



# Significance of Social Capital as a Resource for Women's Empowerment: An Analysis from Bangladesh Perspective

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## Research Article

### Abstract

*Social capital has been recognized as a route through which empowerment may ensue in a developing nation like Bangladesh. This research investigated the relationship between social capital formation and women's empowerment in Bangladesh. A narrative review was performed to derive conclusions from secondary data for this qualitative study, employing a descriptive research design. Two themes emerged from the findings: the role of social capital in capacity building and the significance of network building as a means of establishing social capital. Firstly, women's participation in social networks increases their likelihood of making strategic decisions regarding themselves and the community. Secondly, women's engagement in self-help projects and credit groups, which are based on women groups, helped them to build their capability in those sectors along with the rise in education and entrepreneurship. However, challenges coming from deeply rooted traditions, conservative religious practices, and family and social values contradict the benefits of social capital women may derive from them. Thus, social capital must be considered for the policies concerning future community development and women's empowerment. This study also provides guidelines for further study with broader scope and systematic studies in the future.*

**Keywords:** Social capital, Women's empowerment, Social networks, Capacity building, Narrative review, Bangladesh.

### 1. Introduction

Empowering women is an essential prerequisite in the pursuit of gender equality, which constitutes the fifth sustainable development goal (SDGs) (Richardson, 2018). Additionally, it serves as a fundamental pillar of economic progress and a mandate for the stoppage of violence targeting women (Ikhar et al., 2022). In the policy community of a developing nation like Bangladesh, empowering women and ensuring that they have equal access to opportunities and rights are both paramount concerns (GoB, 2011; Siddiqa, 2023). Bangladesh ranked 59th globally on the Global Gender Gap Index 2023, surpassing other South Asian nations, in spite of the challenges it has overcome in advancing women's empowerment in many domains (WEF, 2023). Also, the government has adopted Agenda 2030, which includes a commitment to achieve "gender equality" and women's empowerment (SDG 5) as part of the development framework (UNDP Bangladesh, 2023). Women empowerment is a multidimensional and multifaceted phenomenon requiring empowerment in all spheres of life (Jain, 2023). Still, the concept of empowerment is confined to the narrow bands of expansion of choices based on women's financial or economic status in developing countries.

In this context, social capital was recognized as one of the avenues for empowerment to occur (Machio et al., 2022). Since social capital signifies the social relations facilitating the production of economic and non-

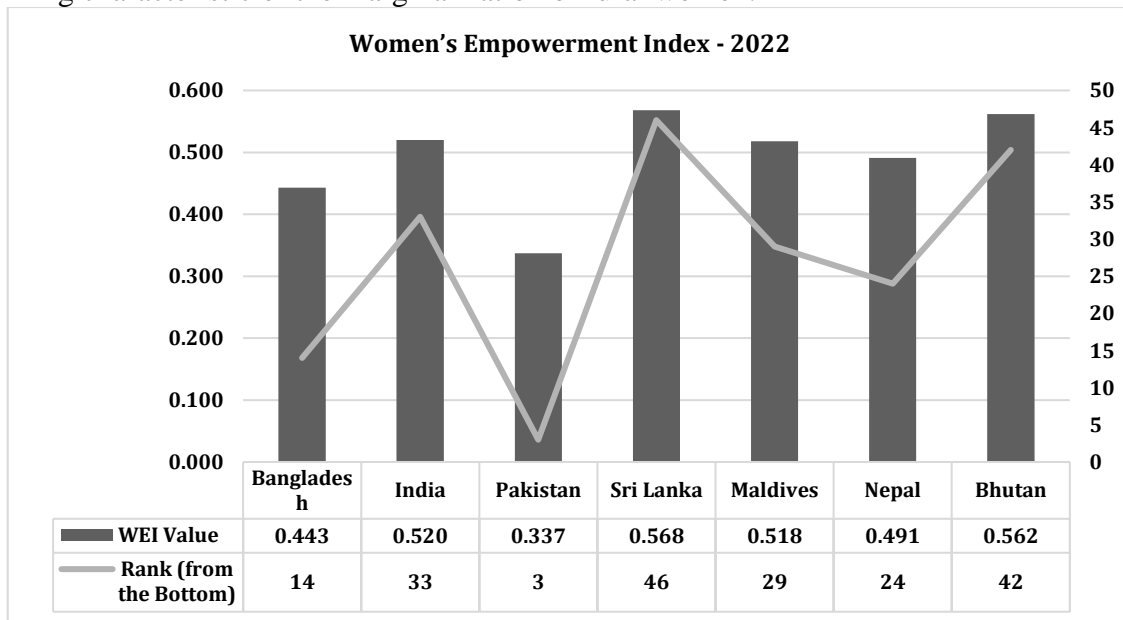
economic goods (Paxton, 2002), it can be a driver of women's development. In light of the new area for research, it will be helpful to understand how the social capital of women particularly reinforces their empowerment process and gives them more opportunities to make more decisions about their lives and achieve gender equality. Therefore, understanding how social capital and the process of women's empowerment are correlated is essential to identifying such a phenomenon in the total development of women. This research's overarching objective was to evaluate that relationship's importance. This study has the potential to offer policymakers and advocates for women's development a valuable resource by presenting a fresh context within which to pursue their objectives of empowerment.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Empowerment and Women's Empowerment

Empowerment as a process involves activities to empower vulnerable groups, and as a goal, it signifies the achievement of outcomes through social change (Purnamawati & Sudibia, 2019). The concept of empowerment and empowerment of women is predominately characterized by the capability to make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999). However, the conceptualization of empowerment emphasizes the interdependence of individuals rather than absolute independence, and it denotes structural change in the empowerment process. As Kabeer (1999) stated, those structures of society shape elements of resources, agency, and achievements while influencing the capacity of actors to determine their interests, goals, values, and preferences. However, in women's empowerment, low empowerment has profound repercussions for the well-being of women and their family members, as well as adverse economic and health consequences (Richardson, 2018).

The term 'empowerment' in women empowerment has been defined by Batliwala (1994) as the level of control over material and intellectual resources or external affairs affecting their lives. The author posits that women's empowerment should aim to counter patriarchal ideologies, effect structural change to combat inequality and exert authority over material and informational resources. Furthermore, the progression of women's status in society is a global concern emphasized in SDG 5 (Ikhar et al., 2022). However, Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta (2006) discovered that a lack of empowerment within the household and in society at large is a defining characteristic of the marginalization of rural women.



**Fig. 1: Women's Empowerment Index Value and Ranks of South Asian Countries**

Source: UN Women & UNDP, 2023

According to Sanyal (2009), rural women in South Asia who live in a patriarchal culture lag in their empowerment. Figure 1 illustrates that South Asian nations possess a relatively low degree of empowerment of women and are positioned in the lower half of the 100 indexed countries in 2022 (UN Women & UNDP, 2023). Economic deprivation, social practices, and norms are significant factors in their disempowerment. Conversely, it was discovered that inadequate education, limited economic participation and opportunities, poverty, and bank account ownership were substantial determinants of women's empowerment (Bushra & Wajiha, 2015). However, women's empowerment is a crucial and more feasible policy alternative to tackle gender-based roles, societal norms, prejudices, rights, obligations, and perceptions (Asriani & Osira, 2019).

## 2.2. Conceptualization of Social Capital in Empowerment

"Social Capital" was used by Coleman (1988) to denote aspects of social relationships as resources for achieving interests. Social capital refers to informal norms or values that community members collectively embrace to foster cooperation (Fukuyama, 2002). It is the extent to which social norms, networks, and trust are accessible to individuals to address shared challenges. Participation in associations, clubs, volunteer work, or philanthropic organizations is mandatory for such networks to flourish (Debertin & Goetz, 2013). Therefore, forming social capital entails the establishment of networks in which everyone benefits from resolving a given issue.

After conducting a literature review, Durlauf and Fafchamps (2005) underlined three main ideas regarding social capital. Firstly, it enables the sharing of values, trust, and norms and, in turn, produces positive externalities. Besides, informal organizations are established either through social networks or alliances based on common values and norms. Lastly, not all social interactions are positive, and negative social capital does exist. Nevertheless, according to Purnamawati and Sudibia (2019), social capital can be applied to various needs, including community empowerment, which supports integrative action and individual reciprocity. They argued that social capital is not only a capital that drives empowerment, but also it is empowerment itself. Policy planners have also acknowledged its contribution to empowering women's participation in domestic decision-making (Machio et al., 2020).

In its 2000/2001 World Development Report, the World Bank was the first to emphasize the conceptual connection between empowerment and social capital. As per the report, establishing social capital is considered a fundamental component of the empowerment process, facilitating community-based development and reinforcing local networks and organizations at the micro-level (Kanbur et al., 2000). Encouraging and maintaining trust to empower disadvantaged groups is proportional to the strength of the positive relationship between social capital and empowerment (Nega et al., 2009).

## 2.3. Social Capital as a "Source" of Women's Empowerment

After the initial conceptualization of social capital in the empowerment procedure, research on women's empowerment has progressively expanded its focus to incorporate the gradual contribution of social capital. To bring about such empowerment, Kanbur et al. (2000) considered the roles of both social institutions and social capital directly in that process. Machio et al. (2020) likewise discovered a significant and positive correlation between women's empowerment and social capital. It was determined that women with greater social capital exhibited a higher likelihood of empowerment. However, in a study conducted in the rural region of Northern Ethiopia, Nega et al. (2009) did not find any specific link between social capital and women's empowerment. Nonetheless, a positive correlation between social capital and overall empowerment was described.

According to the arguments of Purnamawati and Sudibia (2019), social capital possessed by women is a crucial component of women's collective empowerment. Social capital in the family generates social support through which individuals retrieve social capital. They further argued that by bridging the status of

different individuals, social capital can provide access to power and distribute scarce resources. That way, social capital can become both a source and a resource for women's empowerment. This conception is comparable to the study of Bantilan and Padmaja (2008), who explored the relationship between gendered power and the effects of women's social networks on their collective action in Maharashtra, India. Initially, women were barred from male-controlled village networks; however, as informal women groups emerged, they were progressively extended invitations to partake in the meetings. This illustrated how the development of social capital enabled women to participate and gain autonomy.

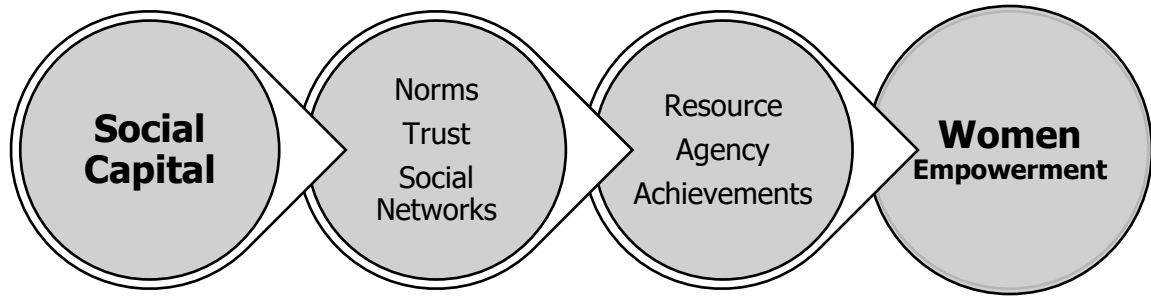
The research of Lowndes (2004) exhibited that, despite minor distinctions, women possess the same amount of social capital as men. As a result of the substantial contribution of neighborhood-specific informal sociability networks to the development of women's social capital, women are considerably more likely to utilize social capital as a resource than men. The accumulation of social capital indicates women's capacity to engage in altruistic and mutually beneficial collective actions (Sanyal, 2009). Schroeder et al. (2013) discovered in a qualitative case study conducted in Benin that women were empowered through the utilization of collective actions and social networks, which granted them access to supplementary income-generating opportunities and participation in decision-making processes.

In another study in India, Ikhari et al. (2022) discovered social capital to be a substantial predictor of women's empowerment. Furthermore, they posited that microfinance initiatives and community-based projects initiated by self-help groups and organizations substantially bolstered social capital and, consequently, empowered women. Similarly, Machio et al. (2020) emphasized that women possess an easily accessible resource in the frame of social capital that can be harnessed to achieve self-empowerment. The social capital theory posits that human capital can be developed and accumulated by utilizing social relationships as resources (Machalek & Martin, 2015). Notwithstanding, social capital is another tool in the hands of policymakers, advocates, and women in negotiating power structures with a definitive objective of holistic empowerment (Jetti, 2006).

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

According to Kabeer (1999), three interrelated aspects, namely power, agency, and achievements, comprise women's empowerment, which expands the capacity to make life decisions. The dimensions of power encompass material, human, and social resources; agency, which denotes the ability to make decisions individually or collectively; and achievements or attaining objectives (Richardson, 2018). Malhotra et al. (2002) synthesized commonly cited dimensions of women's empowerment, including economic, socio-cultural, familial/interpersonal, legal, political, and psychological. These can manifest themselves in the domestic, communal, and wider spheres. Huis et al. (2017) put forth a comparable operationalization of women's empowerment, wherein they classified it into three distinct categories: personal, relational, and societal empowerment. Social capital and social networks are two significant constructs within the relational dimension that indicate a substantial interrelation with women's empowerment.

In the literature on empowerment, social capital reverberates frequently despite its formation having few theoretical foundations. The notion of social capital was initially conceptualized and developed by Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam, each of whom brought forth a unique view of the matter. Bourdieu equated it with private property that empowers an individual to amass resources, Coleman with a public good that benefits all, and Putnam with the quantity of trust that is accessible (Claridge, 2018). Moral obligations and standards, social values and trust, and social networks, particularly voluntary associations, are the three components of social capital as defined by Putnam (Siisiainen, 2003). According to Jones & Woolcock (2007), social capital can be evaluated along six distinct axes: cooperation and solidarity and groups and networks; empowerment and political engagement; information and communication; social cohesion and inclusion; and collective action and cooperation. Notwithstanding this, social capital formation consists of the development of networks through which community members can identify issues, exchange information, and implement problem-solving strategies that benefit all (Debertin & Goetz, 2013).



**Fig. 2: Conceptualization of Social capital and women empowerment**

Source: Adapted from Kabeer (1999), and Siisiainen (2003)

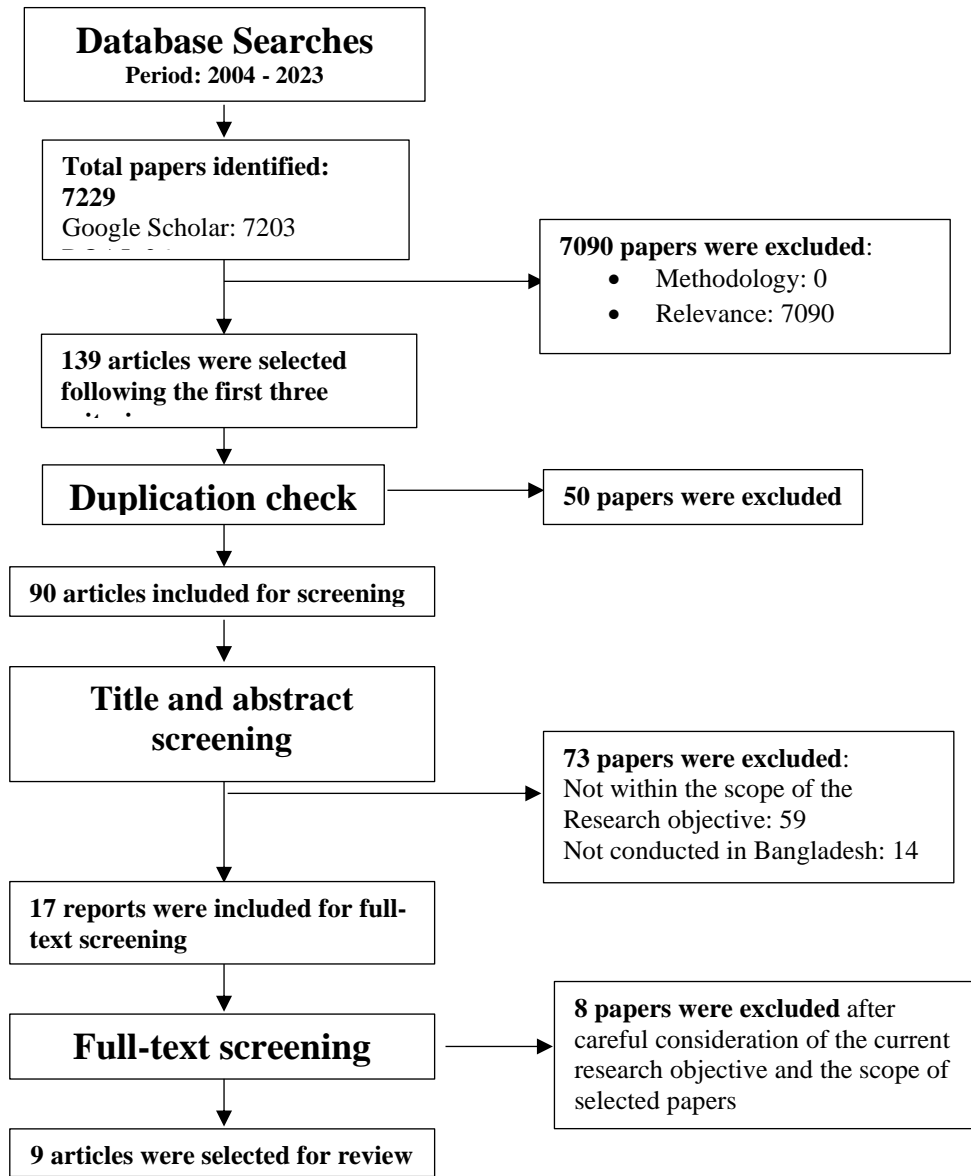
The existing body of literature on social capital and women's empowerment suggests that both concepts are intricately connected. Furthermore, establishing social capital is contingent upon the social environment in which women are situated. This also suggests that women's collective social capital may facilitate women's empowerment in some cultures. On the contrary, since social capital influences women's empowerment, empowered women may generate additional social capital, creating a symmetric causal relationship between these two concepts (Machio et al., 2020). However, components of social capital, such as trust, social networks, and norms, may affect women's resources, agency, and accomplishments in society; this constitutes women's empowerment, as depicted in Figure 2.

#### 4. Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was adopted in order to gain insight into a multifaceted and unfamiliar research domain, as suggested by Barker et al. (2015), for answering exploratory questions. Furthermore, the present study utilized a narrative review method for a disparate topic like the role of social capital in women's empowerment. Authors considered Narrative review the best-suited approach (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Bui & Deakin, 2021) for topics that require interpretive and discursive synthesis of existing literature (Sukhera, 2022). Because narrative review summarizes published literature to provide readers with a comprehensive report on the knowledge of a particular area being a "much-needed bridge" between them and the vast field of inquiry (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Dixon-Woods et al., 2004). Narrative review provides an appropriate starting point for future inquiries and research developments (Cronin et al., 2008). Generally, the narrative review does not follow any specified research protocol or standards; instead, it integrates qualitative and quantitative evidence through narrative juxtaposition, and often, it has been used with systematic reviews to overcome that weakness in similar contexts (Adedeji, 2021; Dixon-Woods et al., 2005; Greenhalgh et al., 2018).

Criteria for including a study in the current review are as follows: (a) published in the last 20 years [2004-2023] and written in English, (b) empirical studies and either follow quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methodology, (c) relevant in searches, among top hundred papers, (d) investigate women empowerment and social capital in the same article, (e) conducted in Bangladesh. To begin, a Boolean search strategy was formulated to locate and retrieve accessible documents. Open access databases, particularly DOAJ and Google Scholar, were queried utilizing keyword combinations that pertained to the concepts of women's empowerment and social capital in Bangladesh: ("Women empowerment" AND "Social capital" AND

"Bangladesh"), ("women empowerment in Bangladesh" AND "social capital"), ("social capital in Bangladesh" AND "women empowerment"). The whole selection process is graphically explained in Figure 3.



**Fig. 3: Results from searches and screening**

For each search in databases, the first 100 papers were screened for relevance, though only one term resulted in more than 100 results. A total of 7203 results were returned from Google Scholar and DOAJ, and based on the first three criteria, only 139 were screened. However, 50 results were found to be duplicates, and accounting for the last two criteria; another 73 papers were discarded. In the final screening process, the abstract and full text of 17 papers were carefully read and analyzed for relevance to the study objective, and 8 papers were discarded, leaving the final nine papers selected for this study (See Table 1). The review of the articles revealed various areas of women's empowerment, which have been categorized based on the classification proposed by Malhotra et al. (2002). Each of the nine selected articles mentions women's economic empowerment through micro-financing or other entrepreneurial endeavors that lead to other forms of empowerment among women.

**Table 1: Articles selected for Narrative Review**

Source	Area of empowerment	Forms of Social Capital
Akter et al. (2020)	Economic; Political	Participation: Women's network
Akter et al. (2023)	Economic; Psychological	Bonding social capital
A. Ali et al. (2005)	Economic; Socio-cultural	Social network as collateral
M. M. Ali et al. (2017)	Economic; Socio-cultural; Familial	Social networking
Dowla (2006)	Economic	Social trust; Horizontal and vertical networks
Dupuis et al. (2022)	Familial; Socio-cultural	Self-efficacy; Social support network
Lanteri (2017)	Economic; Socio-cultural; Familial; Psychological	Social network; New skills and education
Sultana et al. (2010)	Economic; Socio-cultural; Familial	Social network; Socialization; Capability
Mozumdar et al. (2017)	Economic; Socio-cultural; Legal	Network formation; Entrepreneurial development

As for social capital, its formation was analyzed from the full texts, and the linkage with women's empowerment was mentioned. The themes revealed that women's groups are the source of both empowerment and social capital formation. Further explanation of those themes is presented in the findings and discussion section.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

Two overarching themes have emerged from our examination of selected literature regarding the correlation between social capital and women's empowerment in Bangladesh. The initial theme concerns network building as a form of social capital formation that has the potential to empower women in Bangladesh. The second theme pertains to the potential empowerment of women through capacity building, which is facilitated by social capital.

### 5.1. Network Building for Women's Empowerment

Social capital is fundamentally composed of social networks that facilitate cooperation and coordination in the relationships of its members (Gabbay & Leenders, 2001). These relationships grant individuals the ability to obtain, distribute, and generate resources. There is a potential for social networks, in conjunction with the trust and support of their users, to foster collective action for the advancement of the community and promote social cohesion. Additionally, the components of social capital are intertwined with affiliations to groups and social networks, thereby amplifying the impact of other types of capital (Siisiainen, 2003). Therefore, fostering an environment that supports and incentivizes group members to accumulate capital through alternative means could potentially enable them to attain greater agency in specific spheres of life, particularly for women and other disadvantaged segments of society. This has been true in the context of Bangladesh as M. M. Ali et al. (2017) discovered that social networks increase women's income generation and decision-making opportunities in a familial context. Thus, one could posit that the preservation of women's social capital across a broader spectrum of social, economic, and political contexts would afford them considerably more opportunities for empowerment.

For instance, social capital generated from horizontal and vertical networks in Grameen Bank has furthered microfinance activities in Bangladesh. Dowla (2006) argued that this happened on the back of the mutually beneficial structure of the Bank, creating a norm of transparency among lending groups. However, he observed that mutually beneficial arrangements among rural women in Bangladesh were common. Thus, the development of social capital among Bangladeshi women was not predicated on externally imposed standards but rather on resource sharing, cultural values, and trust. Dupuis et al. (2022) demonstrated, albeit in a limited way, that social capital is an indispensable factor in women's empowerment. It was disclosed

that women engaged in homestead food production participated in exchanging and borrowing seeds, a practice that benefited and supported both parties. In essence, these social networks safeguarded women's empowerment and amplified their autonomy in household matters.

Similarly, Nawaz (2018) investigated whether microfinance could empower women borrowers, and utilization of newly acquired social capital appeared to be positively correlated with her findings. As a result, these women are motivated by their social capital, which is enhanced through increased social mobilization; furthermore, the empowerment gained from collective community actions has a domino effect throughout the community. One could substantiate the claim that the empowerment of women through their social networks yields societal and individual benefits, thereby generating alternative policy approaches for reducing poverty and fostering community development. From a broader perspective, after studying the strategies of an NGO and poor women in Jessore to reinforce their social capital. Seferiadis et al. (2018) suggested that conscientization in groups where they could collectively consider solutions to their problems enables them to join the road to empowerment. This supports the claim that women's participation in social networks increases their likelihood of making strategic decisions regarding themselves and the community; therefore, social capital can be regarded as an asset in promoting women's empowerment.

## **5.2. Capacity Building for Women's Empowerment**

While social capital facilitates progress in the realms of economics, society, and politics, the personal dimension of women's empowerment is intricately linked to the implementation of that authority (Akter et al., 2020). Thus, the capacity of women to be empowered could become a prominent issue despite opportunities in their external environment because empowerment requires security, equality, and the development of skills to negotiate in a patriarchal society such as that in Bangladesh. In the social capital formation processes, both the ability and capability for mobilizing their agency or resources are acquired and/or realized by women. Numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs), self-help groups, and social networks prioritize enhancing women's skills and accumulating social capital (Uddin, 2024). Similarly, Lanteri (2017) observed that the Bangladeshi NGOs started the empowerment process through income generation and integrated human and physical capital. This has led to a positive externality in women's empowerment, highlighted by a broader network of social relations, social cohesion, and social changes. In addition to fostering women's social and political empowerment, Basargekar (2010) argues that access to credit and savings accounts contributes to their economic empowerment. According to this line of reasoning, social capital facilitates women's empowerment and enhances their capacity to effect positive societal change.

From an economic empowerment standpoint, social capital-based microfinance programs have the potential to empower women by enabling them to participate in economic and social activities and exert authority over their income (Mayoux, 2001). Also, social capital was described as 'a key resource in entrepreneurial success' regarding business activities by women in Bangladesh (Mozumdar et al., 2017). In particular, these women enjoyed greater access to alternative forms of capital due to their extensive social capital and networks, facilitating their capacity for independent decision-making and overall empowerment. In a similar tone but from a social and political perspective, Hasan (2015) rightly argued that participation significantly advances the process of empowerment as women gain confidence and a sense of personal control. As a result, social interactions in networks or groups invariably enhance women's capacity to comprehend and execute critical decisions, which is fundamental to women's empowerment. These arguments concur with the findings of Reza & Yasmin (2019), who drew evidence from various sectors to show that women are more empowered than ever before and engagement in self-help projects and credit groups which are based on social networks helped women to build their capability in those sectors along with the rise in education and entrepreneurship. Inferring from this, women's empowerment is substantially facilitated by capacity building based on social capital.



### 5.3. Challenges in Women's Empowerment Through Social Capital

Although the aforementioned discourse suggests that social capital has enabled women to attain social, economic, and political empowerment, numerous institutional and social obstacles in Bangladesh, including patriarchal systems and gender inequality, prevent women from attaining complete empowerment (Gocio & Kulkarni, 2016). From an economic perspective, despite numerous success stories of women empowerment facilitated by NGOs and microfinance programs, A. Ali et al. (2005) argued that there is some sort of pseudo-empowerment. Because sometimes women take loans from male family members and bear the burden as well. When they cannot repay the loans, they face rebuke from society for dishonoring the community and resentment of their networks for 'breaking faith' and devaluing solidarity (Karim, 2012). From a political perspective, women's decisions about participation in political and social activities are surprisingly limited despite having sole authority in household affairs, including healthcare (Tabassum et al., 2019). This reminds us that neither having social capital nor empowerment in one aspect of life can ensure the overall empowerment of women. From a social dimension, Zafarullah and Nawaz (2019) argued that employment and microfinance in Bangladesh positively impacted women's empowerment despite difficulties originating from the social environment, unsettling their daily lives and mobility. Those challenges come from deeply rooted traditions, conservative religious practices, and family and social values, contradicting the benefits of social capital women may derive from them. Therefore, social capital might not be a tool for women's empowerment unless society as a whole undergoes transformation.

## 7. Conclusion

Women's empowerment is an inseparable component in the context of a developing nation like Bangladesh, specifically concerning the goals of achieving gender equality and improving women's contribution to society. Additionally, women's involvement is crucial for significant political, social, and economic advancement. Evidently, women's meaningful participation and empowerment are possible in those aspects of life by accumulating and utilizing women's social capital. It is possible for women to bring about a transformation in traditional gender norms and to shape their social relations by utilizing networks and enhancing their competencies. During this process, women's social capital may serve as a resource that facilitates the elimination of barriers to their access to additional tangible and intangible resources that otherwise would have been denied individually. However, the influence of powerful women's social capital may not be particularly beneficial for the empowerment of disadvantaged women, who face significant challenges in amassing such capital within their male-dominated, contested social hierarchy. The onus then shifts to state apparatuses to implement proactive measures aimed at educating and enhancing the skills of this marginalized group of women, thereby providing opportunities to acquire social capital and empower themselves independently.

Based on the literature review, the study confirms the critical connections between social capital and women's empowerment and has recommended significant aspects to strengthen this relationship. For example, it is essential to promote gender equality in terms of equal opportunities and outcomes in all aspects of life as provisioned in the Constitution. Moreover, educating society and raising awareness of women's rights is vital to discourage discrimination or violence against women in any form. The importance of social capital for women needs to be considered in policies targeting community development and women empowerment. Taking affirmative action for women's education, training, and upskilling is also crucial to establishing a national platform for women to enhance social networking among women. The organization of women's associations should be facilitated to increase awareness of women's rights in the underprivileged and rural areas.

## 8. Limitations and Direction for Future Research

Nevertheless, the current study faces several limitations, one of which is its scope. It only reviewed studies conducted in Bangladesh, although there may be many more potential studies conducted in other countries. Another limitation of the study is being constrained to available open-access materials in DOAJ and Google Scholar. This study, therefore, could provide guidelines for further study with a broader scope and systematic studies in the future.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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