Poverty as a Social Fact: Can It Be Eliminated or Only Reduced?

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Article Info.	Abstract
	Poverty eradication efforts have traditionally been framed within two dominant paradigms: individualistic and structural approaches. These perspectives often overlap internally yet diverge significantly in their definitions of poverty and proposed solutions. The individualistic school attributes poverty primarily to personal shortcomings, such as passivity, lack of motivation, or unwillingness to adapt, often focusing on behavioral reforms and empowerment strategies. In contrast, the structural school emphasizes broader socio-cultural, economic, and political factors, viewing poverty as the result of systemic inequalities, labor market failures, institutional discrimination, and historical marginalization. Although each perspective offers valuable insights, their contradictions suggest that neither framework alone sufficiently addresses the complexity and persistence of poverty across diverse contexts. This article proposes a synthesized model that integrates both individualistic and structural elements, arguing that a blended approach better compensates for the limitations inherent in each. By recognizing that individual agency operates within structural constraints, the proposed model seeks to create interventions that are both empowering at the personal level and transformative at the systemic level. Empirical analysis of urban contexts further demonstrates that while neither model alone successfully eradicates poverty, their combined application contributes meaningfully to its reduction. The study concludes by suggesting that future anti-poverty policies must adopt this integrated framework, emphasizing multidimensional strategies that are responsive to both personal and systemic dynamics. *Keywords*: eradication, individual, poverty, reduce, structure

Introduction

The United Nations [UN] (1995) defines poverty as a condition characterized by several deprivations of daily human needs, including foodstuffs, pure drinking water, bathing, washing and toileting, other health facilities, residence, education, and information (p. 57). From the UN's definition, it can be understood that poverty is a state of being unable to obtain food and water when hungry and thirsty, lacking the money to replace torn clothes and slippers, lacking safe, permanent shelter to stay overnight, lacking the opportunity to send children (who wish to study) to school, and lacking the ability to treat ill family members when they fall sick. This is probably the absolute explanation of poverty.

Poverty also appears in another dimension, where it is understood in terms of the income and expenditure status of other individuals in the same society. It generally occurs when people do not enjoy the same standard of living as the majority

in a given society, as claimed by Townsend. Townsend's claim signifies that poverty can be understood by comparing the living standards of individuals within their surroundings (Townsend's, 1979, p. 31). Thus, it is different from the former condition; however, it also deprives individuals of the facilities, services, and opportunities available to others living nearby.

Likewise, according to the United Nations Development Program [UNDP] (2010), poverty is a state involving more than just a lack of income and resources needed to guarantee a durable livelihood. Its outcomes include an empty stomach and poor nutrition, limited access to education and other basic services such as healthcare, drinking water, and sanitation, as well as experiences of social discrimination like untouchability and exclusion from caste and class unions, along with the lack of participation in decision-making processes (p. 15). This approach also emphasizes both structural and individual factors as causes of poverty and could serve as one of the foundational perspectives for its eradication.

This perspective can be supported by the capability approach to poverty eradication, which combines both preceding structuralist and individualist approaches by strengthening individuals' navigational capacity. It argues that poverty ought to be understood as the deprivation of fundamental capabilities rather than merely the lowness of incomes and resources. Therefore, whether poverty exists in an urban or rural setting, it is better to apply a combined method to eliminate it from the ground up, relying on the self-efforts and capabilities of local individuals.

The Statement of the Problem

Does anyone become poor? Or is anyone made poor? This has remained a debatable question for a long time within the social sciences. One group of scholars, who focus on individualistic schools of thought, argues that poverty is the manifestation of weak individual values, attitudes, and pessimistic behaviors. In contrast, another group of scholars, who support the structural school of thought and view institutional structures as obstacles to poverty

eradication, argues that poverty is the outcome of social structural inequality rather than a lack of willingness or pessimistic behaviors among individuals.

Various programs based on both approaches to poverty eradication have been launched and implemented separately in different societies. However, poverty has merely been reduced, not eradicated as expected or claimed by these perspectives and programs.

Thus, on the one hand, this article aims to juxtapose the debates that challenge each other regarding poverty eradication. On the other hand, it seeks to reconcile them by proposing a compiled model that offers a better solution for the eradication, rather than the mere reduction, of poverty.

The Review of Literature

As Ruth Lister (2004) claims, the phenomenon of poverty must be understood both as a painful reality experienced by millions of human beings and as the construction of competing conceptualizations, definitions, and measures (p. 36). Two opposing arguments divide the schools of thought into two categories. A group of scholars who assert that poverty is primarily a painful condition experienced by individuals can be described as belonging to the individualistic school of thought. Similarly, groups of scholars who define poverty based on cultural behaviors, income inequality, welfare access, cost of basic needs, food energy intake, subjective evaluation, and related factors have created various approaches that can all be categorized under the individualistic schools of thought, which often overlap in their ideas.

In contrast, a group of scholars who view poverty as a consequence of institutional and systemic constraints can be described as the structural school of thought. Scholars who explain poverty through the lens of social institutions—such as gender, class, caste, race, ethnicity—as well as through policies, residential segregation systems, unequal distribution of wealth and resources, and power relations, have developed various approaches that can be grouped under

the structural schools of thought. These structural perspectives also show considerable overlap in their ideas. This paper first discusses the individualistic schools of thought and then the structural schools of thought.

The individualistic school of thought argues that cultural behaviors are the primary causes of poverty. Poverty is largely the result of social and behavioral deficiencies in individuals that ostensibly make them less economically viable within conventional society (Mead, 1997; Murray, 1984; Jordan, 2004, p. 19). The persistence of poverty in certain areas reinforces the behavioral perspective, supported by the culture of poverty thesis, which suggests that individuals create, sustain, and transmit to future generations a culture that perpetuates various social and behavioral deficiencies (Rodger, 2000; Jordan, 2004, p. 19). These arguments explicitly suggest that the culture of poverty is the primary cause of poverty, meaning that the inherent activities of the poor themselves perpetuate their condition. Thus, this view argues that poverty eradication efforts should focus on individual behavioral change rather than institutional reforms.

Similarly, another individualistic school of thought argues that income inequality is a major cause of poverty. Gregory Jordan contends that income inequality is a significant indicator because the service sector has split into two parts: low-income service workers and high-income service workers, with little opportunity in between (Jordan, 2004, p. 20). As Ruth Lister (2004) also suggest, poverty can be seen as a reflection of low income, indicating that income inequality at the individual level eventually pushes people into poverty (p. 18). Thus, poverty eradication must again be revisited at the individual level.

A group of scholars who view welfare as a tool for poverty eradication argues that welfare programs provide a "big push" needed to break the poverty trap. Jeffrey Sachs, adviser to the United Nations and director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, argues that if the rich world had committed $195 billion in foreign aid annually between 2005 and 2025, global poverty could have been eradicated by the end of that period (Banergee & Duflo, 2011; Jordan, 2004). This school of thought sees welfare as a major instrument for eradicating poverty at the individual level.

Additionally, the capability approach argues that education, skills training, healthcare, and other foundational capabilities are essential for enabling individuals' self-reliance. Scholars such as Amartya Sen, Bentham, and Layard also support this school of thought. Another group of scholars believes that the cost of basic needs, food energy intake, and subjective evaluations are major factors in determining individuals' poverty status. Micro-level vulnerability and absolute poverty are further individualistic approaches that view poverty as the manifestation of individuals' passivity and lack of effort. All these schools of thought overlap within the boundary of individualistic explanations of poverty, but they contrast sharply with the structural schools of thought.

Contrary to individualistic views on poverty, some scholars identify social institutions and systems as constraints to poverty eradication. Their major arguments highlight gender, class, race, ethnicity, state policy, unequal distribution of resources, and power relations as key barriers to eliminating poverty. The structural school of thought asserts that structural constraints not only confine individuals but also restrict their mobility, trapping them within the boundaries of poverty.

Gregory Jordan notes that proponents of the "structural" school argue that most poverty can be traced to structural factors inherent in the economy or in several interrelated institutional environments that serve to favor certain groups over others, generally based on gender, class, or race. To support this claim, Jordan further argues that the disproportionately high rate of poverty among women may be viewed as a consequence of a patriarchal society that continues to resist their full inclusion into historically male-dominated sectors. As a result, welfare programs have often been designed in ways that stigmatize public support for women (Jordan, 2004, p. 22).

Building on this argument, another structural perspective suggests that the problem of poverty stems from the prevalence of low-quality, low-paying, dead-end jobs created by today's job systems. Referring to Thomas Piketty, Royce contends that it would be no easy task to specify precisely what an equitable distribution of society's resources might look like (Royce, 2009, p. 16). This point further underlines that poverty originates from inequalities in the distribution of power, opportunities, and resources.

This school of thought also claims that socio-cultural institutions, by depriving individuals of freedom and choices, compel them to become objects of charity, ultimately pushing them below the poverty line. As Royce (2009) argues, the structural perspective attributes poverty to a range of economic, political, cultural, and social forces outside the immediate control of individuals. People face a shortage of jobs that pay a living wage, a corporate profit-making strategy centered on reducing labor costs, and government policies that prioritize the wealthy while neglecting the interests of working-class families. According to Royce, poor individuals also confront a political and media rhetoric that disparages them, treats them merely as objects of charity, and renders them invisible, along with ongoing discrimination, residential segregation, and social isolation (p. 17).

Patterson (1994) cites sociologist Herbert Gans' mid-1960s argument that the poor constitute "an economically and politically deprived population whose behaviors, values—and pathologies—are adaptations to their existential situation, just as the behaviors, values, and pathologies of the affluent are adaptations to theirs" (Jordan, 2004, p. 19). Macro-level vulnerability and relative poverty are also seen within structural schools of thought, treating poverty as a product of institutional and systemic constraints. However, both schools of thought appear somewhat stagnant in their approaches. The individualistic school views 'welfare' as a major push toward the eradication of poverty, whereas the structural school argues that the 'welfare' system undermines self-sufficiency and economic growth by allowing able-bodied adults to rely on assistance.

Thus, this article proposes a new model—a combination of both approaches—for poverty eradication. Additionally, this study draws upon Appadurai's concept of blending the science of the future with the study of the past as a new model for addressing poverty. Appadurai argues that the capacity to aspire is navigational and is nurtured through real-world experiences of conjecture and refutation, which compound the ambivalent compliance of many subaltern populations with the cultural regimes that shape them (2004, p. 69). Therefore, this study seeks to understand the lived realities of poor households as material social facts, offering a view of culture as a futuristic concept for poverty eradication.

Results and Discussion

The Nepal Living Standards Survey (2023) shows that 20.27% of people in Nepal live in poverty. While the structural model argues that better institutional arrangements contribute to poverty eradication, three industrial estates out of eleven located in this province were identified as enabling factors for accessing employment opportunities. However, 12.59% of the population in Bagmati Province still lives below the poverty line (National Statistics Office, GoN, 2024). This indicates that structural factors are only one segment influencing individuals to become poor.

Recognizing that the household is a key site for describing poverty, this study focuses on 29 households selected purposively from distinct clusters, continuing until data saturation was reached with the final unit of study within this sample size. These households were primarily surveyed to collect data on employment, consumption habits, and income. However, accurate income data could not be fully gathered due to respondents' unintentional behaviors.

Despite the small sample size, this study attempts to explore multiple dimensions of poverty within poor households, including housing, food habits, access to resources, occupation, income,

education, mobility, and strategies for risk reduction and anticipation. Additional NLSS data were also assessed for comparison with the primary data.

How Poor Women's Income and Job Differ in the Urban Setting

The urban poor's housing resembled clusters of huts with black-stained tinplate roofs, some coated with plastic, but generally without any yard space. They appeared more like dens. As Appadurai (2004) argues, "poverty is exposure to risk and high costs for thin comforts" (p. 65); in these huts, no windows were installed for ventilation, no walls were raised for protection from the rain and sun, and almost all were located along the riverbanks. As Appadurai (p. 64) further describes poverty as material deprivation and desperation, these huts—situated between towering buildings—were without electricity and water taps to meet daily needs.

As Becker-Ritterspach (1990) noted, the cost of tanker water can be prohibitive for slum dwellers in Kathmandu, leading to financial strain; most water was typically fetched from *Dhunge Dhara* (stone-spouts) and only occasionally from tanker supplies. Today, the situation has changed somewhat, with water either bought or fetched from a known person's well. Electricity was accessed either through nearby houses or illegal connections. The tiny living spaces within the huts were typically used for at least three purposes—sleeping, cooking, and sanitation. In almost all poor households, one or two cots occupied much of the space, serving for both dining and sleeping. Cooking areas were separated with makeshift plywood partitions. Toilets were shared, small, and generally untidy. Some households kept livestock, and dogs guarded their tamed birds.

As Petras (1981) argues, actors often act not for their immediate, concrete interests, but because the system dictates that they act (p. 148); similarly, two pairs of women were found caring for their impaired adolescent children during working hours, unable to leave for jobs even during mid-day. These material realities further confirmed that these households belonged to the urban poor.

As Carolina (2002) points out, considerations of poverty often neglect the disparities between men and women in access to income, resources, and services. In this study, nearly 19% of women were found working as housemaids, caregivers, and cooks in upper-middle and upper-class homes, while only 4% worked as waste pickers in different slum areas of the Kathmandu Valley. Similarly, 10% were engaged as street vendors, and a small number (5%) worked in garment and handicraft industries. A large proportion (41%) worked as construction laborers, and 21% were employed as restaurant and tea shop staff (p. 1).

Carolina (2002) also notes that these disparities often exist within households themselves: women not only had to prepare food, wash clothes and dishes, and clean their huts, but also take care of children and other family members in addition to holding outside jobs. Sometimes, they had to tend livestock after returning home (p. 1). Therefore, as Carolina states, women have very little leisure time compared to men, a situation that worsens as poverty deepens. If poor women had as much free time as their male counterparts, they might be able to generate more income, seize more opportunities, and save for their aspirations (p. 2).

However, almost all jobs available to poor urban women were part-time, informal, low-paying, and unstable. They struggled to meet even basic needs but continued to hope to send their children abroad for better earnings. Despite often being illiterate, they sent their children to school, managed household chores, and pursued whatever work they could find. In this way, poor women were fighting not so much against homelessness as against hopelessness. It was their everyday culture that helped sustain their capacity to aspire to a better future. However, no major systemic support or "big push" seemed to underpin or strengthen their inspiration and aspirations.

How Poor Men Work and Aspire in an Urban Setting

It was the men who bore the greatest financial responsibilities for poor households in urban settings. Previously, their partners also contributed

to household expenses as much as they could. However, their income levels did not allow them to move beyond mere subsistence. Whatever they earned was entirely spent on basic livelihoods. Children were sent to public schools where no tuition fees were charged, but some expenses still had to be covered for miscellaneous school-related needs. Daily expenses were often unaffordable relative to their income.

Nevertheless, their households managed to survive in the face of countless demands, as urban settings are spaces of infinite expenses. Driving, construction work, street vending, waste collecting and recycling, daily wage labor, security services, mechanical work, and repair jobs were the major occupations held by poor men in the Kathmandu Valley. These jobs provided a means of survival but often came with poor working conditions, low wages, insecurity, and uncertainty. They sometimes engaged in irregular work such as delivering gas cylinders, rice bags, and furniture.

While most of their income was spent on household needs, some portion was used for alcohol and tobacco. Almost all men consumed alcohol and tobacco, although very few women did. Their expenses largely depended on their income, which was irregular and unpredictable. The working class could not guarantee its own subsistence; likewise, poor men's income in the urban setting of Kathmandu was neither fixed nor sufficient. Sometimes they earned one thousand to twelve hundred rupees a day, but other times they had to be satisfied with just one to two hundred rupees. When they earned more than a thousand, they would buy chicken for their family's meals; otherwise, they would return to their huts with soya-balls or, sometimes, with nothing (Novak, 1996, p. 193).

Typically, they had debts at local groceries where they bought goods on credit. Street vendors often faced legal problems while selling fruits and vegetables. They developed new strategies, such as contacting large shops and selling their produce in shop yards. Nevertheless, they constantly played a "see-saw" game with municipal police, who prohibited street vending. Sometimes they managed to evade the police, and sometimes they were caught. When defeated, they shared their unsold fruits and vegetables with neighbors.

This ongoing struggle with local authorities sometimes led them to consider migrating abroad for better income, but they lacked the education and savings needed to realize these aspirations. Despite these challenges, they never thought of returning to their villages. As Appadurai suggests, all these choices and aspirations represent multiple experimentations to break through the brittle horizon of poverty, struggling against systemic barriers, as the structural approach argues that institutional and systemic structures are enemies of the poor (p. 67).

They and their activities resisted both individual passivity and structural systemic problems. Despite hardships, they never stopped aspiring for a better future, hoping to send their children abroad to earn better incomes than they could achieve locally. Their behaviors contrast with the portrayal by the individualistic school of thought, which claims the poor need a "big push" to improve. The actions of poor men in Kathmandu's urban settings did not appear passive; rather, they worked hard to cover extra expenses instead of remaining unemployed. Sharing unsold vegetables and fruits was their way of reducing risks—a cultivated culture rather than a sign of backwardness. They fought against municipal legal provisions and created their own ways to generate income. Their anticipation and aspiration for a better future were evident in their efforts to educate their children. Culture can be futuristic, their hopes, aspirations, and family solidarity demonstrate their navigational capacity toward building a better future (Appadurai, 2004, p. 61).

Poverty as Material Social Facts in Urban Setting

Contrary to Gregory Jordan's assertion (2004) that poverty is the result of social and behavioral deficiencies in individuals that make them less economically viable within conventional society, poor people in Kathmandu generate income to run their households despite lacking skills, education,

and adequate capacity (p.19). Likewise, as Ruth Lister (2004) states, poverty is the lowness of income, indicating that income inequality at the individual level eventually pushes people into poverty; poor people generate low incomes that create and recreate their poverty (p. 18). However, they also build the capacity to debate, contest, and inquire through their "connections" in everyday activities, as described by Appadurai (Appadurai 2004, p. 70).

They may lack the full capacity to hold high-income-generating jobs and occupations; however, they create "maps" for their own mobilization. As Appadurai (2004, p. 69) argues, the more privileged individuals in any society use the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and realistically, and to share this knowledge more routinely than their poorer and weaker neighbors. Many poor people in Kathmandu try to connect with prosperous households in order to explore the future more frequently and to share knowledge among couples, relatives, and neighbors.

Further, following Appadurai's idea of the capacity to aspire as a navigational capacity (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69), poor people search for many job opportunities based on their abilities and anticipate sending their children abroad for better job and income opportunities. They are actively trying to overcome poverty; however, their existing conditions persist extensively, often beyond their individual efforts. Thus, poverty cannot be fully explained by either the individualistic or the structural schools of thought alone. A combined model of poverty is essential for its eradication, as both dominant models primarily focus on poverty reduction rather than true eradication.

On another note, Planet Hollywood reports that more than US$ 260 billion is spent annually on marketing and advertising, from which US$ 100 could theoretically be distributed to every person on earth (Neville, Richard, as cited by McMichael, 2004, pp. xxvi–xxx). Similarly, as McMichael (2004) cites, US$ 17 billion is spent annually on pets in Europe and the USA—US$ 4 billion more than what is allocated for the health and nutrition of the world's people.

Yet, like the poor in Kathmandu, a significant number of people worldwide continue to suffer from hunger and poverty. These facts suggest that poverty is not simply a matter of eradication but largely one of reduction. If it were truly a matter of eradication, the rational world would not allocate more resources to marketing and pet care than to meeting the basic needs of human beings. If these vast budgets were instead invested in enhancing the capabilities of the global poor, the world could be in a far better condition than it is today, and poverty in Kathmandu could be extensively transformed alongside global improvements.

Conclusion

This study concludes that neither of the dominant approaches—structural or individualistic—fully achieves the eradication of poverty. They primarily contribute to its reduction to varying extents. As Appadurai (2004) argues regarding the possibility of a futuristic culture, this study claims that if poor people cultivate the capacity to aspire, they can eventually overcome poverty in their future endeavors. However, expenditures in non-human sectors must be redirected toward human sectors for both systemic and behavioral transformations. Such a shift would eventually alter the nature and relationships among human beings, thereby promoting their capacity to aspire.

It also appears that, as the poor population limits its over-attachment to specific localities within urban settings, they may be able to defeat poverty through their own self-efforts. Their hopeful efforts, mobility, and anticipations surpass both systemic institutional barriers and individual deficiencies. However, they have yet to significantly raise their voices or fully develop the capacity for inquiry.

If they continue participating in economic activities that strengthen the navigational capacities of their children, they will eventually triumph over poverty. Contesting poverty through self-aspiration contributes to the creation of a unique culture—an aspiring self-bound by hope—which can gradually mitigate this historic problem across urban settings through a compiled model.

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