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SOCIAL ANALYSIS AND ACTIONS FOR GHANAIAN WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT WITHIN BOSORE AND ABIREM COMMUNITIES: A PROJECT STUDY

Gabriella Leelee Enchill

*National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation,
genchill@hse.ru*

Abstract. Background: The empowerment of women is contingent upon the attitudes of both women and men, especially when there is no opposition from men. The project study sought to explore the barriers that hinder women to challenge themselves to be capable for their own development. The study, in the form of a social analysis, was initiated along with a project that served as a social action, within the period of 2021–2023. It was a collaboration between Mama's Helping Hand community-based group, which emanated from the support of ASA International to the two women's groups in Bosore and Abriem communities (Salvation Army Group and Amazing Grace Group respectively). Methods. The study employed a qualitative approach, which involved 40 women aged between 20 and 65 years. Non-probability sampling was adopted, in regards to purposive sampling and snowball sampling for focus group discussions (10 participants each for 4 groups). A vignette design for an open-ended structured discussion guide was used for data collection. The process was framed within the characteristics and principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Thematic analysis was employed, in which the retrieved data were transcribed and coded. Subsequently, the data were interpreted by sorting them into broad themes per the 9 central human functional capabilities of Martha Nussbaum, and their subtopics. One of the 10 human capabilities, being the 8th (other species: to live with animals/plants and concern for), was omitted as the study goal did not focus on the women's ability to live with the world of nature. Results. The data discovered how the actions of the communities and existing barriers that conform to the system of the communities which recognized social institutions tend to limit the women's capabilities to be empowered. Such existing barriers include traditions, gendered values and roles that create gender hierarchy, lack of family support, and religious practices that build submissive women. Some of the women hold barriers like traditions and gender roles high esteem, as some do not. In such cases, social expectations and the actions of the local people that are based on locally held beliefs, make the women face difficulties to decide and perform paid jobs aside from their domestic responsibilities. Stigmatization happens to both men and women. Those of the women, who choose to go against the gendered traditional practices, are sometimes stigmatized. At the same time, the men, who choose to support and empower their wives to be economically active, are also stigmatized. Wise sayings were revealed as a heritage of their traditions, which administer the femininity of females and the masculinity of males in the communities, as the people are socialized as such. Conclusion. The concept of women empowerment is also significant to the consideration of the role of men. This is because the involvement of men will enable them to gain the necessary understanding of the positive aspects of women's development and the negative consequences that may arise when women remain underdeveloped.

Keywords: women's development, social analysis, social action, capabilities approach, Ghana

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Научная статья

СОЦИАЛЬНЫЙ АНАЛИЗ И ДЕЙСТВИЯ ПО РАЗВИТИЮ ЖЕНЩИН ГАНЫ В ОБЩИНАХ БОСОРЕ И АБИРЕМ: ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ПРОЕКТА

Габриэлла Лили Энчилл

*Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики»,
Москва, Россия, genchill@hse.ru*

Аннотация. Представлены результаты исследования, основанного на теории потенциальных возможностей и анализе полевых данных о повседневном опыте женщин сельских общин Босоре и Абирем (Гана). Подчеркнута необходимость применения государственными и частными организациями комплексного подхода при условии активного участия членов сообщества к устранению коренных причин бесправия женщин Ганы.

Ключевые слова: развитие женщин, социальный анализ, социальные действия, подход, основанный на возможностях, Гана

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Introduction

Gender inequality is evident in all countries, particularly in the Global South, and the most affected are Sub-Saharan Africa, Arab States, and South Asia [1. P. 367]. This issue tends to manifest itself in a number of sectors within the aforementioned regions, including education, health, economic participation and political representation [2. P. 686984]. Collectively, these hinder women's empowerment and societal progress [3. P. 1–62]. Amadiume discovered that, in Africa, patriarchal gender arrangements are reproduced within kinship structures as familiarization of women whose social roles are reduced to those of daughters, wives or mothers when it comes to the redistribution of goods and title-taking [4. P. 173]. All these conditions lay the ground for the global significance of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for women's development, addressing gender equality and women's empowerment [5. No. 267638; 6. P. 76–79].

Among SDGs, recognizing the critical roles of women and girls in achieving sustainable development is seen as a crucial agenda by nations [7. P. 66–75]. This article is grounded in Amartya Sen's and Martha Nussbaum's human capability approach [8. P. 130; 9. P. 78–81] and presents an analysis of the women's awareness of their capabilities, the barriers preventing them to fully participate in their communities, and the ways they envisage to be empowered and develop, per the significance of women's agency.

The capability theory serves as a conceptual framework, where this study begins, followed by the presentation of the empirical research. The article continues with the analysis of the empirical data collected, in accordance with Nussbaum's central human functional capabilities [9. P. 78–81]. The main section of the article presents the results of the analysis of the Kwabre women's experience, which has been discussed per Nussbaum's capability theory. This is to highlight specific challenges of the women, explore their capabilities, and promote comprehensive empowerment. The conclusion emphasizes the ways to solve the lack of essential capabilities for women to identify and develop their potential in a manner that is meaningful to them.

Conceptual Framework

The foundational work of the theory of capability approach (CA) was pioneered by Amartya Sen [8. P. 130], for the understanding of human dignity and justice. He argued that evaluating people's well-being should not be solely based on their access to resources, but consider their actual capabilities to function in society and lead a fulfilling life. The recognition of such "major sources of unfreedom" [10. P. 3] that limits individuals' ability to make their own decisions is essential to understand how development can alleviate them [11. P. 153–174]. Nussbaum built on the theoretical framework of Sen, positing the need for social and political transformations that expand women's capabilities and freedoms [9. P. 78–81]. Nussbaum identified a list of ten central human functional capabilities (life, bodily health, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play, and control over one's environment) [9. P. 78–80]. She considered that these components are "of central importance and all are distinct in quality" [9. P. 81]. The significance of CA to this study is to identify and analyze the freedoms, unfreedoms, and opportunities the women have to engage in in various dimensions of life, which can contribute to their overall well-being. To explore the Kwabre women's experiences and interpret them in the framework of Nussbaum's CA, the next section lays the methodology ground of this study.

Methodology

Foremost, the project was initiated with other significant stakeholders during a pilot study. In 2021, the author of this article was collaborating with a community-based group (CBG) known as Mama's Helping Hand, which emanated from the support of ASA International (<https://ghana.asa-international.com/>). The group had a vision of implementing a project with women, and this collaboration led to conducting research and elaborating an action plan.

The study used a qualitative approach to describe the life experiences of the participants, to interpret gender arrangements in their social relations. Purposive and snowball sampling was employed for the selection of 40 participants (aged between 20 and 65 years). Ethical clearance was gained from Mama's Helping Hand CBG prior to the study, as of 10th January, 2022. After an informed consent was received from all the participants, discussions were audio recorded, and hand written for documentation.

Each record (total duration of 40 minutes) was further transcribed, coded and analyzed. Subsequently, the data were interpreted by sorting them into broad themes, per the 9 central human functional capabilities [9. P. 78–81] and their

subtopics. One of the 10 human capabilities, being the 8th (other species: to live with animals/plants and concern for), was omitted.

Research Setting

The townships of Bosore and Abirem are among 86 settlements of Kwabre East District in the Ashanti Region of Ghana [12. P. 15–38]. Kwabre East District is located in the northern part of the Ashanti Region, with a total population of 115,556, with 52.3% being females and 47.7% being males [12. P. 15–38]. Most of the habitants are the Asante ethnic group, who speak Asante Twi from the 7 Akan ethnic groups in Ghana. The dominant occupations in the district are “service and sales workers”, “craft and related trade workers”, “elementary occupations” and “skilled agricultural forestry and fishery workers” [13. P. 58–91]. Bosore and Abirem were targeted due to their farness from each other.

Results and Discussion

The first capability in Nussbaum’s approach is life, which means “being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one’s life is so reduced as to be not worth living” [9. P. 78]. As narrated by Serwaa (42 years): *“I was engaged in the occupation of craft trading. I was able to save an amount of money that I was content and proud of. But with family pressure for me to marry, I used the money I had from my trading for the marriage ceremony. This is without my husband assisting me”*. It was stressed that, traditionally, it is the responsibility of a man to finance all activities pertaining to the ceremony held for marrying a woman, but not the other way round. This depicts the capability of life for a woman is not achieved so far as some of them have regrets and see their lives not to be worth living. The deprivation of capabilities tends to affect people’s ability to lead well-lived lives [14. P. 1055–1061]. A healthily well-lived life of the women is crucial for extending their lives, so it is relevant to consider other conditions that influence their longevity outcomes [15. P. e518–519].

The second capability is bodily health, i.e. “being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter” [9. P. 78]. Overall well-being entails reproductive health, adequate nutrition, and shelter [16. P. 2–17]. Women who decide to go against the expectations of them to perform their domestic responsibilities suffer domestic abuse from their husbands. Here, the capabilities framework highlights the significance of tackling any social determinants [17. P. 74–95]. Jenny (42 years) commented: *“Say and say it again oo. I have been complaining about his (her husband) behavior. This idiot (her husband) is asking me for a divorce, and that he will go to my family to tell them about it”*. Most of the women tend to be threatened by their family or husband when they voice out, which can lead to any form of abuse (verbal or domestic). Holistically, it is essential to address the interconnectedness of gender-based violence and women’s disempowerment, and attain significant progress in improving women’s development.

The third capability is bodily integrity, i.e. “being able to move freely from place to place... being able to be secure against assault, including sexual assault, child sexual abuse, and domestic violence...” [9. P. 78]. It is also discovered that some of the unmarried women are compelled to leave their home if they decide to

pursue paid jobs, and some of the married women are threatened with divorce. Esi (26 years) disclosed that: *"I was once beaten by my husband, which made me tell my family about it and their response shocked me especially from my mother. All they could tell me was that is how marriage is because they have never seen any marriage that has no quarrels or beatings. Maybe he hit me because I disrespected my husband"*. The need for females to be educated and empowered is crucial for bodily autonomy, as determined among Brazilian societies, whose unrestricting practices can reduce domestic violence [18. P. NP925–943]. Thus, the prioritization of a more balanced approach, in regards to policy reforms and community engagement, ensures that all the women are able to exercise their rights to safety and autonomy.

The fourth capability is senses, imagination, and thought, i.e. "being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason – and to do these things in a 'truly human' way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education... to search for the ultimate meaning of life in one's own way... to have pleasurable experiences, and to avoid unnecessary pain" [9. P. 78–79]. There are distinct roles that are assigned to each sex (male and female) in the domestic sphere that were developed per the traditions and customs of the communities. Asabea (35 years) argued: *"If it is the tradition for a man to have such duties, why not? Provide for us and let's see"*. The discussion led to the actions the women will take when they lack support from the husband, with their decision to do paid jobs outside home. Asabea (35 years) vocalized: *"I will rather keep it (her decision) to myself and watch my husband to provide for us just like how he is insisting. I don't want any stress"*. Some of the women remain silent and perform their duties, as expected of them. This is because they do not want to go through any stressful and uncomfortable circumstances, which is termed as "hedonic pursuit" by Huta [19. P. 80–89]. This highlights the need for a supportive social environment with the practice of cognitive and emotional learning in the Kwabre people's gender socialization system.

The fifth capability is emotions, i.e. "being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves...to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger..." [9. P. 79]. Irene (33 years) shared how her father treated her mother when she was young: *'He will later throw you and your children away, and go in for another woman. My father did the same thing to my mother when I was in my teens, and it was never easy for us'*. Irene's father also verbally abused her mother, as she stated: *"He (her father) even called her names like 'bad luck', 'witch' and even, 'musuo' (a taboo)"* (Irene, 33yrs). From the extract of Irene, it is seen that her childhood experience has had an effect on how she sees men. A widow among the participants narrated how her deceased husband's family used to accuse her of killing her sick husband, as she was tagged as a killer. All the women's early experiences of neglect and abuse implicate the reasons why women tend to refrain from discussing their situations to other people in the communities. This serves as one of the barriers that prevent the women from having intrinsic motivation to develop themselves, which leads to the creation of an inferiority complex trait of women [20. P. 429]. The need is to tackle any barrier that may challenge the women's social connections and complicate their emotional responses and interpersonal relationships.

The sixth capability is practical reason, i.e. “being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life” [9. P. 79]. Empowering the women has to be the conscious efforts of both the women and their various families, as they serve as a faculty of practical reason [21. P. 833–840]. For married women, it should be a joint effort by the women and their husbands. The situation is different within the communities. Some of the men tend to see women who are not performing paid jobs to be lazy. Aba (38 years) declared: *“Men will be the same individuals who boast that they are the primary providers for the family. These same men will gossip about their wives’ being lazy, with the lack of commitment to work”*. Such negative connotations of women degrade femininity in regards to their roles, which makes up the reasons behind some of the women not to work or to work. Afia (37 years) decided: *“So, if I am seen as lazy just to be told to be a housewife, then I will stop being a housewife and work. It is better if I solve my own problem rather than because nobody is willing to do so”*. The gendered separate sphere is the ideal conception of the Bosore and Abriem communities. This is essential to recognize the interplay between practical reasoning and the social norms of the communities, which can serve as a guiding force for the women’s autonomy and moral reasoning for their decision-making processes.

The seventh capability is affiliation, i.e. “being able to live with and toward others... to engage in various forms of social interaction... to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others...protections against discrimination... exercising practical reason...” [9. P. 79]. Women agency is an essential tool to achieve collectivism for the women to come together and form social networks. Boahemaa (57 years) affirmed: *“This even encourages mutual support and the identification of strategies for pursuing meaningful activities that align with this self-help group members’ values and aspirations, before it is too late to unite, be there for each other, and assist each other”*. Initially, the two women’s groups comprised only economically active women. These women’s course of actions to support each other attracted other women to join. Asabea (35 years) assured new members that: *“...Right now this group is here to support so don’t worry”*. As time went on, they had external support from organizations like Asa International and Mama’s Helping Hand CBG. Most of the new members’ motive of joining the women’s group was to be able to gain financial assistance from Asa International. To understand affiliation, it is needed to create healthy connections between the identity of individuals and the dynamics of their societies [22. P. 518–531; 23. P. 280–287]. It is crucial to consider any condition that undermines communal bonds, which tend to create imbalance between affiliation and alienation, leading to the practice of gender discrimination.

The ninth capability is play, i.e. “being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities” [9. P. 80]. Play is essential throughout life for emotional and mental health repair and development, for the enhancement of people’s intrinsic motivation, which can boost their overall well-being. The declaration of Naana (33 years) was: *“I was socialized in the community accordingly. Especially when it comes to how I have to play with girls because it was weird for a girl to be seen playing with a boy”*. Such characteristics of boys, having to possess masculine qualities, and girls, expected to possess feminine qualities, are related to the practices of gender roles and traditional values by the people. Some of the women

accepted the traditional practices as they are, as ascertained by Asana (30 years): *"That is the traditions of the land. Each family has been educated on that since the time we were born. Just like how we dress, cook our foods, do our house work, speak, play, and others"*. Mostly, children learn by seeing [24. P. 17–31]. If they live in an environment where their parents conform to such stereotypical traditions, they are naturally able to also adopt them before socialization in their schools and the community begins. This is critical to reflect cultural differences of people for the understanding of women's social interactions and development, emphasizing their role to play and have leisure in their societal existence.

The tenth capability is control over one's political and material environment. This pertains to the political aspect, "being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association" [9. P. 80], and the material aspect, "being able to hold property, not just formally but in terms of real opportunity; and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment..." [9. P. 80]. In terms of material capability, lack of skills in occupations could cause imbalance in the labor market [25. P. 225]. There is the need to ensure equal opportunity in employment, and protection is crucial for a just society [26. P. 425–444]. It was also discovered that most women want men as political leaders. The women then compare the work of men and women as political leaders during their tenure to make such decisions. Cee (24 years) described: *"My sister, men need to be voted for, because the women do not do anything when they are voted for"*. The emphasis of the women's individual subjective experience in the political landscape shows their perceptions of political control. This is where the women's attitudes for women's political leadership compared to the male counterparts were disagreed among the participants. There is the need for the reform of local political structures that can improve women's political control and enhance the democratic governance of Ghana.

Limitation of the study

The method of having mixed aged groups as participants could have prevented younger women from speaking up in the presence of the elders. However, the participants were comfortable with each other, as most of them are long-term members of the women's groups, they treat each other as friends and family. Although the discussion guide was open-ended, a reactivity threat was experienced, causing confusion over definition. Two interpreters were then introduced to assist with detailed translation and explanation. Additionally, the views and experiences of other Kwabre women located at the different settings of Kwabre East District can differ. Thus, the findings may be generalized to all Kwabre people only tentatively, since all of them share deeply ethnically rooted culture, beliefs and values.

Conclusion

Empowering rural women in Ghana, such as the Kwabre women, is crucial for achieving gender equity and overcoming the barriers that hinder their development. Such barriers include most of the participants seeing no wrong with gendered traditional and religious practices. This perpetuates segregation of economic activities per gender, rural women living in poverty, deterioration of their nutrition

and health, regress in females' education and training, their unsupportive spirit towards female political representatives, and marital restrictions with threats from husbands, which lead to domestic and human rights abuse. Here, Nussbaum's central human capabilities offer a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing such challenges of the Kwabre women in their communities. However, ensuring the women to have a "fulfilled life", is for them to have access to significant resources and support needed for them to tackle gender issues in their communities. For that matter, this could contribute to combating issues such as domestic violence, inadequate healthcare services, unavailability of resourceful information, marital restrictions, and their unfreedom to reproductive choices, ensuring the women having the capability to gain a "healthy body" and "bodily integrity". Hence, promoting public education and dissemination of information among the rural women can help them acquire knowledge and critical thinking skills, enhancing their capability of "senses, imagination, and thought". This will foster the women's "emotional well-being", when supportive environments are established. Thus, where the women will gain emotional intelligence and can express their emotions about the challenges being encountered without fear or anxiety will promote healthy relationships and self-respect. The women also need to be encouraged to have "practical reason" for critical reflection and decision-making skills that will enable them to challenge any form of discrimination. This can be achieved via the capability of "affiliation", by building social connections to support each, just as the existence of the Salvation Army and Amazing Grace self-help groups in the Bosore and Abirem communities. The availability of such social networks can enhance the women's capability of "play", providing opportunities for recreational activities that will help them to mitigate the stress and difficulties associated with their rural life. By having "control over their environment", the women can be empowered enough to participate in social processes such as communal leadership, political participation, own property, and to be economically viable. However, for the Kwabre women, having these capabilities being addressed through interventions can effectively empower them to overcome any challenges for the enhancement of their well-being and dignity as rural women.

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Information about the author:

Enchill G.L. – Bachelor of Art in Integrated Community Development, Master of Science in Population and Development, International Laboratory for Social Integration Research, PhD student in Sociology, and research fellow, Doctoral School of Sociology, National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russian Federation). E-mail: genchill@hse.ru

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

Сведения об авторе:

Энчилл Г.Л. – бакалавр искусств по направлению «Комплексное развитие сообществ», магистр наук по направлению «Население и развитие» Международной лаборатории исследований социальной интеграции, аспирант по направлению «Социология», научный сотрудник аспирантуры по социологии Национального исследовательского университета «Высшая школа экономики» (Москва, Россия). E-mail: genchill@hse.ru

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