

Exploring Capability Poverty among Women in Pakistan: Unveiling the Constraints and Pathways to Progress

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Abstract: *The capability approach is a normative development framework that helps assess and evaluate the state of individual well-being and progress. According to this approach personal well-being is “the quality of a person’s being, that is what a person is and what he does. This article examines the concept of capability poverty through the lens of the capability approach, with a specific focus on women in Pakistan. The capability approach, pioneered by economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, emphasizes the importance of individual capabilities and freedoms as the key components of human well-being. By analyzing the situation of women in Pakistan, this study sheds light on the various dimensions of capability poverty that hinder women's empowerment and gender equality. Drawing on empirical evidence and qualitative analysis, the article explores the multiple forms of capability poverty faced by women in Pakistan, including limited access to education, restricted economic opportunities, and social barriers. It highlights the critical role of enhancing women's capabilities in promoting their empowerment and fostering social development. Furthermore, the article examines the existing policy framework in Pakistan and proposes targeted interventions and strategies to address capability poverty among women, aiming to advance gender equality and empower women to participate fully in the socio-economic and political spheres of the country.*

Key Words: Capability Poverty, Capability Approach, Gender Equality, Human Rights, Policy Interventions, Socio-economic Development, Social Connectedness, Women

Introduction

The capability approach is a normative development framework that helps assess and evaluate the state of individual well-being and progress. According to this approach personal well-being is “the quality of a person’s being, that is what a person is and what he does. The achieved beings and doings of a person are called functioning, such as being healthy, being mobile, appearing in public without shame, taking part in the life of the community” etc. Capability is defined as “person’s effective freedom to choose over a set of potential combinations of functioning”.

The capability approach, therefore, conceptualizes personal well-being in terms of freedom and availability of the “effective opportunities” to lead the kind of life one wants to

lead, to do what one wants to do and to be the person one wants to be” (Robeyns, 2005, p. 95). Freedom means the mechanisms that enable people to act and make decisions freely; and the chances that people have given their unique social and personal circumstances (Sen A. , Development as Freedom, 1999).

The capability approach acknowledges material, mental, and social well-being as distinct aspects of human well-being that are linked to the economic, social, political and cultural dimensions of life. It takes a comprehensive and integrated view of the idea of individual’s well-being from the availability and accessibility of means and resources necessary for particular human capability /capabilities to the enabling conditions to achieve them. Enabling conditions includes political practices and institutions, the effective guaranteeing and protection of freedom of thought, political participation, social, cultural or religious practices, social structures, social institutions, public goods, social norms, traditions and habits in addition to financial and economic input.

Sen (2000) argues that social connectedness and personal relationships are so fundamental for individual well-being that inability to interact freely with others is an important deprivation in itself and leads to social exclusion and thus capability poverty. Therefore, social connections and relationships lies at the core of the personal well-being and must be taken into account for measuring quality of life alongside other dimensions such as health; education; material living standard (income, consumption and wealth); personal activities, including work; political voice; environmental conditions; and physical or/and economic insecurities (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009).

Sen (2008) asserts that traditionally oppressed groups, especially women, living in intolerant communities, highly exploitative economic arrangements, deeply sexist cultures lack courage to even desire radical change. He further observes that these people often “tend to adjust their desires and expectations to what little they see as feasible. They train themselves to take pleasure in small mercies” (Sen A. , 2008). Basu (2013) further adds that current economic models of development ignore the fact that, "Once people are marginalized over time, forces emerge that undermine their productivity and capability and further their marginalization." Such individuals learn to withdraw from society, while others learn to exclude them, which forms part of the "societal equilibrium." (p. 324).

Nussbaum (2003) emphasizes that traditional public-private divide hinders the full participation of women in the society. Attached to the idea of normative private-public distinction are the typically assigned roles and places. Men are believed to belong to the public sphere pertaining to matters outside the home political and women to the private sphere as it is associated with family and the home. This public-private distinction inherently weighs down girls' development in life. Starting from the basic matters of nutrition, healthcare, and education it affects deep ineffable issues of self-perception and capabilities and tends to push women towards powerlessness. This also affects women's sense of what they can do and what they want to do. They internalize this gendered socialization and may lose their self-confidence and assertiveness on entering public realm believing themselves as interlopers lacking proper capacities for a public role. Such inhibitions are often ascribed to women's nature (Nussbaum M. C., 2001; 2003; Sen A. , 2000; 1984). Hence, unequal social and cultural circumstances force them towards social isolation and severely impede women's fundamental life functioning's and capabilities.

A person's level of social isolation is assessed by both the quantity and quality of social relations. The quantity of social relations refers to the number or frequency of interactions with other individual or individuals. Meeting with family and friends' effects people's lives in various ways i.e. by advancing common goals, in obtaining job, or sense of increase in social status that in turn has an impact on person's development outcomes such as growth, equity and poverty alleviation (Putnam, 2000; Christakis & Fowler, 2011).

The quality of social relations refers to two aspects. Firstly, the type of relationship which satisfies a person's subjective expectations or standards. Any meaningful relationships that include frequent contact and are mediated by cultural norms and symbols are relevant. But to take part in the life of community implies meaningful participation (e.g., a sense of belonging and voice) and not mere social interaction. Secondly, the instrumental value of the relationship that is, different type of friend or network might yield a different kind of contribution to a person's life (Zavaleta, Samuel, & Mills, 2014).

Reciprocity is found to be another key factor for personal well-being. While receiving support from personal relationships is important, it seems even more crucial that this assistance is mutually beneficial. Partly because providing too little or being unable to offer can induce

feelings of guilt or shame, while giving more than one receives can cause one to feel taken advantage of, which can produce power imbalances in relationships to the point where the relationship ends. (Van Tilburg et al. 1991). Moreover, it is found that being able to give independent support (relational support, responsiveness to others, and mutuality) to close friends is a higher predictor of well-being than receiving this support.

Statement of the Problem

Social connectedness and personal well-being are related inextricably and both a cause and consequence of well-being. Lack of social connectedness contributes to increased exclusion and vulnerability and affects men and women both. But in women due to the subordinate status and situation it is further compounded by issues related to substantial freedoms and capabilities. In many countries, including Pakistan women are treated frequently as subordinate group in society. Individually and collectively, they are denied many basic rights and have to face “discrimination, exclusion, and isolation”. They are not permitted to leave the home for any significant amount of time or to travel unattended. Living away from male relatives (husband, father), even for education or for any skill enhancement activity is less likely for them. Moving independently solely for socializing or for recreation is highly unlikely for most of the women. Consequently, a sizeable portion of women population is denied full participation in society resulting in social isolation along with severe failure of capabilities. Research has shown that women with low connectedness showed higher anxiety levels as compared with high cohesion conditions; moreover, it is found to be positively related to an individual’s decreased self-esteem. (Lee & Robbins, 1998).

Methodology

This study aimed to explore the perspectives of women capability in social relationships. Qualitative research technique of in-depth interviews was used for this study. Intensive In-depth interviews with 14 university teachers were conducted. The interviews revealed the experiences, opinions, and expectations of the women regarding their capacity to maintain social relationships in a manner they want or expect them to be. The individual in-depth interviews helped to comprehend the variations in the level of satisfaction and freedom women enjoy due to varied set of contextual variables such as family background, level of education, spousal/family socioeconomic status, and the degree of entitled economic independence of the participants. The

interviews guide was prepared that listed the questions or issues to be explored during the interview. The interviews were flexible and semi-structured and included open-ended questions to get the maximum information from the participants.

The interviews were conducted regarding the set of tested and reliable potential indicators mentioned in the literature to provide information on social connectedness. These dimensions of social connectedness “explain a variety of connections, their quality, and the results for individuals (such as emotional and monetary support, career prospects, and social isolation) as well as society. (i.e., trust in others, tolerance, democratic participation, civic engagement).

The limitations of using the qualitative method of in-depth interview is that the results thus obtained are not generalizable because of the small size of chosen non-random purposive sample.

Findings

The focus of the study was to explore women’s perspective on the notions of social connectedness, social isolation and idea of reciprocity in social life. This study was an attempt to get an insight of the women’s point of view regarding their social life. The dimensions explored regarding the social life include; social connectedness, reciprocity, feeling of social isolation. Through in-depth interviews with university teachers we tried to take a deeper look in the women’s social accomplishments and apprehensions from their eyes. The effect of socio economic, religious norms and patriarchal society which keep the women perform in their full capacities and achieve the lives of dreams and aspirations. Following themes emerged from series of in-depth:

Care Giving Responsibilities

The major reason felt by women for their perceived isolation from society is their traditional care-giving responsibilities. Almost all women were of the view that their responsibilities as mother, wife, and daughter levy too much pressure on them to ignore their own needs. One of the respondents when asked what keeps her from interacting with people she wants to be friends with the spontaneous reply was “mera aurat hona”. She said that when her friends or other ladies in the family make programs for outing or shopping I very often have to refuse them because my responsibility as a mother of two toddlers bound me. But I envy their father as he never has to drop his plans just for this reason. Another respondent said that “I have lot of pending work to do at home which keeps piling up due to my office routine.”

My husband and my family expect a lot from me and I cannot ignore that so easily because I already feel burdened with guilty consciousness that the time I spend at work actually belongs to them. She further added that she knows that she works for her family but still cannot take the thought off her mind that maybe I should not be doing this. She very painfully admitted that deep inside she feels that perhaps she is stealing the time of her family for her own career. As stated in her own words "Any relaxation provided to me is like a cold comfort as my mind is always preoccupied with family and private issues."

Traditional Dependence

The socialization process of our society from the very beginning ingrains in girls' minds that they are not at par with boys. They cannot do what boys can do. They are taught to be dependent upon their fathers and brothers approval and help for their almost every action. An interviewee said that as long as she can remember she never took any step without asking her family especially father and brothers. Almost all of the respondents admitted that the first hand of the world outside the premises of the house was always denied to them. They were never allowed to perform tasks related to offices or in which chances of meeting unknown people were involved. Even getting and submitting admission forms in college and university and checking merit lists was done by male members of the family. This dependency training keeps on even when they get married. Only the names to be dependent changes but dependency remains there.

Prohibitive Costs of Progress

Self-imposed isolation comes naturally from the feelings of being left behind. Progress in career needs aggressive inputs in terms of time, energy, and money. The costs of these inputs are physical as well as emotional and psychological. Our respondents were of the view that they fail to input any of the three essential elements. Very often the costs paid in terms of emotional and psychological are too high to be afforded by woman in a traditional society like ours. One of the respondent gave a general remark about the barriers to progress as "You will discourage someone if you continually disparage one's efforts."

Most of the respondents who have adopted teaching as a career told that the decision was somehow influenced by family and society as teaching is considered to be a safe profession for women. It saves a lady from being exposed unnecessarily to public at large. They are supposed to go to their departments and come back at socially acceptable timings. The university teachers

interviewed told that they feel that their male colleagues excel in their fields and earn awards and appreciations of all including students and administration. While due to many physical limitations they are unable to follow the same path. They say they cannot avail opportunities to get more experience and money. They cannot spare enough time away from home to enter into the rows of serious career persons. Moreover, travelling and transportation always poses a hurdle in taking up any new opportunity.

A university teacher added that money is not a problem for me. The problem is the “intimidating looks and unsaid disapproval remarks, that only I can feel” scares me. She added she compromises all her wishes and aspirations just to avoid those looks and tacit demands of her family members.

Fail to Reciprocate

“Being a woman my ambit of reciprocity is limited as compared to any male due to social and cultural influences which indirectly pressurizes me a lot” My will and wish are suppressed due to some other people in the name of cultures. one of the respondent commented painfully “Ladies are still judged daily in corporate world and in the circle of academia by their conformity or lack of conformity to a prescribed stereotyped package of standards. This continuous practice limits the process of reciprocity in our lives which makes us guilty sometimes in front of others. one respondent remarked sarcastically.

Can't have Best of Both Worlds

The interdependence of women on their social and family environment cannot be ignored while judging their social conduct. Theoretically, in the capability approach context every individual in a society should have the right to live a life he or she has to choose and value. But this does not apply to women. Her accomplishments and aspirations do not necessarily be supported by her circumstances. “No male colleague would like to play second fiddle they, they feel and take it against their so called egoism”. One of the respondents added.

Purdah/Religious Conservatism

The socio economic changes forced women to come out of their private sphere and be a part of public domain. Women used this purdah as a safer strategy for themselves to lubricate their mobility process confidently. This purdah appears in many of its versions and styles but

underlying purpose was same, which was to create a comfortable zone for themselves with in the public sphere. But the public religious discourse turns a blind eye to the reality of new found social life (A.M.Weiss, 1992)

One of the participant added sarcastically that “their right to work and education was made conditional in this patriarchal society. It proved a la-la land as instead of putting a space for our acceptance, our social connectedness was limited in the name of “a purdadar- khatoon”.

Three participants emphasized the same point of view, felt more confidence with our hijabs but due to this sign of modesty our capability was converted into capability poverty. “It is used as a tool to strengthen male dominance in the name of honor of our hijab”, added by some other marginalized women.

Interpersonal Skills

Social interaction and connectedness is not an art which is gender bound. It requires social weather with opportunities. Better interpersonal skills from one’s self keep a person ahead which is often the result of greater social exposure and interaction. Being in public sphere enhances one’s confidence and open-mindedness.

One of the respondent said that when she took her job in university, she for the first time in her life realized about her pretty impressive personality. “With the passage of time, I have found many qualities in my personality which were not obvious in my private sphere, therefore, I feel my worth and high morale with greater understanding of others”, Answered one of the respondent in response to a question related to her well-being and progress. “I never felt myself worthy enough to be taken seriously before I joined my job”I felt happy when my family trusted me that I can handle any untoward situation but, even though a working lady on this administrative post, I am socially restricted within the boundaries of norms and culture in the matter of reciprocity. This poverty of social connectedness, sometimes, disturbs me a lot .another respondent replied: “I am free to move if it is related to my profession, otherwise, I am an ordinary house woman in the patriarchy of a middle class family”

Conclusion and Discussions

The findings clearly revealed that there are many factors in Pakistani society that subtly affect women's social life but remain unnoticed and acceptable. In the perspective of capability approach, the inconsistencies of women's social conduct and accomplishments are direct result of the capability poverty created in them by various taken- for -granted social arrangements. The major inconsistencies are mostly related to the education level and the achieved status, personal values and social conduct. Women interviewed repeatedly admitted that the impression that women cannot be a good friend is not because their personal discrepancies but due to tacit social norms. The themes emerged during the interviews shed light on how women are pushed towards social isolation in the name of various abstract notions of social desirability and their security. Many stereotyped socio cultural norms and values as well as our patriarchal culture curb the capabilities of women in push them towards capability poverty. We also sought information about the economic activities which put women in double burden and effect their health and capabilities. In Pakistan women are in a transformative phase they are being pressured both from family, spouse, society and culture. Literature supports our findings substantially.

Researchers have repeatedly posited the notion that frequency of social contact is strongly linked with well-being, allows estimation of the level of objective social isolation, and describes meaningful relations (Kahneman and Krueger 2006; Krueger et al. 2009; Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009). The two aspects; frequency of contact with family and frequency of contact with friends taken up many foreign studies are completely in line with our findings. It markedly defines the invisible social control over women as mentioned by many studies carried out in Western societies (OECD 2011) (as used in the PSE survey in Britain).

Another important aspect which is found in research literature is Social network support. it provides an estimation of the existence of (real or perceived) supportive relationships having either intrinsic value for a person (such as emotional support or sense of security) and/or instrumental value (e.g., help financially to overcome a crisis). It served as an indicator selected to investigate this domain even in the Gallup World Poll (OECD 2011) Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi (2009).

The research literature to date also points out the importance of having personal friend or some kind of connectedness with other members of society apart from immediate family for gaining confidence and inner strength. Our findings are greatly substantiated by the point that presence of a discussion partner has been used as a measure of the extent and meaningfulness of a person's social contacts, as well as the size of a person's social network (Harper and Kelly 2003; Tigges, Brown and Green 1998; and Van Tilburg et al. 1991). European Social Survey Round 5 (2010).

Theorists have always used the notions of reciprocity and volunteering which are closely related and normatively complicated concepts of social connectedness (Hyypä 2010). These are marked by sharing and giving, respectively. It is important to note that sharing has a bearing of cultural obligation and thus, not considered 'voluntary'. Indicators measuring reciprocity often seems to be measuring perceived helpfulness (Abbott and Freeth, 2008). It turned out that Care giving responsibilities, Traditional over dependence on family especially on male members keep women from conducting their social roles in their own personal way and wishes. Further, the costs of progress which have to be paid in terms of time, money, and energy prohibit women to improve their capabilities and somehow push them towards capability poverty. Religious conservatism also plays its role in perpetuating the situation.

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