

## **Re-conceptualizing Women's Vulnerabilities in Developing World: A Relational Autonomy Approach**

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### **Abstract**

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*Some studies on women empowerment have associated women's vulnerability with negative connotations such as victimhood, helplessness and dysfunctions, which calls for immediate supports to alleviate their deplorable condition. In these studies, vulnerability is mostly conceptualized to be opposite of autonomy, whereby women are seen as deficient of any essence of autonomy and thereby in need of help. The problem of this conceptualization is that it takes away the capacity of women to transcend beyond their current situation by applying resilient strategies (agency). In this paper, we re-conceptualize vulnerability of women by applying the relational autonomy theory to argue that despite women's vulnerability (ontological conditions) they can make reliable decisions to overcome their challenges, which shows their resilience (agency or autonomous capacities). We considered the relational approach as a macro level of conceptualizing women's empowerment from vulnerability, since it depicts women's values, resilience, agencies and struggle for social justice. This paper argues that vulnerability and autonomy should not be seen as oppositional, and that such an approach can result in paternalistic and coercive forms of interventions that will not yield any benefits to poor women. Thus, the paper proposes that relational conceptions of autonomy can reconcile the apparent tension between autonomy and vulnerability, by showing that vulnerability is relative, and that women can actively contribute towards their empowerment.*

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**Key words:** Relational autonomy theory, vulnerability, women empowerment, human development, autonomy, agency,

## 1.0 Introduction

The fate of women in developing countries has increasingly become the focus of much debate, particularly with regard to how they can alleviate their vulnerabilities (Beijing Platform for Action, 2010). An important step towards the feasibility of empowering women to overcome vulnerabilities facing them in developing world is the establishment of the International Day for Rural Women by the United Nations General Assembly, which is commemorated on the 15th of October every year (UN Women and Beyond, 2008). This particularly focuses on improving these women's capacity to overcome constraints to their wellbeing in rural settings. An essential aspect of the empowerment of women advocated by the Beijing Platform for Action (2010) is enhancing the capacity of women to take independent action towards ameliorating their vulnerabilities and to improve their lives. This notion has since raised a debate on the best practices or strategies for enhancing the women's agency<sup>1</sup> in transforming their lives.

The assessment of women's empowerment starts with the theorization of their vulnerability, especially how they can operate at individual or collective levels to ameliorate challenges facing them in their communities. It is from this dimension that this study adopted the relational autonomy approach to show the contribution of the widows in the empowerment process. Specifically, the relational autonomy approach was adopted in this paper to argue against the common conceptualization of vulnerability which rests on the assumptions that the human body, which is ever prone to risks, harm and death, makes vulnerability a constant feature of man, and thus renders the need for moral obligation and ethics of care in the response to people who are vulnerable (Butler, 2004; Fineman, 2008; Godin, 1985; Kittay, 1999; 2010; Turner, 2006). This conceptualization has often been used to classify vulnerable women such as widows, women heading households, unemployed or unskilled poor women, and poor rural women etc. (Nwokoro, 2016; Potash, 1986; Slater, 1986).

However, concentrating on these universal and constant variables of vulnerability (risk, dependency and bodily frailty) eludes the understanding of the contribution of other important factors that are valued by the vulnerable person such as the person's initiatives and aspirations, which are driving forces for change and transformation (Anderson, 2013; Anderson and Honneth, 2004; Dodd, 2008; Mackenzie, 2013; Mackenzie et al., 2013). Moreover, most of the conceptualizations of vulnerability that focus on 'risk', 'dependency' or 'harm' have evolved as a way of responding to the needs of a specific type of vulnerable people such as the disabled or mentally challenged, who because of their condition require the support of others to function properly (Shiloh, 2011). This conceptualization cannot be effectively applied to all individuals, especially as experiences and coping capacity vary between individuals (Mackenzie et al., 2013; Mackenzie, 2013). It equally cannot show transformative and valuable choices that the vulnerable subject can make to achieve desired wellbeing (Anderson, 2013; Keating, 2009; Mackenzie et al., 2013). Hence, a pertinent issue is to show that vulnerable women can exercise their agency in changing their lives. This is what this paper aims to achieve.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the next sections deals with vulnerability issues facing women in developing world; the third section traces the origin of the concept of vulnerability in development studies and the fourth section showed how vulnerability studies found its way to the social sciences giving way for various approaches in the study of women's vulnerability in developing world. The fourth section provides the stance for the re-conceptualization of women's vulnerability from a relational autonomy perspective. The final section – the conclusion, wraps up the paper's ideas for implication of further studies.

## 2.0 Issues in Women's Vulnerability in Developing World

The context from which women devise various responses to vulnerability is inescapably bound to negative socio-cultural arrangements that affect their wellbeing (Nussbaum, 2000). By highlighting negative socio-cultural arrangements that affect women's wellbeing, the paper will be justifying the reason why they would develop strategies or actions to deal with vulnerabilities facing them. This is analyzed from two perspectives. First is the impact of exclusion of women from needed resources. The second focuses on the institutional flaws that cause deprivations of needed assets, and its impact on women heading households in rural areas in developing world.

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<sup>1</sup>Agency is defined as "what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values she regards as important" (Sen, 1985: 203). Agency is a type of capability, which enables individuals to pursue personal goals.

Nussbaum (2000) suggested that because of the impact of gender inequalities and discriminations, the ethics in responding to women's vulnerability should first address the various social constraints to their autonomy. This concerns the exclusion of women from useful resources or ability to receive support needed for dealing with their life challenges (Hall and Taylor 2009). Social exclusion and deprivation issues in women's studies are reflected in the ways women lose access to important productive resources because of their gender (Agarwal, 2003; Ezeakor 2011; Jackson, 2005; Folber 1988). The extent of women's social recognition determines their position and ability to elicit connection to other sources for dealing with life challenges. When excluded from accessing important assets for dealing with life challenges, it is possible that these women will begin to experience the realities of their deprivation in episodes of grief and suffering, which can result to emotional traumas (Butler 2004; Kirby, 2005; Misztal 2011).

Moreover, some studies have highlighted institutional flaws that facilitate deprivations women face in developing societies (Butler, 2004; Fineman, 2008; Kirby, 2005; Mackenzie, 2013; Turner 2006). The argument in these literatures is that the possibilities of women's vulnerability first exist because of the different positioning in society, which defines the privileges they enjoy from institutions that provide needs. This different positioning leads to differentials in distribution of resources, so that those on the upper cadre of society are given more attention than those in lower cadre (Butler, 2004; Fineman, 2008; Kirby, 2005). Social institutions collectively create a system that provides us with assets for people to cope with vulnerability. However, these institutions tend to overlap and interlock in this process creating opportunities and potentials for pitfalls (Kirby 2005). Individuals interact with these institutions in the course of their life and in so doing can be opportuned or inopportuned to receive supports they need (Fineman 2008). As their wellbeing is concomitantly dependent on their link to social institutions that provide assets, deprivation and exclusion from this capacity can easily push women to poverty and hardship (Kirby 2005).

Some literature assessing poverty situation of women heading households like widows and single mothers in developing societies highlight the implication of rural–urban dichotomies in facilitating development setbacks in most societies in the developing world, which limits resilience of rural dwellers (Chant, 2003). A foremost contribution of this vulnerability is the unresponsiveness of government to the need of women in rural areas. Turner (2006) argues that the unresponsiveness of government contribute to the exacerbation of vulnerabilities that women face in developing countries. Deprivation of wellbeing leads to vulnerability because wellbeing is an asset or entitlement that gives women a sense of security (Turner, 2006). Thus, the deprivations that women are exposed to bring with it the additional possibility of more precarious situations, which they cannot control.

## **2.0 Origin of the Conceptualization of 'Vulnerability' in Development**

The original interest of researchers on the concept of vulnerability began with the obvious recognition of the risk of the human kind to global forces such environmental degradation, climatic change, disease epidemics, natural disasters and global economic recession, overpopulation and food insecurity, war, nuclear attacks and global insecurity, terrorism and poverty (Kelly and Adger 2005; Wilkinson 2010). Following this recognition was increased studies and researches focused on understanding the capacity at which these global forces pose great risk to human wellbeing and their survival on the planet, as well as the issues pertinent in combating these threats to humans and the earth's biosphere. Kelly and Adger (2005) argued that within the hazard framework, the common methodology to analyze the potential effects on vulnerable population is through the risk indicator. For them risk is a function of hazard and vulnerability.

In their assessment of risk from natural hazards perspective, Blaikie et al (1994) cited in Kelly and Adger (2005:327) defined risks as consisting of two components, the first is the measurement of the hazard and the second assesses adaptability or coping capacity. From this perspective Blaikie et al (1994) was able to separate the biophysical and the social dimensions of vulnerability and went further to define vulnerability as "the ability or inability of individuals to respond to, in the sense of cope with, recover from or adapt to any external stress placed on their livelihood or wellbeing. From this definition vulnerability is more than been susceptible to hazards, but the ability to quickly adapt to the changes and continue existing. This includes different strategies towards combating the effects of our ever changing environment and supporting people affected by its consequences.

### 3.0 Studies on Women's Vulnerability

Some authors have made attempts in separating the social dimension of vulnerability from the natural disaster dimension by focusing on other stressor margins like poverty, disease, hunger, deprivations, social injustice etc. Wu et al (2002) and Kelly and Adger (2005) agree that two major perspectives emerge from studies on the potentials of human risks to various stressor margins; the first perspective view vulnerability as pre-condition to potential exposure to these stressor, while the second perspective focuses on differential vulnerability, which is defined as the 'coping ability' of people in the state of vulnerability (Rygel et al., 2005). Coping ability is further defined as combination of resistance and resilience (Wu et al., 2002). Resilience in vulnerability literature refers to many ways individuals and groups respond, cope, adapt and recover from unwanted structure in their society (Rygel et al., 2005). Resilience and resistance highlight human actions and relationships constructed in the process of surviving effects of vulnerabilities.

However, when actions are constructed in dealing with the effects of vulnerabilities of women in developing countries, most researchers focus on the various interventions by international or local governments, civil society organizations etc. (Adger and Kelly, 2002). From this perspective, Adger and Kelly (2002) noted that the assessment of vulnerability would then focus on the implications for formulating policies and organizational strategies that will facilitate immediate support to women affected by various life stressors. Most of these studies come to emphasize on the role of development organizations in supporting vulnerable women. Unfortunately, this emphasis has come to challenge the agency role of women in transforming their lives by their own strategies and not by using strategies of development organizations or agencies (Sen, 2002).

In the recent past, the concept of women empowerment was dominated by traditional welfare economic propositions whereby social wellbeing was judged by some utility based criteria (Alkire, 2002; Robyne, 2003). The main message championed by this school of thought is that women's wellbeing relates to economic improvement (especially as poverty was considered a growing global issue facing women in developing world), and thus should be the focus of upcoming developing organizations in supporting vulnerable women (Kaldor, 2005). The state of affair was the provision of monetary supports and other utilities to support pro-poor development initiatives for women in the underdeveloped countries (Alkire, 2002). However, in line with Sen (2002) and Robyne (2003) we argue that there is more in human development than utility or economic target.

Sen (2002b:71) criticizes the traditional welfare economic theory formulated by Jeremy Bentham for concentrating on the monist or utility informational basis to interpret wellbeing. Applying the utility approach creates epistemological problems since generalizing individuals' choice and need in utility definition do not justify how to address other personal choices that override a particular utility concern. This is why some scholars have come to critique Nussbaum (2000) for putting up a set of capabilities which she had assumed would guide development agencies to engage effectively in making appropriate strategies for empowering women in the developing world (Sen, 2002). Sen, much like Mackenzie (2013), and Alkire (2002) believe that experiences of vulnerability varies in individuals, and argues that it would be unrealistic to have a distinct set to guide people's choice, since wellbeing is a personal property and could vary across individuals.

Moreover, the effectiveness of development organizations to embrace grassroots participatory methods, with respect to challenges or tension between agency and empowerment structures has been questioned (Hudock, 2005; Hulmes and Edwards, 2005). This contingency explains why empowerment strategies of some development agencies have not successfully achieved its objectives of alleviating suffering or poverty of women in most developing countries (Huddock, 2005). This perspective also exposes many ways international donors insist on interfering with the strategies of local development organizations, which in turn debunk the essence of autonomy in the empowerment process (Moser 1993:87-89). For instance, Hudock (2005) critically questions the possibility of the local NGOs in Africa to achieve the much needed development of women in the grass roots, and observed that the major reason for this was lack of autonomy to manage funding from the international organizations.

Due to these limitations in the utility approach framework (i.e. the incapacity of development agencies), there is need for alternative source for assessing other ways of responding to vulnerability of women. Consequently, the paper goes ahead in the next section to conceptualize women's vulnerability from the relational autonomy approach.

### 3.0 Conceptualizing ‘Vulnerability’ of Women in Developing World

#### 3.1 *The Relational Autonomy approach*

Most literature that subscribe to the social dimension of analyzing vulnerability of women often focus on topics such as, dependency, risks, disability, victimhood, or pathology, which calls for immediate support by development agencies (Fineman 2008, 2010; Turner 2006; Butler 2004; Wilkinson 2005; Kittay 1999, 2011; Shiloh 2011). For instance, women living below poverty line in developing countries are often attributed prototypical and sympathetic labels in analyzing their conditions, thereby excluding other important factors (Mackenzie 2013). Other conceptions of women’s vulnerability center on discussions of the philosophical enquiries to the interpersonal and socio-cultural relevance in understanding of their social status and recognition in the society (Mackenzie et al 2013; Mackenzie 2013; Dodd et al 2013; Anderson 2013). These different emphases have created ongoing debates on how theory, analysis and policy would be applied in reducing vulnerability affecting women in developing societies.

One major debate centers on the universality of the human vulnerability or ‘risks’ variables (our shared vulnerability), which focuses on our embodied frailty, dependency and constant proneness to risk, harm and danger (Turner 2006; Wilkinson 2005; Fineman 2008; Butler 2004, 2009; Goodin 1985; Mitzal 2011). According to these theorists, our shared vulnerability (which carries with it ever-present possibility of risk and misfortunes) is an apparent reality of our mutual dependence or interdependence and engagement in society, and even the formation of institutions of support in the society (Fineman 2010: 269; Turner 2006; Kittay 1999). In this framework, vulnerability is seen as being behind the need for state and development institutions and actors to respond effectively to the fundamental needs of our shared human frailty and dependency, and equally subsumed in the doctrine of the welfare state (Fineman 2008, 2010; Turner 2006; Wilkinson 2005; Kittay 1999; Shiloh 2011). The concern of some of these theorists is to promote a different notion that disassociates the vulnerable subjects from being solely responsible of transforming their lives as posited by traditional liberalists’ views, but to focus on the social justice in caring for dependent people. For instance, in her proposition Fineman (2010:225) uses her *vulnerable subject thesis* to argue against the autonomy focus in the liberalists’ human development ideology, which she claims is a myth and farce, which continues to hide the responsibility of state and its institutions for protecting the welfare needs of poor and marginalized people in the society. Fineman (2008) view of this protection is that vulnerability is static position, and justifies the reason for state or development institutions’ responsibility in protecting the rights and welfare of the vulnerable subject. Fineman’s propositions have been criticized for making the so-called ‘vulnerable subject’ a constantly dependent person without any form of idea or strategy for moving out of her deplorable state (Mackenzie 2009:38). For instance, Fineman (2008:9) purportedly said, “*Whereas both (vulnerability and dependency) are universal, only vulnerability is constant...*”

On this note, a second school of thought within the relational autonomy theory which is chiefly championed by scholars such as Mackenzie (2013), Mackenzie et al (2013), and Anderson (2013) suggest that the digression from the thesis of human autonomy in vulnerability analysis is a recipe for disaster, since the concept provides platform for guiding decisions and duties involved in addressing specific vulnerabilities in the society. These authors argument is that vulnerability is experienced in different ways and should be assessed in relation to social and interpersonal factors that restrain development and application of people’s autonomy, especially as autonomy is said to be essential for attaining aspired wellbeing. This provided the premise for bringing in the human autonomy in the analysis of vulnerability.

Autonomy in Mackenzie (2013:48), Anderson (2013) and Mackenzie et al. (2013) views draws from the ideology of capability-based theory which supports the claim that encouraging autonomy in vulnerability analysis will enable individuals utilize their initiatives and capacities (which is free to them) to change negative aspects in their lives. Mackenzie goes ahead to define autonomy as “the capacity to lead a self-determining life and the status of being recognized as an autonomous agent by others” (Mackenzie 2013: 41). Mackenzie (2013:34-35) raised the relational autonomy concept to respond to Fineman’s (2008, 2010) arguments in her vulnerable subject thesis and her connotation of the concept of autonomy as devoid of any sympathy to the vulnerable subject. Mackenzie’s (2013:35-38) argument is that Fineman ignored the essence of autonomy in the individual’s dispositions and capacity to transform her life through her self-initiatives, which now raises questions of pragmatism in her theory.

The notion of ‘dependency’ only projects the individual as incapable of making personal decisions (or using her initiatives) that could bring positive transformations in her life. Mackenzie (2013) argues that all individuals cannot be assessed based on the dependency framework provided by Fineman, because individuals experience vulnerability in different capacities and have different coping capacities. Thus, the expansion of autonomy of individuals should be the focus of vulnerability analysis, and not only ‘dependency’ or the overly protection of the ‘vulnerable subject’ as Fineman (2008, 2010) assumed in her theory.

Furthermore, the relational autonomy theorists understand that concentrating on dependency framework (‘risks’ and our universally shared vulnerability) may eventually elude other important indices that contribute to vulnerability of women in societies. For instance, the implication of poverty, stigmatization, inequalities and other patriarchal structures on widows’ wellbeing, which cannot be overlooked in analyzing vulnerabilities facing these women in developing countries. This is why Mackenzie (2013:33-57), Mackenzie et al. (2013:1-6) and Anderson (2013) used the relational autonomy notion to argue that despite the ontological notion of our shared vulnerability (which is said to cause inter-dependency in humans) it is essential to understand that vulnerability could equally be experienced in other different ways.

### **3.2 Framework for analyzing Women’s Empowerment in the Relational autonomy Approach**

To explain the evaluative relevance of their relational autonomy theory, Mackenzie et al. (2013:6-9) and Mackenzie (2013:38-40) used what they termed taxonomy of vulnerability to argue that vulnerability could be experienced by people in the inherent, situational and pathogenic dimensions, and thus, any evaluation of people’s vulnerability should focus on these dimensions. They went on to provide premises for which their theory would be relevant in analyzing vulnerability of women, especially in patriarchal societies. According to Mackenzie et al. (2013: 14) *“the first premise of relational autonomy approach highlights the capacity of vulnerable women to exercise some degree of self-determination in leading a flourishing life – (their aspirations); while the second premise argues that the degree and sustainability of this capacity entails broad and persistent interpersonal, social and institutional support and the fact that these can be thwarted by inequalities, deprivations and disadvantages in human environment.”* These premises provide the frameworks for analyzing the autonomy dimension of women’s vulnerability.

#### ***i. First Premise***

The first premise suggests that disempowered women could respond to their life challenges as autonomous agents. This premise is important because it will enable an analysis of various imageries (for e.g. personal, socio-cultural, religious, collective) women would use to perceive vulnerabilities in their communities. Within this perspective is the idea that hardship and suffering tend to facilitate the application of various autonomy competences or strategies (which are developed by the individual from childhood) by the disempowered women in dealing with life challenges (Anderson 2013:135; Hall and Lamont 2009:7). This dimension addresses how disempowered women could achieve empowerment using individual and collective efforts, especially in making rational choices beneficial for their wellbeing. Moreover, this perspective means that the investigations of vulnerability affecting women would focus on how they perceive their experiences of vulnerability (Mackenzie 2013; Anderson 2013; Chamber 2002).

This is why Mackenzie (2013:37-39) argues that people have different ways they respond to vulnerable conditions, and it is rational that the analysis of their vulnerability should be focused on how they experience and perceive it in different ways. Chambers (2002:15) study equally shows that the experience of vulnerability would vary among women because they have different capacities of coping with life challenges; thus, he argues that an effective synthesis of women’s vulnerability would center on individual experiences and coping capacities. Focusing on this individual level analysis is considered relevant because it could expose different ways women would interpret the social structures and interpersonal relationship that condition the way they respond to vulnerabilities the experience in their communities.

Moreover, the meaning women attach to their recognition in societies could give rise to collective actions (Lamont 2009; Kabeer 1999). These collective imaginaries allow the individual to rationalize the importance of joining collective groups when faced with difficult situations, and how to solicit supports of the groups (Hall and Lamont 2009). This also point to the importance women may attach to their membership in social groups or networks and how they use membership in these groups to deal with their life challenges (Hall and Taylor 2009). This dimension also highlights the ways personal agency can be transformed to collective agency when women make choices to pool resources for responding to difficult situations (Kabeer 1999; 2003).

### *ii. Second Premise*

In the second premise, Mackenzie et al. (2013:16-17) argue that because women's autonomy depend on the level of recognition, this dependency on the recognition of others could equally lead to various forms of vulnerability, thereby justifying why analysis of women's vulnerability should focus on how social institutions create interpersonal and social scaffoldings that encourage or inhibit recognition of women in traditional societies. Recognition is said to be important to an individual because it sustains the individual's motivations to associate, connect and gain continued access to productive resources in her society (Anderson, 2013:140; Keating, 2009). In establishing relationship between vulnerability and autonomy, Anderson (2013) observes that the desire for praise, acceptance or the fear of being disliked or isolated are such powerful motivating forces that may inhibit the capacity of an individual to exercise her autonomy. In this dimension, the consequent condition of self-assertiveness transpires to be subjective to interpersonal relationships, which determine how she is accepted, interacted with, or derive benefits as a member of the community.

One major characteristic that affects the levels of recognition that women could receive from their societies is gender inequality or hierarchical system in the society (Hall and Lamont, 2009:13; Hall and Taylor, 2009; Fineman, 2008). Fineman (2008: 16) highlights on how access to valuable life can be denied due to the privileges that one enjoys, and insists that vulnerability is shaped by systems of hierarchy and privileges which function together to create webs of disadvantages and inequalities in human societies. Thus, the threats of vulnerability first exist because of the different positioning of people in society, which defines their privilege or access to resources in societies (Fineman, 2008).

The social recognition dimension is relevant because it provides the framework for understanding how women's ability to pursue their goals in developing world is inhibited by patriarchal cultures and other negative social relationships. Patriarchal cultures tend to maintain hierarchical and gendered systems in the distribution of resources in developing societies (Jackson, 2005). Because of the observed influence of patriarchal culture on the autonomy of women especially vulnerable women in developing societies, the social recognition or privilege dimension analyses how structures of social relations apportion levels of prestige, recognition and status, and determine the capacity of women to gain access to needed support, assets or resources in dealing with their life challenges (Hall and Lamont 2009; Wilkinson 2005). This issue is mostly reflected in empirical studies of challenges women face due to their widowhood status. Because of the absence of a male role figure in their lives, women in most patriarchal societies lack appropriate recognition and social standing (Jackson, 2005). Without the recognition of a man's identity in her life, a widowed woman may find it difficult to function properly in society, for instance, gaining access to productive assets like land and property, or effectively engaging in community activities (Ezeakor, 2011).

Although the relational autonomy theory has made remarkable points in assessing interpersonal and social conditions that inhibit women's wellbeing, the approach is not without limitations. For instance, Pipin (2008) and Baynes (1999) (cited in Anderson, 2013:142) argued that there are people who may lack recognition but are still able to lead an autonomous life in society. This objection was clarified by Anderson (2013:143) who stresses that the recognition dimension has achieved a successful approach in vulnerability analysis due to various empirical studies that solidify claims of the implications of social recognition in inhibiting women's autonomy. Though it may not be generalized, but it still cannot be ignored in the studies that reflect implications of social exclusion on women's ability to function well in society.

## 5.0 Conclusion

The paper set out to re-conceptualize the vulnerability thesis on women in developing world using the framework of the relational autonomy approach. This is because most studies on women classify them as utterly helpless people, why in reality these women, especially in less developed societies where they face negligence and cultural limitations, have developed more capacity, strategies and resilience in addressing their challenges. The neglected conditions that the women find themselves in, has increased their survival strategies, and this is an important area to begin researching about their empowerment –that is, their own capacity to transform their lives (Potash, 1986; Slater, 1986). The strength of the relational autonomy approach is in recognizing the possibility of the vulnerable women to utilize their agency (capacity) in transforming their lives. The paper highlighted the capacity of vulnerable women to exercise a degree of self-determination in leading a flourishing, which instigates the desire for change. Since attaining wellbeing is a special goal in an individual's life, therefore the analysis of women's vulnerability will be assessing their capacity to transcend from vulnerability to achieve desired wellbeing (Anderson, 2013). This dimension will provide analytic space for understanding how the women's perceptions of their vulnerability translate to the desire they develop for change and the various initiatives they develop to change negative structures in their life.

Evaluation of the women's experiences of vulnerability can provide the context for understanding the meaning they give to their life challenges and what they desire for change. Because human beings have different experiences and values, as well as different capacities to cope with life stressors, it is rational that the analysis of women's vulnerability should be focused on how they perceive it. Thus, an effective synthesis of the women's vulnerability would focus on how their perceptions of vulnerability could encourage strategies for bettering their lives. This includes various strategies they use to respond to the challenges and needs facing them in their societies. This analysis of women's vulnerability would extend beyond the situational dimensions of their vulnerability to focus on the ways their experiences of vulnerability motivate them to strategize actions for dealing with them. This makes them active agents in ameliorating their vulnerabilities.

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