

Psychosocial Barriers as Impediments to the Expansion of Functionings and Capabilities: The Case of Mexico

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ABSTRACT *Social norms can enable or limit development. The focus of this paper is on how psychosocial barriers limit functionings and capability development in Mexico. As far as individuals make such barriers their own, they go from being external to being internal; that is, they go beyond being social norms to becoming personal ones. As social norms become personal norms, they can become either barriers or opportunities for change. In fatalistic and tight societies such as Mexico, pressure to conform to “what will happen anyway” and to external norms and expectations is strong. This makes it easier to adopt such barriers than to expand one’s functionings and capabilities and thus become an agent of change. In other words, it is more comfortable and practical to continue being a subject rather than an agent of change. The consequence is the apparent and accepted state of affairs of neither oneself nor others enabling the development of personal agency. It is through experiential workshops based on facilitating cognitive, emotional and social skills, and knowledge in health, education, citizenship and productivity that freedoms can be expanded in such a way that psychosocial barriers are reduced and that individuals change behaviors so as to become agents of change.*

KEYWORDS: Psychosocial barriers, Capability development, Personal agency, Mexico

Introduction

Socio-cultural norms and role expectations are means to preserve social order. Such order can be maintained on the one hand through external control, and on the other through the expansion of freedoms and the concomitant enhancement of individual responsibility.

In an ideal society, socio-cultural norms encourage and facilitate the expansion of capabilities and functionings as well as the personal agency of individuals. In the capability approach developed by Amartya Sen, “functionings” mean the various things a person

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may value doing or being (Sen 1999, 75). “Capabilities” are defined as opportunities, as “options or choices open to the person, possible functionings from which a person may choose” (Crocker 1995, 162); or as the freedom to promote or achieve valuable functionings (Alkire 2005).

For Sen (1992, 65), freedom includes “a person’s ability to get systematically what he would choose no matter who actually controls the levers of operation.” This entails support for making those freedoms a reality. Living with this kind of social support, one is able to understand that as one grows, one’s neighbor does too. This means accepting the fact that as one enhances one’s freedoms, one is likely to enhance those of others and *vice versa*, thus creating a virtuous circle of human and social development. The community supports this growth because it is clear that supporting individual development helps it thrive as a whole. But—and there is a big but—most developing societies have not traditionally functioned in this way; fatalistic attitudes and stringent social norms (and, derived from these, stringent individual norms too) tend to block informed, autonomous decision-making and action rather than encourage choice, empowerment and agency. In fact, norms in these cases present one of the main barriers to realizing “entitlements” because they entail pressure to conform (Sen 1998) rather than freedom to grow; thus reducing the “capability set.” This term refers to the set of attainable functionings from which a person can choose (Crocker 1995, 162), one’s life options, while “entitlements” in the human capabilities approach is a term used to describe the commodities over which the person can potentially establish command and ownership. These entitlements can be economic or political, or otherwise are means to the well-being (Devereux 2001; Pick and Sirkin 2010).

As far as entitlements are socially defined, when social pressure to conform to prevailing norms is so limiting that these expectations occupy a higher hierarchical value than realizing an individual’s own rights, the possibility of meeting one’s potential becomes severely restricted. As far as social pressures take precedence over individual development, functionings and capabilities suffer. Individuals under such circumstances are likely to, in turn, impose similar restrictions on the development and growth of others. Their families, communities and the institutions to which they belong are thus negatively affected.

Human development programs ideally should include, and have as a central point, group dynamics, self-reflection and experiential exercises that facilitate the development of skills and knowledge. This will enable individuals to address psychosocial and other kinds of barriers and to enhance informed, responsible and autonomous decision-making and action, as well as to reduce external control through fatalistic attitudes.

Sen says that “we need behavioral norms and reasoning that allow us to achieve what we try to achieve” (1999, 249). The Framework for Enabling Empowerment (FrEE) and its concomitant Programming for Choice strategy (Pick, Beers, and Grossman-Crist 2011; Pick and Sirkin 2010) make his capability approach operative in a psychosocial perspective. It was after more than 25 years of field experience in close interaction with and feedback from theories of behavior change (for example, Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Prochaska and Di Clemente 1982) and axiology (Hartman 1967) that the FrEE was put together.

The FrEE describes how to facilitate processes to manage and change existing norms in order to facilitate desirable achievements. Among these are life skills for critical analysis, decision-making and assertive communication (WHO 1997) that together with knowledge and means for reducing psychosocial barriers form the core of FrEE and Programming for Choice-based programs. If equality in social arrangements is to be reached, it will be through expanding freedoms; through recognizing the inherent need and desire of people to realize their potential, to have the space of actions to make values, functionings and capabilities a reality (Sen 1996). “The enhancement of living conditions must clearly be an

essential—if not the essential—object of the entire economic exercise and that enhancement is an integral part of the concept of development” (Sen 1988, 11). Enhancing freedoms as the core of social norms is essential if one is to succeed in expanding individual and community capabilities.

Tight Societies

Where fatalism prevails as a source of guidance for one’s decisions and actions, the probability for innovation, growth and development is curtailed. The leading principle is one of submissiveness and obedience; of acceptance of the *status quo*, of “not touching,” “not asking” and certainly “not doubting.” Uncertainty is accepted as part of everyday life, making it very hard to have control over one’s actions and decisions. The control over one’s life is in the hands of others.

In addition to fatalistic attitudes, in a tight society (Pelto 1968) the strong pressure to conform (or at least to appear as if one is conforming) to social roles and expectations provides an incentive for lying and cheating as a means for meeting basic needs, while maintaining social appearances. If the main motivator for those with little or no power is conformity and acceptance, and one’s needs and desires are not in accordance with this line of action, such deviant ways may be the best alternative. In this way, one has a higher likelihood of not losing face.

The likelihood of social norms transforming into personal norms (Valsiner and Lawrence 1997) is higher when the system is tight and does not easily allow for alternative courses of action. “You better do things by the book or you’re out” is a message that places an important barrier to freedom of expression and action. The adoption of social norms is also influenced by the public perception of their legitimacy. It is often based on the perceived legitimacy of the “promoters,” which tend to be the dominating social forces. Key players in this sense are individuals who have (or are perceived to have) social, political or economic influence: those with higher educational or economic status, government officials, private-enterprise gurus, highly revered members of religious groups. Such powerful individuals or groups are likely to establish and, make sure others follow, social norms that are in the interest of the powerful. The motivator for those in power—that is, for “the gainers” (Gaspar 2000, 993)—is to keep the *status quo* and “mobilize forces to do so” (2000, 993).

Individuals who are better able to identify social pressures and do not experience confrontation or pressure from them are also better able to make plans and give themselves space within prevailing socio-cultural norms to make their own decisions (Sapp, Harrod, and Zhao 1994). Individuals with a strong sense of personal agency are more likely to make value judgments about which norms they value for their own development and that of their families, communities, institutions and their society as a whole, and which norms they choose to ignore.

The Case of Mexico

Mexico has traditionally been a fatalistic society. This means that there is broad acceptance of things as they stand; there is faith in a higher power that determines destiny. This leads to high levels of external control, a mindset of passivity and inability to change. Such is the case even under the harshest of circumstances. One is not supposed to react, but simply to accept. Put in Rotter’s (1990) terms, the locus or place of control of one’s life lies outside one’s control; it is external. In fact, this is reflected in the use of language where

it is frequent to hear such phrases as “it fell,” “I don’t know whose fault it is” or “I did it because he told me to; it’s his problem.”

External locus of control is at one end of a continuum. At the other end is internal control. Under internal control the individual is an active agent of his decisions, instead of a merely passive acceptor of what happens to him. Fatalism strongly enhances external control and limits proactiveness, and in fact feeds the idea of a continuous vicious circle of a self-fulfilling prophecy of passivity and little initiative or control. This goes something like: there is nothing I can do to change the course of my life: things happen to me because they are supposed to happen, because I deserve them and I must accept my fate as there is nothing I can do about it. The possibility for expanding one’s freedoms is almost inconceivable under such circumstances. According to some studies (for example, La Rosa 1986 as quoted in García-Campos and García-y-Barragán 2011), Mexicans tend to have an external locus of control. Díaz-Guerrero (1982) has pointed out that many Mexicans believe that the powerful have control over other people’s lives and that they venerate both spiritual divinities and secular and temporal symbols considered almighty (the President), which leads to a sensation of impotency over their own lives and surroundings.

However, more recent studies (for example, García-Campos and García-y-Barragán 2011; García and Corral-Verdugo, 2010; Vera-Noriega and Cervantes 2000) suggest that this might be changing to a more internal locus of control. Different socio-economic factors, however, affect the locus of control. For example, education is an important factor; individuals with more education tend to present internal locus of control, while people who have studied less tend to externalize their achievements and failures more (Palomar-Lever and Valdés Trejo 2004; García-Campos and García-y-Barragán 2011). Economic factors also influence the locus of control; Mexicans with high socio-economic level tend to attribute their success to themselves, while Mexicans living in poverty or extreme poverty tend to think that external and structural factors condition their lives. This can be associated with the fact that in developing countries like Mexico, the efforts of the poor can be easily frustrated, leading to passive attitudes, and that the poor are more likely to identify themselves with traditional values, such as obedience and conformity (Palomar-Lever and Valdés Trejo 2004). The traditional Mexican culture socializes the individuals to be obedient, to put a lot of importance on other people’s opinions, and thus externalizes the control over their lives. The Mexicans who have more traditional values tend to also have an external locus of control (García-Campos and García-y-Barragán 2011).

In addition to the fatalistic attitudes and expectations, in Mexico there is a strong pressure to conform. It can be defined as a “tight” rather than a “loose” society (using terms from Gelfand, Nishii, and Raver 2006; Pelto 1968). As mentioned, in tight societies there is strong pressure on the individual to adhere to restrictive societal roles, with a focus on maintaining the *status quo*, appearances and external control over decisions. As opportunities arise (e.g. improved quality of education, greater access to media and to health clinics, a better judicial system) socio-cultural norms tend to change and possibilities occur for acting outside tight norms and external control; the society becomes “less tight.” In addition, the expansion of opportunities, capabilities and freedoms is likely to lead to changes in the norms themselves. For example, until a few decades ago it would have been unheard of to think that one day the necessary social and political flexibility would exist to allow the largest poverty alleviation program in Mexico (*Oportunidades*) to be focused on providing funds to women (Levy 2006), as has been the case since 1997.

There is a strong pressure to follow and adhere to what is socially expected. In fact, being well educated or “*bien educado*” is defined in terms of how well one adheres to prescribed social norms, rather than to many years of formal education (Peterson and Hennon 2006). A

person who is *bien educado* is respectful, obedient, caring and, above all, follows what is socially expected of her. This person maintains these characteristics even if doing so requires overriding personal interests and desires; it is the external aspects that are valued and put in place, far beyond internal needs and desires. A person who places internal or intrinsic values above these systemic ones (Hartman 1967) is considered “*mal educado*”: disobedient, disrespectful and unworthy of receiving social support, and even attention or love (Gongora Coronado, Cortes Ayala, and Flores Galaz 2002).

It is interesting to note that even though Mexicans in higher socio-economic levels tend to have more internal locus of control than the poor, they place a lot of importance on the achievements of their goals to *amiguismo*—using the social relationships to succeed—and being pleasant (García-Campos and García-y-Barragán 2011; Palomar-Lever and Valdés Trejo 2004). Thus, even the individuals that otherwise have an internal control of locus can feel the pressure to please, as part of one’s success is attributed to it.

The pressure to please and to do what others think is “correct” can be so strong in Mexico that it prevents one from taking day-to-day risks that should be part of everyday life. This leads to fear of taking initiative, and to fear of failure as well as fear of success (for example, Chen 2007; Jáuregui 2010). There is fear of making autonomous decisions and being an agent of change rather than a mere object thereof. If the focus is on doing everything as expected, without mistakes, incentive for risk-taking is strongly reduced. Such patterns clearly limit the possibility for enhancing one’s freedoms, taking hold of new opportunities and developing others.

If acting autonomously (Rotter 1990) is unacceptable, one must find ways of doing things that do not appear to go against social norms, even at the cost of seriously limiting one’s functionings. This can easily lead to an education based on pressure, including shame, fear and guilt as well as the use of lies and cheating. Under such circumstances, one often does not have the necessary skills and knowledge to even consider the possibility of expanding one’s capabilities. Agency “is influenced by and develops according to particular structures of living together, so we need a way to distinguish the types of structures that help promote individual agency” (Stewart and Deneulin 2002, 67).

When fatalism and limiting socio-cultural norms are set within a paternalistic system, such as is the case of Mexico, opportunities for expansion of freedoms are further limited. School and parental education as well as the state interfere (not just protect or educate) in all or most aspects of a person’s life under the (mis)understanding of offering protection (Dworkin 2005). In Mexico, paternalism both leads to and results from an education and widespread acceptance of social norms based on lack of personal responsibility and inner control. The means of solving problems and addressing different situations are determined by someone other than the interested party herself. Individuals are simply not seen as capable to take control over their lives and are considered subjects of someone else’s needs and desires, as the following testimonies registered by Tacher and Givaudan demonstrate:

... many other programs of the governments see us as savages with bad habits, (they think that) if we can’t read or write we can’t be capable to manage our own lives (a 25-year-old woman). (2012, 51)

It is just that we have waited night and day, day and night, and we haven’t stopped being afraid, afraid and ashamed of who we are in front of the others. This fear comes from the ancestors (a 58-year-old indigenous man). (2012, 50)

Cross-cultural studies have shown that, in Mexico, the distribution of power is highly unequal and that this high concentration of power is accepted by the ordinary citizens

(for example, Bastarrachea Arjona and Cisneros-Cohernour 2006). These studies also show that the low and middle socio-economic levels in Mexico feel that they are at the mercy of forces over which they have no control (Guillén Mondragón et al. 2002). In this context, paternalism is accepted, expected and even appreciated (by both the “beneficiary” and by the “provider”). Control (generally under the guise of protection) that some “pater” (family, government, religion, father, older person) has over an individual is linked to a belief (rarely expressed openly) that it is a select few who should be making the decisions, including decisions on behalf of others. Instead of promoting personal agency and empowerment, paternalism manipulates people into accepting dependence on the prevailing family, economic and educational systems. This requires pleasing the paternalistic figure even at the expense of one’s own well-being (Peterson and Hennon 2006; Pick and Sirkin 2010). Examples of paternalism and socially accepted norms that support dependence as well as offering little room for expanding functionings and capabilities are rampant in family life and treatment of children and women, as well as in politics. The Mexican family unit is traditional with strong parental authority; the expectation is that there should be blind respect, obedience, interdependence and discipline (Gregory and Munch 1997; Paz 1950). Such dependence and submissiveness are key impediments to the autonomous development of youth. This is more marked among girls, who are expected to be even more dependent and submissive than boys. Obedience is instilled to such a degree that different kinds of violent behavior (verbal and physical) are considered acceptable, even necessary to attain proper behavior (Corral Verdugo et al. 1995; Frías Armenta and McCloskey 1998; Frías Armenta et al. 2004; Peterson and Hennon 2006). The objective of parenting is to make sure that the father is a good provider; that the children are obedient, they comply with social expectations and do not bring shame upon the family. In order to reach these objectives, threats, humiliation and guilt are commonly used. External control begins early on and is applied at all age levels and in all contexts.

Children are expected to be quiet in the classroom, patients are not expected to ask questions at the clinic, bosses are expected to have the last word in work relationships, daughters-in-law are supposed to blindly obey mothers-in-law and children to obey their parents. Internally derived responsibility, expansion of freedoms and capabilities are not part of the equation. It is about public image, about pleasing others (or at least appearing to be trying to go in that direction), about following what others dictate, about authority and authoritarianism. Human development has a different meaning in such a society; signifying “development of a minority through social pressure on the majority.” Paternalism is not always authoritarian and dominant, but can be disguised as something positive, as in the case of protective paternalism. Research on ambivalent sexism shows that while dominant paternalism justifies the male dominance with women’s inferiority, protective paternalism sees women in a positive way, but explains that men should protect women, because women are weaker (Cruz Torres, Zempoaltecatl Alonso, and Correa Romero 2005; Marván, Vázquez-Toboada, and Chrisler 2013).

Passivity is a common result of being raised and living in a context of psychosocial barriers. If the control over one’s life is in the hands of others, if it is external to oneself, making an effort and taking initiative is counterproductive to what is defined as success. As a kid said after mass: “So why make an effort? I am bad, even without doing anything wrong.” It simply does not make sense under these circumstances for someone to make any effort. These kinds of attitudes are common in Mexico and in other Latin American countries and lead to resignation, lack of initiative and feelings of powerlessness (Sánchez 2005), forming barriers to development (Greaves de Pulido and Miñarro 2001). This fabric of external control clearly has emerged in numerous interviews administered in the context of the programs discussed below (see Pick and Sirkin 2010). Being surrounded by such

constraints makes it very difficult to become empowered, to make one's entitlements become a reality. Not only does the person not have the skills and knowledge to do so, but in addition he is pressured under a very tight observance not to dare step out of order. Such a context leads to paralyzing choice and action. The immobilizing effect of such barriers impedes informed, responsible and autonomous decision-making. One is not deemed to be capable of making decisions (in fact, in Mexico the term "*tomar decisiones*" [take decisions] is used—as if one is taking them from someone or something else). That power belongs to men, to bosses, to mothers-in-law, to people older than oneself, to God. This pressure goes so far that it can lead to feelings of jealousy and envy and other negative emotions when acts of rebellion against the pressure lead one to success in any way—be it economic, social, artistic, interpersonal or any other kind (Staller and Petta 2001).

Psychosocial barriers not only act as deterrents to choice, action and responsibility, but also to a mentality of scarcity of means; in which one does not see oneself as capable of accessing existing opportunities nor of creating new ones. Kids pick up this behavior from very early on. In Mexican schools we see a culture where students are discouraged from thinking for themselves or making decisions that they feel are right for them. The school system instead encourages students' obedience to authorities and is generally based on a "Shut up, sit down, and do as you're told" kind of mentality. In other words, kids learn from very early on that their value lies in their ability to take orders rather than initiative or responsibility, and that their gateway to acceptance is to be found in others' approval and accreditation of their actions. As kids and teens are met with this apparent disregard for their wishes, thoughts and feelings from practically all angles of their lives (in school by teachers, at home by parents, and in their free time by other adult authorities), they very quickly learn to adapt to this behavior and it becomes a part of the kids' relationships with each other and their outlook on life:

- The lack of knowledge about how to be autonomous manifests itself throughout society. If parents, authorities, teachers and bosses do not understand the importance of informed choice and are unable to make or communicate informed decisions, this results in a social failure to exercise and encourage self-determination, autonomy, growth and opportunities. Consequently, restrictiveness begins to permeate decisions at each level of society. Conversely, citizens who know their rights and obligations and exercise them in a free way can take responsibility for social problems. (Pick and Sirkin 2010, 35)

Tello Peón (2007) asserts that nations whose citizens take on personal responsibility recognize both successes and problems as their own.

In line with such norms, gender inequality is normative. Premarital virginity is highly valued (Carrillo 2002), and sexuality education is traditionally contaminated with moralistic messages and includes few scientific facts (Givaudan et al. 1994; Ramírez Aranda et al. 2006). Yet concurrently, premarital sex is implicitly encouraged as a means for a woman to coerce a man to marry her (Pick, Givaudan, and Aldaz 1996) given that a woman without a man is considered somewhat of a second-class citizen. There are a lot of contradictory messages that lead to confusion and, more seriously, to unwanted pregnancies. For example, social norms emphasize an external appearance of sexual prowess and masculinity for the males (Amuchástegui and Aggleton 2007; Szasz 1998). They are expected to have as many sexual partners as possible and to get as many women as possible pregnant (Marston 2004). The high value of virginity placed on females leads one to ask a question as basic as who will these boys have sex with? The secretiveness and moralism associated with

sexuality brings a series of long-term problems in addition to the unwanted pregnancies and births, such as HIV/AIDS (Brito 1996; Carrillo 2003).

Such pressures also limit communication about sexuality, feelings and desires, thus reinforcing limited autonomy and pressure to conform. Feelings of fear, guilt and shame can be so strong as to make a person feel invisible both as an individual and socially. The individual does not count—it is all about what he represents or can provide for the image of others. It is not hard to understand how limiting this is for exploring new avenues of development, for accessing or creating opportunities for oneself.

Having a non-participatory and largely passive and conforming Mexican citizenry makes private-enterprise moguls and government domination and manipulation quite easy. Social norms often lead to attitudes and behaviors, even laws and regulations, that restrict people's capability sets, even privilege the capability sets of a few at the expense of most. The focus is on personal gain (Estrada 1991). The lack of independence that prevails in many Mexican institutions and individuals places a significant burden on institutional development (Rubio 2006). Rubio added:

Resources are directed at maintaining the status quo and the favorite projects of the people in power, which rarely are the most profitable, the most desired by the population, or the ones that could constitute the foundation of the economy and future society. (2006, 19)

The pressure to put public image above attaining specific and clearly measurable results reinforces the attitude of “save your own skin, forget the people you are supposed to be serving” (Alberto Jonguitud, personal remark, April 9, 2002).

Lack of autonomy leads to citizens' feelings of incompetence and powerlessness in politics, which in turn feeds passivity, lack of initiative and low motivation for competence (Peschard 1991). Individuals adopt a normative passive-dependency from an early age, which leads to limited civic participation. This is reflected in Mexico's political culture and political participation. Even though there has been formal and institutional progress in the process of democratization after the long years of authoritarian governments, there have been no such advances in democratic values. Political apathy and abstention have been and are characteristic to Mexican political life. The citizens lack the instruments to manifest their inconformity and prefer to leave politics to the politicians. The consequence is manifested in the abstention to take part in politics and demand that political parties are held accountable for their actions (Duarte Moller and Jaramillo Cardona 2009). Parents actually teach that active participation makes little sense (Segovia 1991), instead of teaching with an example of exercising one's rights and obligations; of voicing concerns and fighting for one's rights.

Using Emotions for Social Control

An important psychological mechanism for the maintenance and continuation of the prevailing patterns in social relationship lies with emotions. Shame, guilt and fear serve as psychological barriers to decision-making and to actual behaviors, thus limiting an individual's potential to make choices and to act upon them. When trying to live up to the standard of the community as is predominant in Mexico (Paz 1950), these emotions serve to regulate behaviors, as one fears being scorned if one transgresses what is socially expected and rewarded. In traditional communities, the individual's main source of motivation may in fact be the “social applause” that comes with following social norms, with being obedient, not questioning, not taking initiative, not performing better than the average. Pressure is

such that it is often seen as more socially acceptable to lie or cheat than to admit to an error or to contravene what is socially accepted. Psychological barriers can be a major constraint to individual and community development. They also hamper utilization of health services (Bingham et al. 2003), use of financial services (Pick and Pérez 2006) and political participation (Segovia 1991). Psychological barriers apply at all socio-economic levels (Pick and Pérez 2006).

Pena and vergüenza. *Pena* refers to the shame one feels or is supposed to feel, and sometimes also show, when doing something that is not socially acceptable, when making a mistake or when not directing one's efforts towards doing what is socially expected, namely pleasing someone else. Closely related is "*vergüenza*," a similar feeling that is closer in meaning to embarrassment. In Mexico, it is very frequent that we hear "*me da pena*." This is a phrase used as an excuse of an action not having gone in the expected direction or in the socially accepted way. It is also used when not having been able to arrive on time, to comply with a commitment, to carry out an action. It translates into English as "shame." The expression "*me da pena*" is equivalent to saying "sorry" in English. The difference is that it is not only the notion of "being sorry" that is expressed, but "being sorry and ashamed"—that is, the person is at fault, while others judge him. "The value of *pena* . . . is so ingrained and associated with socially-expected submission that people are expected to demonstrate and say they feel *pena* even if there is no real reason for it" (Pick and Sirkin 2010, 40).

Both *pena* and *vergüenza* are expressed as shyness, insecurity or timidity, manifested in daily behaviors by avoiding eye contact, not answering a question or responding "I don't know" even if one is certain of having the correct answer. Such reactions are seen as a sign of behaving properly, of modesty and of understanding what is socially acceptable behavior (Barriga 2001). *Pena* and *vergüenza* affect females more than males because the social pressure for the former to make use of these emotions is stronger than it is for men (Amuchástegui 2001). Yet the pressure to place higher importance on one's public image and on outward compliance than on commitment, personal agency and responsibility is very strong for both genders. *Pena* and *vergüenza* are so highly valued that men are expected to prefer obedient, sweet, virginal-looking (and acting) women to those who show personal agency, make decisions or act autonomously. This has concrete consequences on sexual health. Condom use is associated with promiscuity, and if a woman wants to use a condom she can be classified as sexually active and thus suspicious. It is socially desirable for men to marry women with no sexual experience or who at least do not show sexual desires (Szasz 1998). For a young woman, the risk of getting pregnant or getting a sexually transmitted infection might seem less severe than the risk of losing her reputation and social status (Amuchástegui 2002).

Guilt. Guilt is another key psychosocial barrier. It refers to the remorse one is supposed to feel and show over not having acted according to social norms (López-Pérez 2010; Wong and Tsai 2007). The pressure can be so strong that the remorse felt is the key guiding principle of one's actions, especially those related to sexual and reproductive health and rights (Pick, Givaudan, and Kline 2005). It is elicited by criticism, public exposure of one's actions and gossip. Guilt is used to control people at different levels and by various actors (Foucault 1976 as quoted in De la Fuente Rocha 2006): boss to subordinate, parents to children, teachers to students and very pronounced, both directly and indirectly, by religious authorities. Directly refers to the fact that such messages are used in religious teachings, as is the case in mass. There is indirect influence in as far as it has become part of the cultural framework to use guilt as a means of external control over peoples' decisions and actions (De la Fuente Rocha 2006).

The use of guilt is seen as the means *par excellence* of raising kids at home and of controlling them in school. It is also seen as the means to get subordinates to comply with what

is expected from them in the workplace and as the way to exert pressure on the more marginalized groups to do as the minority in economic, social or political power sees fit (Etxebarria 2000). The concept of sin, “*pecado*,” is repeated in mass, homes and schools in Latin America, and is central to the widespread use of guilt that has permeated educational methodology, educational contents and interpersonal relationships. In fact, it is so common and so widely accepted that it can be called a “cultural guilt” (Pick and Sirkin 2010). Inducement of guilt is a strong means for restricting pleasure and, more generally, freedom to choose (for example, Olivella Quintana and Porroche Escudero 2005). If the individual makes a choice that leads to success or pleasure, beyond that achieved by his friends and relatives, then that person is made to feel that he is not complying with what he is expected and is a candidate for punishment or social rejection.

Fear. Instilling fear is another means of limiting an individual’s freedoms and functionalities through exerting externally induced control (Darley 1966; Janes and Olson 2010). The way it generally takes place is through threats to be applied when the individual does not behave “properly” (for example, “Perspective” 1960; Scheff 1988). It is seen as useful in preventing rebellious behavior or misbehavior. The degree of laxity with which “rebellious” and “proper” are defined, can vary from group to group, and even from family to family.

As is the case with other psychosocial barriers, fear limits autonomous decision-making, specifically if these decisions can be conducive to obtaining pleasure, happiness or simply realizing one’s potential. In a context of obeying and doing what is socially desirable, the right of individuals to make their entitlements a reality, to expand their freedoms and capabilities, is not only secondary but is in fact strongly frowned upon and restricted. An example of this self-limitation can be found in gifted girls. Research has shown that highly gifted girls tend to receive less attention from parents and teachers than boys in the same situation due to a gender bias. Highly gifted girls often hide their capacities and let others (parents, teachers, peers) decide their destiny in order to be more socially acceptable and likeable. More generally, women tend to assign their success to external factors and their failures to internal factors. Their fear of success is connected to fear of social rejection (Valadez Sierra 2004).

Fear is easily instilled by the use of superstitions and myths to scare people from autonomous action. Such is the case of myths associating contraceptive methods with sterility or with the husband abandoning the woman if she does not give him all the children he wishes. Being afraid of engaging in new activities, of trying out new experiences or things, also affects productivity and competitiveness in the workplace (Suárez 1997). Making a mistake is not seen as part of a learning process, but instead as an example of misconduct that must be punished. One is severely limited in the possibility of taking risks, of trying out new things (Pérez Alonso-Geta 2009; Schein 1993). This may even lead to escaping responsibilities. After all, if one does not take initiatives or risks, one cannot be held responsible for the consequences, whether positive or negative. Fear can be seen as the perfect mechanism to limit not only responsibility, but also participation. Fear is so restrictive that, beyond limiting decisions and rights, it limits possibilities for curiosity and learning.

Scope for Change

When opportunities for change are facilitated in such a way that they can be accessed in order to enhance one’s well-being, one is able to reduce such psychosocial barriers as have been discussed in the previous section and become an agent of change. The FrEE hand in hand with its programmatic strategy, Programming for Choice (Pick and Sirkin 2010), is a means to make Sen’s human capabilities approach operative from a psychosocial perspective. It basically consists of experiential workshops through which (in groups of 15–

30 individuals) a facilitator helps to enable life skills, enhance specific knowledge, reduce beliefs and facilitate opportunities for reducing shame, guilt and fear. Life skills refer to cognitive skills (e.g. decision-making, problem-solving, analytic thought), social skills (e.g. assertive communication, empathy) and emotional skills (e.g. self-knowledge, management of emotions) (Mangrulkar, Whitman, and Posner 2001). Knowledge enhancement and belief reduction basically facilitate the acquisition of specific knowledge and reduction of myths regarding carrying out a specific behavior (e.g. condom use, consumption of fruits and vegetables, participation in the classroom, starting a community savings bank).

Such programs have been carried out among marginalized populations in both urban and rural Mexico for specific behaviors in health, education, productivity and citizenship. Among the results have been found increases in knowledge (e.g. in themes related to nutrition, sexual and reproductive health and hygiene; see Leenen et al. 2008) and changes in behaviors such as increases in prevention of school drop-out (Givaudan, Romero, and Barriga 2012), use of a Pap smear test (Givaudan et al. 2008), contraceptive use (Givaudan and Pick 2005) and boiling of water (Givaudan, Pick, and Barriga 2008).

In addition to increasing their knowledge and their life skills, the participants have also reduced their psychosocial barriers. The following are some examples of these programs.

School programs have brought statistically significant changes in children's scientific interest and capacity to think critically (increase from 55% to 79%) and their motivation to study (increase from 69% to 79%) (Givaudan et al. 2010). Children who participate in these school programs also get better grades and are more likely to continue studying. They also participate more in the classes and express their opinions more openly than before the program (Givaudan, Romero, and Barriga 2012). These kinds of results are important, as the traditional educational model in Mexico encourages children to obey and listen to the teachers, as we mentioned earlier.

In the field of health, the life skills program to prevent cervical cancer is a good example of how increasing knowledge, overcoming psychosocial barriers and developing life skills can lead to behavior changes that improve the quality of life of the participants in a concrete manner. Cervical cancer presents severe problems to women's health in Mexico. The high mortality rate has much to do with the late detection of malign tumors. Even though access to health services is sometimes limited (DiGirolamo and Salgado de Snyder 2008), there are also other reasons that limit the use of the preventive screening services. Prevalent myths of how cervical screening may disable women sexually, embarrassment of being treated by a male doctor and lack of partner's or husbands permission to undergo a screening test have also been shown to play an important role (Bingham et al. 2003; Givaudan and Pick 2005). "I want to, I can ... prevent cancer" is a program that develops participants' capacities and knowledge needed to take into account these barriers. The evaluation of the program has shown that the women who participate in the program are more likely to get a Pap smear test. For example, when the program was implemented in rural villages in Oaxaca there was an increase from 22% to 27% in Pap smear tests taken after the program in the experimental groups, and the probability of having a Pap smear taken was significantly higher than in control groups. The participants also increased their knowledge on cervical cancer and its prevention (for example, Givaudan et al. 2008).

Another example of successful programs is the sexuality education program directed at elementary school students. Many adolescents receive ambiguous and contradictory information from their families, mass media and the schools regarding sexuality and sexual health (Amuchástegui 2001 as quoted in Pick et al. 2007). Among the youth, there are psychosocial barriers to communication about these themes, such as embarrassment, lack of trust and fear of talking to the opposite-sex parent (Magnani et al. 2005). The purpose of the "I Want to, I Can ... prevent HIV/AIDS" program was to provide the elementary

school student with the skills (with emphasis on communication) to discuss difficult topics (sexuality, substance abuse) with parental figures. The program was implemented in Hidalgo and Campeche to assess the effect of the communication-centered life skills program on norms, attitudes, behaviors and intentions towards communication about difficult subjects. As a result of the program, the children were able to reduce psychosocial barriers (e.g. shame and fear) and develop competencies (communication skills and behaviors) that serve as protective factors for risk behaviors in adolescence. After the program, the students also changed their perception about social practices and norms that they previously accepted (Pick et al. 2007). Kirby (2002 as quoted in Pick et al. 2007) has shown that the perception of social norms is a dominant factor in adolescent safer-sex behaviors. A breastfeeding and infant development program implemented at a national level also demonstrates how life skills education and reduction of psychosocial barriers can lead to behavior changes and increasing empowerment. To promote breastfeeding is important, because it is still common for the health personnel in Mexico to recommend to mothers that they should use formula instead of breastfeeding their babies. The objective of the program was to promote breastfeeding and early childhood development and prevent crib death by training healthcare personnel to replicate the program with the women all over the country. The evaluation of the program showed behavior changes both in the healthcare personnel and the mothers. The healthcare personnel started to make recommendations to promote breast-feeding, prevention of crib death and child development. The healthcare personnel also increased their intrinsic empowerment after participating in the program (Athié, García, and Givaudan 2012).

In the field of productivity, the program participants have also reduced their psychosocial barriers. The objective of the “I want to, I can ... start my own business” program is to improve the quality of life in rural and marginalized communities through the development of life skills, reduction of psychosocial barriers and creation of community banks and microenterprises. By starting to save and learning practical abilities of managing a micro-enterprise, the participants can generate income and gradually find their way out of poverty. In addition to increasing their knowledge on community banks and microenterprises, the women participating in the program in rural villages of Oaxaca have reduced their psychosocial barriers, especially fear and shame, in a statistically significant manner. The control group in this evaluation showed an increase in fear. The participants of the experimental group also had more favorable attitudes towards gender equality after the program. In addition, there were positive tendencies towards strengthening the empowerment and abilities of expressing feelings and critical thinking (Santana, Ortiz, and García 2012). In rural communities, where women’s position is still very unequal, these kinds of changes are very important.

Hand in hand with these knowledge and behavioral changes, results show statistically and qualitatively significant increases in personal agency and intrinsic empowerment (Pick, Beers, and Grossman-Crist 2011). For example, after the programs, participants have started to demand authorities for more support than before, help to resolve problems in their communities and give their opinion in community meetings (Pick et al. 2008).

Measuring the psychosocial barriers is a difficult task. While better instruments to evaluate these barriers are developed, much of the evidence for successful program administration comes from testimonies in interviews with program participants, conducted both before and after program administration. Such evidence can be found in several publications in which the Programming for Choice strategy and implementation has been presented (for example, Pick, Beers, and Grossman-Crist 2011; Pick and Sirkin 2010; Venguer, Pick, and Fishbein 2007). The following testimonies illustrate reduction in psychosocial barriers:

I was ashamed and was afraid to talk in school, now after the course I learned that there is no reason to be ashamed [and] not to be scared to participate in the classroom. (Venguer, Pick, and Fishbein 2007, 401)

I used to feel *agachada* (bent over); I always kept my head down. I had no right to look up or to ask questions. I was an *agachada*. Now I can look straight up, and I can ask ... I am just as valuable as anyone else. And many others have learned from me. My daughters' lives are very different from mine. I talked to them many times after the course and they talked to their friends. It was like a chain that helped change things. (Pick, Beers, and Grossman-Crist 2011, 13)

I myself want to thank you because I ... before this workshop didn't how would I say ... I didn't value myself, I didn't value myself ... I didn't question my husband, I never said no, I never answered anything, I ate it all always, everything, and I looked myself at the mirror and I saw myself all ugly, and thanks to this workshop I value myself, I look at myself now and say: how beautiful, it is not that I changed as a person, I did change, I valued myself as you can't imagine, I hope you keep coming. (Givaudan et al. 2010, 48)

While in the workshop, my husband came to say that I had to leave because the kids were hungry, I told him that he should go and prepare food for them. Usually he hits me, ever since he helps with house chores and has not hit me. (Venguer, Pick, and Fishbein 2007, 401)

The people have learned to talk, to not stay quiet, to value themselves, to have confidence in themselves, to recover what they didn't have for years. (Tacher and Givaudan 2012, 50)

We have to stop relying on government and utilize our own resources. It is just that sometimes it is easier to put your hand out or let somebody else do our job for us ... but after participating in this workshop ... not anymore. (Tacher and Givaudan 2012, 46)

For me it is very difficult to talk about sex and sexuality, as in my home things just happened to us (menstruation, teen pregnancy, depending first on parents and older brothers, then on husband and in the future on one's children) ... and I do notice that I live with fear, although these workshops have opened my eyes and I can see that my barriers—as you call them—are stronger than I am and I know that it is important to take this [things learned in the workshops] to the communities where they don't even have schools ... But I look at myself and say to myself: “who is going to believe me?” ... I didn't go to school and besides I'm a woman. But I remember the other women when we were here in the workshop, and I say to myself, well if they can, I can too and I get out there and I really start to believe it [...]. (Tacher and Givaudan 2012, 48)

I have more life options ... there are always things that require me to think and work outside of the box, now I can confront many of those because I believe in myself and I can think by myself. When you count as a person you feel you count for everything else and you want to do more. When you do not count as a person like before when we only counted for the government because they wanted to use us for their politics

or our husbands to use us to serve them or our children to care for them, I did not feel I counted. Now I do. Counting means you are important, you can believe in what you believe without having to ask others if it is okay ... you count simply because you count, not because you do something ... and that makes you feel important, free, and intelligent. (Pick, Beers, and Grossman-Crist 2011, 13)

Conclusions

Freedoms in a restrictive social milieu, as is the case in a good part of Mexican society, are seen as a poison that can break the social cohesion and social networks. If one grows, “she must be stopped; put in line.” And this is done through imposing one or more psychosocial barriers. Just like success at performing one’s functionings and the opportunity to make one’s capabilities a reality can generalize to different situations, psychosocial barriers generate insecurity that can expand to diverse situations and become a generalized limiting mindset. It is as if one gets programmed for a mentality of passivity, of being a subject of change rather than an agent thereof.

To change this kind of restrictive context of social control and to expand their freedoms, individuals need to develop life skills and reduce their psychosocial barriers. The FrEE and its concomitant programming for Choice Implementation (Pick and Sirkin 2010) explains how to facilitate this process through experiential life skills and knowledge facilitating workshops, so that people can realize their potential through enhancing their well-being and personal agency. Such a process is essential for any human development-based social and/or economic program to be successful and sustainable in the long term.

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