

Nussbaum on Gender Equality

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Gender equality... Women's rights... Issues that have continued to shape ethical and moral questions about the way women should be treated continue to exist. Women have sadly been undermined, treated in a biased fashion because of their gender, and are susceptible to sexist ideologies all over the world. Certain traditions have perpetuated inequality for women, and they have hindered the progress of women because of gender discrimination. Degrees of inequality have and continue to differ depending on where a woman lives, but the question that continues to persist is, how can we solve this ethical problem and apply a universal concept that will allow women to gain a respectful and significant equal place in the world? The "Capabilities Approach" constructed by Martha Nussbaum is a way in which we can ascribe universal capabilities in order to elevate women to an equal place in the world. This approach opens a pathway for women to live a fulfilled life that is not influenced by traditions that enable injustice to continue against women.

Essentially what Nussbaum presents are ten "Central Human Functional Capabilities" (1999, p. 42) that all human beings should have the opportunity to acquire in order to live a good human life. In addition, this theory entails the notion that because women also have the potential to embrace these capabilities (not just men), that it is essential for this approach to be carried out for women to be seen as equal to men. In a sense, a hint of expectation also presents itself on the grounds that since a woman has the potential to expand these capabilities, then she is entitled to the right of having the prospect of fulfilling those capabilities. In order to paint a clearer defense of the Capabilities Approach following are Nussbaum's ten essential elements for a good human life:

1. *Life*-Being able to live to the end of a human life.
2. *Bodily health and integrity*-Being able to have good health, nourishment, shelter.
3. *Bodily integrity*-Being able to move freely, secure against violence, have sexual satisfaction, and control over reproductive health.

4. *Senses, imagination, and thought*-Being able to use senses, education, and expression.
5. *Emotions*-Being able to have attachments to things/persons outside ourselves.
6. *Practical reason*-Being able to form a conception of the good and engage in critical reflection about planning one's own life.
7. *Affiliation*-Having social basis for self respect and ability to live in relation to others.
8. *Other species*-Being able to live with concern for/in relation to the world of nature.
9. *Play*-Being able to laugh, play, and enjoy recreational activities.
10. *Control over one's own environment*-Political choices that govern one's own environment and material choices with being able to hold property, having right to seek equal employment, and exercising meaningful relationships. (Nussbaum 1999, p. 41)

It is beneficial to add that if the social goal is the capability of its members to perform significant functions then women would be allowed to contribute at a much higher amount for the progress of the whole society. The Capabilities Approach is meaningful because it creates an outlet for females to be able to take part in areas where typically male domination is the traditional norm.

The value of a woman's labor or mental capabilities, whether inside or outside of the home has been devalued in certain parts of the world, but by recognizing capabilities and acknowledging that women serve and contribute in an integral part in many different ways will allow for the ten above capabilities to be explored. These ten capabilities will range on how they may be implemented in diverse cultures. As a bare minimum, without any one of these capabilities, Nussbaum's approach "claims that a life that lacks any one of these capabilities, no matter what else it has, will fall short of being a good human life" (1999, p. 42). If a human life lacks one of these elements it creates a barrier for the person to develop into what he or she may personally want. The ability to have control over one's own life and ability to make their own decisions not only contributes to a person's individuality, but also gives them the personal validation that the choices that they make are those in which they have taken into consideration.

An important feature of Nussbaum's approach is that she is presenting a route in which women can be elevated to an equal status that is the same as men's. Instead of forcing an idea of how one's being should be treated, she incorporates a universal set of preconditions that allow for one to become equal. Nussbaum's path is clear through a set of causes that lead to the overall effect that she is aiming for, which is equal treatment for both women and men. By presenting the approach that we should allow people's capabilities

to reach their full potential, she is able to grasp and keep the attention of people who may be easily discouraged by feminist ideologies. Her application of the capabilities approach not only is able to bring out the possibility of positive prospects of women but also opens up the opportunity for anyone who may be undermined or oppressed.

By focusing on the capabilities approach, Nussbaum's presupposition that "human capabilities exert a moral claim that they should be developed...human beings are creatures such that, provided with the right educational and material support, they can become fully capable of the major human functions" (1999, p. 43). This presents a crucial point that refers to the lowering of females in certain cultures and traditions in the world. In these cases, females are sometimes purposely limited in order for them not to succeed; traditional or cultural restrictions define what a woman is allowed to take part in or who she can become.

In many parts of the world, certain cultures, mentalities, and traditions are perpetuated through time that do not work in favor of women to excel in their environment. We must acknowledge that women have capabilities that rise above what certain customs allow them, and that, because all humans have a potential of some sort, they should be able to express and have the chance to let it blossom instead of being inhibited or constrained.

This capabilities approach may be controversial to some, regarding its essential universal applicability for humanity. Some may see this approach as problematic when it comes to respecting different cultures and diversity throughout the world. Respect in this instance is highly considered and diversity needs to exist in the world in order for people to enjoy and embrace the great assortments of people that continue to make humanity unique. What is important is the necessity for all humans to be able to work with open conditions that are not influenced by a presupposition of male dominance. A great array of cultures and people can exist with the Capabilities Approach on the basis that if a person is given the opportunity to reach their potential it will enable that society to benefit from the added contributions.

In addition, this approach is not stating that a set of definite rights has to be applied to all people; as an alternative we can use the Capabilities Approach as a guiding passageway and say that all humans deserve to exert their potential capabilities. This approach permits each individual to move toward better expectations for themselves, and through the process of aiming at your capabilities will eventually bring about the needed changes naturally.

With concern of respecting different societies and allowing them to practice based on their traditions allows for a relativistic argument against the capabilities approach to arise. An argument that may be made in opposition to this approach is that no one has the right to step into a situation and impose their viewpoints as the "right" way. What relativism is able to say against the capabilities approach by people such as Ruth Benedict is that "morality is culturally relative" and that "values are shaped by culture" (Benedict 1934). Therefore, cultural diversity allows for moral relativism to be accepted. This type of relativism can become problematic when evaluating different societies and whether or not they can be justified in their actions towards women.

What Nussbaum is presenting is not to eradicate cultural diversity with a set of new rules for people to live by. Instead, the Capabilities Approach is a tool that can be utilized towards both males and females toward equality. Since all humans have capabilities, what Nussbaum is pointing to directly is that all humans should be able to have the opportunity to exert their potential to progress as an individual. Relativism can become problematic because a person may be confined by their culture and lack the ability to express their capabilities. Relativism becomes a very weak argument against the capabilities approach because it can allow for different cultures to practice traditions that can lead to very harmful effects for individuals. It is possible to attempt to justify treating women unequally by claiming that cultures are relative to their environment and that they should be respected. Especially in regards to Benedict's viewpoint, relativism can become dangerous because if you respect any type of culture as justified within their contexts it can turn into a slippery slope to try to validate horrible things. Relativism has been used to defend the way women have been unequally treated in certain parts of the world, and has allowed for ideas such as the Capabilities Approach to be ignored when it is actually a weak theory that may be refuted.

Another argument that may be made against the Capabilities Approach is the long held tradition that there is a division of labor between men and women. What this entails is that there are certain jobs that a man is able to do more efficiently than a woman, and vice versa. This type of argument creates an automatic dichotomy that relies on historical placement of roles for where a woman or man is expected to be classified in their work, whether it be mental or physical roles, women have, for the most part, been seen as the weaker sex according to this ideology.

The main reason why this ideology doesn't survive against the capabilities approach as explained by Alice Kessler-Harris is that

“women have always worked, but the form and meaning of their labor has varied through history” (Kessler-Harris 2007, p. 105). This division of labor presupposes that a male is more inclined to do tasks that involve more labor intensive movements, while a female is needed to take care and nurture the children and hold the household responsibilities. The problem with this is that throughout history women have always been able to do the work that a man is able to do. While exceptions that defy the division of labor argument may seem to be far and few between is not the case, what needs to be realized is that in many ways gender is socially constructed into a certain mold by the surrounding social structure or traditions. Furthermore, women or men who are able to live according to their desires or need to work because of socioeconomic status are able to illustrate the reality that there aren’t gender categories in which you *have* to place human abilities into. Furthermore, in order to keep the platform equal, men have also been able to successfully fill jobs or roles that have typically been reserved for women.

Take for example slavery in the early years of the United States. Slaves were forced to work in very physically intensive circumstances. As horrible as slavery was, there was no implementation for a division of labor between men and women because women were required to work side by side next to the men in the fields. As Sojourner Truth once proclaimed in her speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” she was able to grasp a representation of how she worked and was as able as a man, but when broken down to an even deeper level her inequality was further perpetuated by her race. What has happened in history that continues to occur in many parts of the world is that a woman’s abilities and hard work are sometimes devalued and not seen as significant as a man’s work. If societies are able to implement the capabilities approach it would allow for women to gain a sense of personal choice and become independent from a generalization that may set females at a lower level than men.

Lastly, there may be arguments that claim that by proposing a set of universal capabilities that every human being is endowed with, we would be neglecting a person’s autonomy because there would be a set standard that the person would have to adhere to. The assumption would be that this would take away from the person’s personal choice to choose whether or not they want to have those capabilities, and that we should not expect all to want to abide by these capabilities.

On the other hand, the positive outcome is that by placing this set of universal capabilities onto humans, especially women, would in effect allow for the highest amount of autonomy. A direct effect of

the capabilities approach is that a person is able to be autonomous and freely choose different paths in their lives. This type of universalism actually provides the option of personal choice at its best. This approach is not saying one must be a certain way, it is saying that a woman or man has the potential and should be given the opportunity to be capable of realizing those potentials. Each one of the ten capabilities that Nussbaum outlines opens the door for autonomy, from integrity and emotions to playing and environment. This approach doesn't create any barriers that withhold the bare minimums that constitute a good life. By applying the capabilities approach would not be forcing people, especially women, to be a certain way or follow certain values, instead it gives them the opportunity to choose and decide without the imposing authority of a male dominated atmosphere.

What Nussbaum has outlined is a progressive step that would not only greatly contribute to progressing equal rights, but also have lasting effects onto all other aspects of life, including politics, education, and family structures. The world has been and continues to be in a state where women have to have their voices heard, their impacts validated, and their contributions appreciated. Although there are still many places where women's presence and roles are ignored throughout the world, there is no doubt that humanity is going in the right direction. Changes are being made every day, little events that trigger transformations in people to mass movements that quickly infiltrate societies. People are moving forward, and women are optimistically moving in the right direction towards a World where they will be accepted universally as equal to a man in their right to live a life of great capabilities.

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