active public intervention</li> <li>● lack of significant means of earnings and revenue</li> </ul> <p><b>(iii) Social Opportunities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● have some primary level of education</li> <li>● limited freedom to move outside and to get employment</li> <li>● illiteracy perpetuates their language deficiency, limits their confidence, and increases their shyness</li> </ul> <p><b>(iv) Protective Security:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● less financial assistance, putting their lives in danger in the event of any crisis.</li> <li>● denied genuine opportunities, which limits their capacity to live their lives appropriately</li> </ul> <p><b>(v) Transparency Guarantees:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● little possibility of maintaining transparency</li> <li>● less transparency in terms of recruiting tea workers</li> <li>● inequality in education arises due to a lack of access to modern education methods</li> </ul>
<p><b>(Source: Klls and FGDs, 2023)</b></p>

**4.5 Transparency Guarantees:** The women workers are not formally appointed to work in the tea garden; hence, there is little possibility of maintaining transparency. The tea authorities, although required to circulate job openings, rarely comply

with this requirement. One of the informants argued that the panchayat recruits its men in the garden and excludes women in the process. Therefore, women are deprived of substantial freedom to get a job of their choice, which hinders them from leading a good life. One of the FGD participants stated that the existing system should be changed to improve transparency in terms of recruiting tea workers. One of the informants stated, "We strive to promote women's empowerment within the marginalized women tea garden workers' community and establish women's rights in the Sylhet tea gardens." However, as one FGD member said, the situation is not advantageous in terms of the equal rights we demand.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper explains how women who work in the tea industry in Bangladesh are denied any form of instrumental independence. The analysis demonstrates that the lack of freedom of one instrumental category leads others to be deprived. The study, which examines Sen's (1999) capability approach, discovers that workers are forced to act as "captive laborers," which prevents them from achieving well-being. In other words, their 'captive' interferes with their ability to get proper healthcare, educational opportunities, and employment. Therefore, 'captive laborers' struggle due to their limited access to social

possibilities, poor economic engagement, lack of political freedom, and exclusion from safety net services.

The process is best described as a vicious circle where 'captive laborer' and well-being deprivation are interwoven. Removal of the deprivation of basic capabilities will enhance substantial freedom of women, thereby contributing to their well-being. Therefore, this research urges the tea garden authorities and the government to concentrate more on the enhancement of the freedom of the workers. This will both guarantee

the welfare of the workforce and hasten Bangladesh's social growth.

**Conflict of Interest:** I, the author of this research manuscript, declare that I have no financial interest. I have provided written consent to publish the paper in this journal.

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