



## Coping on Women's Backs

### *Social Capital–Vulnerability Links through a Gender Lens*

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**abstract:** This article aims to conceptualize the gendered interface between social capital and vulnerability. It emphasizes Pierre Bourdieu's notion of social capital embedded in his Theory of Practice as a fruitful analytical device for this intersection. The authors' conceptual thoughts are based on a review of the literature on the role of migration-related social networks from mainly diverse Asian contexts and empirical fieldwork in South and Central Asia.

**keywords:** Bourdieu ♦ gender ♦ migration ♦ social capital ♦ social networks ♦ vulnerability

In the development discourse, social capital has been discovered as an answer to the vulnerabilities of individuals, households, regions and whole nations. In contrast to this mainstream discourse's assumption of a strengthening role of social capital, feminist analysis has highlighted that social network dynamics in a wide range of cultural contexts can heighten women's vulnerabilities. By applying Bourdieu's notion of social capital, we show that these negative consequences are a result of women's subordination within male and through male-centred networks.

Bourdieu identifies the investment in the symbolic capital of female honour as an indirect outlay in social and, ultimately, economic capital. Resultantly, women become instruments of the accumulation of network-based capital, often without being able to capitalize on these very relations. Based on Bourdieu's theory, we suggest a shift from the investigation

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of women's exclusion from and gender inequality within social networks to an analysis of masculine domination, which appears to be directly associated with the degree of vulnerability that women experience.

### **The Myth of Strengthening Social Capital**

Processes of labour migration are embedded in social networks, from sending households to migrants' associations at their new destinations. This has been widely acknowledged in sociological migration research. Tilly and Brown (1967) and Lomnitz (1977) emphasize the importance of kin and friendship networks in shaping and sustaining migration. These interpersonal ties connect migrants and non-migrants in their destination and places of origin and can encourage circular migration and reduce migration risks (e.g. Boyd, 1989; Fawcett, 1989; Gurak and Caces, 1992; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993; Pries, 1999; Thieme, 2006). Migration itself is often assumed to reduce the risks and vulnerabilities that individuals, households and economies face.

In recent development discourses, social networks have been identified with a form of social capital. It has been celebrated for being the 'missing link in development' by some under the aegis of the World Bank (Grootaert, 1998). The World Bank defines social capital as 'the norms and networks that enable collective action' (World Bank, 2007) and assumes it to be critical for growth, equity and poverty alleviation (Grootaert, 1998). A number of authors find that community social networks reduce poverty and vulnerabilities of individuals, households, regions and whole nations (Grootaert, 2000; Maluccio et al., 1999; Narayan and Pritchett, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

Vulnerability has emerged in applied development research as a more dynamic concept than poverty (Moser, 1998). It indicates a state of 'defencelessness, insecurity and exposure to risk, shocks and stress' (Chambers, 1989). Definitions often differentiate the following two dimensions of vulnerability. Sensitivity, on the one hand, denotes the degree to which a social unit is affected by the exposure to any set of stresses. Resilience, on the other hand, describes the ability to resist to or recover from the damage associated with them (Moser, 1998).

As part of livelihoods research, the notions of social capital as well as vulnerability have become important conceptual lenses, especially for migration research, during the past 10 years (e.g. de Haan and Rogaly, 2002; Ellis, 2003). Both the research catalysed by the World Bank and the more applied conceptualizations like the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (DFID, 2002; Rakodi and Lloyd-Jones, 2002) make a simple equation between the two: more social capital means less vulnerability. This is based on the assumption that social networks guarantee better access to resources.<sup>2</sup>

A number of authors have rejected such a harmonious reading of the role of social networks and point to a 'downside of social capital'.<sup>3</sup> The World Bank's conceptualization of social capital widely ignores that social networks are often based on the exclusion of others based on unequal power relations. In Portes and Landolt's (2000: 532ff.) words: 'the same strong ties that enable group members to obtain privileged access to resources, bar others from securing the same assets'. A focus on spatial entities, such as communities, regions or even whole countries, may divert attention from the privileged access of economic and social elites to social networks and the associated resources. Lack of purchasing power or time, for instance, could bar people from participation in or support for social networks of reciprocal help (Das, 2004). According to Gittell and Vidal (1998), 'bonding social capital', that is, relations between family members, close friends and neighbours, involves a higher degree of exclusion of non-group members. Van Staveren and Knorringa (2007) point out that bonding social capital is associated with greater power inequalities as compared to 'bridging social capital', such as relations to distant friends, colleagues and associates (Gittell and Vidal, 1998). Such inequality again is often explicitly associated with greater vulnerability (UNISDR, 2002, quoted in Cassel-Gintz, 2006).

Inequality in access to and roles in social networks also have distinct gender dimensions. Gender norms stipulate who migrates and the roles considered appropriate for those who stay behind (Chant and Radcliffe, 1992; Curran et al., 2006). The nature of patriarchy thus determines access to, the role in and use of networks. Although gender relations are a major social stratifier, even in the critical social capital debate they have been largely ignored (Mayoux, 2001; Molyneux, 2002; Riddell et al., 2001). They also influence the vulnerabilities individuals face. Therefore, an understanding of gender relations and inequalities is necessary for making useful statements about the nexus between social capital and vulnerability in order to move towards greater resilience (Fordham, 2003).

Inequality and power have been discussed extensively in Pierre Bourdieu's work on social capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). We therefore explore the fruitfulness of his analysis for the gendered nexus between social capital and vulnerability. Although Bourdieu's work often does not refer to gender explicitly,<sup>4</sup> its reception by and conversion within feminist research has been both welcoming and critical, but in both cases inspiring for social science research (Adkins and Skeggs, 2004; Anderson et al., 2007; Dillabough, 2004; Kraiss, 2006; McCall, 1992; McNay, 1999). This article therefore aims to conceptualize the gendered interface between social capital and vulnerability by referring to his social theory. It emphasizes Pierre Bourdieu's notion of social capital as embedded

in his Theory of Practice as a fruitful analytical device for this intersection. It thus offers a bridge between development discourses and social theory. We develop our conceptual thoughts based on a review of literature, mainly on the role of migration-related social networks from diverse Asian contexts as well as empirical fieldwork by Siegmann in Pakistan and Thieme in Nepal, India and Kyrgyzstan.

The next section describes the emerging picture of the gendered nexus between social capital and vulnerability. The examples from the feminist literature on social networks and migration do not match the simple instrumentalism of social capital that assumes a neat equation between more social capital and less vulnerability. Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, including his concept of social capital, is then outlined in the third section. It enables us to reread the puzzling image distilled from diverse case studies as a coherent whole, which we do in the fourth section. The final section summarizes the contribution of Bourdieu for a deeper understanding of the gendered social capital–vulnerability nexus. It emphasizes that the concepts of domination and subordination provide fruitful devices both for analytical purposes and at the level of interventions for societal change.

### **A Gendered View of Social Networks**

The growing feminist literature on the social capital debate has shared the criticism of the naive equation of social capital as promoting growth as well as reducing poverty and vulnerability.<sup>5</sup> It has gone beyond that, though.

#### ***Gendered Exclusion from . . .***

Taking up Portes and Landolt's (2000) point in the previous section, various authors have highlighted a gender dimension in the exclusion from formal and informal social networks relevant for migration.

Migration laws adopted ostensibly to protect women may have counterproductive results by limiting their access to formal migration-related networks. Not only do such bans deprive women of an income, they often encourage women to leave clandestinely and put them at even greater danger of abuse (UN, 2006: 40). For example, in 1998, the Government of Nepal officially banned female migration to the Gulf States as a response to physical abuse of Nepalese women in the Middle East. This ban has been discussed controversially and was several times lifted and declared again. According to the latest amendment in the beginning of 2009, women are not allowed to migrate for domestic work to the Gulf States and Malaysia. Despite legal barriers and social stigmas, women have not failed to migrate, but have gone through illegal channels. However, illegal migration increases their vulnerability to cheating and exploitation. They

incur higher costs of migration, e.g. because they have to engage in step-wise migration to the Gulf States via India. Payment to an intermediary adds to these costs. Upon arrival in their destination they often have to hand in their passports and get involved in a form of labour bondage as they have to repay travel costs to the middleperson (NIDS, 2003).

Segregation of female and male Central American migrants into different occupational niches on the US-American labour market excludes women from relevant network-based information. Hagan (1998) describes how the isolation of women domestic workers prevents them from accessing information about legalization campaigns. Male migrants' social interaction is not confined to their ethnic co-workers. Their colleagues at their factory workplace as well those from their spare time, while playing soccer for instance, help them to transcend the boundaries of their own migrant community. This is not the case for female Central American migrants. The non-migrant networks from which Latinas are largely excluded enable men to access information about legalization and thus citizenship rights. The associated legal status significantly improves migrants' well-being even beyond their economic security.

Silvey and Elmhirst (2003) describe kin-based networks among women labour migrants in Indonesia during and after the Asian financial crisis. These networks perpetuated occupational segregation of migrant women workers in factory work, thereby excluding them from the more lucrative street vending. It also prevents them from accessing potentially more powerful associations, such as labour activist groups, that would enable them to support their interests. In case of business or political favours, valuable contacts typically operate through male in-groups, implying that women are usually excluded from networks that bring economic advantage (Molyneux, 2002). Dannecker (2005) describes networks of male migrants from Bangladesh that not only exclude female compatriots, but also appear to strategically improve their own position in the global labour market through translocation of the Bangladeshi gender order. This is undertaken through demands to install the cultural ideal of *purdah*, i.e. the segregation of sexes, often legitimized with reference to Islamic concepts, which hampers women's access to paid employment and their (international) mobility. In the event, women's ties to more influential networks are often only indirect, through their relationships with men (Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003).

### **. . . and Inequality within Social Networks**

Gender roles within social networks also reflect existing gender inequalities, for example, regarding access to relevant information and in terms of the gender division of work. Both female and male Central American

migrants in the US-American labour market use social networks to access employment. However, the rewards of this use differ significantly between women and men. As mentioned earlier, they lead to more insecure, lower-paid informal employment, chiefly in domestic work, for Latinas as opposed to comparatively better working conditions in manual and industrial labour for their male colleagues (Hagan, 1998; Livingston, 2006).

Besides differential rewards, women's expected contributions to a social network are often higher than males', rationalized through gender-specific normative assumptions. Rankin (2002) illustrates this with the case of the *guthi* religious and cultural associations of the Newar merchant community in Nepal. Women perform the domestic labour entailed in keeping up social obligations associated with the *guthis*, thus contributing to men's honour, while being excluded from the associations themselves. Similar to the case described by Dannecker (2005) for Bangladesh, these networks then serve to reproduce a shared moral framework justifying segregation by gender and caste. Similarly, *jirgas* in northwest Pakistan might decide women's fates. *Jirgas*, a decision-making assembly of male elders, regularly take on a judicial role, among others on matters of female chastity (Saeed, 2004). As a matter of the local code of behaviour, women in northwest Pakistan's are obliged to provide hospitality to guests including the preparation of food (Akram-Lodhi, 1996). Men, the representatives of family honour, in contrast, attend social meetings while rarely contributing to these time-consuming preparations. Silvey and Elmhirst (2003) report that young female return migrants in Indonesia had to face disproportionately higher labour demands in their households of origin to cope with the effects of the Asian financial crisis, while their male counterparts free rode on their work. They pointed out that this does not indicate that women themselves do not benefit from the family and kin networks. However, they face comparatively greater constraints on their participation. Agarwal (2000) concludes that the gendered bifurcation of authority within networks and responsibility for their sustenance systematically disadvantages women while increasing their work burden.

This gender bias is reflected at the level of the macro-economy. An extensive literature has summarized the role of women as 'shock absorbers' for their families in economic crises, for example, triggered through structural adjustment programmes. They often compensate income losses due to other household members' unemployment and the more costly provision of healthcare through intensified reproductive, subsistence and/or informal work (Benéria, 1995; Commonwealth Secretariat, 1989; Elson, 1995; Moser, 1998; Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003). The gender division of labour, assigning women the responsibility for family provision of resources such as water and wood for fuel, makes women more sensitive

to the risks involved in shifts from public to private provision of these resources and their degradation (Westermann et al., 2005). Moser (1998) emphasizes that more time spent on subsistence tasks such as water hauling implies foregone income and greater vulnerability. Benefits for their family and kinship networks are often paid for by greater individual sensitivity to health-related risks (Floro, 1995).

### **Social Capital for Coping**

The asymmetries in rights and obligations on the basis of gender outlined above translate into differences in the ability to cope with economic difficulties (Moser, 1998). However, as is detailed below, social networks may also contribute to a reduction in vulnerability both with regards to lower sensitivity to shocks and stresses, as well as enhanced capacity to cope with adversities. Apparently, significant differences in the gendered role of social networks depend on whether they involve bonding or bridging social capital. Whereas bonding ties between family members and close friends appear to contribute to women's vulnerability, more distant bridging relations between friends, colleagues and associates may play a crucial role in strengthening resilience.

As mentioned already, women often paid a heavy toll for their role as buffers against the negative fallout of economic crises on their families. On the other hand, outside of household and kinship relations, social networks appear to be an important vehicle for reducing women's vulnerability. Agarwal (2000) stresses that, among women, 'everyday forms of cooperation' are more common. She gives the example of the borrowing of small amounts of food and other items by women within a network of families as a way of coping with food shortage or drought. In the context of migration, Thieme and Müller-Böker (2004) give the example of Nepali women who follow their migrating husbands to Delhi, India. They establish their own financial self-help associations in order to avoid the caste-related disputes they observe in men's groups. These associations provide them with access to financial capital and reduce their husbands' dominant role. In addition, they save and remit money for their children's education. Kabeer (1994) highlights the potential of extra-household associations and networks for poorer women as women's shared experience and exposure of the mechanisms of male domination may form the basis of a strategy for change. Since they tend to be most disadvantaged in their access to state and market mechanisms of resource distribution, social networks offer them possibly the only route to material resources and claims. Therefore, such networks' leverage to challenge gender hierarchies within the domestic arena is correspondingly curtailed in contexts where norms of seclusion and segregation constrain women's ability to

participate in community-based networks (Kabeer, 1994; Rankin, 2002), such as in large parts of South Asia and the Middle East, where women's mobility is curtailed such as described earlier for the case of Bangladesh (Dannecker, 2005).

Contrary to the dominant discourse on the positive significance of access to network resources, Hart (1991) notes that the exclusion of women from official politics in rural Malaysia may actually entail an emancipatory potential. While men were hired as individual agricultural workers, women workers organized and sold their labour collectively in spite of efforts by large landowners to disband female labour gangs. The resulting higher earnings combined with their membership of these newly emerging extra-household forms of cooperation improved their fall-back positions vis-a-vis other household members. The gender difference was in part due to the fact that poor men were enmeshed in subservient political patronage relations with rural party bosses who wielded political and economic power at the local level. Women were largely excluded from these relations. Dannecker (2005) describes credit systems of women in Bangladesh that developed parallel to the existing ones, which excluded women. These associations played a crucial role in enabling women's migration and safe investments of female returnees.

The emerging picture from this review is that feminist writings on social networks have rejected the stance that the social capital rooted in associations may be a simple and cost-effective tool to fix development and reduce poverty as well as vulnerabilities. They have made visible a gender dimension that includes asymmetric costs and benefits of as well as dissimilar roles in social networks for women and men. Paradoxically, women appear to invest in social networks without being able to capitalize on them. The gender-differentiated investments in social relations with higher demands being placed on female family members both reflect persistent inequalities in women's and men's positions within households and contribute to corroborate them (Mayoux, 2001; Rankin, 2002; Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003; van Staveren, 2002). Despite this magnified image of the underbelly of social capital, these authors also specify the potential that networks have to offer for social change. The collective action of the subordinated could thus reduce their sensitivity and strengthen resilience to hardships.

Many of the authors that have investigated social capital from a gender perspective have referred to Pierre Bourdieu's social theory – some in passing (Molyneux, 2002; Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003), some throughout (Rankin, 2002; Risseuw, 1991). In the section that follows, we present salient features of Bourdieu's work that may be useful for a more systematic investigation of the social capital–vulnerability nexus from a gender perspective.



## Outline of Bourdieu's 'Theory of Practice'

### **Social and Other Capitals**

Bourdieu uses the economic term 'capital' to show that social science should endeavour to grasp capital and profit in all their forms and to establish the laws whereby the different types of capital change into one another (Bourdieu, 1986: 242ff.). He sees capital as accumulated labour and includes all material and symbolic goods that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation (Bourdieu, 1977: 178).

He distinguishes between economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. They can be transformed into one another through transformation work in the form of time and energy (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital is ownership of monetary rewards and can be cashed in. Cultural capital is the product of intellectual or educational qualification. Symbolic capital, for example in the form of honour and prestige, is the recognition and legitimization of other kinds of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). He sees the accumulation of symbolic capital as, probably, the most valuable form of accumulation in a society in which, for instance, the severity of the climate and limited resources demand collective efforts (Bourdieu, 1977).

According to Bourdieu (1986: 248ff.), 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 – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.

Such social networks have to be maintained and institutionalized through multiple forms of interactions between members needed to provide access to resources (Bourdieu, 1986: 249–52). For instance, relations within an extended family in mountainous Pakistan are cultivated through joint festivities. A wedding may one day be the collective provider of a loan to fund a visa to Dubai and thus the entry ticket to the Emirate's labour market (fieldwork, Siegmann, 2007). Men's labour migration to the Gulf States has been an important source of livelihoods in Pakistan's northwest, in particular since the oil crises in the 1980s (Gazdar, 2003). The initial costs of visas and travel are high and most households have to rely on loans and support from their kin at the outset. Individuals already established in the Gulf often obtain the work visa and expect repayment after the new migrant has established himself (Watkins, 2003).

More or less institutionalized forms of delegation of social capital exist in all groups, though (Bourdieu, 1986). One might think of the patriarch's unquestioned legitimacy to represent his family in a meeting to take decisions

on behalf of his family, such as in the *jirgas* mentioned earlier, but also to sanction lapsing family members. Bourdieu highlights that the power exercised by the single agent or small group representing the group may be incommensurate with the agent's personal contribution. Paradoxically, the mandated agent can exert on and even against the group that power, which the group enables him or her to concentrate. Bourdieu (2001) specifies the role of women in the accumulation of social capital. Their reputation and, especially, their chastity constitute a 'fetishised measure of masculine reputation' and thus represents symbolic capital. They are reduced to instruments of production or reproduction of symbolic capital in order to support the institution of social networks between men.

In Bourdieu's approach, associational life appears as inherently conflictual and contradictory. Social capital based on associations is understood as an instrument of power and domination (Bourdieu, 1977; Harriss, 2006). This reading of Bourdieu goes beyond a 'downside of social capital' that emphasizes that the beneficial effects of social networks may be based on the exclusion of others. It highlights inequality and domination produced and reproduced within and through the group.

### ***The Relativity of Social Capital***

The form capital takes only receives significance or power if one enters a social field where it is valued (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This conceptualization of social and other capitals as relative and socially constructed denotes a major difference to the notion of capital within the popular social capital and livelihoods literature. Bourdieu understands a field as a network of objective relations between social positions (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 97). Each field prescribes its particular values and possesses its own regulative principles, which is in contrast to an understanding of society as a seamless totality (Wacquant, 1992: 16ff.). Hence, for Bourdieu, a differentiated society is an ensemble of relatively autonomous spheres that cannot be collapsed under an overall societal logic. The positions within the field are defined by actors' possession of power or capital as well as by their relations to other positions, such as domination, subordination or homology. This possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 97).

Labour migrants populate the field of transnational labour, which establishes exchange values setting the terms for the types of engagement that can be made. The entry into the home and host societies are characterized by different degrees of codification of the entry into the fields. Visa requirements, for example, can be considered 'juridical frontiers' (Bourdieu, 1996: 226) constraining the right to enter the destination's labour market.

Migrant job seekers hope to use their capitals to their advantage. Their experience, however, that, for instance, depending on the context, their skills become valued on different scales. A former Russian teacher from a Kyrgyz village school, for instance, might not be able to use her language proficiency for upward mobility in Moscow's labour market. Women who have always been involved in the paid labour market in the former Soviet Union have experienced a double devaluation of their skills in the transition process. The gender gap in education below tertiary level was virtually closed in socialist times (UNDP RBEC and CIS, 2005). Whereas, before, the cultural capital of education was a guarantee of economic stability and signalled social status, the transition led to more rapid dismissals in sectors characterized by a high concentration of female jobs. This triggered migration flows to international destinations, such as Kazakhstan and Russia. While their Russian skills did not provide them with a comparative advantage in the Russian labour market, their socialization in a rural area further disadvantaged them in the Russian capital (Thieme, 2008). The depreciation of cultural capital causes a loss of capability, indicating Bourdieu's relative concept of power.

### ***Habitus between Social Field and Practice***

The social practice of an individual or a social group has to be analysed as the result of the interaction of habitus and social field. The 'habitus', or a person's incorporated history, is a socially, culturally and historically conditioned set of durable dispositions of the individual for social actions. It is only in relation to the structures of a certain social field that habitus produces given practices, but limits people's possibilities at the same time (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The dispositions of the habitus render the basis of inequalities literally invisible because they equal the objective structures of the world from which they are issued (Wacquant, 1992: 23).

Bourdieu thus claims that through the habitus, large-scale social inequalities are established by the subtle inculcation of power relations upon the dispositions of individuals (McNay, 1999). Gender is one of the most powerful social hierarchies embodied in this way (Krais, 2006). It implies that this process of corporeal inculcation is a form of domination, which is 'exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 167) with the habitus as the hinge for this type of symbolic violence (Krais, 2006; McNay, 1999). He acknowledges, though, that often the recognition of existing hierarchies may be the result of strategic behaviour on the part of the disadvantaged, such as women and the young. It could be their only chance of neutralizing those effects of domination most contrary to their own interests (Bourdieu, 1977; Risseuw, 1991). This understanding of women's relationship to hegemonic patriarchal

structures has been supported by feminist research. For example, research in different Asian contexts suggests that women recognize male domination as ideology, but also comply in strategic ways that ensure their own and their children's security (Agarwal, 1997; Hart, 1991; Rankin, 2002).

Although Bourdieu's focus clearly is on the (re-)production of a certain social order, he also recognizes that domination may generate resistance:

. . . I do not see how relations of domination, whether material or symbolic, could possibly operate without implying, activating resistance. *The dominated, in any social universe, can always exert a certain force*, in as much as belonging to a field means by definition that one is capable of producing effects in it (if only to elicit reactions of exclusion on the part of those who occupy its dominant positions). (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 80; emphasis in the original)

While the resilience of subordination resides in the unconscious fit between their habits and the field they operate in (Wacquant, 1992: 23), as soon as women become aware of the social structures inscribed on them through the habitus, these conflicting experiences may explain their revolt against masculine domination in modern society (Krais, 2006).

## Social Capital and Masculine Domination

### ***From Gender Inequality to Masculine Domination***

The emerging picture of the nexus between social capital and vulnerability described in the second section of this article is puzzling from the perspective of the instrumental social capital approach, which assumes a neat equation between more social capital and less vulnerability. Bourdieu's social theory, however, enables us to read this emerging image as a coherent whole. The unequal investments in and benefits of social network participation between women and men, as well as women's exclusion from male networks and the resulting vulnerability can in fact be read as different aspects of the same process of reproduction of male domination.

As described earlier, women provide a significant share of labour for the transformation of economic into social capital (Akram-Lodhi, 1996; Rankin, 2002), as well as for the generation of economic capital. The latter, for example, is done through drawing on disproportionate investment by women and girls in order to buffer the harmful effects of economic crises (Elson, 1995; Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003). Despite such gender-differentiated investment in social networks with women carrying a heavier burden, they are often excluded from politically and economically powerful networks (Dannecker, 2005; Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003) or those which can provide access to crucial information (Hagan, 1998). The only indirect access to social capital through men makes women 'associated members of the club', such as in the *jirgas* of northwest Pakistan referred to earlier.

This asymmetry can be explained with reference once more to Bourdieu's concept of social capital. In *Masculine Domination* (Bourdieu, 2001), women appear not as members of the family, participating on equal footing with men, but rather as instruments of capital accumulation. They invest transformation labour into the social networks that may ultimately provide material benefit through their work, as well as through the constraints they are submitted to in order to acquire the symbolic capital of honour for the family. This way, the puzzle of gender-differentiated, unequal capitalization of social networks described earlier can be explained by what Bourdieu (1986) terms the 'paradox of delegation': the patriarch may not be the one who has invested most but can nonetheless utilize the network's capital for reproduction of his dominant role within it. As the household's main decision-maker, he is legitimized to utilize his delegated power according to his own discretion both externally and internally. His power is unquestioned through a habitus of acceptance of patriarchal domination prevalent among all actors in the respective social field. As a consequence, women's contribution to the production and reproduction of the social network, for instance, her inputs in the form of time, labour and restrictions placed on her related to the family's reputation, may be considered merely instrumental.

In the second section in this article we were confronted with another seeming contradiction. On the one hand, social capital based on social networks can support women's ability to cope with hardship. Their exclusion from such networks would thus negatively impact their resilience. On the other hand, women's exclusion from specific types of social networks may actually create possibilities for their collective action (Hart, 1991; Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003).

Contrary to the World Bank-led view of benign social capital, it appears as an instrument to reproduce domination in Bourdieu's economics of practice. Social capital based on networks is an aspect of social fields, in which a struggle for power and domination takes place. In many of the otherwise diverse fields referred to earlier, networks thus become an instrument of the production and reproduction of patriarchal domination. Therefore, seen from Bourdieu's perspective, exclusion as the flipside of participation in a social network becomes merely a description of non-participation rather than a normative, negatively loaded statement.

Resultantly, social networks may be characterized by internal inequality as concisely summarized in the 'paradox of delegation' or (re-)producing domination externally. Kin-based ties often reflect patriarchal domination and thus demand high investments from female members without providing them with the voice and resources that would enhance their resilience. The exclusion of young women migrants in Indonesia from

occupational networks that might improve their bargaining power and, thus, working conditions through kin-based ties might serve as an illustrative example for such domination *through* social capital (Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003).

Conversely, social networks' empowering potential depends on the extent of domination prevalent *within* them. As indicated by Kabeer (1994), social networks that go beyond the bonding social capital of family and kin, both in terms of membership and ideological orientation, may serve as vehicles for collective action. Similarly, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) underline that the experience of domination often evokes acts of resistance. Jointly, women's position can be strengthened because of the lower degree of masculine domination within the associations of like-minded women, such as in the case of Bangladeshi and Nepalese women's financial self-help groups mentioned earlier (Dannecker, 2005; Thieme and Müller-Böcker, 2004). In Bourdieu's perspective, domination rather than exclusion becomes the analytical tool to investigate the role of social networks for different aspects of vulnerability.

### **Gendered Vulnerability through Bourdieu's Eyes**

The preceding discussion of social capital as seen through the lens of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice can be related to gender-differentiated vulnerabilities. Sensitivity, as the degree to which an individual or group of actors is affected by an external event, can thus be associated with the validation of capital within a social field. Depending on the change of social field or aspects thereof, which is a characteristic experience for labour migrants, capitals become newly valued. Some might lose their significance and hence lead to a loss of power. Others might gain importance and thus can help to protect individuals from the impact of external change. In the process of transformation in Central Asia, for instance, the role of social networks for migration has become more relevant than educational qualifications (fieldwork, Thieme, 2006, 2007). Cultural capital was depreciated as outlined above.

The same endowment with capital that influences sensitivity determines the ability to react to a problematic event or adapt to a change of or within a social field. People might be able to react differently once damage is experienced. Again, this capacity depends on the recognized capital one can build on in a given social field. Besides capital, the field structures inscribed over time on the individual as habitus also have a role to play. Through the interplay between habitus and capital in a particular field, the scope for successful reaction to negative experiences might be limited or widened. In the context of post-socialist structural change in Central Asia mentioned earlier, women have increasingly faced disadvantages in

the labour market due to their lack of access to economically relevant social networks. Concurrently, traditional ascriptions of 'male breadwinners' and 'female homemakers' regained importance (Kuehnast, 2002). As a result, women's participation in the public sphere of the labour market was increasingly curtailed. They, therefore, lack the direct access to economic capital as a powerful means to cope with problems such as covering expenses for healthcare, children's education and family disputes.

Vulnerability as seen through Bourdieu's eyes can thus be equated with being powerless and subordinated. As pointed out above, the significance of capitals such as those based in social networks is relative to social fields. This implies that, consequently, vulnerability as well becomes a field-specific and, thus, relative notion. Hence, different gender-specific risks of damage as well as the ability to recover are the socially constructed results of an interplay of social fields and habitus. The fields of interest here are often structured by norms that legitimate patriarchal domination and, resultantly, gender inequality in access to capitals. Such inequality creates constructed gendered vulnerabilities, for instance, a heightened risk of sexual abuse of female domestic workers from South and Southeast Asian countries employed in the Gulf States (Amnesty International, 2005).

As shown, social capital means power and can become an instrument to produce and reproduce women's subordination, such as in the case of male Bangladeshi migrants' networks described by Dannecker (2005). For gender-specific vulnerability, this implies that the scope of masculine domination within a particular social network defines the extent of women's vulnerability. For example, the reduction in male family labour available to a household paralleling migration from Pakistan to the Gulf States is buffered by a re-shuffling of workload within the household or external hiring (Alavi, 1991; fieldwork, Siegmann, 2007). The prevalent type of adaptation depends on the mobility constraints applied to female household members. In large parts of South Asia, women's circulation is restricted in order to preserve the honour of the patriarch and his household. As a largely unwarded investment in the family's reputation, such restrictions may be seen as indicators of the prevalent extent of subordination.

As a perverse consequence of men's mobility in search of livelihoods, in rural northwest Pakistan, constraints on women's circulation in public space may prevent them from accessing appropriate healthcare if their migrating husbands are not around to accompany them to the hospital (fieldwork, Siegmann, 2007). These constraints are often applied more strictly as a consequence of migration, reflecting the higher economic and social status that has been achieved through labour migration (Lefebvre, 1999). A habitus that does not question gendered (im-)mobility norms here endangers the health and even life of female household members as

a sacrifice to the symbolic capital of family honour. The micro-economics of family honour demand a high toll. Restrictions on women's mobility are one aspect of the distressingly high maternal mortality ratio in South Asia as compared to other regions (WHO et al., 2004). Against this fatal background, Bourdieu's (2001) interpretation of women as mere symbolic instruments of men's politics in a power game does not appear exaggerated.

It is therefore important to distinguish vulnerabilities at different levels of analysis in order to access its gender dimensions. Vulnerability at the level of an individual woman may serve to strengthen the resilience of her respective family or clan, tribe, etc. This is because gender norms in Asia often assign women the role of symbolic bearers of family honour without providing direct access to its benefits and communicating their own individual interest at household, local or even national level. The experience of a young Kyrgyz woman may serve as an illustrative example (field-work, Thieme, 2006). She moves in with her in-laws after marriage. After a short period of time, her husband takes off for work in Moscow leaving his wife at the mercy of her in-laws. They exploit her labour power without giving her the rights of a family member. Patri-locality widespread in Asia gives the husband a crucial role in mediating between his parents and his wife. Thus, male out-migration causes a loss of the protection of the daughter-in-law's interest. A person's habitus might generate an unquestioned acceptance of such decreased intra-household bargaining power once her husband has left. She suffers silently in order to protect her biological family's honour. The symbolic capital she has helped accumulate is located at the level of her native family. This investment was associated with considerable emotional and physical stress for her but did not benefit her individual social or economic position.

In Bourdieu's eyes, the notion of social capital equals power and does not necessarily imply a benign understanding of social capital. His analysis of the accumulation of social capital highlights the gendered contributions to and benefits of social networks rooted in structures of masculine domination. It brings to fore the exploitation of women's transformation labour for the production and reproduction of patriarchy – implying higher sensitivities to (e.g. health-related) risks and lack of means for coping with them.

This explains the puzzle of 'empowering exclusion' described earlier. The bonding ties of the family are characterized by a greater degree of masculine domination as compared to extra-household networks. The habitus of women's sacrifice for the family often prevailing in Asian societies – but not limited to them – thus, potentially increases women's individual vulnerability, whereas the benefits of her work and the constraints she is submitted to accrue to the larger network of family and kin.



The bridging social capital of women's extra-household networks, in contrast, entail more potential for collective action as well the possibility of resistance against masculine domination. This is due to the less hierarchical relationships they are often characterized by. The degree of masculine domination as a characteristic of most social fields thus constructs women's vulnerability whereas egalitarian networks of the subordinated may open space for resistance and their improved well-being. Several authors have underlined that a prerequisite for such collective action is consciousness and critique of dominant gender ideologies (Kabeer, 1994; Molyneux, 2002; Rankin, 2002). This undermines the effective, because largely unconscious, inculcation of the structure of social fields in the habitus which then reproduces its power structure.

### **Summary and Outlook**

This article contributes to a critical perspective on the social capital debate by linking it with the notion of vulnerability. In the critical discourse on social capital, little has been said about intra-household relations as a social network of crucial relevance for a gendered understanding of vulnerability. We have contrasted the popular, 'instrumental' approach to social capital with the social theory Bourdieu offers. What appears as puzzles and paradoxes from the perspective of the popular discourse can be read as a coherent whole from the perspective of his notion of social capital.

If the notion of social capital is emptied of its historical, social and spatial dimensions, there is a danger of falling into the trap of ignoring gendered vulnerabilities that may arise due to unequal access to and roles within social networks. Bourdieu's social theory provides a coherent conceptual framework for the feminist analysis of this nexus although he has not explicitly linked his discussion of gendered social capital with vulnerability. His theory allows highlighting the social construction of gendered vulnerability and identifies the investment in symbolic capital of female honour as an indirect outlay in social and, ultimately, economic capital. The gender-differentiated unequal investment and incomplete fungibility, though, makes women not just 'associated members of the club' but mere objects contributing as 'symbolic currency' within social networks often without being able to capitalize on the very relations. This way, social capital becomes an instrument of masculine domination and heightens women's vulnerabilities.

Based on Bourdieu's theory, we therefore suggest a shift from the investigation of women's exclusion from and gender inequality within social networks to an analysis of masculine domination. It appears to be directly associated with the degree of vulnerability that women experience. This

also involves a change of perspective from a particular 'stressor' for vulnerability to the analysis of a social field, with particular focus on the prevalent modes of domination. Methodologically, the importance of the right level of analysis for the investigation of the social capital–vulnerability nexus has been highlighted. As shown in this article, the use of social capital as an instrument of intra-household domination may endanger the well-being of dominated individual household members. The investigation of the role of social networks for vulnerability on one level of analysis thus always implies an analysis of domination between levels.

Regarding the range of applicability of this main argument of the article, it can be said that, on the one hand, it is of general relevance for the nexus between social capital and vulnerability. It can prove particularly fruitful for migration research due to the significance of social networks in enabling migration as well as the relevance of the assumption that migration and remittances actually contribute to reduce individuals', households' and even nations' vulnerabilities. In addition, Bourdieu's notion of social field provides an important conceptual tool. It is the transnational nature of the valuation of migrants' capitals that makes the understanding of the context essential to the analysis. On the other hand, the points raised regarding the association between the degree of domination and vulnerabilities may cross-fertilize the analysis of other types of domination. Age, caste or class, for instance, are other stratifiers of society that intersect with masculine domination. They create a heterogeneity among women and men that was not emphasized in the present article for reasons of conceptual clarity. These divisions may also go hand in hand with hierarchies and subordination between different groups of women and men.

The findings are relevant not just as contributions to an emerging critical literature on social capital but also as criteria for policy formulation. The mainstream discourse on social capital outlined here has been influential for policies and practice in migration management. The simple equation between social capital formation and reduced vulnerability ignores the possible risks for some members of social networks or the risks of being excluded from them and thus potentially endangers the well-being of migrants and their family members. By using domination as a main analytical category, structures of subordination and the associated vulnerabilities are not only described, but avenues for change are also highlighted. As Westermann et al. (2005) have pointed out, it is critical to diagnose the power relations among men and women to be able to influence and facilitate gender relations and dynamics in collective action. A relevant question here is what leads to a change in a habitus that previously supported the reproduction of patriarchy? It has been indicated in this article that consciousness about the field structures of domination

may be a first but crucial step to undermine their effective reproduction. With his Theory of Practice, Bourdieu provides an effective analytical instrument to shed light on the hidden and thus very resilient, dialectics between social structure and social practice. This has practical consequences both for the significance of critical social science research as well as for awareness-raising through local intervention.

## Notes

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1. In this article, we also refer to this approach to social capital as the 'instrumental' or 'popular' discourse on social capital.
2. For a critical assessment of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, see, for example, de Haan and Zoomers (2005).
3. For an overview, see Harriss (2006).
4. Bourdieu (2001) is an exception in this regard.
5. See van Staveren (2002) for an overview.

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