**Neoliberalism and Mental Health**

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The rise of neoliberal ideas and behaviors in recent decades has impacted both the people of the global north and the global south. Neoliberalism is an economic and political ideology that advocates free-market capitalism, privatization, deregulation, and limited government interference in the economy. It has emerged as a dominant factor in determining global policies and societal norms, including in underdeveloped nations where pursuing neoliberal ideals is now viewed as a path to success. Neoliberalization of everyday lives across Pakistan has resulted in a shift of values and goals, impacting how people view success and manage their socioeconomic settings. As a researcher investigating neoliberalism and development, I collaborated with a team of experienced psychologists in Lahore and Chicago to better understand the impact of the capitalist ideology on the lives of young people. Over the course of two years, 500 people aged 18 to 30 participated in the study. The findings were shocking: 95% of the students reported being ‘unhappy’, and the same 95% claimed to have no sense of direction in their lives, while the other 100% revealed anger and resentment against the wealthy and powerful individuals and institutions of the country. The survey was only undertaken at one institution in Punjab, which, for confidentiality reasons, will not be named but has a mixed student population from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds.

Men reported suffering considerable social and economic pressure on the choice of their careers; notably, many described their parents being displeased with their career choices and increasingly driving them into trauma by labelling them as ‘failures’. Most men reported feeling enormous pressure from their parents to take the CSS exam or pursue medicine as a career. Students pursuing arts and social sciences believed they had picked a field that would never win their parents’ approval, especially in terms of making them ‘proud’ Parents frequently compare their children to one another in a competitive manner; in fact, competitive psychology demonstrates that competition is an integral component of the human evolutionary process.

However, according to Neoliberalism’s tenets, the entire system, from education to the job market to the pursuit of love and marriage, is founded on the values of material gain. The idea instilled in young people from an early age is that resources are few, competition is fierce, and they must win at any cost. The race to win resonates well with a Machiavellian mindset of ‘the end justifies the means,’ Though, this mindset is opposite of the essential traditional values of faith. Pakistan, which claims to be a bastion of the faithful. Upon questioning the definition of ‘success’ 80 percent of the student population defined success as being wealthy and powerful. The principal reason for students’ unhappiness was believed to be encountering serious barriers as a result of the class struggle across Pakistan. Many students considered that the power and elitist lifestyle of Pakistan’s wealthy and powerful is a reason for the country’s ongoing struggle as they feared that unless the rich and powerful institutions gave up their position of control and opened the country’s resources, there future options would remain bleak. There were also 65 percent of men and 45 percent of girls who said they would migrate overseas if men’s economic well-being was the most essential, while 45 percent of females said they would travel abroad to postpone their marriage process.

Overall, the study indicated that Pakistan’s youth are waging multiple inner conflicts. A detailed mental health checklist, designed and used for the surveys by Dr. John Benson of the University of Illinois at Chicago found that about 95 percent of the youth in in Pakistan struggled with anxiety and experienced depressive episodes. In comparison to the gender, men were reported to have a higher number of anxious thoughts in comparison to women. The country’s worsening economic situation is exposing the country’s long-standing class strife. The birth of Pakistan, which favored the country’s elites, is now being challenged by the country’s young population, which no longer wishes to submit to an arbitrary system. Furthermore, mental health and the desire to materially integrate into the global capital market are not new, as countries across East Asia and elsewhere have witnessed this motivation in young people to follow in the footsteps of industrialized economies, and states have responded with possibilities. If the class struggle continues in Pakistan and the youth is not provided with opportunities to meet their social and economic obligations, the future will present itself challenging for those in power as well. As far as the mental health challenge is concerned there needs to be channeled awareness across households and overall, within the community to mitigate the challenges faced by the young individuals. Additionally, investing in education and skill-building programs can help bridge the gap between the aspirations of the youth and the opportunities available to them. By providing avenues for personal and professional growth, the government can empower young people to contribute positively to society and the economy. Moreover, addressing mental health issues openly and promoting access to resources for support can help create a healthier and more resilient population. Ultimately, by investing in the well-being and future of its youth, irrespective of Class and social background, Pakistan can pave the way for a more prosperous and stable society for generations to come.

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