



POVERTY REDUCTION THROUGH SOCIAL CAPITAL: A CASE STUDY OF A WOMEN FARMERS' ORGANIZATION IN THE WESTERN PROVINCE, SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is a predominantly agricultural country with 77.4% of households still living in rural areas. Out of the total population in the country, 53.2% are women. However, only 34.5% of the female population participates in the labour force of the country (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020). They are considered a valuable resource potential for the rural agricultural sector in Sri Lanka. The contribution of women in agriculture in the national economy is increasing and nearly 29.7% of employed women in Sri Lanka are engaged in the agricultural sector.

A significant proportion of the total population of Sri Lanka depends on agriculture for their livelihood (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020). Many family units cultivate vegetables and fruits for their own consumption. However, in order to meet our food needs, the government has to spend a considerable amount of foreign exchange annually on importing food items, and consumers have to pay high amounts of money on them. As a solution to this problem, at village level, 'Sithamu' (Let's Think) women farmers' organizations were established under the Agrarian Development Act No. 46 of 2000 "to boost rural development with female participation in agriculture" (Ministry of Agriculture, 2016, p.90). Under this project, it is expected to establish 25,000 women farmers' organizations. Through these organizations, it is expected to achieve national development aspirations by empowering families in all spheres such as economic, social, health and nutrition. The current study was conducted to investigate the impact of women farmers' organizations in its members' economic growth and poverty reduction by enhancing their social capital.

The concept of poverty includes different dimensions of deprivation. In general, the term denotes the inability of people to meet economic, social and other standards of well-being. In order to be able to compare poverty levels across countries and over time, those that live below a given level of income, the poverty line (Ravallion, 2010), are classified as poor. Economic poverty can be defined in either absolute or relative terms. "Absolute poverty is a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to social services" (United Nations, 1995, p. 38). Relative poverty stands for poverty defined in relation to the social norms and standard of living in a particular society. In this study, poverty is defined as a state of deprivation of human needs according to the norms of one's society.

According to Bourdieu (1986), capital is accumulated labour which, when appropriated on a private basis, enables people to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour. Capital is found in three fundamental forms: economic capital, immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; cultural capital, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and social capital, made up of social obligations, convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility. Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition to membership in a group which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. In the absence of outside networks, social capital inside poor communities remains a substitute for the resources and services that are normally provided by the state or market (Cord et al., 1999).



Therefore, the concept of social capital can represent a valuable tool for poverty reduction programmes. Thus the purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of women farmers’ organizations in their economic growth and poverty reduction using Bourdieu’s concept on Social Capital (1986).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study was conducted as part of a larger study on the structure and functions of a women farmers’ organization which comes under the purview of the Ministry of Agriculture, Sri Lanka. It followed case study design, which allowed the researcher to gain in-depth understanding of the case being studied, i.e. a women farmers’ organization in the Western Province selected through convenience sampling.

Research Questions

This study focused on the following research questions:

- In what ways does membership in the women farmers’ organization contribute in the development of social capital of the participants?
- How does the development of social capital through membership in the organization reduce their poverty?

Data Generation and Analysis

Eight members of the selected Women Farmers’ Organization were recruited as participants of the study. All the participants of the study were married home-makers of over 30 years of age. The informants’ profile is presented in summary in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of the Informants

Informant’s name (Pseudonym)	Age Range (in years)	Highest Level of Education	Types of crops cultivated	No. of children/dependents	Average family income per month (in Sri Lankan Rupees)
Padmini	Over 51	Junior secondary school	spices, fruits, vegetables	02	35,000.00
Indumathi	Over 51		Aquatic flowers, betel, vegetables	04	35,000.00
Rasangi	31-35	Senior secondary school	betel, vegetables	03	45,000.00
Chathurika	41-45		spices, vegetables	01	35,000.00
Lasanthi	46-50		ornamental plants	03	35,000.00
Sreema	Over 51		betel, vegetables	03	15,000.00
Irangani	Over 51		betel, vegetables	03	25,000.00
Manoshika	46-50	Bachelor’s degree	betel, organic vegetables	03	35,000.00

Source: Survey data

Data were generated through multiple means: a 14-item background information questionnaire used to collect demographic data of each participant; a semi-structured interview schedule and observation of the participants’ agricultural work. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The constitution of the women farmers’



organization was used as a secondary source of data. When recording and presenting data, each participant was identified by a pseudonym, and other information that would lead to identification of participants were also anonymised or omitted.

The eight interview transcripts were analysed using both theory driven and data driven codes. The initial findings were triangulated by analysing the field observational notes and the secondary data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of data showed that participants' membership in the Women Farmers' Organization contributed to the development of their social capital and through it, in reducing their poverty.

Development of Social Capital

Findings of the study show that membership in the organization resulted in fostering their social networks. It promoted camaraderie among members and their families. All the members participated in the special occasions that took place in one another's families and made their contribution to those activities. For instance, when someone in a member's family died, others visited them and helped with chores such as cooking and serving food to the guests. Another example is visiting and helping members when they fall sick. It is evident that membership in the Women Farmers' Organization helped to improve their social networks:

“We all get together. We have that feeling of companionship. We get to know one another. Although we stay at home, we live in difference places in the village, right?” (Rasangi, in her early thirties).

On the other hand, the social networks to which the members belonged had the potential to benefit the Organization as well:

“Actually, as for myself, as I have connections with those who are in politics, I intervene getting fertiliser and other things to the Women Farmers' Organization.” (Manoshika, in her late forties).

Information sharing is the continuous flow of communication between partners, and contributes to better planning and supervision. It is evident that being members of the Women Farmers' Organization provided the participants with social capital for knowledge sharing thereby leading to the development of their economic capital. Their membership had given them the opportunity to work closely with the Agrarian Services Center and its staff as well as other public and private sector institutions and officials involved in agriculture. The participants were also introduced to a range of resource persons such as doctors, dieticians and expert farmers. These resource persons conducted special awareness sessions and training on a variety of topics such as food security and nutrition, how to get a good yield from plants and how to propagate plants.

At the monthly meetings of the Organization, different matters related to cultivating and harvesting were discussed. These meetings also provided a space for the members to share their experiences with regard to farming and food preparation. This helped them further and personalize the learning that occurred as a result of the training and awareness sessions conducted by the local Agrarian Services Centre. In addition, members also shared their own plants and seeds with one another.

“At the monthly meetings, [...] we share our experiences with one another. That is more important than just speaking from mere knowledge.” (Lasanthi, in her late forties).

Normally when a Women Farmers' Organization is registered, the number of members should be limited to twenty. However, the organization selected for this study had twenty-five members. Although the members received plants, seeds and other benefits from the government to be distributed among twenty members only, the members of this organization treated all members equally and had their own strategies for sharing the benefits among the entire membership. For instance, if the members got one hundred fruit saplings to be distributed among twenty members with five different types of plants for one member, they



distributed four plants per person. In doing this, each person was asked to take plants that they did not already have in their home garden. This shows that, within the organization, they employed their own strategies to maintain equal access to resources in spite of the excess number of beneficiaries, which according to the participants, enhanced their sense of togetherness.

The role of social capital in small-scale agriculture has been generally documented and the social capital can be found in networks and mutual trust among farmers, creating fruitful social connections and information sharing between farmers (Osabuohien, 2020). Community collective action is also part of social capital and has a solid impact on the development of growing social welfare (Puspita et. al., 2020).

Poverty Reduction

Social capital may support in alleviating poverty through three main channels: 1) At micro level, informal social networks of families and neighbours create abundant ground for the building of mutual trust, creating fruitful social connections and information sharing among farmers. 2) Social capital may improve the poor people's capabilities, specifically in underdeveloped areas where marketplace establishments fail and the role of the state is limited. Social connections lead to the availability of informal credit networks or the entree to formal credit. In fact, social capital may be measured as key to the success of small initiatives. 3) Social capital may help the poor to advance their life settings through collective action, permitting people to carry out encouragement and politicization activities that would not be possible without it. At macro level, social capital may play an unintended role in alleviating poverty by earnings of its optimistic impact on financial development.

Involvement in social activities may reduce the risk of being poor through two main channels: 1) associations facilitate the creation of networks (which in turn may serve for mutual assistance purposes); 2) remittances among network members often help to cope with temporary lack of money. Research also provides evidence that non-governmental voluntary organizations may contribute in improving the living standards of the poor by improving the provision of key public goods and public services and/or helping the poor in claiming their right to access them (Adams & Chowdury, 2003).

From the poor people's point of view, social capital is the more reasonable form of capital. Since social contact is time exhaustive, the poor may take to rely more on social capital than the better off. Social capital may thus be measured as a means for the development of the living standards of the poor through an improvement of their capabilities, nurturing their access to information, education, formal and informal credit and technology, and improving common pool resource management (Fox & Gershman, 2000). For female farmers, social capital is a key benefit as it permits both a discount in transaction costs and the opportunity to share knowledge about technology and market circumstances, with the aim of refining productivity. Moreover, social networks play a serious role in female farmer's access to credit, since formal and informal credit schemes generally work better when borrowers are connected to the sources of funds by social bonds (Chloupkova & Bjornskov, 2002). Different categories of credit plannings available to the poor rely on social ties and connections as part of the strategy and implementation of their transfer and implementation mechanisms. By getting these loans, they can purchase their requirements for agricultural work. This leads to their economic development.

“When we have a savings account, we can apply for loans. We can get loans at an interest rate as low as 2% from the local agrarian service center, and we can apply for loans at any moment from Rs. 10,000.00 to 500,000.00.” (Chathurika, in her early forties).

A substantial body of literature shows the ability of social ties to effect the sharing of information and technology to agricultural entrepreneurs in rural villages. The basic impression is that there are spill-overs in the dispersion of more compound agricultural technologies. Isham and Kahkonen (2002) as well as Parthasarathy and Chopde (2000) afford extraordinary examples of the part of social capital in development of knowledge and new technologies. Isham and Kahkonen (2002) demonstrate that in Tanzania the probability of



implementation of new agricultural technologies grows in the presence of ethnic relationships and dispersion of advice-giving norms. Parthasarathy and Chopde (2000, p. 1) express that social capital is defined as ‘an increased ability and willingness to co-operate and work together for achieving common goals, and sustaining and developing norms and networks for collective action.’ Thus the members of the women farmers’ organization barter their excess harvest among one another. This helps to strengthen their family economy:

“We have an excess of harvest which is more than our home requirement. Then when we get together for the monthly meetings, we bring the excess here and sell it to the others” (Padmini, over 51 years old).

A third conduit through which social capital can reduce poverty is given by the ability of common values, social norms and the relationship to associations and other kinds of social networks to nurture a productive ground for collective action. This conduit enables the poor to collaborate for mutual advantage, to carry out support activities, and to contribute in common pool resource management and delivery of public service. In Putnam’s words (1995, p. 67), ‘Networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved’. The role of social capital and collective action in the development of the living standard of the poor becomes clear if we ponder the extensively documented ability of social networks to foster an effective access to public services (Douglass et. al., 2002).

It is apparent that social capital has an impact on members’ economic capital by means of raising their living standard, creating opportunities for self-employment, providing access to credit facilities and development of their entrepreneurial skills. It is recommended that more opportunities be made available for home markers from low-income families to benefit from these types of organizations.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Social capital is an asset for a community, which helps in providing collective answers to personal needs. The social capital gained through membership in Women Farmers’ Organizations has the potential to increase members’ access to economic resources, to make maximum possible use of available economic resources, and to improve individuals’ capabilities to use them efficiently. In this sense, social capital supports women to fight poverty and increase their living standards.

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