

EXPLORING CAPABILITIES IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY: WOMEN PROCESSORS IN THE DRIED FISH VALUE CHAINS OF ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA

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This paper applies the Capability Approach, developed by Amartya Sen and further elaborated by Martha Nussbaum, to examine the entrepreneurial livelihoods of women engaged in dried fish processing in Andhra Pradesh, India. These women operate informal, home-based micro- enterprises and are best understood not merely as workers but as entrepreneurs who take on economic risks, make key decisions, and actively manage their livelihood activities. Despite their entrepreneurial agency, they face a range of structural constraints, including limited access to capital, market information, infrastructure, and formal recognition that restrict their ability to expand and sustain their enterprises. The Capability Approach, with its emphasis on individual's real freedoms to achieve valued ways of living, provides a useful lens to assess how these women convert available resources into meaningful capabilities and functionings. Drawing on qualitative primary data, the study explores how intersecting structures of gender, caste, and informal institutional arrangements, including market imperfections, influence both opportunities and constraints for these women within the dried fish value chain. The study observes that these structural factors influence access to raw material, market spaces, mobility, and decision-making power, often reinforcing women's marginal status despite their central role in the sector. While capability deprivations are evident, the analysis also highlights the women's adaptive strategies and resilience in navigating these barriers. The findings underscore the need to recognise and support women's capabilities in ways that address structural and institutional barriers as a pathway to more inclusive and equitable development.