

The Capabilities Approach and Violence Against Women

Implications for Social Development

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Social development approaches, welfare policies, and antipoverty strategies have often been premised on the idea that an increase in income or the material wealth of households is the best means to end poverty and thus the primary goal of social development. Neoliberal growth-oriented strategies of capital accumulation, privatization, and investment in developing countries with cheap labor markets are similarly focused on materialist underpinnings, often ignoring human well-being and human rights.

Many approaches to social development ignore the idea that how people live their lives and the kinds of services and institutions that they have access to are potentially just as important as, and tied in to, their annual income. Poor and low-income individuals are at risk and have low functioning not just because they have no money, but because they may lack certain freedoms or

capabilities (Sen, 1999). Poor and impoverished women who are victims of violence and abuse in their isolation are especially vulnerable in the sense that they have less freedom and access to institutions. Unfortunately, social development approaches have rarely incorporated the unique realities of poor women into their blueprints, particularly the special concerns of women who are victims of violence. Though the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations are appropriately concerned with gender equality and the empowerment of women, their indicators on these issues are not explicitly focused on violence against women. This is the case despite the evidence that violence against women and girls clearly has an adverse impact on women's economic and overall well-being (Pyles, 2006a; Raphael, 2000; Tolman and Rosen, 2001).

The capabilities perspective offers an alternative to development theories and policies

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traditionally grounded in such materialism. The capabilities approach, as articulated by Sen (1999), Nussbaum (2000), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP; 1999), is based on the notion that human freedom and access to opportunities are central to social development. Given that women represent the largest number of individuals living in poverty and that they are vulnerable to violence and other inequalities that exacerbate their vulnerabilities, the capabilities approach offers a social development framework that can incorporate these realities. After clarifying the capabilities approach, I review the literature on the economic aspects of violence against women. I show how the capabilities approach, especially the work of Nussbaum (2000), offers new insights into understanding both violence against women and social development.

Capabilities Approach

The 1998 Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen (1999) argues that while providing primary goods to a society, as proposed by the philosopher John Rawls, is an important moment in economic thinking, what use one makes of these primary goods “depends crucially on a number of contingent circumstances, both personal and social” (1971: 70). These circumstances, or “diversities and heterogeneities,” as Sen calls them, include personal heterogeneities, environmental diversities, variations in social climate, differences in relational perspectives, and distribution within the family. People’s abilities to activate these primary goods vary. Sen (1999: 73) thus emphasizes the importance of looking into “the *actual living* that people manage to achieve.” This emphasis on securing a real opportunity for every individual to achieve functioning—what the person can succeed in doing with the primary goods at one’s command—is the basis of the philosophy of the capabilities approach (Gotoh, 2001).

Many theories of welfare hold the position that positive outcomes, such as working in the formal wage-labor sector or achieving an income above the poverty line, contribute to well-being. The capabilities approach asserts that processes and human relationships are, in and of themselves, valuable and also valuable insofar as they have a positive impact on material well-being outcomes. According to the capabilities approach, equality of opportunity is what matters most for well-being (Pressman and Summerfield, 2000). Sen has focused on “what is of intrinsic value in life, rather than on the goods that provide instrumental value or utility” (Pressman and Summerfield, 2000: 97). While a utilitarian measure of human welfare would indicate that people are worse off if their standard of living is lower, the capabilities approach shows that with greater freedom and choice, welfare may increase. Poverty is viewed as a deprivation of basic liberties as opposed to just low income (Sen, 1999). Income is not necessarily an end in itself but a means to an end. The end is to increase the functioning and capabilities of people, so that an adequate measure of welfare ought to measure these capabilities.

The United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) is an example of a way to measure development not based on income alone, but incorporating other valued aspects of human life. The HDI is a “weighted average of income adjusted for distribution and purchasing power, life expectancy and literacy and education. It is expressed in terms of deprivation from what is potentially achievable” (Pressman and Summerfield, 2000: 101).

The basic capabilities advocated for by Sen (1999: 126) are “the ability to be well nourished, to avoid escapable morbidity or mortality, to read and write and communicate, to take part in the life of the community, to appear in public without shame.” Nussbaum (2000), who broadens Sen’s capabilities, incorporating more explicitly feminist concerns, articulates 10 central human capabilities: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought;

emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment. Clearly, these perspectives reflect a different view of economic development compared with the traditional goals of achieving a certain income or owning property. To better grasp the idea of capabilities, it is important to understand the centrality of the concept of freedom.

Freedom as the Means and End

Freedom, liberties, agency, and choice are central tenets of the capabilities approach. According to Sen (1999), there are two aspects of freedom: the processes that allow freedom of actions and decisions; and the opportunities that people have, given their particular personal and social situations. Freedom is both the primary end and principal means of development. Sen also describes this dual function as the constitutive role and the instrumental role, respectively. He (1999) advocates for five basic instrumental freedoms: political freedoms (i.e., civil rights and other aspects of democratic processes); economic facilities (i.e., access to credit and other distributional considerations); social opportunities (i.e., access to education and health care); transparency guarantees (i.e., societal preventions of corruption and financial irresponsibility); and protective security (i.e., a social safety net providing income supplements and unemployment benefits). All of these instrumental freedoms are interconnected in their ability to help facilitate the ends of development.

It is critical to grasp the distinction between functioning and capabilities. A functioning is what people actually do, whereas a capability is what they are able to do given the personal and social situation. If one has the capability of being able to eat, one can still always choose to fast. Thus, the capability may not necessarily translate into a functioning. Women may choose to stay home with their children and/or do informal work rather than engage in the formal economic sector. But providing them with the capability to

choose to work in the formal sector (in a way that is safe and facilitates economic self-sufficiency) is the responsibility of society. So, under the capabilities approach, people should have the freedom to choose and self-determine their lives. The capabilities approach is ultimately congruent with social work perspectives on social justice, empowerment, and self-determination (Gutierrez and Lewis, 1994; Hill, 2003; Morris, 2002).

Violence Against Women and Economics

Violence against women affects the ability of women to achieve full functioning in the world. I define violence against women as physical, sexual, and emotional violence against women and girls by intimates, acquaintances, or strangers. Like many researchers, I view it as a patriarchal mechanism for controlling women, defined particularly by the use of power, force, manipulation, and isolation. In this section, I will discuss the ways in which violence against women tends to affect poor adult women. First, I will explain how violence limits women's access to certain institutions; then, I will discuss the effects of violence on the physical and emotional well-being of women; and finally, I will articulate the explicit ramifications of abuse on the economic well-being of women.

Violence as a Limit to Women's Access to Institutions

Women who have been victimized by an intimate partner or a stranger often experience fear, shame, and isolation. People who abuse women may use the tactic of isolation by deliberately isolating them from friends, family, work, and social institutions. These abusers often perceive connections with others in the community as a threat to their system of power and control. Women tend to be cut off from law enforcement, courts, healthcare systems,

and other sources of social support. According to Sullivan (1991: 42),

It has been suggested that a critical reason so many women remain with or return to their assailants is a lack of access to community resources, specifically, housing, legal assistance, employment, education, finances, childcare and social support systems.

This isolation from such social support is so pervasive that the most common form of intervention with survivors of violence is advocacy services (Schechter, 1982). The purpose of such advocacy services is “to enhance the quality of women’s lives by improving their access to community resources and increasing the social support available to them” (Bybee and Sullivan, 2002: 105). Furthermore, because of the nature of the isolation associated with a problem such as violence against women and the fact that it is understood as a community rather than individual problem, many communities have developed community response teams to violence consisting of representatives of various institutions in the community. Cheers et al. studied family violence in an Australian indigenous community, and they argue for “an innovative, holistic and multifaceted community development response [that] addresses the economic, social and structural issues relating to family violence” (2006: 59).

Violence Affecting Women’s Health and Mental Health

Women who have been assaulted or battered may be dealing with the realities of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and other physical health problems (Plichta, 1996). Tolman and Rosen (2001) found that women who experienced domestic violence in the past year reported three times as many mental health disorders as their non-abused counterparts. Sullivan and Bybee (1999) found that when

abuse in an intimate relationship ceased, the victim’s physical health improved. Nasir and Hyder (2003) identified domestic violence among pregnant women in developing countries as a significant global health issue. The main risk factors in their research were identified as belonging to a low-income group, little education in both partners, and unplanned pregnancy.

Many survivors of violence must cope with memories of traumatic events, thoughts of suicide, and the effects of physical injuries. From a study by Raphael and Tolman (1997: 10), a research participant describes her experience:

I have trouble at work as a result of past domestic violence. . . . I worry that I am always missing something. I am always watching for an attack so I am on guard all the time and I am not really listening. I am always needing to ask for clarification and that angers people on the job.

The ongoing effects of violence—physical and emotional—can be barriers to women’s ability to engage in the community, get vocational training and education, and work in both formal and informal sectors.

Violence Affecting Women’s Ability to Generate Income

Economic abuse is an aspect of violence that some women report having experienced (Raphael and Tolman, 1997). This kind of abuse may include behaviors such as isolating women from financial resources or preventing them from working. Many battered women do not have ready access to cash, checking accounts, or charge accounts. Studies show that an abuser may directly interfere with a woman’s attempts to work or attend school by harassing her at work, disabling the family car, destroying her books or clothes, giving her visible wounds, or renegeing on child-care commitments at the last minute (Raphael and Tolman, 1997). Other research has

focused on how violence from an intimate partner affects women's alternative resource-generating strategies, including participation in the informal and illegal economies (Pyles, 2006b).

Violence appears to be a direct contributing factor to the poverty levels of women. Women who have left abusive relationships may find themselves with multiple barriers to employment in the formal sector, such as transportation, child care, and other ongoing safety issues (Sullivan, 1991). Thus, it has been reported that many women stay in abusive relationships for economic reasons (Sullivan, 1991).

Capabilities and Women

The work on capabilities conducted by Nussbaum (2000) expands Sen's original ideas and represents an important voice for advocating for the capabilities of women. Many of these ideas emerge from empirical evidence that exists internationally, particularly in developing countries. There are three additional concepts that are critical for understanding the capabilities approach and how it is useful for capturing the phenomenon of violence against women. In this section, I will review the concepts of missing women/household inequality, caring labor, and bodily integrity in more detail, as they are particularly important components of an expanded understanding of poverty alleviation.

Missing Women and Household Inequality

Sen (1992, 1999) has identified the high mortality rates of women across the world, a reflection of a capability deprivation for women. While women in Europe and North America tend to outnumber men, this is not the case in many developing countries. The explanation of this can be discovered by looking into the experiences of females in developing countries, especially female children. While female infanticide

does exist, the larger problem appears to be the neglect of female health and nutrition. "There is indeed considerable direct evidence that female children are neglected in terms of health care, hospitalization and even feeding" (Sen, 1999: 106). Sen estimates that 100 million women worldwide are missing in this sense.

Closely linked to the phenomenon of missing women, that is, women who have died prematurely in developing countries as a result of inadequate health care and education, Sen has acknowledged the phenomenon of household inequality (Sen, 1999). Household inequality is the idea that there are domestic power imbalances that need to be accounted for in assessing economic well-being. Because of such domestic hierarchies women do not have full access and opportunity to achieve capabilities. In fact, Iversen (2003: 97) remarks, "domestic hierarchies can deform individual preferences," forcing women to adapt their preferences and make choices about their lives that they would not make if they had true equality of opportunity.

Caring Labor

Scholarly inquiry into the nature of women's care work, that is, the often unpaid or underpaid caretaking of children, older adults, and families, has revealed some of the complexities of this phenomenon. Multidisciplinary thinkers have argued about the inequities that exist for women doing care work and how philosophers such as Rawls have ignored this aspect of women's realities (Okin, 1989). More recently, UNDP has incorporated the concept of "caring labor" as a critical element of social development (UNDP, 1999).

Because women worldwide spend two-thirds of their working hours on unpaid work and men spend one-quarter (most unpaid work is spent on caring work), women certainly have a lot to gain from an increased attention given to this reality (UNDP, 1999). For women in abusive relationships, commitments to care work may put them further in harm's way. Duties to care for children

and husbands can influence the choices women make to report the violence they experience as well as to stay in or leave abusive relationships.

Bodily Integrity

While Sen (1999) has certainly been attuned to the unique situation of women and the necessity for increased attention to women's vulnerable position in order to enhance their capabilities, he has not proactively addressed the issue of violence against women. Nussbaum (2000), however, does take a proactive stance in her work on capabilities and one of the critical themes reflective of this is her recognition of violence against women as a capability deprivation. She calls this capability "bodily integrity." Nussbaum (2000: 78) defines the capability of bodily integrity as being able to move freely from place to place; having one's bodily boundaries treated as sovereign, that is, being able to be secure against assault, including sexual assault, child sexual abuse, and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.

The reason for setting forth this capability is to recognize the community's responsibility to provide the social conditions (laws, interventions, etc.) that enable this capability in the case of women who experience lack of bodily integrity as a capability deprivation. This is crucial, as bodily integrity is an important freedom in its own right as well as a means to further freedoms and economic opportunities. According to the capabilities approach, the government, via its social policies, is ultimately responsible for delivering "the *social basis of* these capabilities" (Nussbaum, 2000: 81).

Implications for Social Development

It should be clear from the above discussion that there are complex ramifications to the problem

of violence against women, including adverse effects on individual well-being and the ability of women to access social institutions, including the labor market. The capabilities approach identifies violence against women as a capability deprivation, arguing that social policies ought to provide social structures necessary to achieve capabilities, including bodily integrity. It is also the case that the capabilities approach sheds an important light on the problem of violence against women. Traditional interventions in violence against women, such as empowerment, strengths, or medical models, have often failed to address the deeper poverty and social development issues that accompany violence against women (Pyles, 2006a).

The limitation of the capabilities approach is that theorists tend to overlook how to implement the theory or discuss practice methods for actualizing its vision. Thus, it is important for scholars and practitioners in fields such as social work, education, business, public health, and other applied disciplines to contribute to this dialogue. In this section, I offer suggestions for social development practice as well as social research.

Social Development Practice

It would seem that a critical question concerning the articulation of a social development approach is how the approach can be actualized in practice. Promoting instrumental freedoms is an essential component of the development of women who are vulnerable to violence. Thus, this may include addressing political freedoms, social opportunities, and the protective security of women and their families. Historically, some of these activities have fallen under the purview of social workers and other social development practitioners. For example, social workers advocate for a minimum safety net of welfare and/or unemployment benefits.

Increasing the social networks of individuals and promoting access to services are important steps in the advancement of instrumental freedoms.

However, these traditional social work skills must be supplemented by the skills of organizing and policy advocacy. While it is the case that some social workers possess such skills, social development specialists and community organizers can offer their expertise in the areas of organizing and advocacy. When communities lack such skills, it may be necessary to partner with union organizers, feminist organizers, and other activists. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel of community organizing and mobilization. Established, successful methods are well documented in the areas of planning, organizing, and advocacy. Concomitant activities may include the promotion of social capital, civic engagement, and democratic participation of women (Gutierrez and Lewis, 1994; Putnam, 2000). Women's support groups, grassroots political coalitions, and the promotion of women candidates are examples of democratizing activities that can enhance political freedoms and social opportunities.

Access to job development, micro-loans, and higher education are essential strategies for developing the economic facilities for women who are surviving violence (Pyles, 2006a). Providing supportive services for women working in both the formal and informal sectors will enhance the capabilities of women, especially those living with violence. These supports may include child care, support groups, legal advocacy, and other supplements to allow them to be successful in their work (Sullivan, 1991).

A vital component of social development involves not only economic and social development strategies, but also safety net assurances for the most vulnerable populations. Promoting the right to protective security measures such as a welfare safety net can be achieved through policy advocacy. Additionally, practitioners can advocate for unemployment and disability benefits for women who are forced to leave their jobs due to domestic or sexual violence. Thus, it is incumbent upon social workers and other social development practitioners to advocate for such policies, emphasizing a capabilities discourse.

Social Development Research and Policy

More research should continue to be conducted on the effects of violence on women's capabilities. Like the United Nations human development initiatives, social researchers investigating development practices and outcomes may be well served to consider measuring social development progress on a capabilities scale.

Though studies have been effected that are concerned with how violence affects the abilities of women to maintain employment and access supports, studies could explore how violence influences women's access to social institutions and political participation. Studies that correlate experiences with violence and access to social institutions and political participation would enhance the knowledge base of social development specialists. In addition to qualitative and exploratory studies, research could be conducted utilizing secondary data analysis to inquire into the association of women's social and political participation (such as voter turnout and other forms of political participation), rates of violence against women, and the availability of prevention and intervention programs.

There is a paucity of research published in social work journals that is concerned with the efficacy of community organizing strategies as well as social development programs. Evidence-based practice studies of micro-enterprise programs for battered women, job development endeavors in urban and rural areas, and the effects of political participation on the well-being of communities are just a few ideas of endeavors that could be assessed. With greater knowledge of what works and what does not work, practitioners and community members will be more able to actualize the ideals of the capabilities approach, including the safety and economic well-being of female survivors of abuse.

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