

## **Applying the Capabilities Approach in Examining Disability, Poverty, and Gender**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores the similarities related to disability, poverty, and gender. Overlapping issues are described, which set the context for examining these issues using a single framework – namely, a capabilities approach. Although the effects of disability, poverty and gender are measured by different mechanisms, the parallels between these issues facilitate the application of the capabilities approach to explore their relationships. Both Martha Nussbaum's and Amartya Sen's capabilities approaches are applied in addressing these issues.

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## **Introduction and context of disability, poverty and gender:**

It is estimated that approximately 7-10% of the world's population has some type of disability with economic, educational, and/or social consequences.<sup>1</sup> Disability is generally defined as a limitation in actions or activities due to a physical, mental or emotional condition.<sup>2</sup> Poverty rates vary among countries, but the majority of the world's poor (approximately 1.2 billion) live in developing countries, which are characterized by high rates of disability, as well.<sup>3</sup> Both poverty and disability affect an individual's capabilities, especially women, impacting their participation in society.

Disability and poverty are related inextricably in every society.<sup>4</sup> Although anecdotal evidence on poverty and disability is abundant, comprehensive studies on these linkages and their relationships have not been conducted.<sup>5</sup> It is generally concluded that disability is both a cause and consequence of poverty, and disabled people are amongst the poorest of the poor. However, the strength and extent of each path (from disability to poverty and from poverty to disability) remains unknown and unsubstantiated.

Poverty and disability reinforce each other, contributing to increased exclusion and vulnerability.<sup>6</sup> Although disability and poverty affect men and women worldwide, the subordinate status and situation of many women is further compounded by these issues. In fact, parallels can be established between the inequality experienced by disabled people and that encountered by women in the majority of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> See Brundtland (1999) as cited in the Director-General speech given at the Interagency Consultation on Disability, 15-16 June 1999.

<sup>2</sup> LaPlante (1991: 55-77).

<sup>3</sup> See Barnes & Mercer (1995:37).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the links between poverty and disability, see Peat (1998: 45).

<sup>5</sup> Elwan (1999) states linkages have been noted between poverty and disability but not systematically examined.

<sup>6</sup> Asian Development Bank (2000: 1).

Interestingly, gender is correlated with specific types of mental and physical disorders (impairments and chronic conditions that often lead to disabilities) as well as with the time (number of years) lived with the disability.<sup>7</sup> One reason is that girls and women in many countries have an increased risk of malnutrition and of consuming overall less food than their male counterparts. This is true in countries where food is scarce and by tradition the females eat whatever is left after the males have eaten.<sup>8</sup>

Contributing to the correlation is the lack of access and the use of health services and treatment for women. In many countries women are not permitted to leave the home for any significant amount of time even for medical care since they are responsible for taking care of the home and family. And, it is often improper for women to travel unattended or to live away from male relatives (husband, father), making long-term health care and treatment less likely for them.<sup>9</sup>

Not only disability, poverty has a gender dimension. In most countries women hold a lower position than men. Consequently, women have less access to education and training, and they have lower participation in the labor force. Resulting from these limitations are lower incomes and the greater likelihood of experiencing poverty, especially if they are the single income-earner in the household (due to death of their husband, divorce, sick or disabled husband, etc.).

Poor people, disabled people and women are treated frequently as subordinate groups in society. Individually and collectively, they have been denied rights and have faced discrimination, exclusion, and isolation. All three groups have been deprived of

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<sup>7</sup> Kennedy, Carlson, Ustun, Regier, Norquist & Sirovatka (1997: 131-132).

<sup>8</sup> Pacey & Payne (1985) as cited in Groce (1997: 181).

<sup>9</sup> Groce (1997: 182) explores these issues for women.

their full participation in society as they continue to be marginalized socially, economically, and politically across the world.<sup>10</sup> Such treatment and experiences have placed these groups at a significant disadvantage in the communities worldwide.

Martha Nussbaum has written much about women's experiences dealing with obstacles based on their gender, including intimidation and discrimination.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, disabled people are faced with barriers based on their disability. As indicated by Nussbaum, "unequal social and political circumstances give women unequal human capabilities."<sup>12</sup> The same perspective applies to the poor and disabled people.

Generally, women and poor people and disabled people face unequal distribution within society or a community. If a woman has a disability, she is most likely at a greater disadvantage than either a woman without a disability or a man with a disability.

Inequities within the household are commonly characteristic with these groups.

Differences in intra-household distributions based on gender or disability are present among both poor and non-poor households with women and disabled members.

Overall there is much overlap between these groups that warrants exploration. When poverty is combined with inequality, regardless if it is based on gender, disability, or socio-economic status, the result is a severe failure of capabilities. Interestingly, poor and disabled people as well as women and girls traditionally lack opportunities, resources, and support to develop and promote their capabilities. Thus, the application of a capabilities approach in addressing these areas seems appropriate and a necessary mechanism of intervention for the development of these groups.

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<sup>10</sup> For discussion of the oppression and marginalization of individuals with disabilities, see Oliver (1996: 23-29); Coleridge (1993: 4).

<sup>11</sup> See Nussbaum (2000; 1995).

<sup>12</sup> See Nussbaum (2000: 1).

### **Capabilities and its relationship to poverty, disability, and gender:**

The capabilities approach is useful for examining the overlapping concepts of poverty, disability, and gender. According to Amartya Sen, an individual's well-being, or quality of life, should be assessed in terms of the individuals' capabilities, the ability or potential to achieve certain things or functionings.<sup>13</sup> Functionings range from elementary (such as being adequately healthy) to complex (such as being socially integrated) based on how individuals attach weights to these functionings. The capability of an individual reflects the different combinations of functionings the person is able to achieve dependent on their particular circumstances.

Sen argues in support of a capabilities approach to poverty.<sup>14</sup> This represents a non-welfarist approach, which uses basic achievements (such as the ability to meet basic needs by converting goods) rather than actual goods or utilities as the means for comparing well-being.<sup>15</sup> To focus upon an individual's opportunity to pursue his/her objectives, one must consider not only those primary goods possessed by that individual but also the relevant personal characteristics governing the conversion of primary goods into the individual's ability to promote his/her ends.<sup>16</sup>

Building on this perspective, the capabilities approach is appropriate for understanding disability. As illustrated by Sen:

A person who has a disability may have a larger basket of primary goods and yet have less chance to lead a normal life (or to pursue her objectives) than an able-bodied person with a smaller basket of primary goods. Similarly, an older person

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<sup>13</sup> Sen (1980; 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Sen (1999: 87-88).

<sup>15</sup> Ravallion (1994: 4-5).

<sup>16</sup> Sen (1999: 74).

or a person more prone to illness can be more disadvantaged in a generally accepted sense even with a larger bundle of primary goods.<sup>17</sup>

Even if disabled people possess more income, they might require an even greater amount to accomplish the same functionings as other non-disabled people.

For instance, an individual who is a quadriplegic may earn a higher salary than another individual without a disability. However, a large percentage of his/her income must pay for costs associated with the disability (high medical bills, wheelchair maintenance costs, an accessible van with a lift, and personal assistance fees), leaving a smaller percentage to be allocated for other life areas.

The capabilities approach is concerned with evaluating an individual's advantage in terms of "actual ability to achieve various valuable functionings as a part of living."<sup>18</sup> Both Sen and Nussbaum use capabilities to indicate an evaluative space from which comparisons of well-being can be completed. This allows a better comparative means to determine equality and inequality among individuals. In addition, Nussbaum discusses how capabilities along with a threshold level of capabilities provide a basis for fundamental constitutional principles that individuals are entitled to demand from their governments. This is especially applicable to these groups (the poor, disabled people, and women) who often lack a voice and the power to address their own needs.

### **Applying the capabilities approach from poverty to disability:**

According to Sen, well-being involves life with basic freedoms, such as the freedom to live a healthy life by having access to adequate medical care and treatment.

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<sup>17</sup> Sen (1999: 74).

<sup>18</sup> Nussbaum and Sen (1993: 30).

Development involves expanding the freedoms enjoyed by individuals and removing the sources of unfreedoms, such as poverty and poor economic opportunities.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, disability may be seen as a source of unfreedoms due to its restrictive nature on individual functioning. If so, then development in this context involves alleviating or removing disability while promoting capabilities.

Similarly as poverty is considered a deprivation of capabilities, disability can be treated likewise. To build capabilities means to either enhance the positive elements (functionings and capabilities) and/or to eliminate the negative aspects (poverty, disability). This can be accomplished with different interventions based on the conceptual framework embodied in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) recently developed by the World Health Organization.<sup>20</sup>

The ICF describes and organizes health and health-related information into several domains. These domains include body functions and structures as well as activities and participation, all expressed along a continuum of functioning to disability. Functioning is the umbrella term for all body functions and structures, activities and participation whereas disability is the umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to note that the term functioning in the ICF is comparable to the term functioning used in the capabilities approach. Essentially both terms relate to the set of doings and beings. This compatibility of terms will facilitate not only the

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<sup>19</sup> Sen (1999: 3).

<sup>20</sup> The ICF was completed and distributed in 2001. For detailed information regarding the ICF see the WHO web-site (<http://www3.who.int/icf/icftemplate.cfm>).

<sup>21</sup> Disability in the WHO ICF context differs from the traditional view of the term disability as used in the introduction of this paper.

understanding of the capabilities approach but hopefully its use among disability professionals. The ICF has been endorsed by the UN General Assembly and represents a long-term international effort in its development. Therefore, bridging the capabilities approach with the ICF framework is a critical component in promoting overall adoption.

Each ICF level requires a different type of intervention to develop the capabilities of individuals and/or to remove the disability. At the impairment (body) level, the appropriate interventions are medical or rehabilitative. The next level of activity limitation involves rehabilitation that attempts to correct or extend the range of individual capacities. Or it can be addressed by the use of assistive technology<sup>22</sup> that compensates for activity limitations. Finally, the participation restriction level includes interventions that change the environment (remove barriers and/or establish facilitators) as well as those social and political elements necessary to facilitate modification in the environment (research, lobbying, policies, programs, etc.).

Poverty analysis determines “what those capabilities are in specific societies, and who fails to reach them.”<sup>23</sup> This same objective has application to disability analysis and gender analysis. Comparing aspects of human development (specific functionings and capabilities) between individuals with and without disabilities can provide additional insight into the life situations of disabled people. The same is true for assessments between women and men. Furthermore, comparisons across variables (poor and non-

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<sup>22</sup> Any item, piece of equipment or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified or customized, that is used to increase, maintain or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities” as defined in the U.S. Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1988.

<sup>23</sup> Ravallion (1994: 6) and suggests Desai (1990) for capabilities-based poverty measures.

poor, with and without disability, female or male) facilitate greater understanding of the effects of these variables on the lives of individuals.

### **Capabilities and human development among the poor, disabled people, and women:**

Emphasizing human capabilities is the objective of human development. By expanding both choices and opportunities, human development enables and empowers individuals to lead valued and respectful lives, and hence is an appropriate framework for examining marginalized populations like disabled and poor individuals. Furthermore, development involves areas of choice highly valued by all individuals including “participation, security, sustainability, guaranteed human rights – all needed for being creative and productive and for enjoying self-respect, empowerment and a sense of belonging to a community.”<sup>24</sup> Since these same areas parallel those emphasized by the disability rights movement, it seems fitting to utilize a capabilities approach in addressing disability.

It is especially instrumental in developing countries, which have the majority of the poor and disabled people but currently have limited resources and opportunities for developing capabilities. In many developing countries, disability is not considered a critical issue. While human development can enhance capabilities via appropriate cultural, economic, political, and social re-orientations, some groups remain “structurally excluded from using and enhancing their capabilities.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> UNDP Human Development Report 2000 (2000: 17).

<sup>25</sup> As discussed in the Nepal Human Development Report published by the United Nations Development Program (1998: 1).

Both disabled and poor individuals along with women (and girls) have been denied access to capability enabling opportunities, such as education. Individuals with disabilities “lack access to vocational training and are often trained into trades for which there is no demand or that do not provide decent livelihoods.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, rehabilitative services and assistive technology are not available or not affordable, especially in developing countries. Therefore, it is fundamentally important to promote capability development among these groups.

### **Conclusion:**

Poverty, disability, and gender affect an individual's capabilities, impacting their full participation in society. Not only can the concept of capability be used to examine poverty, it is also useful in assessing the dynamics of disability. Similar to poverty, disability may be considered a capability deprived state where individuals with disabilities may be seen as less capable than individuals without disabilities.<sup>27</sup> The same can be viewed in regard to women and their traditional gender roles and their lowered status in most societies.

Furthering the understanding of the unique circumstances of individuals, including women, experiencing disability and poverty is crucial for development efforts. A dearth of policies currently exists to assist individuals with disabilities that face poverty. This situation is even more relevant to women since they are at an increased risk of becoming disabled throughout their lifetime and once disabled they are at an increased risk of being sicker, poorer, and more socially isolated than either men with

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<sup>26</sup> See Asian Development Bank, Report of the Workshop on Disability and Development (1999: 13-14).

<sup>27</sup> Goffman (1965).

disabilities or women without disabilities.<sup>28</sup> Utilizing the capabilities approach, including both Sen's and Nussbaum's approaches, will contribute to the knowledge base regarding disability, poverty and gender.

For a capabilities approach to be adopted in addressing disability and poverty, we need to identify the needs of disabled people in developing countries especially and understand how they meet their needs in this context of limited resources and support. The implications for the additional burden of disabilities and the traditional female role require thoughtful consideration and enlightened policies.<sup>29</sup> For this reason, we need to highlight the unique circumstances of disabled women, who experience additional disadvantage.

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<sup>28</sup> International Labor Organization (1989) and McPherson (1989) as cited in Groce (1997: 180).

<sup>29</sup> Kennedy, Carlson, Ustun, Regier, Norquist, & Sirovatka (1997: 152).

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