



## EMPOWERING WOMEN TO ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY SOCIAL CAPITAL

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Many development programs for women often work through or involve existing women's groups. Whether providing women with microfinance or extension services; increasing women's access to and control over land, water, livestock, and livestock products; or improving women's employment opportunities, these programs aim to go beyond the direct benefits that they deliver and become an instrument for empowering women through social capital.

Social capital refers to networks, social relationships, or connections among individuals in a community, such as civic associations, social organizations, or family and kinship ties. It is a concept that has come to take center stage in development, especially in grassroots participation and empowerment efforts and in reaching the poor. International organizations, governments, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have enthusiastically embraced the concept as an alternative to government or market-based approaches, with the World Bank hailing it as "the missing link" in development. Working through groups also reduces the cost of delivering services to many individuals, making the outreach of programs more cost-effective.

Social networks, developed through formal organizations, kinship, neighborhoods, work groups, or informal interactions, are a critical component of social capital. Networks facilitate communication, coordination, and the provision of information on the trustworthiness of individuals. They create obligations and expectations of reciprocity among their members. They are assumed to generate social capital such as generalized trust and norms, or common understanding. Social networks therefore facilitate collective action and institutional effectiveness.

Women draw upon a range of social networks for personal and family livelihood. Building upon this, many development interventions work through various forms of women's groups or kinship ties. Research in Honduras illustrates that women's groups can be vehicles for both individual and collective women's empowerment in decisionmaking. In Zimbabwe, women in areas with dense networks of women's associations played a more effective role in decisions relating to location of water points, management of finances for the repair of their water pumps, making of water-use rules, and other aspects of water management. Such women were likely to occupy important positions on water committees and be involved in collective decisionmaking meetings. They were trusted and listened to by others because of their record of good conduct in the other associations in which they participated. This suggests that networks indeed do generate social capital for individuals, leading to more participation and trust, and creating a "virtuous circle" of participation.

But to what extent do social networks really empower women in decisionmaking? Are they a public good benefiting all in the community, or only those individuals participating in strong networks? This brief draws particularly on evidence from Zimbabwe to answer these questions.

### ROLE OF INDIVIDUALS

Although networks may indeed empower women and help build and maintain social capital, there is evidence to suggest that the characteristics of individuals also play a role. Research from Zimbabwe, suggests that it is women participating in multiple networks who are likely to be empowered and thereby to seek greater decisionmaking roles. Such women volunteer for positions in water committees because they have learned habits of trust, such as reliability and communication. They are also likely to perform well in their leadership positions and actively participate in collective decisionmaking meetings. Other individual characteristics of these women were a good reputation in their communities and competence in their work.

### FAMILY AND KINSHIP TIES

Family and kinship ties can generate social capital and empowerment. Marital status is an important factor in shaping participation. Evidence from Zimbabwe shows that married women are likely to be elected into positions of decisionmaking and take an active role in collective decisionmaking meetings because they are better trusted and respected. They can indirectly influence higher-level decisions through their husbands and their own kinship networks. Their married status allows them access to more networks and thus enables them to generate more social capital. Among married women, however, class and individual characteristics are also important factors. Married women from wealthier households are more likely to achieve decisionmaking positions.

At the same time, the role of the family in empowering women should not be romanticized, since kinship institutions are also sites for the reproduction and transmission of patriarchal relations within society. Evidence suggests that they may be the site of mistrust, conflict, and deception, and may stifle women's freedom of speech and ability to exercise individual choice. In some societies, husbands can refuse their wives permission to occupy decisionmaking positions or attend decisionmaking meetings. In these situations, family and kinship ties are not necessarily empowering to women, but may actually constrain women's ability to develop their own networks and to construct and benefit from social capital.

This complex relationship between kinship ties and



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women's empowerment raises questions of how social capital is linked to family and kinship ties and to individuals.

### EXCLUSIONARY ASPECTS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

Although social networks promote cooperative action, institutional effectiveness, women's empowerment, and social capital, they may also have a dark side. They can be grounds for intolerance and lack of openness, for example, the mafia. They may also operate in ways that exclude others as the trust and norms that they generate are empowering only to the "insiders." Richer women, for instance, are likely to form their own networks, while other women's networks tend to be formed along the lines of marital status, religious affiliation, ethnicity, interest, and age. Research from Zimbabwe illustrates how disadvantaged women, especially those who are poor or not densely networked, are generally excluded from decisionmaking processes. They often lack information even about schedules for community meetings. At the same time, networks operate in complex ways, and do not always strictly follow these social differentials. For example, two women, whether both rich or both poor, may develop different types of networks that vary according to their individual circumstances.

Although the literature often presents horizontal networks as the determinant of participation and women's empowerment, research illustrates that vertical relationships of power are the context within which groups form and operate. For example, research in Zimbabwe shows that effective women leaders often are those already linked to networks of power by marriage, birth, and wider networks. Their linkage with power structures legitimizes their credibility, indicating that networks tend to reproduce and reinforce locally specific power relations.

Social networks often operate along gender lines, although literature tends to treat them as gender-neutral institutions. While they may indeed empower women, there are also indications that networks reflect the gendered nature of power relations between men and women. Women and men frequently belong to different networks, and many women's projects are set up or operate through women-only groups. While these groups can be important for ensuring women's participation and building their self-confidence, such networks often cannot command and exercise as much authority as men's networks. Under these circumstances, strategies of empowering women through social networks may further isolate them from mainstream decisionmaking processes.

These exclusionary aspects of networks raise some questions. How can we ensure the inclusion of the socially disadvantaged as well as the building of democratic principles in community decisionmaking? To what extent can we rely on social networks as instruments for empowering women as both a social category and as individuals, given the differences among women?

### LESSONS FOR GROUP-BASED PROGRAMS

Networking requires time, especially when formal group meetings are required. Women in poor households face particularly

serious time constraints because of their various livelihood activities and childcare responsibilities. Membership fees may create a further barrier to participation by poor women, who have limited control over cash resources. Furthermore, women with little education may feel they will be perceived as "ignorant" or having nothing to contribute, or they may feel they will not be listened to and that it is therefore not worth their time and effort to participate.

To include poor women, programs that work through membership groups need to choose convenient times and locations for meetings. Contributions of time, cash, and other resources should be kept affordable. The organizations need to deliver benefits that the women and their families value. The benefits could be tangible, such as credit, livestock assets, or education, or intangible, such as increased confidence in members' ability to interact with outsiders. For example, a women's group in Bangladesh reported that a major benefit of working with an NGO group for vegetable production was that they could negotiate with traders more confidently. Finally, it matters how meetings are run. The use of explicit contractual obligations, rules, and sanctions may not only reduce cheating and corruption, but may also generate and reinforce common understanding and trust among individuals. Social capital thus interacts with formal measures in empowering women, suggesting that formal and informal institutions complement each other.

### CONCLUSION

Social capital has complex and contradictory effects on women's empowerment in decisionmaking. We need policy interventions that deal with these contradictions and complexities, also taking into account the following factors:

- the importance of both formal and informal institutions,
- the social structure, which encompasses historical and cultural factors,
- diversity of human livelihoods, specifically among households of different economic and social status, and
- heterogeneity among women, especially in marital status, social capital, personality, social skills, and on-the-job competence.

Finally, while development programs can build upon social capital as a means of empowering women, this approach neither comes without costs nor brings automatic results. Only long-term investment that takes relevant factors into account can ensure success. ■

For further reading see J. Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (Supplement, 1988): S95-S120; M.S. Dikito-Wachtmeister, "Women's Participation in Decision Making Processes in Rural Water Projects in Zimbabwe," PhD thesis, University of Bradford, 2000; R. Putnam, "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life," *The American Prospect* (No. 13, 1993): 35-42; and J.

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