

CONTRIBUTION OF BONDING SOCIAL CAPITAL ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: AN OVERVIEW FROM BANGLADESH

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Abstract

Social capital has been recognized as an essential towards empowering rural women in the Sylhet District of Bangladesh. This paper examined the contribution played by social capital and participation towards the empowerment of women through IGAs in Bangladesh with a specific focus on rural women in Sylhet District, Bangladesh. The study used questionnaire as its main instrument of quantitative data collection from a total of 328 randomly selected respondents. In the qualitative phase, the in-depth interview method was used for data collection and a total of fifteen (15) informants were purposively selected and interviewed. Bonding social capital (56.6%- high) was found to be the most contributing factor to women empowerment. With regards to the psychological and financial dimensions of empowerment, the results indicate that level of bonding determines financial assets (57.2% -moderate) as well psychological assets (52%- high) among the rural women. The data analysis showed that there is a significant relationship between bonding social capital and women empowerment in the Sylhet District of Bangladesh and this results were also supported by the qualitative analysis of data. The overall results indicated that the conceptualizations of bonding and participation have provided a good understanding of empowerment among women as most of the findings appear to suggest.

Keywords: Bonding Social Capital, Women, Empowerment

Contribution/ Originality: The present study has taken the challenge of improving the rural women empowerment status through participating in different income generating activities with the contribution of bonding social capital and will try to improve their socio-economical and psychological condition as well as taking part in different decision making process in their family and social life which ultimately play a role in the process of women empowerment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment involves the process of attempting to help people directly by reducing poverty and increasing their income levels for a better standard of living (Liao, H., 2018). It is the capacity of an individual's income and assets that dictates the way they live. According to (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018), empowerment significantly increases the empowered women's knowledge, skills, adoption of contemporary management technology and access to financial services (Hasan et. al., 2015; Parvin et al., 2005; Shariful Islam & Mainuddin, 2015). However,

empowerment can only be achieved when the community works together to actively fight for the welfare of the community (Siddiqi, 2017; Ashraf & Prentice, 2019).

Bonding Social capital is considered an important tool in facilitating community activities for the empowerment of women, as well as for the sustainable development of a country, because it represents the productive benefits of sociability (Liao, H., 2018; Cancino, C., 2017). Previous studies have demonstrated how income-generating activities (IGAs) are the best tools for empowering women (Samah et al., 2011). Participation in different IGAs is the primary method for a community to improve its quality of life. Women's empowerment, in terms of poverty alleviation through IGAs, refers to a series of actions which can produce mutual benefit for organisations, communities and individuals (Hasan, et al., 2015; Jabeen et al., 2020 & Zimmerman, 1995). Members' participation in IGAs plays a vital role in the failure or success of an organisation.

The current research aims to investigate the contribution of bonding social capital in empowering rural women through IGA-participation in rural areas of Sylhet, Bangladesh. Thus, this research was carried out based on the current position of bonding social capital, participation and women's empowerment involving different IGAs in Sylhet to analyse the relationship between them.

1.1 Women Empowerment

In this society, men are considered the breadwinners of the family. Women experience, and recognise, a distinction between them and their male counterparts in terms of birth; rearing of children; rights to education; employment opportunities; and privileges of decision-making in their families as well as in society. Women are a vital part of, and play a significant role in, society, and are an important part of the nation building process (Basnet, Adhikari & Krishna Prasad, 2001). All over the world, the contributions of women to the development process are gradually increasing. The concept of women's empowerment is used to understand the changes needed to improve the living conditions of poor, vulnerable and powerless women. The situation of women, particularly in the Third World and developing countries (e.g. Bangladesh), is not very encouraging. They have fewer opportunities and less decision-making power in their lives compared to men. There are many reasons for the disempowerment of women in developing countries. One of the major reasons is poverty. Bangladeshi women are considered to be poor in the financial world, with the percentage of women living in poverty being at 38% (ADB, 2009). Women's empowerment denotes multi-dimensional action by women who are aware of their identity and empowerment in all disciplines of life (Hossain, 2018; Kamal et al., 2015). In recent decades, women's empowerment has been acknowledged as a pivotal tool for the reduction of poverty, and for combating developmental issues (Streatfield et al., 2015; Kamal et al., 2015 & Hossain, 2017). Women's empowerment is a process, and sustainable development encompasses the socio-cultural, economic and environmental aspects of this process, thus covering an enormous domain (Streatfield et al., 2015; Kamal et al., 2015 & Hossain, 2017). Women's empowerment is necessary for the enhancement of a society, since it increases both the quantity and quality of human resources for the development of a community (Kamal et al., 2015; Siddiqi, 2017; Fakir, 2008 & DFID, 2000). Women's

empowerment is not only necessary; it has become imperative now. Nowadays, Bangladesh thinks women's participation is key for the empowerment of women, and they are seen as the main drivers to remodelling the country, ranking from low to middle income (Khatun, 2018; Hossain, 2017; Hossain, 2018 & Nazneen, 2018). In a developing country like Bangladesh, empowerment among women is really needed for the enhancement of the community and society throughout the country (Hasan & Nazneen, 2017).

1.2 Bonding Social Capital

Bonding Social capital is a procedure of obtaining support and resources, along with social relations and networks (Siddiqi, 2015). Bonding Social capital plays a key role in empowering poor women (Woolcock & Narayan, 2002). Women's empowerment, along with social capital, are involved in the discourse of development in society, since they enhance both the quality and quantity of human resources available (Merigo, J.M. 2017; Cancino, C., 2017 & Huo, A.Y, 2017). Among women who are marginalised from entry to resources, ownership of social capital acts as an essential catalyst to attaining higher levels of empowerment (Magigi & Godfrey, 2015; Yount et al; 2018). Bonding Social capital acts as an important tool for the reduction of poverty and aids the long-term development of the country (World Bank, 2002). The first initiative taken to understand the relation of bonding social capital to women's empowerment was a report in the World Development Report (World Bank, 2001). In recent decades, Bonding social capital and women's empowerment studies have focused on developmental issues (Christiaan Grootaert & Bastelaer, 2002, 2006).

Bonding social capital refers to the relationships that we have with people who are like us, and typically refers to the relations among family members and ethnic groups. Bonding social capital can serve a useful function by providing a vital source of support to the rural women who suffer from various socio-economic hardships, and face problems in participating in different income-generating activities (Zulfiquar, B., 2017; Zomorrodian, A., 2016; Roberts, A., 2015). Bonding social capital tends to help the rural women 'get by' and provides them with the norms and trust which facilitate their involvement in income-generating activities, as well as collaborative action (Turner, S.G., & Maschi, T.M., 2015). Social capital, along with the empowerment of women, is an important subject entering the discourses of development (Magigi & Godfery, 2015). For the reduction of poverty, the long-term development of society and the empowerment of women, social capital is one of the most important elements needed to be considered (Ratha, D., Eigen-Zucchi, C. & Plaza, S., 2016). Some researchers have also reported that bonding social capital allows for the sharing of information, facilitates collective decision-making and mitigates opportunistic behaviour among people who promote social, economic and political developments (Erkens, M., 2015; Cancino, C., 2017 & Liao, H., 2018). Through bonding social capital, groups of rural people become efficient in performing blooming jobs, such as resource management, mobilisation, role-making, communication and coordination with others (Zomorrodian, A. 2016; Roberts, A., 2015 Zulfiquar, B., 2017). People who work together towards a common goal, and who trust each other, function more effectively as a team than communities, which lack social capital (Poteete & Ostrom, 2004;

Khatun, 2018). Social capital is an important component for the empowerment of women (Turner, S.G. & Maschi, T.M., 2015).

1.3 Objectives

Considering this context, the present study was, therefore, conducted with the following specific objectives

1. To measure the levels of bonding social capital and levels of empowerment in IGA groups with rural women participants in the Sylhet District of Bangladesh.
2. To examine the relationship between bonding social capital and women's empowerment in the Sylhet District of Bangladesh.

2. METHODOOGY

2.1 Location, Population and Sample

The empirical research was carried out in South Surma Upazila of the Sylhet District, a village surrounded by hills in northeast of Bangladesh, located between 24.8211°N, 91.8904° E. South Surma Upazila consists of 9 unions. Among the 9 unions, 3 unions, namely Daudpur, Kuchai and Shilum, were randomly selected to carry out the research. The researcher chose the research area because of the unique problems observed in the local community. Among the problems, lack of education and poverty was observed among women in the local community. The research area was purposely selected because, here, rural women's involvement in different IGAs is quite common. Moreover, this district is easily accessible and, thus, more affordable as far as travelling expenses are concerned. Most of the areas in the Sylhet District also has fairly good roads that are passable throughout the year. These are among the reasons for choosing it as the research site for this study. A quantitative approach was used because it was more appropriate for the gathering and analysis of data in order to answer our specific research questions in this research. This study is quantitative in nature, and partially supported by qualitative data through the use of in depth interview to support the quantitative data.

The sample size of this study was arranged in the Morgan Table (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970), based on the probability proportional to size sampling of the women involved in income activities and associations with GOs & NGOs. The population of the study was 2, 312 (N), therefore, the number of samples was 328 (n) at a confidence level of 95% and alpha (α) = 0.05 (margin of error). The researcher used (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) as a reference, as the number of samples for the study was great enough for oversimplification of the findings. Moreover, (Kenpro, 2012) explained that the Morgan Table had all the provisions required to sufficiently attain the required sample size. In this study, probability sampling was employed so that there was equal chance of each item in the population being selected as a sample (Babbie, 2008). This was to achieve unbiased and generalised inferences. Based on the Morgan Table (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970), out of the 2, 312 women, 328 women were selected randomly for the sample of the study.

To identify the sample respondents from each selected village, a proportionate random sampling technique was used, using the following formula:

$$n1/ N \times n2= s$$

Where, N= Selected Population; n1= proportion population; n2= determine sample size and s= sample (Harun, 2016)

Overall, during the interviews, the researcher noted that the data became saturated at the 12th informant, which occurred with the most experienced women. To ensure that the data was fully saturated, the researcher decided to complete the interview with the remaining three informants. This was observed when the researcher asked questions to the informants, and most of them repeated what previous informants had said. However, the researcher interviewed three more informants to confirm that data saturation was reached. Consequently, fifteen (15) informants were eventually interviewed.

2.2 Data collection instruments

The data collection instrument is an important tool for the success of any research. Without this instrument, the data collection procedure may not be valid, subsequently leading to failure in collecting appropriate data. Structured questionnaires are perceived as an appropriate research instrument in determining reliable information that can be analysed and interpreted as a meaningful statement according to the research objectives (Harun, 2016). Moreover, questionnaires are considered the most appropriate method for the data collection process (Said et al., 2018; Taylor-Powell & Herman, 2000). Hence, this study employed a set of adapted questionnaires as a survey for gathering primary data in the numerical form. For giving the final shape, the questionnaire had pre-tested with 35 women which was equivalent to 10% of the study's sample size, who were randomly selected from 18 villages. Based on the pre-test results, required corrections, modifications, alternation, and adjustments were made and then finalized the questionnaire accordingly. After pilot testing, actual data collection may be performed with confidence.

2.3. Period of data collection

Rapport was built with the respondents through informal discussion regarding objectives of the interview. The interviewer personally did the data collection through a face to face interview. Data was collected from 10 February to 15 July 2022.

2.4 Measurement of Variable

Measurement of Independent Variable

Bonding Social Capital

The adopted instruments addressed the dimensions of bonding social capital having 7 items to measure the level of women's empowerment in different IGAs. The study items were developed by the researchers by adopting instruments developed in (Hamidrez Babaei, 2012).

Measurement of Dependent Variable

Women's empowerment: In this study, women's empowerment is comprised of two aspects: psychological and financial empowerment.

Psychological empowerment: This is a distinctive psychological benefit for women achieved through partaking in different income-generating activities, including intimacy, self-respect, self-esteem and consciousness. It was estimated by 10 items using a five-point Likert scale measuring strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), undecided (3), agree (4) and strongly agree (5). The scores were further summed up into three levels: low (1-2), moderate (2.1-3) and high (3.1-4). The study items were developed by the researchers by adopting instruments developed by (Malik, Chughtai, Iqbal and Ramzan, 2013).

Financial empowerment: In this study, the financial empowerment of women is defined as various financial benefits granted to a respondent's participation, individually or in a group, through various IGAs, such as capability, skilfulness and resources related to attaining a sustainable income for one's livelihood. To determine the financial empowerment of women, the study used 12 items along with a five-point Likert scale measuring strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), undecided (3), agree (4) and strongly agree (5). The scores were further summed up into 3 categories: low (1-2), moderate (2.1-3) and high (3.1-4). The study items were developed by the researchers by adopting instruments developed by others, such as (Kabeer, 1999 & Vida, 2011).

2.5 Statistical Analysis

Both descriptive and analytical methods were employed to analyse the data. Descriptive techniques were used to illustrate the current situation, describe different variables separately. These included frequency, distribution, percentage, range, mean, median, standard deviation, maximum, minimum and coefficient variance. In most cases, the opinions of respondents were grouped into broad categories. Analytical techniques were used to investigate the relationships between variables and compare the difference between the two groups of participants, with the aim of discovering significant differences/associations among them. Statistical tests, like independent sample T-tests and correlation were used in this study. Each statistical technique was used under specific conditions and depended on the measurement scales of the different variables.

Thematic analysis is effective in gathering qualitative data based off the open-ended questions used in interviews (Patton, 2002; Saunders et al., 2012). (Cohen et al., 2007) argues that thematic analysis can be developed on the basis of principle for purpose. This is supported by (Bryman, 2012) who states that it is the most common approach to qualitative data analysis, while (Braun & Clarke, 2006) also supports the idea that it provides researchers with the opportunity to ensure the right themes are developed based on their findings rather than generalising the findings.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Objectives 1: To measure the levels of bonding social capital and levels of empowerment in IGA groups with rural women participants in the Sylhet District of Bangladesh

Table 1: Level of Bonding Social Capital (N=328)

Levels	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Standard deviation
Bonding				
Low (8-17.5)	18	5.4%		
Moderate (17.6-28.65)	120	48%	27.15	5.27
High (28.66-37)	190	56.6%		

Table 1, explains the level of bonding social capital of the respondents while engaged in different income-generating activities. The results show that 56.6% of the women had high levels of bonding, 48% of the women had moderate levels of bonding and only 5.4% of them conveyed low levels of bonding social capital, with a mean score of 27.15 and standard deviation of 5.27. The findings of the study show that there is a high level of bonding among the respondents. This suggests that the majority of respondents achieved a high level of bonding within the IGA community in South Surma Upazila. In addition to that, (Cramb, 2006; Harknett, 2006; Erkens, M., 2015; Shen, Y. A., 2016) also reported high levels of bonding social capital in their studies' participants.

The above findings of the quantitative phase are supported by the following qualitative findings from the respondent's statements. Some of the responses given by the respondents are indicated in the next paragraph. The informants stated that establishing a strong relationship and understanding with family members enhances levels of participation in IGAs. For example, informant 1 believed that *"a good understanding and mutual relationship with family members, friends and neighbours plays a great role in participating in income-generating activities"* (Informant 1)

Similarly, informant 3 posited, *"we have a mutual relationship with my family members, (which helps me) with my IGA a lot. We also understand each other"*. (Informant 3) Positive relationships can boost women's happiness and reduce stress, improve their confidence level and help them to cope with traumatic life events. On the other hand, mutual understanding leads to respect for core interests and major concerns, and expands consensus and common interests, which is the foundation for a long-term healthy and stable relationship (Hardy, J. Y., 2017). This supported the findings from the survey where the women indicated high level of bonding social capital.

Table 2: Levels of empowerment (n=328)

Dimension	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Psychological Empowerment				
Low (20-28)	73	12.5		
Moderate (29-37)	110	35.5	36.63	2.25
High (38-45)	145	52.0		
Financial Empowerment				
Low (22-29)	35	7.0		
Moderate (30-37)	220	57.2	38.86	2.79
High (38-45)	73	38.5		
Total Empowerment				
Low (18-25)	116	28.0		
Moderate (26-33)	180	62.5	75.49	4.83
High (34-41)	32	9.5		

Based on the summation of the two dimensions of women’s empowerment (financial and psychological), as contained in Table 2, the overall mean score is 75.49 and standard deviation is at 4.83. The results show that the majority of the respondents (180 respondents/62.5%) had dimensions of overall empowerment that were at a moderate level, while 116 (28%) respondents reported high levels of empowerment and only 32 (9.5%) respondents were at low levels of empowerment. Our results are consistent with the findings of past literature. Previous studies have found that women who partake in IGAs have a moderate level of empowerment through their active involvement in income activities (Sambangi, 2009; Vida, 2011; Mahtab, 2017; Arun et al., 2010; Moyle et al., 2006; Alkire, 2008; Alsop et al., 2006).

The above quantitative findings are supported by the qualitative findings from the interviews: Social status is reported to have improved after joining IGAs. Informant 3, for instance, narrated that,

“Before, women (would) say that I (was) a fool (for) going outside and doing work (that was) difficult for me. Now those women can understand that (being) involve(ed) in income activities (has improved) my family’s condition, and now they also want to join income-related activities. Before joining, I considered myself a servant. Now I am a member of the community. My boldness and self-(confidence) has increased. Due to training, my confidence level has increased. I go outside and sell my hand products, and sew clothes in a shop in the village market. My social status has (improved) after joining income activities and NGOs. I am a trusted woman in the NGO of ASA (Association for Social Advancement) and the organisation provides loans to many women through me. My social status and respect have increased”. (Informant 3).

Evidence indicates that socioeconomic status affects overall well-being and quality of life for women. Domestic and sexual violence against women can often lead to a cycle of poverty through job loss, poor health, and homelessness (Ullah et al., 2007).

Respondent 7 opined that, *“As I am a widow and a rural woman, my life was not easy. Before (becoming) involve(ed) (in) income activities, poverty in my family had no bound(s). But,*

Alhumdulillah, thanks to Allah, I succeeded because I received cooperation from my family, friends and especially from the NGO (BRAC), who provided me micro-credit for running a small farming business. I have received training, motivation, advice, support and assistance (for) marketing from an NGO.” (Informant 7).

When I visit an NGO, I meet with other women and (we) share our personal experiences, troubles and other matters, which helps us to get better ideas to solve our problems. It was very helpful in our personal, as well as professional, women entrepreneurs’, lives. In participating (in) IGAs and earning (an) income, I feel (more) empowered than before, and it helps me out of poverty. Now (my) living status (has) changed”. (Informant 1).

Solvency can be an important measure of financial health, since its one way of demonstrating a person’s ability to manage its operations into the foreseeable future. Depending on own finances, one can consider buying more and increasing her owner's equity. This can help offset debt obligations, sway the ratio in your favor, and make women herself more solvent (Shen, Y. 2016).

The above findings support the quantitative findings, and it can be said that bonding social capital, via participation in IGAs, play a great role for the development of a community, as well as empowerment of women in a society. The participation of women in IGAs helps take them out of poverty so they can lead a better life.

Objective 2: To examine the relationship between bonding social capital and women’s empowerment in the Sylhet District of Bangladesh

In order to determine the relationship between empowerment of women and total social capital, Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was conducted. In Table 3, a significant relationship was found between social capital and empowerment (r =0.485, N=328, p< 0.001). Therefore, the findings show that social capital is higher, correlation coefficient is confirmed and there is a significant association between bonding social capital and empowerment. The findings of this research support the social capital theory, which states that bonding social capital play a great role in women’s empowerment (Woolcock & Narayan, 2002).

Table 3: Pearson Correlation between Empowerment and Social Capital

Descriptive Statistics			Correlation	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Pearson Correlation	Significance (1-tailed)
Bonding Social capital	47.39	17.81	0.485***	0.000
Empowerment (psychological + financial)	31.12	11.85		

*** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (1-tailed)

The above findings is similar to those in other research (Henly, et al., 2005; Easterly, et al., 2006; Bebbington, Woolcock & Guggenheim, 2006; Esman, 2003; Islam, et al., 2005; Mayoux, 2001; Harknett, 2006; Cramb, 2006; Putnam, 2001) which specify that social capital could be

regarded as a key element of acquiring empowerment among women. (Field, 2003) indicates that social capital is not limited to the powerful, but could also convey real benefits to poor marginalised women. (Gobezie, 2010) and (Alsop et al., 2006) found that social capital increases empowerment, and has a strong positive relationship to it, as was found in the present research as well. Bonding social capital among poor women shows the importance of poverty alleviation, as well as the implications of social capital for empowerment and community driven development (Poteete & Ostrom, 2004).

The informants maintain that their relationships with other women affects their income positively. For example, informant 9 posited that,

“Women from other villages also inform me about trainings related to income activities. I also supply handicraft(s) to the other villages’ IGA groups to help me sell my products. Alhamdulillah, now I am satisfied with my life”. (Informant 9)

Apart from speaking to their fellow IGA participants, the qualitative data shows that there is also a cordial relationship between the IGA participants and NGO workers, which is also significant towards their empowerment. During the interview, informant 10 narrated that, *“Yes, the co-operation between women and NGO workers is very nice. The behaviour of the women are very nice. We help each other a lot. Cooperation with other women and NGOs (has) helped me from the very beginning of joining IGAs”. (Informant 10)*

For instance, while responding, the 8th informant stated that, *“I am involve (d) in income activities and (can) earn money, I can (make) financial decision(s) in my family. After participat(ing) in IGAs, (my) family members and society respect me very much. Now I can buy things for (my) family (based) on my decisions”. (Informant 8)*

Studies tell us that the way decisions are made in a family plays a crucial role in establishing lifelong dynamics among the members. Families that come together to solve problems or where opinions of all members are sought before taking a decision, big or small, develop stronger bonds between themselves over time (Sultana, A. M., 2010).

The data from transcripts of the qualitative interviews also support the quantitative analysis substantially. The overall results indicate that there is a significant relationship between bonding social capital, participation in IGAs and empowerment among women; and most of the findings appear to support the existing theories.

4. CONCLUSION

The overall findings of the research revealed that bonding social capital has a strong and positive significant impact on psychological and financial empowerment among women. The findings indicated that by increasing the level of bonding social capital, the level of empowerment significantly improves ties between people who know each other well, such as family members, close friends and neighbours. Furthermore, the findings indicated that bonding social capital, which refers to the looser ties between people who are not alike demographically, but have broadly similar economic power and status, increased

empowerment. The overall results indicated that the conceptualisations of bonding social capital have provided a good understanding of empowerment among women as most of the findings appear to suggest.

5. RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the present study, psychological and financial asset is thought of as the leading determinants of women's empowerment. Further research may be conducted with other assets of women (e.g. human assets, informational, organizational and material assets), as posed by the World Bank (Alsop, Bertelsen & Holland, 2006). Since this study only thought bonding social capital further study can be conducted

of bridging and linking social capital among rural women as community development policy makers might focus on building and facilitating bridging and linking as dimensions of social capital in order to facilitate the empowerment of women in Bangladesh.

Credit authorship contribution statement

All authors contributed to manuscript conceptualization, writing, revision, and read and approved the submitted version.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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