

## Social Capital: Strengthening women through networks

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### Introduction

Women's empowerment has gained currency over the past three decades in both academic and policy circles. The term *empowerment* has replaced buzzwords of the past like 'welfare', 'upliftment', 'poverty alleviation', and 'community participation'. While it has undergone several surgical treatments, the changes are not reflected in its practical application. From a minimal definition that encompasses control over material resources, it has extended to include control over ideology (Molyneux, 1985; Baltiwala, 1994; Osirim, 2001). Despite the current development discourse's emphasis on the comprehensive definition of empowerment, many international, non-governmental and feminist organizations are still maintaining a specialized focus of empowerment.

This is evident in the agenda of most development policies of the global South which dichotomize interventions into either gender issues such as sexual and reproductive rights, legal rights, protection from violence and the like, or economic justice issues such as income generation, employment in government services, debt relief and the like (Barton, 2005). While each agenda is important in its own right, one cannot be ignored or overlooked at the expense of the other, especially if empowerment in its current characterization is to be operationalized. An examination of the appropriation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), formulated by the United Nations, highlights the specialized focus among most non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in their endeavor to attain women's empowerment.

The Eight MDGs that world leaders agreed upon and put forth at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 are 1) poverty reduction 2) primary education 3) gender equality 4) reducing child mortality 5) maternal health 6) Disease prevention and reduction, especially HIV/AIDS and malaria 7) environmental sustainability and 8) equitable global finance and trade. Most NGOs targeting development in the global South have picked up one or a combination of a few MDGs in their development foci toward poor women. But success in one area does not lead to success in the others.

For instance, the reproductive and sexual rights on most NGOs agenda aims to reduce fertility rather than giving women control over their sexuality and fertility. The focus is on educating women on family planning, use of contraceptives and the like. Instead NGOs should enable women to recognize, access and assert their reproductive and sexual rights. The disconnect between the discourse of holistic empowerment and implementation of piece-meal programs, especially in the lives of poor women of the global South, is due to an ineffective framework through which their lives are viewed. Instead of pitting gender justice issues against economic justice issues, a framework that integrates both the issues in addition to other concerns that are of importance to the women themselves is needed.

This paper makes the case that Social Capital provides that lens through which we can explore the multiple dimensions within which the notion of women's empowerment is enmeshed. It will begin by delineating the meaning of women's empowerment as employed in the current development discourse limiting the exploration to women in the South Asian context, specifically India. This will be followed by an explanation of the concept of social capital highlighting its origins, definitional conundrums and why it provides a clearer framework for understanding women's empowerment. In conclusion a case study will be used to establish the unity of the theory of social capital to the praxis of women's empowerment.

### What is women's empowerment?

The notion of empowerment has had significant coverage in the social sciences, especially feminist literature albeit in varying degrees. In its minimalist version, it was defined as "bringing about equality between women and men in the control of production factors and the control of distribution of the benefits of development" (Sarah H. Longwe as cited in Osirim, 2001, p. 168). Since women were mostly confined to the private sphere of the home, with childcare and management of the household as their primary function, they had limited entry into the labor market resulting in limited financial independence. It was assumed that greater financial independence would change the status quo of poor women in the southern hemisphere.

On the contrary, there is ample evidence to suggest that women's entry into the labor forces had added the extra burden of work to the already existing chores of childcare and household maintenance (Baltiwala, 1994). In patriarchal societies where hierarchy of gender is not questioned, the earnings from small scale employment like sheep rearing, poultry farming, tailoring, soap-making and the like are typically handed over to the husbands, fathers or other male heads of households, making financial independence seem like an illusion (Muhmud, 2003). In order to be holistic, the definition of empowerment should include change in power relations where the powerless can take charge of their life situations. Addressing the

structural factors that perpetuate exploitation of poor women necessitates an extended definition, which Moser eloquently articulated as “giving women the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change through the ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material resources” (as cited in Osirim, 2001, p. 168).

This definition adds to the inventory of resources, over which women need control in order to bring about a change in their status quo, i.e., in addition to material they need non-material resources. In the study of population and health, Batliwala subsumes within the category of non-material resources i.) intellectual resources such as knowledge, information and ideas and ii.) ideology, i.e., beliefs, norms, attitudes, values and behavior. According to her, power accrues to those who have access to material, intellectual and ideological resources. Therefore, women who are able to accrue such power will be in a better position not only to challenge the inequitable power relations but also gain greater self-respect, self-confidence and a general sense of well-being.

Women’s successful attempt to accrue such power is documented by Mary J. Osirim in a study of students of color in predominantly white campuses in America. She demonstrates that minority students can actively engage in shaping their own experiences if the right environment and control over material as well as non-material resources is made available. She observes that students gain agency in their experiences in colleges that adopt affirmative action policies in faculty hiring and student admissions. Specific curricula in disciplines like sociology, that explores minority backgrounds, provide these students with intellectual and ideological resources that they can use toward the kind of empowerment they seek.

One of the subtleties of women’s empowerment is that it is not something that can be handed down, as welfare or aid. Empowerment arises out of women’s interests and in their own understanding of what needs to improve to enhance the quality of their lives. Maxine Molyneux, the most influential writer on women’s interests, makes the distinction between women’s practical and strategic interests. *Practical interests* are derived from women’s lived experiences in their roles as wives and mothers in the society. Women’s positioning within the gendered division of labor, forces them to focus less on themselves and more on the roles they are expected to perform.

*Strategic interests* on the other hand are derived deductively when women challenge their positioning within the society. Here the emphasis is to change the current power structures and to put in its place a satisfactory set of arrangement where women’s needs are recognized and given weight. An external agency cannot decide what these strategic needs are, they can only provide a critical space within which women can see for themselves what they need and seek to bring about the needed change. An example of such a critical space is demonstrated in a literacy campaign, launched in the early 1990s by the government of India in collaboration with several other volunteer organizations, in Nellore District of the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh (Batliwala, 1994).

A lesson in the adult literacy primer of the literacy campaign depicted a story of a poor landless woman whose husband spent the meager family wages on alcohol consumption while the rest of the family struggled to make ends meet. Realizing that the story was mirroring their own lives, the women who were attending the adult literacy classes decided to take action. They initiated an uprising against government licensed liquor shops in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The anti-liquor agitation came about as women critically re-examined their lives, recognized the structures of power and initiated action toward their betterment. While external agencies can act as catalyst, they cannot empower women. Empowerment occurs organically out of women’s interests depending on their priorities.

Another subtlety in the notion of women’s empowerment is that it is rarely a neutral process. In empowering themselves women are essentially challenging the hegemony of those in power resulting in social upheavals. As in the case of the anti-liquor movement women challenged not only the liquor contractors and politicians, but also the male heads of households (fathers, husbands, brothers), which is unacceptable in a male-dominated society. They put their lives and welfare at risk by contesting prevailing patriarchal ideologies that promote obedience, sacrifice, submission and silent suffering.

Molyneux cautions policy makers that “strategic interests can only be effective as a form of intervention when full account is taken of these practical interests”(1985, p. 234). If strategic changes occur in piecemeal fashion and there are no alternative compensations made for the risks undertaken by the women, then short-term practical interests of the women could be threatened. For instance, programs that begin with a neutral focus such as reproductive rights might face backlash from religious fundamentalists and others in the community who are uncomfortable with women choosing for themselves what they want to do with their bodies. It is therefore essential for development policies to acknowledge and address these concerns that might jeopardize women’s lives.

While the development discourse and rhetoric has called for a holistic view of women’s empowerment, the policies at the grass-roots level are not mirroring this appeal. A primary example is the concerted efforts to eradicate the practice of female genital cutting (FGC) primarily in sub-Saharan Africa and certain countries in the Middle East and Asia. Eradication strategies have included legislation to prosecute those practicing FGC, educating communities on the harms associated with this practice and

training for the treatment of FGC related complications. While these interventions are focusing on the symptoms, they are undermining the broader structural issues of gender and power.

The practice of FGC is culturally laden, i.e., its fundamental purpose is to reinforce subordination through social confinement and restraint of sexual desire (Allotey and Reidpath, 2005). Eradication strategies demand more than a technical fix of the clinical problem. Intervention programs should campaign against the cultural traditions that bind women's freedoms at the structural level of gender inequity. Reproductive rights such as the campaigns against FGC have diluted the broader agenda of empowerment by narrowing the focus to ameliorate specific harm. Feminist scholars have always contended that power relations, within which women's lives are enmeshed, operate at multiple levels.

Gita Sen and Srilatha Baltiwala, scholars in the field of population studies have identified four levels within which gender-power relations operate, they are: The household/family, the community/village, the market, the State. Women's interactions at each level are interconnected in such a manner that the status quo in one level is reinforced in the others. Therefore it is necessary to remember that changing the status of women in one level does not automatically carry on to other levels, i.e., if power relations in the household are overturned, the community level ideologies might still hold women in their grip or the market through its discrimination against the female labor force. In order to effect structural changes, simultaneous efforts should be made at all levels.

But not all women have the same kind of power relations at the same levels. Identifying the interactions at various levels requires a framework through which the women's networks can be viewed at the same time recognizing how the networks might be appropriated towards their empowerment. Social capital in its conceptualization as a theory of networks provides the needed framework to understand poor women's location in the power structure and how their networks can be leveraged to bring about the change that they desire. Fraught with definitional and conceptual conundrums, social capital has come to mean all things to all people. The next section will delineate this concept and sharpen its focus to serve in the explication of women's empowerment.

What is Social Capital?

Social capital as a construct has permeated multiple disciplines such as economics, political science, business management, social epidemiology, sociology and international development. The interdisciplinary nature of social capital rests on its attempt to understand human behavior based on social relations. But by virtue of being applied in various fields, the concept has undergone several definitional adjustments to suit the epistemological needs of the respective fields. The basic idea of social capital can be summed up in the common aphorism "It's not what you know, it's who you know". In other words, one's family, friends and acquaintances constitute an important asset that can be leveraged in times of need.

Pierre Bourdieu was the first social scientist to make a systematic analysis of this concept. Bourdieu defined it as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of durable network or more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances" (Fram, 2004, p. 561). It refers to the value attached to one's social ties. Keeping in line with Bourdieu's definition of the concept, i.e. instrumental and accruing to individuals by virtue of participation in a group, are Glenn Loury and James Coleman. Loury used the term to illustrate the differential access to opportunities for minorities and non-minorities based on their social ties (Portes, 1998, p. 5).

Coleman defines social capital by its function as a structure of relations between and among individuals (Coleman, 1988, p. 98). The 'durable networks', 'social ties' and 'structure of relations' is important in understanding how social capital works. Firstly, networks facilitate the *flow of information*. An individual with connections in strategic locations can gain information about opportunities otherwise unknown (or unseen). Allied to this is the second function of *influence*. Connections in high places can not only give access to information but also exert influence in favor of the individual. Finally, networks provide *reinforcements* of identity and recognition. Members of social groups with similar interests and resources derive identity from their membership and claim to resources of the group (Lin, 1999).

In their enthusiasm to popularize its functions (such as flow of information, influence, reinforcement) proponents of social capital have defined the concept based on what it does rather than what is it (Portes, 1998; Woolcock, 2001). Political scientist Robert Putnam has gained celebrity status for his book 'Bowling Alone' in which he defines social capital as "social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them...closely related to what some have called 'civic virtue'" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Putnam emphasizes civic virtue at the expense of 'networks' in making his argument for the decline in civic engagement in America. While such an argument has dramatic appeal, it leads to tautology since now social capital is defined by what social capital does.

Similar definitions can be found in the business and economics realm where social capital is defined as "...a harmonious commingling of trust, viable channels of communication, and norms and sanctions...sufficient levels of social capital are essential for social and economic development" (Neace, 1999, p. 150). Usage of terms like 'trust', 'norms', 'reciprocity' as synonyms for social capital leading to difficulty in measuring the concept. While the conceptual overreach into multiple disciplines through such definitions might be broad, there is danger of employing social capital as a panacea. A parsimonious

definition with a sharp focus on embedded resources in the available and potential social ties lends itself to concrete indicators and measurements.

Toward this end, Nan Lin formulated a theory of social capital as “resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions” (Lin, 1999, p.35). This definition has relevance for the present purpose of exploring women’s social ties within the power structures and how they can be accessed for purposes of empowerment. A common feature of the poor is that they are excluded (often actively) from membership in certain networks, which leaves them lacking in information, influence and reinforcements. Therefore, understanding the networks that are currently available and those that can be sought in the future is a strength-based strategy that should be harnessed by development policy makers and practitioners.

A common typology to understand networks is through the notion of ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ social capital. Bonding refers to relations between family members and close friends while bridging on the other hand refers to distant friends, colleagues and associates (Woolcock, 2001). The sociologist Mark Granovetter uses ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ to describe the mediatory role of social capital in poverty transitions. He recognizes that intra-community (bonds) ties are needed to give members of the social network, like families and friends, a sense of common purpose and identity. But in a modern society there needs to be inter-community (bridges) ties that can cut across social divides such as religion, race, socio-economic status and so on. Bonding and bridging social capital make clear the distinction between “getting by” and “getting ahead”.

Individuals who are able to flow in and out of strong and weak ties can maximize the benefits from social capital. This can be illustrated through the following example given by the World Bank development researchers Michael Woolcock and Deepa Narayan. Poor entrepreneurs initially depend on family and friends (bonding social capital) for credit and insurance needs. But as their business expands and they acquire skills and resources to participate in extensive networks, they transcend their immediate community into mainstream economic life (bridging social capital). The diagram in the Appendix demonstrates graphically the efficient use of social capital in the context of group-based credit programs in the developing world.

In micro-credit programs, poor people who lack material collateral are given loans on the basis of membership in a small peer group. The group is jointly held responsible for any defaults by the members. With the help of these loans the group members can start or expand their business leading to an improvement in the welfare of the individual member’s family (Box A). The economic returns to the given network reach a limit (Box B). As the network expands the resources are overwhelmed, reducing the well being of the established members. In fact, the long term members may find group commitment and obligations to be obstacles in their future advancements leading to a decline in welfare (Box C). This leads to a situation where members divest in bonding social capital (Box D) and move on to networks that are more diverse with promising economic opportunities and higher welfare for their families (Box E). Migration from villages to cities is a prime example of such bridging social capital.

The above example highlights the negative aspects of social capital in that it can exclude non-members from access to resources and make excess claims on group members restricting their freedom. Never the less, the right combination of social networks, can lead to better opportunities for the poor. Granovetter used the notion of bonding and bridging in terms of economic betterment but the framework can just as easily be applied to explore the non-economic or strategic interests of women. The next section will take up a case study to demonstrate the usefulness of social capital theory in understanding women’s empowerment.

#### *Velugu: Unity of theory to praxis*

Velugu is a project financed by the World Bank in the Indian State of Andhra Pradesh with the aim of alleviating poverty through micro-credit schemes. This project is implemented by the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty, an autonomous body of the State Government. It has been in operation since June of 2000 and covers about 187,500 families. Velugu is focused on women belonging to the lowest caste in the Indian caste hierarchy, the Dalits. Small loans are given to a group of women, referred to as Self Help Groups (SHGs) that the group members allocate for income generating projects based on group consensus.

It is a common practice in micro-credit programs for the SHGs to meet on a regular basis every week to discuss matters related to loan repayment or future loan applications. For most SHG members this is their only group association outside of familial relations thereby leading to an expansion of their hitherto limited social networks. For instance, a business start up leads to interaction with market vendors for raw material, thus increasing their network base. While the networks are increasing due to economic reasons (i.e. practical interests), is it possible that there are resources embedded within these networks, which can be accessed for strategic interests?

In the Chintalladimma village of the Vizianagaram district of Andhra Pradesh, an SHG had started a clothing business. The SHG consisted of 12 women wherein a couple of them were equipped with tailoring experience. When a decision to set up a tailoring business was made, all of them took up tailoring classes. With the micro-credit loan that the group received, they bought sewing machines and other necessary raw

material needed to set up their 'Ready to Wear' factory cum showroom. They work on contract basis with retailers in their district and plan to expand to the capital city of Hyderabad (Velugu, 2006). While this might not seem like a huge achievement, a look at their past shows the strides they have made.

The women in the SHG groups belong to the lowest caste ("untouchable" also referred to as Dalits) of the Indian caste hierarchy. While Dalits in general suffer heavy discrimination, the worst hit are the Dalit women. Historically they were not allowed to work outside the house by their families and communities since they were easy targets for the higher castes. The statistics on their apathy have reduced over the years but they are none the less vulnerable to attack. Prior to the Velugu project in the districts, the Dalit women in this SHG were restricted from working outside their homes and communities.

But when the Velugu volunteers informed them of the possible benefits (mostly monetary) that would accrue from small-scale businesses and the fact that they would be working with other women, their families were less apprehensive. Women who were earlier confined to their homes are now able to go beyond the work place to the market (20 kms away) to procure raw materials. Apart from breaking even, most have made enough profits to be able to save money from their business in the State Bank of India. While the families' income has obviously increased, there are other changes that are simultaneously occurring at various levels.

If viewed from the framework of bridging social capital, the women in the SHGs have networks, which include the immediate household, the market, the village and the State. The women are able to access the resources embedded in these networks as needed. The interactions in the market as well as the state (i.e. Banks) have increased their confidence in what they can achieve. Their improved economic status and their hardwork have earned them respect from their household and the village. As the women maneuver through various ties of the network structure, they are constantly negotiating the gender-power relations at each level.

By participating in this micro-credit program, they have broken the gender and caste stereotypes of the society. Their families appreciate them for adding to the meager income. The husbands have come to accept the independence of these women as they go about conducting their business outside the house. The local banks recognize them as successful clients as do the retailers at the market. Owning a business has opened up newer opportunities for the women as well as those on the other side of their networks. The economic outcomes grew out of women's practical interests but the non-economic outcomes came about due to their strategic interests.

If development policy makers and practitioners are aware of the available and potential networks and can make interventions which simultaneously address all level, it would create a critical space within in which women can recognize their interests and seek to realize them. The amount of assets available to the poor are very limited but their primary asset is in their available and potential networks. Portes asserts, "Whereas economic capital is in people's bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships" (1998, p. 7). Social capital is another tool in the hands of policy makers, practitioners and the women as they seek to negotiate the power structures with the ultimate goal of holistic empowerment.

#### Conclusion

Development scholarship in the past has put forth a compelling image of a poor woman from the Global South . She is depicted as a passive victim, assumed to "lead an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)" (Mohanty as cited in Ray & Korteweg, 1999, p. 47). Evidence from the field presents the changing dynamic in the lives of poor women as they seek to empower themselves. Looking at women's lives through the lens of social capital provides greater insight into the complex relationships within which these women operate. Programs aimed at providing the tools from women's empowerment have thus far pigeonholed their goals into one or a few levels. A broader focus with the aim to challenge the structural gender-power relations at all levels can provide the critical space allowing for effective action for and by women.

#### Endnotes:

1. **Reproductive rights include:** freedom to decide the number, spacing and timing of children; access to services and information on highest standards of reproductive and sexual health; freedom from discrimination, coercion and violence in decisions concerning reproduction. **Sexual rights include:** respect for physical integrity of human being's body, i.e., freedom from violence, mutilation or sexual assault; access to highest standards of sexual well-being; right to decisions concerning sexuality free of discrimination, coercion, or violence (Sen & Batliwala, 2000, p.23).
2. Velugu in the local vernacular means light
3. Current statistics can be found at [www.velugu.org](http://www.velugu.org)

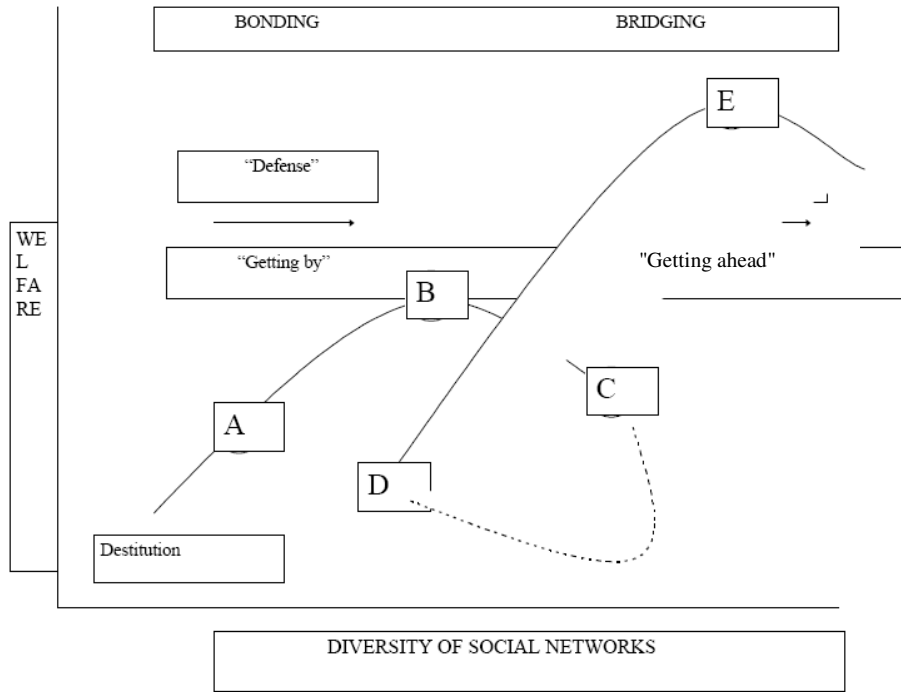
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Appendix

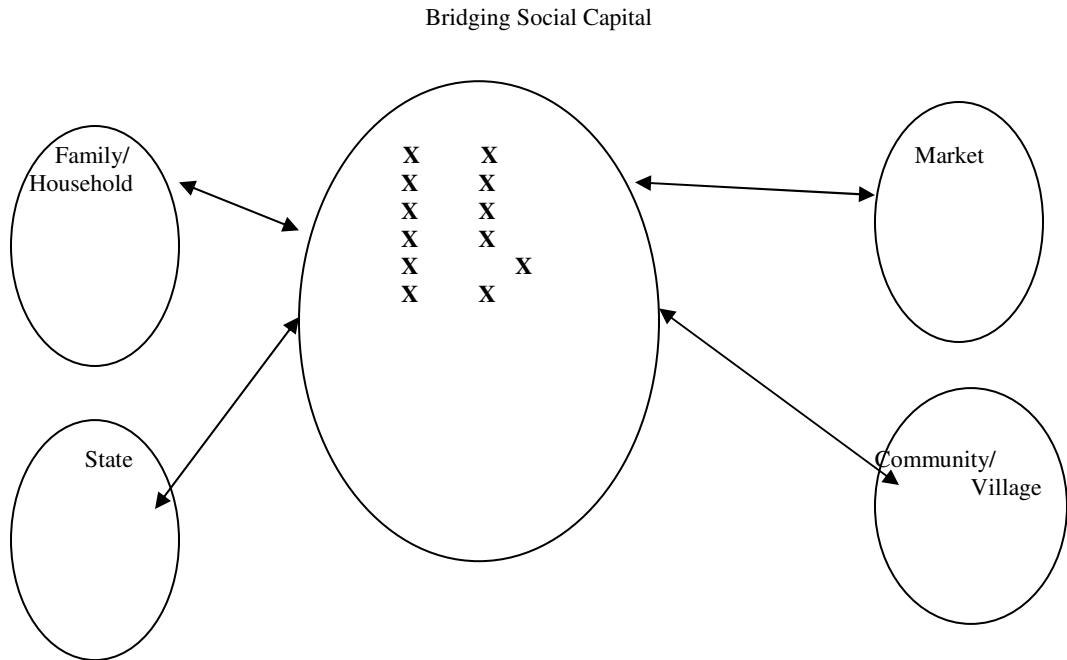
Diagram 1.

Figure 2: Social Capital and Poverty Transitions



Source: Woolcock (1999b)

Diagram 2.



X represents the women in the group. The above diagram represents the networks available to the women at multiples levels.