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Education of women with disabilities in Pakistan: enhanced agency, unfulfilled aspirations

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Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which the capability approach captures the complexity of the lives of young women with disabilities in Pakistan, particularly in relation to their education. Focusing on their educational experiences and outcomes, we examine the ways in which education shaped what these young women were able to achieve- what they wanted to do and be. In undertaking this research, we adopted a collaborative, qualitative approach involving in-depth interviews with six young women with disabilities. All these women were interesting and exemplary cases given their very high levels of education. Our findings suggest that the capability approach provides a framework that is able to capture the educational experiences-outcomes journey of the young women. However, also interesting to note is how the expansion of their capabilities is bounded, primarily because their freedoms are intrinsically linked to their socio-cultural positioning and largely negative perceptions of disability in the wider society.

Keywords: Disability; Education; Gender; Pakistan

Introduction

Disability is a complex phenomenon, which is interlinked with a range of variables, such as impairment, gender, poverty and social-cultural context (WHO 2011). In recent years, Amartya Sen's capability approach has been applied to better understand the multifaceted nature of disability (Terzi 2008). Adopting the capability approach allows for an exploration of disability embedded within a multitude of factors, such as gender, economic, justice, well-being etc. (Nussbaum 2006; Sen 1999a, 2004b). However, the empirical application of the capability approach is currently limited and it is unclear if it can adequately capture experiences of educational provision and outcomes of people with disabilities.

This paper discusses the findings from a small scale project undertaken in urban Pakistan to understand the perceived impact of education on the lives of young women with disabilities. In-depth interviews were conducted with six women with disabilities having significantly high levels of education (attended college or university). The aim of our exploration was to understand their educational experiences. In particular we wished to understand how these young women perceived the impact of education on their socio-cultural, political and economic lives. We framed our research broadly on Martinetti's (2006) representation of the capability framework, thus focusing on 'educational experience-outcome' journey of these women. We begin with an overview of disability in Pakistan and the use of capability approach in relation to our research perspective, before moving on to discussing insights from the research.

Review of literature

Despite high disability prevalence in Pakistan, we know very little about the lives of people with disabilities. The country has a high incidence of poverty (World Bank 2010), with approximately 3.2 million (2.49% of the population) people with disabilities (Pakistan Population Census 1998)[i]. In recent years, this number has increased due to natural disasters and post-9/11 volatility (Irshad, Mumtaz and Levay 2012). Researchers such as Ahmed (2005) have noted that a medical, impairment based approach towards disability dominates Pakistani society. Educational provision tends to be segregated (Afzal 1992; Miles 1998; Thomas and Thomas 2002b), and most children with disabilities are educated either in special schools, NGOs (Lari 2000) or madaris[ii] (Zaman 1999). This situation is even more problematic for women with disabilities given that more generally female participation is very low in education in Pakistan (DFID 2010). Women with disabilities are further marginalised and are considered by many as facing 'double discrimination' that is, socio-

cultural biases arising from both one's gender and disability (Hannaford 1989; Lonsdale 1990), which Thomas and Thomas (2002a) note becomes 'triple discrimination' due to poverty in developing economies such as Pakistan. Thus an exploration of the role of education in relation to gender is rather pertinent.

Mitra (2006, 244) notes that 'Sen's capability approach provides a powerful framework for examining, among others, disability, gender and poverty, all of which represent neglected areas of research'. Advanced in 1980s by the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, the capability approach focuses on people's capabilities to function. Capabilities are the real alternatives (substantive freedoms or effective opportunities) available to an individual to undertake the actions and activities s/he wants to engage in and whom they want to be. Thus capabilities are the real structures that underlie and shape and/or generate the observables functioning (state of doing) and involve a complex web of interactions between a range of individual and contextual factors, such as gender, poverty, family structures, and social, political and economic arrangements (Sen 2004a). These interactions have the potential to limit or enhance individual capabilities into outcomes (achieved functioning) as well as the expansion of other capabilities (economic, social, political, etc.) (Robeyns 2002). Important also in the capability approach is the concept of agency, that is, what an individual can do or does to realise any of her goals (Crocker and Robeyns 2010; Sen 1985, 1992).

The capability approach has been applied in a number of areas, but rarely to the education of women with disabilities. Currently research studies either take a broad view on capability approach or work with a few selected variables. For example, the approach has been applied to better understand the intersections between disability and gender (Welch 2002) or between disability and poverty (Kuklys 2005). Similarly, within the field of education studies focus on inequalities in resource distributions (Trani, Kett, Bakhshi and Bailey 2011; Unterhalter and Brighouse 2007), specifically within gender and education (Majumdar and Subramanian 2001; Unterhalter 2003), and on the role and purpose of education extending beyond economic outcomes (Walker 2006; Terzi 2005). Arendes-Kuenning and Amin (2001) focus specifically on the education of women in Bangladesh, examining how people in two villages perceived women's education in expanding their choices. Interestingly, the study found that parents educate their daughters because education enhanced women's capabilities by increasing their earning potential, making them more desirable for marriage.

The capability approach regards education as a basic capability (Anand and Sen 2000). Education is regarded as more than schooling, and includes forms of learning that

occur outside schools (Unterhalter and Brighouse 2003). It is argued that education enhances freedoms and develops human agency (Walker and Zhu 2006) and leads to human development, that is, enlarging people's choices or the range of things people can be and do (Sen 1983). Sen (1992) also differentiates between the instrumental and intrinsic value of education. Its instrumental value involves better career opportunities, standard of living and life prospects; whereas it's intrinsic value includes people's engagement and participation in social and civic life. Thus, education lays the foundation for the expansion of other capabilities to do other things (Sen 1992), such as strive for greater economic, social and political freedom (Anand and Sen 2000). It also allows people to make informed decisions about what is it that they actually want to pursue in life, which is particularly relevant for marginalised communities, such as those with disabilities, whose aspiration and ambitions are often diminished by the prevailing socio-cultural constraints (Green 2007). Such a holistic perspective of education is vital for capturing the diverse ways in which education impacts on people's lives.

We worked with the capability approach for a number of reasons. Firstly, this approach views disability in terms of human heterogeneity, that is, diverse characteristics and needs of individuals (Sen 1992). People with disabilities not only face difficulties due to their impairments, but also due to other characteristics, such as, gender and age (Thomas and Thomas 2002a). Secondly, the approach takes account of contextual realities because capabilities are qualified or constrained by socio-cultural, political and economic arrangements (Crocker and Robeyns 2010; Sen 2004a). This is particularly relevant for women with disabilities living in Southern countries[iii] who largely function within the confines of their household (Ghai 2002), influenced by resource distributions within families, relational perspectives, poverty, etc. (Sen 1999b). Thirdly, the capability approach shifts the focus from income and commodities to quality of life and human fulfilment (Nussbaum 2006). Finally, the approach emphasises enhancing people's real choices and freedoms as aspired by individuals themselves (Sen 1992). This subjective perspective is critical in understanding the lived reality of people with disabilities (Barton 1998).

What counts and what should count?

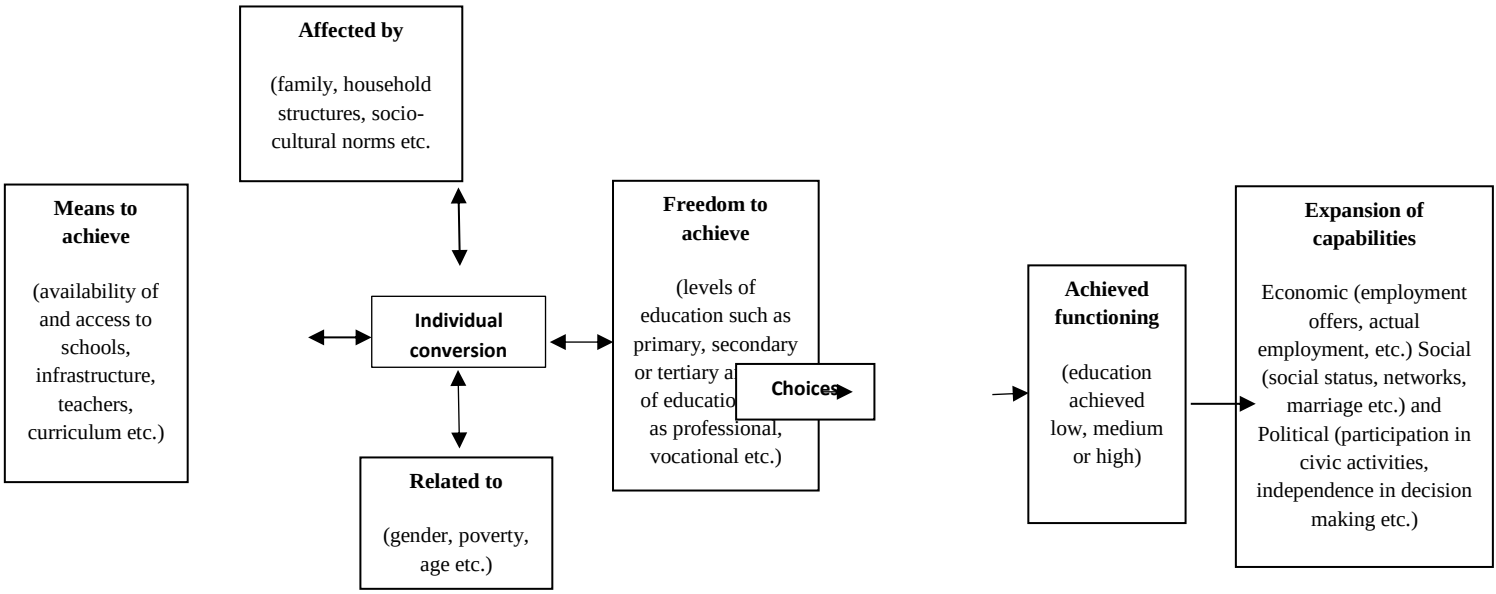
Educational outcomes have traditionally been measured in economic terms, such as the link between years of education and earnings (Orazem, Glewwe and Patrinos 2007). This economic focus is evident in studies that estimate costs of impairments to national economies (Gooding 2006), the loss of gross domestic product (GDP) arising from people with

disabilities being out of work (Metts 2000) or the enrolment, completion rates and employment (UNESCO 2011). People with disabilities in this economic view are perceived as 'resilient' individuals characterised as being able to navigate through life events on their own (Hutcheon and Lashewicz 2014, 1387) based on their academic achievements (Miller 2002). This sole focus on economic outcomes is problematic because people with disabilities are constrained in terms of their earning and the ability to convert money into good living (Singal, Bhatti, Janjua and Sood 2012). In addition, this narrow focus understates the role of education even though examples from different national contexts show that education plays a much broader role in the lives of people with disabilities. For instance, more years of education improves behavioural skills (Fisher and Meyer 2002) enhances individual agency (Morley and Croft 2012) increases their self-confidence, awareness of rights and reduces dependency on others (Singal et al. 2012). Moreover, the educational achievements of people with disabilities may also be influenced by context in which they function. The contextual influences are particularly important in the Southern countries where place and position of an individual in the family and society is often negotiated (Nyamnjoh 2002) and this interdependence could have the potential to restrict the development of their individual agency. The economic focus on educational outcomes therefore limits our understanding of what is valued by people with disabilities themselves. However, moving away from this purely economic focus has remained a challenge, even though people living in poverty, including those with disabilities themselves define their valued outcomes as more than economic, such as being perceived as valued members of the society (Singal et al. 2012).

In this paper, we take a broader view of educational outcomes. We adopt measures that do not merely capture the broader benefits of education but also the contextual realities. We adapt Martinetti's (2006) representation of the capability approach in the context of education as an experience-outcomes framework (see Figure 1). The framework shows how individual conversion is preceded by *means to achieve*, influenced by or related to individual characteristics and environmental factors, and results in *freedom to achieve, choices, achieved functioning.* To this we added the *expansion of capabilities.* Our variables were guided by Singal's (2007) educational outcomes framework, wherein she argues for a focus on four intersecting variables: the learning self; purposeful activities (income and non-income generating tasks); the self (physical, experienced and spiritual self); and participation (in household and community). Following this framework, the specific measures we used to elicit young women's experiences included self, family, schooling, NGO/DPO support, government support, and intersectionalities between disability and gender. For examining

educational outcomes we used individual agency (self-confidence, aspirations, and enhanced status), sense of activism (participation in civic activities), labour market participation (employment) and the relational world (friendships and marriage).

Figure 1: The capability approach and education (Adapted from Martinetti, 2006)



Adapted with permission of Professor Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti

Research approach

A case study approach was adopted to collect rich narratives of women with disabilities. This approach is particularly useful when attempting to develop an in-depth understanding of individual lives accounting for multifaceted complexities (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000), such as women with disabilities. Each case in this research represented a strong and positive example, and best exemplified the focus of our research (Yin 2003). The authors[iv] undertook this study in partnership with two local Disabled Persons Organisations - Special Talent Exchange Programme and Pakistan Foundation for Fighting Blindness. These organisations acted as our critical friends and helped us in identifying participants, providing details of the context, articulating and dealing with ethical issues, and enhancing our understanding of religious, socio-cultural sensitivities related to doing disability research in Pakistan. Their membership listing provided our sampling framework and we identified six

women aged between 20 and 33 years belonging to low socio-economic group with comparatively high levels of education living in urban areas. After establishing direct contact with the women and seeking their approval, we conducted in-depth interviews using a life history approach. These individual interviews were conducted in Urdu, the preferred language of Pakistan with a typical interview lasting around one and a half hour. The interviews were recorded with due consent of women, and later transcribed in English[v], coded and categorised to identify emerging themes and patterns from the data. In two cases we were also able to interview the mothers to help further illuminate the lives of the young women, and provide deeper contextualised understanding.

The interviews elicited young women's views on their educational experiences, and how these contributed towards their socio-cultural, political and economic lives. During the field work the first author maintained a diary of her observations and captured personal reflections arising from various conversations (Burgess, 1981). These notes became important points for discussions with the second author and allowed for a critical examination of assumptions being made and inferences being drawn based on what had been heard and observed in the field. We began our data analysis with open coding, and then drew up a code sheet to capture both the manifest and the latent content in the data (Esterberg 2002). Throughout the process we were conscious of the fact that the young women were active participants (Barnes and Mercer 1997) in the research process and were repositories of local knowledge and experts on their life. Thus sharing of information was undertaken on the basis of mutual respect. The research process became an enriching and learning experience for us as it highlighted the resilience of our participants in different aspects of their lives (Hutcheon and Lashewicz 2014). The women also appreciated the opportunity that these interactions provided them to express themselves and reflect on their life experiences, an aspect which has been noted by others such as Singal (2010). In order to protect the identities of our research participants we have used pseudonyms in all cases and even changed the name of their home towns.

Profiles of the young women

Table 1 provides the details of the research participants. All came from large families (average seven members), which is the norm in these communities (Pakistan Population Census, 1998). Three were originally from towns in the Punjab province, but their families moved to a city, either for education or employment purposes. In terms of parental education,

the fathers of five women had low levels of education (secondary school only), while one father had been educated at the College level. In four cases, the mothers had never been to school, while two had been educated up to the secondary level. The fathers were in middle income jobs, and were either shop-keepers, government employees or store managers. All mothers were housewives, except for one who ran a private school. Five of the young women did not have impairments at birth but experienced it in early, middle or later years of their schooling[vi]. As a result, most began their schooling in mainstream education (aged four), but later moved into special schools. They re-entered mainstream education mainly at the college level. Four women interrupted their education because of health issues, such as typhoid, loss of partial sight, etc. Interestingly, all women had education levels either equal to or higher than their siblings, including brothers.

Table 1: Profiles of the young women

Cases (Pseudonym)	Age (years)	Family size	Level of education	Marital status	Nature and onset of impairment	Type of education institution
Asma	24	7 (2 sisters and 3 brothers)	12 years (FA)	Unmarried	Physical (later years of schooling)	- Mainstream Schooling - College (private candidate)
Rehana	27	7 (5 sisters)	16 years (MSc in Mathematics)	Unmarried	Physical (early years of schooling)	- Mainstream Schooling - College and University (private candidate)
Humeira	33	7 (3 brothers and 2 sisters)	16 years (Masters in Islamic Studies – still studying for another MA)	Unmarried	Visual (later years of schooling)	- Special (only courses) and Mainstream School - College and University (private candidate)
Ayesha	30	7 (3 sisters and 2 brothers)	16 years (Masters in Mass Communication)	Unmarried	Visual (early years of schooling)	- Special and Mainstream School - University
Farhana	20	9 (4 sisters and 3 brothers)	16 years (Master in International Relations – still studying)	Unmarried	Visual (impairment at birth)	- Studied at home until completing College - University
Naseem	30	9 (Father died – 5 sisters and 3 brothers)	12 years (FA)	Unmarried	Visual (middle years of schooling)	- Mainstream and Special School - College (private candidate)

Analysis of the findings

Using the framework shown in figure 1 we began our analysis with a focus on the means to achieve. The term 'achieve' is qualified because it is influenced by a range of interrelated factors which could be linked to individual and environmental factors, followed by the analysis of their conversion reflecting choices generated to facilitate their education. We then extended our analysis to the individual agency and the expansion of capabilities to examine the impact of education on the lives of these young women.

Individual conversion – from means to achieve to achieved functioning

Educational institutions

Four of the six women had experienced both mainstream and special schools at some point in their educational journeys. All noted the reluctance of mainstream schools to admit them because of their impairment and because special schools were available which were more appropriate for their particular learning needs. Farhana and Rehana were refused admission to the mainstream school due to their impairment, but Rehana's mother negotiated and eventually got her admitted. However, Farhana had to study at home until matriculation. Issues related to curriculum and infrastructure in mainstream schools also featured prominently in young women's narratives. They particularly highlighted the lack of representation of people with disabilities in curriculum or during lessons, where examples given were mostly not relevant to their lives.

> There is no representation of people with disabilities in curriculum. [Rehana].

Naseem expressed similar views but in relation to examples used by teachers during lessons.

> There were never any examples related to people with disabilities in regular [mainstream] schools that any teacher highlighted or gave us. [Naseem].

Others reflected on the lack of appropriate infrastructure. Asma and Rehana noted the lack of support for conducting experiments by reminiscing that table tops in the laboratory were too high for them to conduct experiments. While Rehana's mother helped her with experiments by holding her up, Asma had to drop science. Rehana further noted that given the way that the timetable was structured there was a lot of shifting of classrooms in College. This was very difficult for her and she ultimately dropped out of regular College and began studying independently at home, taking her examinations privately. Interestingly, all the women noted that their teachers had been very supportive and accommodating, especially when they became aware of their impairment.

> The behaviour of the teachers was really good. The teacher that I got when I began school were really good, she never scolded me. She appreciated me. [Humeira].

It is rather significant that none of the women in the sample talked about being discriminated against or punished by their teachers throughout their school journey. Even though mainstream schools were not able to accommodate these young women for the entire duration of their education, their accounts of the mainstream provision were largely positive. For instance, most of them actively participated in the school's extracurricular activities, and received encouragement from teachers.

> I used to participate in every function whether it was singing, drama, games or girl-guide. [Ayesha].

Ayesha, however, also observed the tensions in the mainstream setting where young women with disabilities were at risk of being at the margins.

> In special schools, all children are blind and they keep the most active child in front. But in the mainstream school there are only one or two blind students and so they don't bring them forward as they do in special schools. They give preference to normal students, even in the office over here [where she worked] they would give preference to able-bodied people [Ayesha].

Given that a significant number of women had attended special schools at some point, not surprisingly they also reflected on their experiences in these settings and drew contrasts with the mainstream as evident in the example above. A central theme that emerged in their discussions about special schools was the distance between these settings and their homes. Asma highlighted that while she lived in a largely deprived area and majority of government special schools were located approximately 10 kilometres away. While her mother was willing to accompany her on the commute, her father was not in favour given the associated costs and his conservative views about women travelling alone.

Even though gaining admission to special schools was easier, not all women were overwhelmingly in favour of special education. While many of them spoke very positively about the inspiration they drew from role models and the belongingness they felt in these settings, they expressed concerns regarding the narrow curriculum and limited orientation in these settings. Ayesha's observations highlight this tension.

> …there is no doubt that in special schools you do not get the feeling that you are not less than anyone. I felt very comfortable. The teachers are all trained, the environment is good. [Ayesha].

Like some others, Ayesha too felt that special schools mainly provide vocational skills rather than 'standard' education, and these skills inadequately prepared them for later life. She strongly argued that only children with severe disabilities should attend special schools.

> ...if a blind child remains with other blind children all the time, and does not have the experience of a mainstream school…that person will not have the confidence to interact and live side by side with non-disabled people. [Ayesha].

Rehana expressed similar views, particularly in terms of limited curriculum followed by special schools.

> ...persons with disabilities are restricted to special education, this should not happen. All they do in special education system is to teach them some sort of skill such as embroidery for girls or some other skill for boys. They should give them proper education, so that their intellectual abilities are improved rather than simply skill development. Skills should come later, if they are educated then they will earn themselves [Rehana].

The young women critically evaluated their experiences within different educational settings. While, they recognised the contribution of both special and mainstream institutions, they felt that special schools remained limited in preparing them for later life (Barnes 1999), and that they remained at the margins in mainstream schools (Warnock, 2005). This dilemma remained with our young participants throughout their educational journeys.

Civil society and government

Disabled Peoples' Organizations (DPOs) played a very important role in the narratives. They not only provided these women with indirect support, such as the provision of wheelchairs, laptops, and other appropriate learning software, but were also more directly involved in their education. Farhana noted this when she observed: 'they provided Braille books from primary level all the way to Masters'. Post schooling, some of the DPOs provided support not just in finding gainful employment, but also in developing soft skills, for example, leadership skills,

inter-personal skills and capacity building. The importance of this support was noted by Asma who, after the onset of her impairment, became dejected and depressed but was counselled through a DPO. She recounted how members of DPO supported her, 'they gave me a new life'. Thus, the close support offered by these DPOs was a valuable resource, as has been noted in research conducted in other countries, such as in the context of Canada by Hutchison, Arai, Pedlar, Lord and Yuen (2007) and Holland (2003) in the context of Central and Eastern Europe.

In complete contrast was young women's experience of support provided by the government. Even though there is provision of various entitlements, such as special arrangements during examinations (e.g. extra time, provision of a writer, etc.), these were difficult to access because of the considerable time and effort required to arrange them.

> ...they have some restrictions that need to be followed, for instance the writer needs to be two years younger, they also take a certificate of the school/college where that person is studying, photographs etc. Along with other papers, these papers are also submitted to the Board...they say that they will give us this extra time, but normally they give it with very great difficulty.....I got it but again with great difficulty [Ayesha].

However, even when extra time was granted, students felt pressured by invigilators to finish quickly. For example, Ayesha recollected that invigilators often said that they have been made to sit longer because of her and that she needs to finish her work quickly so that they can go home. This was very stressful for her and meant that she did not complete the examination even though she knew the answers and was entitled to extra time. Thongkuay (2009) makes similar observations where she noted that while people with disabilities in Asia Pacific region might recognise the availability of government's educational arrangements, these can be extremely difficult to access.

Family

All six women spoke very positively and caringly about their families. They noted that they were well-treated by their family members and in many cases were even given preferential treatment.

> I think I have been able to achieve all this because of their [family] support... a lot of encouragement… My parents created an encouraging atmosphere in the house which has really helped. [Ayesha].

Interestingly, across the sample group the young women highlighted the pivotal role of their mothers. They noted rather eloquently about how their mothers got them admitted to school, and acted as carers, for example, by accompanying their daughters to school, being physically present in the school, feeding them during lunch breaks, supporting them in classrooms and helping them during laboratory experiments. They also supported them in the school's extracurricular activities and nurtured the educational aspirations of these young women. In later years, they even accompanied them to DPO activities. Rehana talked at length about the support offered by her mother.

> My mother did everything for me...I had physics, chemistry in school. Whenever I needed to do experiments, I used to ask my mother to come and help me. She used to pick me up and hold me while I did my experiments. *Ami* (mother) was always there. My education would not have been possible without my mother's help [Rehana].

Our findings corroborate studies that note the facilitative role of families in the education of people with disabilities in different contexts. For instance the positive role played by families is highlighted in the Singaporean context by Dixon and Reddacliff (2001), in South Africa by Kabzems and Chimedza (2002), and in India by studies conducted by Sen and Goldbartb (2005) and Kalyanpur (1996). Miles (1998) discussing the role of community based rehabilitation in Pakistan also noted the very important role played by families. However, there are very few studies that have highlighted the very important and enabling role of mothers in supporting the education of their girl with disabilities.

Disability and gender

Similar to experiences of other non-disabled women in the Pakistani society, most young women felt that being a woman limited their freedom of movement (Jejeebhoy and Sattar 2001). For instance, Naseem showed her concern by comparing her freedom of movement with the opposite gender.

> The only problem that I can think of being a girl is that we have a problem in going out (*ana jana mein - travelling*) as compared to boys. Other than that being a girl with disability is not a problem. If I was a boy I could easily go out [Naseem].

Thus the young women did not perceive their gender-related difficulties in terms of their impairments. Rather they noted that they shared the same gender based issues and restrictions, such as moving outside the house, that were common to other non-disabled women in Pakistan. During interviews, in order to better understand the complex relationship between disability and poverty the young women were asked if it was better being someone with money and disability, or someone who is poor and without a disability. Asma responded that she would have preferred being poor, but without a disability, as it would make it easier to navigate the world.

> …if I can walk, I will make my way myself through this world even if I am poor. [Asma].

In response to the same question, Ayesha provided an interesting insight, where she preferred to be disabled.

> I don't wish to get my eye sight back, what I want is that I should achieve with this challenge...I want things to be better with this condition. If I was sighted and did my Masters and did this job then that would have been a very ordinary thing...I have achieved all this while being blind...if I had my eye sight then that would not have been a big achievement. [Ayesha].

Thus while Asma saw her impairment as a limitation, Ayesha viewed it as a challenge that she could overcome. These divergent views on their impairment perhaps influenced the extent to which each was able to achieve their functioning and expand their capabilities.

Overall these findings suggest that the choices that these women were able to make were indeed influenced, mostly positively, by a number of factors, including educational institutions, teachers' attitudes, and in particular the support that they received from family, especially mothers. These choices were however negatively influenced by issues to do with being a woman, but perhaps more profoundly by how they viewed their impairment. The positive influences in turn enhanced their freedom and allowed them to

achieve high levels of education (achieved functioning). The contribution of education did not end at high levels of education, but also led to a number of further outcomes.

From achieved functioning to the expansion of capabilities

In examining the perceived impact of education on their lives, the narratives of these young women highlighted a heightened sense of individual agency and a great deal of participation in various spheres of life.

Individual agency

All the women spoke at length and with great confidence about the value of education in their lives. This is clearly reflected in the levels of education they were able to achieve in a context where even their able-bodied counterparts get less education than boys[vii]. All women at the outset recognised and appreciated the importance of education in developing their confidence.

> Education has contributed tremendously to my confidence. [Ayesha].

Asma compared herself to her less educated cousins to express her views on education.

> I have two other cousins who have not studied at all. When I look at them I think I am so much better than them. Thank God I have studied. I can talk to people and behave nicely. [Asma]

Similarly, Farhana believed that education has enabled her to gain respect of others, primarily because she is a well-adjusted member of the society.

> ... the right cause [purpose] of education is to work for the society so that I could adjust, be part of the society and benefit the society. [Farhana].

Humeira described at length the impact of education on her awareness and increased desire to learn.

> Education has helped me a lot as it has increased my awareness, things that I did not know. I listen to things and observe them, remember them, and think what it means. Also, my passion for education and learning became even more. [Humeira].

Naseem was unequivocal in expressing her views on education, and its important role in bringing about a change in people.

> It is only education that brings about a fundamental change in a human being. [Naseem]

Rehana believed that education opens up real choices for an individual to do many things in life.

> ... if you are not educated, then you are confined to do something particular and you can't do anything else. But if you are educated, you can enjoy a lot of things, such as you can read, and choices are increased. [Rehana].

Very importantly, the young women felt that education contributed towards their improved status within the household.

> Whenever I say something, they [my brothers and sisters] listen to what I am saying carefully, and what I say is accepted [family members think]…she is educated and whatever she is saying must be right. [Naseem].

Thus while our young participants appreciated the role of education in developing their individual agency in a number of ways, they also placed a lot of value on its positive manifestation in their familial context (Nyamnjoh 2002).

Sense of activism

Interestingly, all participants were also very active in the wider community. For instance, they participated in events organised by various DPOs, such as counselling, training, conferences or other voluntary work.

> [DPO]...introduced me to television and radio, this is how I was interviewed by the media. [Humeira].

All the women had appeared on the media (radio and TV) to raise issues and rights of people with disabilities, a role that they intended to continue in the future.

> I keep on thinking, what else can I do for my disabled community? I want to fight for their rights. I have given interviews on radio...whenever people from television come to visit my workplace they talk to me and take my interview. [Naseem].

Thus all the women displayed much heightened sense of agency and belief in advocacy.

Labour market participation

Of the six women, five were engaged in some kind of income-generating activities and one was in the process of confirming a new job. The women had different work profiles, and interestingly except for Naseem, none of the others were in jobs which are likely to be seen as 'traditional' for women, such as being a school teacher. For instance, Humeira had a short-term contract job with an international donor-funded project. Ayesha was a producer at a radio station. Naseem was a teacher at an Academy and Rehana worked for a charity. Quite interestingly, Rehana also gave private tuition in mathematics to children in her neighbourhood and aspired to be an entrepreneur. She wanted to open up her own academy and employ tutors under her supervision.

All the women in our study attached a lot of value to employment and income as important outcomes of education, as these enabled them to make a contribution towards their household. This was particularly important for Naseem as was the main earner in her household.

> ...whatever I earn and bring home at the end of the month. That is how this house is running and we are able to cover our expenses. [Naseem].

Income was also equated with better quality of life. Humeira spoke in terms of the independence it provided her and her mother from the extended family.

> ...I want a job that gives me a separate house...where I want to live with my mother and fulfil her desires...that way I will be able to live my life well. [Humeira].

While studies have generally shown that people with disabilities have limited employment prospects in Pakistan (Maqbool 2003; Miles 1990), most young women in our study were gainfully employed. They equated education with not just better employment prospects, which allowed them to make contributions to their household's income but also with better status and sense of worth (Singal and Jain 2012).

The relational world

Another important factor highlighted in all the interviews was the impact of education in broadening their social networks. For many of them being in school or university, provided them opportunities to develop new friendships.

> …with education you also improve how you manage your relationships. For instance, I teach and that has helped me to develop my social circle, it has improved my social life, now many people know me, I know so many people. These things count a lot. [Rehana].

While this was seen as very valuable, a few did question the nature of these friendships and distinguished between mere acquaintances and close friends. For instance, Ayesha felt that even though education was helpful in expanding her social circle, she was not able to develop close or deep friendships. Two of the four women had close school friends with whom they shared personal concerns and feelings, especially related to their disability, but these friends had moved away after marriage. Moreover, others felt that developing friendships with able-bodied people was particularly problematic.

> Most people meet me nicely and they are also cooperative, but it is not like real friendship. For instance, if there are three people sitting together, then I may be a part of the group but the non-disabled people will be more friendly with each other than me. [Ayesha].

Singal, Jeffery, Jain, and Sood (2011) in their research in India highlight similar issues in terms of lack of friendships with non-disabled peers that led to high levels of frustrations among young people with disabilities attending mainstream schools.

While all six women regarded education as being transformative in a range of different life spheres, they also reflected on the social barriers they continued to face. One such issue related to marriage. In Pakistan's culture, like most of the South Asian region, a significant value is placed on being a wife and a mother (Thomas and Thomas 2002a). It is a social norm that woman should be ideally married in their late teens or early twenties[viii]. Of the six women, three were in their thirties and one close to thirty and therefore, not surprisingly, discussions on marriage featured heavily in many of the narratives.

While generally it is argued (Thomas and Thomas 2002a) (and seen) that the parents of a girl with disability usually lower their expectations of finding a suitable boy (e.g. they would settle for a poor boy or one with low levels of education to compensate for their daughter's disability), this was not the case in our sample group. Having been so highly educated (in comparison to their counterparts) the expectations of young women from their partner, in terms of his personal characteristics, employment status and financial capacity had increased.

> If I get a person who has the same mind set and thinking, then I will do it [marriage], otherwise not. [Humerira].

Ayesha also noted that education does improve the prospects of marriage.

> There have been *rishtas* (marriage proposals), [because of] the fact that I have done a Masters and I am doing a job. [Ayesha].

However, these increased prospects and proposals do not culminate in being married. Ayesha thought that marriage is a problem for all girls in Pakistan, but more so for women with disabilities due to negative societal perceptions about disability.

> ...it is more of a problem if the girl is blind...I have a good life [but] there is a life partner missing...There is no acceptance [of disabled people] in the society. People think that if she is blind she will not be able to do household work. Even if a boy takes the step and wants to marry a blind girl, then his parents and family will not give him permission. [Ayesha].

Ayesha, like other women in the sample group, held the belief that being highly educated would help them overcome significant barriers and also compensate for their various perceived inabilities; however this was not always the case.

> I actually thought that once I got educated to the highest level, I will be able to overcome my disability-related problems…I have done the things that were within my control, got educated, overcame barriers in employment, solved my problems, and now I am facing the barriers posed by the society, such as attitudes and other barriers which are beyond my control. [Ayesha].

It is interesting to note how Ayesha, a woman who stood apart in so many ways, being highly educated, politically very active, doing a non-traditional job, felt resigned to her fate of being a single woman.

> …that [marriage] is important in our society. [Ayesha].

Others however did not express the same level of acceptance of societal norms around marriage. For example, Humeira viewed marriage as a religious obligation.

> I may do it [marriage] just to fulfil the Sunnat [religious obligation]…[Humeira].

Asma showed flexible views on marriage.

> ….If it [marriage] happens, it will happen if not then I am not bothered. [Asma]

Naseem, however seemed reluctant to marry.

> ....I am managing my house with great difficult how can I take on more responsibilities [with marriage]? [Naseem].

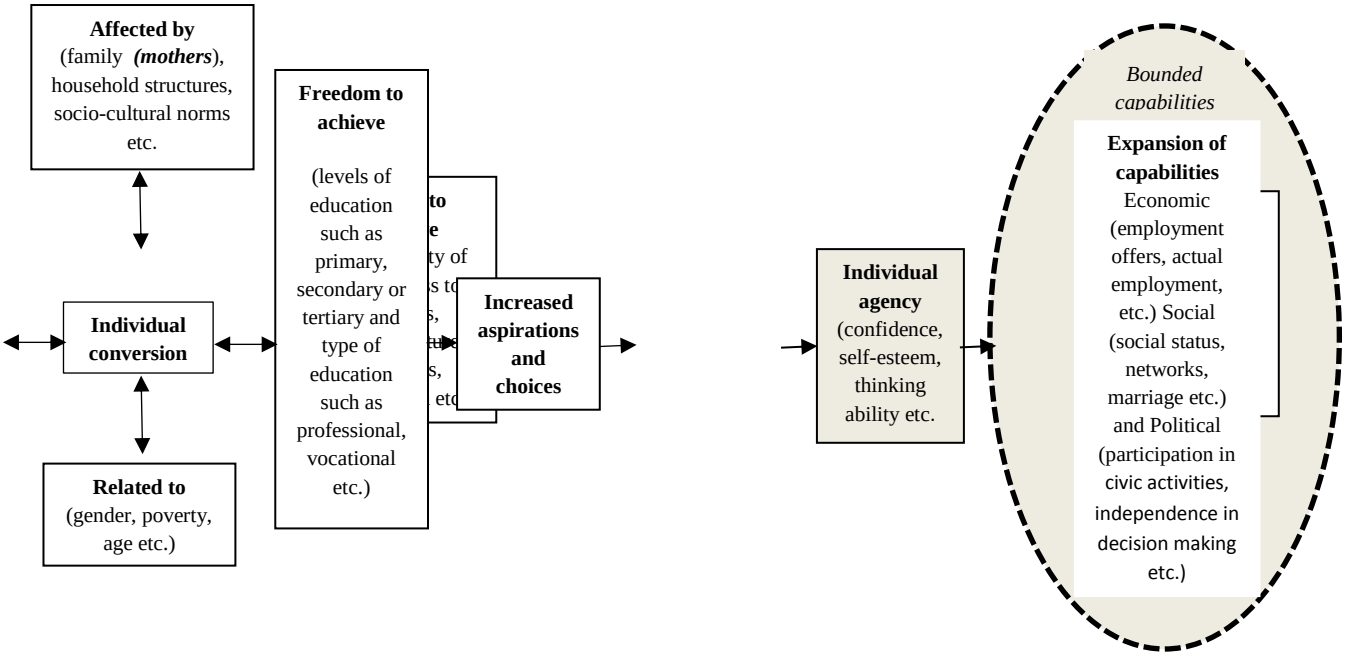
Thus whereas Ayesha seemed to have reconciled with society's expectations regarding a women' marital status, others did not necessarily perceive marriage as a necessary and ultimate marker of how they defined themselves.

Enhanced agency, unfulfilled aspirations

Our aim in this study was to understand the role of education in the lives of young women with disabilities in Pakistan. We also wanted to examine the extent to which the capability approach as an experience-outcome framework captures the complexity of their educational journey and outcomes. Our findings suggest, as shown in Figure 2, that individual conversion was indeed influenced by the means to achieve in terms of access to schools, schools' infrastructure, teachers, DPO support, government policy, etc. While some influences were enabling, such as support from teachers, fellow students and DPOs, but these were also negative in terms of issues of access in colleges, lack of representation in curriculum, and the absence of governmental support. Nonetheless, these young women achieved high level of education, and this conversion was significantly influenced by the support they received from their families, in particular, their mothers. Together these means and enablers enhanced the young women's educational aspirations and the choices available to them (especially in a context where women's education is not necessarily a high priority for families). This achieved functioning enhanced their individual agency, reflected in their increased levels of self-confidence and enhanced position within their household. As argued by Sen (1992), the achieved functioning also led to the expansion of their other capabilities, such as economic (i.e. employment offers or actual employment), social (i.e. wide social interactions and networks), and political (i.e. participation in civic activities).

However, we also found that the young women fell short of what they 'aspired to achieve' in life. This was not just in terms of the continued absence of close friendships, but also, and more importantly, in terms of marriage. Even though most of our participants did not regard marriage as a necessary condition for defining who they are, they recognised that marriage is a significant marker of being a woman in Pakistani society. However, for these young women, it remained an unfulfilled aspiration. Here it is useful to understand that marriage is a relational concept and intimately linked to the private domain of others within society. Based on the narratives of the young women in our sample it was evident that they were unable to get married primarily due to deeply-held societal prejudices about disability, over which they had little or no control. Thus it is possible to infer that the expansion of capabilities does not work in an unbounded space, but rather within a contextual domain which is overall bounded- thus the notion of *bounded capabilities*.

Figure 2: The capability approach and education of women with disabilities in Pakistan



Conclusions

Our findings suggest that even though the young women were able to achieve high levels of education, the translation of this achieved functioning into valuable outcomes, what they aspired, had its limits, especially in terms of the expansion of capabilities. Their capabilities therefore were not working in a vacuum and regardless of their aspirations; these were intimately linked to the way society perceived their disability. As a result their capabilities created real choices for them in certain domains, but not in the others. Thus while our findings do not disregard the value of freedom as choice (Gasper 2002), we believe that the capabilities (freedom to act) of these women cannot be approached exclusively in terms of what they 'aspire to be' because these are intimately linked to and cannot be dissociated with capabilities of others in society. In other words, our findings suggest that whereas the capability approach indeed provides a broader framework for evaluating educational outcomes compared to a purely economic framework, it has its own limitations. These limitations are mainly related to its position on individual characteristics such as disability, gender etc. For instance, while the capability approach relies on an individual (with its diverse characteristics) as a unit of analysis to evaluate outcomes related to social arrangements such as education, it remains reluctant to take a normative position on an individual in relation to society (Robeyns 2005). This unobservable space is deliberatively kept open to enable an examination of capabilities from diverse positions and perspectives depending on the choice of theory - economic, sociology, and so forth. (Robeyns 2003). Our

findings show that social structures that underlie social institutions such as marriage shape and impact upon outcomes in terms of what the young women ‘aspired to be’. Thus individual properties not only exist but are intrinsically related to others, where they have the potential to constrain valuable outcomes, such as in the case of young women where their aspiration of marriage remained unfulfilled due to deeply held prejudices about disability. We therefore argue that evaluation of educational outcomes in societies, such as Pakistan, needs to take into account socio-cultural realities, as experienced by women with disabilities themselves. This however requires a shift towards an individual-focused approach to educational outcomes that accounts for interplay between underlying structures and agency in different contexts.

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[i] There are no recent Census figures available. According to the official Census website http://census.gov.pk/census2011.php it is noted that the latest census is currently underway, but no other official updates are available.

[ii] Madaris (singular madrasa) are the religious schools providing religious education as well as serving social welfare function by providing boarding and lodging to children from poor backgrounds (Zaman 1999).

[iii] In recent years 'North/South' has become shorthand for highlighting the complex set of inequalities and dependencies between countries divided not by geographical boundaries, but by fundamental economic inequality. Significantly, most countries of the South also share the legacy of having been conquered or controlled by modern imperial powers, resulting in a continued legacy of dependency, poverty and exploitation (Singal & Muthukrishna, 2014).

[iv] The first author lives in the UK but is originally from Pakistan and continues to have strong familial connections there. The second author is a UK based Indian academic and has undertaken extensive research in Southern countries, including Pakistan.

[v] The first author is fluent in both Urdu and English. She conducted all the interviews and then translated and transcribed the data. External member random checks were used on parts of the interview data to ensure accuracy of translation.

[vi] The women did not specify the exact age at which they acquired their impairment but spoke at length about the medical cause of their impairment. Asma mentioned her heart-related condition which was detected just before finishing school but which eventually led to her physical impairment. Rehana explained her bone-related condition which was diagnosed during early years of schooling but which deteriorated with age. Humeira had some vision in her early years of schooling but completely lost it before entering college. Ayesha's visual impairment developed prior to her starting her schooling, and the onset of Naseem's visual impairment came about in grade 7 (at around 12 years of age).

[vii] Of the total enrolment at the primary level, 9.441 million (56%) are boys and 7.543 million (44%) are girls. Enrolments at the middle level is 3.179 million boys, and 2.397 million girls, and at the University level is 1.491 million boys, and 1.079 million girls (Pakistan Education Statistics 2010-11).

[viii] The legal age of marriage in Pakistan is 18 years for male and 16 years for female and around 80% of women aged 25–29 are married (Bhatti and Jeffery 2012).