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## Perspectives from Europe, Asia and Africa

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#### **Title**

**Coping on Women's Back**

**Social capital-vulnerability links through a gender lens**

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# COPING ON WOMEN'S BACK

## Social capital-vulnerability links through a gender lens<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Processes of migration are embedded in social networks, more recently conceptualised as social capital, from sending households to migrants' formal and informal associations at their destinations. These processes are often assumed to reduce individuals, households and economies' vulnerabilities and thus attract policy-makers' attention to migration management. The paper aims to conceptualise the gendered interface between social capital and vulnerability. It utilises Bourdieu's notion of social capital as an analytical starting point. To illuminate our conceptual thoughts we refer to empirical examples from migration research from various Asian countries.

Bourdieu's theory highlights the social construction of gendered vulnerability. It goes beyond that by identifying the investment in symbolic capital of female honour as an indirect investment in social and, ultimately, economic capital. This gender-differentiated unequal investment and these capitals' incomplete fungibility, though, makes women not just indirect members of social networks but mere objects contributing as 'symbolic currency' within them, often without being able to capitalise on the very relations. Based on Bourdieu's theory, we suggest a shift from the investigation of women's exclusion from and gender inequality within social networks to an analysis of masculine

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domination. It appears to be directly associated with the degree of vulnerability that women experience.

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## **1. THE MYTH OF STRENGTHENING SOCIAL NETWORKS**

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 migration research. Starting with Tilly and Brown (1967) and Lomnitz (1977), the scholars of the 1970s emphasize the importance of kin and friendship networks in shaping and sustaining internal as well as international migration. These interpersonal ties connect migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in origin and destination. They encourage circular migration and can reduce migration risks (Boyd, 1989; Fawcett, 1989; Massey, 1990; Gurak and Caces, 1992; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993; Goss and Lindquist, 1995; Faist, 1997a, 1997b; Pries, 1999; Thieme, 2006). Migration is often assumed to reduce individuals, households and economies' vulnerabilities and thus attracts policy-makers' attention to migration management.

Social networks have been rediscovered in the development discourse as an answer to vulnerabilities of individuals, households, regions and whole nations. Vulnerability indicates a state of 'defencelessness, insecurity, and exposure to risk, shocks, and stress' (Chambers, 1989)<sup>2</sup>. 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).

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview over vulnerability definitions and concepts, see Cassel-Gintz (2006), Twigg (2001).

Social capital in the form of trust, norms, and networks is celebrated for being the ‘missing link in development’ by some under the aegis of the World Bank (Grootaert, 1998). It 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)<sup>3</sup>. A number of authors find community social networks to reduce approximations of poverty (Grootaert, 2000; Maluccio, Haddad and May, 1999; Narayan and Pritchett, 1999). The bank refers to Robert D. Putnam and his colleagues (1992). They laid the foundation for a collective interpretation of social capital, that is, social capital seen as a property of groups (Beall, 1997; Harriss and de Renzio, 1997). This understanding is in contrast to Putnam’s intellectual forerunners. James S. Coleman (1988) argues that social capital is a resource available to individual actors.

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 ten years (e .g. de Haan and Rogaly, 2002). Despite their popularity and overlap, the two concepts have hardly been related to each other. The World Bank-catalysed research as well as more applied conceptualisations like the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (DFID, 2002; Rakodi and Lloyd-Jones, 2002) have in common, though, that they make a simple equation of more social capital meaning less vulnerability<sup>4</sup>.

A number of authors have rejected such a harmonic reading of social networks<sup>5</sup>. One of the most fundamental criticisms is their ignorance of the ‘downside of social capital’. Putnam’s – and, subsequently, the World Bank’s - collective conceptualisation of social capital ignores that social networks are often based on the exclusion of others. In Portes and Landolt’s (2000:532f) words: ‘(...) the same strong ties that enable group members privileged access to resources, bar others from securing the same assets’. But even in

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<sup>3</sup> Despite the significant role of trust as an aspect of social capital in this current debate, the focus here is on social networks.

<sup>4</sup> For critical assessments of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, see, for example, de Haan and Zoomers (2005).

<sup>5</sup> For a useful overview, see Harriss (2006).

Coleman's writings on social capital, this asset available to individuals is treated as an unmixed blessing (Coleman, 1988).

An focus on spatial entities, such as communities, regions or even whole countries, diverts attention from the privileged access of economic and social elites to social networks and the associated resources (Berner, 2006). Lack of purchasing power or time, for instance, may bar people from participation in or support for social networks of reciprocal help (Das, 2004). Van Staveren and Knorringa (2007) point out that 'bonding social capital', that is, relations between family members, close friends and neighbours, is associated with greater power asymmetries as compared to 'bridging social capital', such as relations to distant friends, colleagues and associates (Gittell and Vidal, 1998). More specifically, according to them, bonding social capital involves a higher degree of exclusion of non-group members. Such inequality again is often explicitly associated with vulnerability (UNISDR, 2002, quoted in Cassel-Gintz, 2006).

Inequality in access to and roles in social networks have distinct gender dimensions. While commonly framed in a gender-neutral language, mobility across national boundaries as well is a highly gendered process. Informal gender norms besides formal legislation define whether women or men move and to which destinations, sectors, and occupations they take off. They also delineate roles considered appropriate for those who stay behind. The nature of patriarchy 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 (Molyneux, 2002; Mayoux, 2001; Riddell, Wilson and Baron, 2001). It also influences the vulnerabilities individuals face. Therefore, an understanding of gender relations and inequalities is necessary for making useful statements about the nexus between social networks 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, 1992, 1986, 1977), which is why his analysis is referred to

below. Although it often does not refer to gender explicitly<sup>6</sup>, his social theory has inspired feminist research a great deal (Krais, 2006; Adkins and Skeggs, 2004; McNay, 1999). This paper therefore explores the role of social networks for vulnerability from a gender perspective by referring to his social theory. Empirical reference is made to migration research from Asia.

The next section gives an overview over findings regarding the gendered nexus between social capital and vulnerability. It highlights asymmetric costs and benefits of as well as dissimilar roles in social networks for females and males. Gender-differentiated investments in social relations with higher demands being placed on female family members are flagged. They both reflect persistent inequalities in women and men's positions within households and contribute to corroborate them. Also, social networks appear as supportive resources in some cases as compared to obstacles for women's empowerment in others. Section 3 outlines Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social capital embedded in his theory of practice. Social capital as an instrument of masculine domination is a core feature of Bourdieu's inconvenient analysis. In section 4, this lens is employed to enhance the analysis of the gendered nexus between social networks and vulnerability. The investment in the symbolic capital of female honour is identified as an indirect investment 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 capitalise on the very networks. Based on his theory, we 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. Section 5 summarises conceptual components for en-gendered research on social capital and vulnerability and puts forward conceptual and methodological benchmarks for future research.

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<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu (2001) is an exception in this regard.

## 2. A GENDERED VIEW OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

The growing feminist literature on the social capital debate has shared the criticism of the naïve equation of social networks as promoting growth as well as reducing poverty and vulnerability<sup>7</sup>. It has gone beyond that, though.

### **Gendered exclusion from ...**

Taking up Portes and Landolt's (2000) point above, various authors have highlighted a gender dimension in the exclusion from social networks. For example, whereas Babar (2006) finds that women tend to outnumber men in organisations formed around community-based disaster management, the situation is reversed in more formalised emergency planning. There, women are not only excluded from decision-making bodies, but also from the text of any significant decisions regarding disaster response (Babar, 2006). Agarwal (2000), investigating gender dimensions of social networks in natural resources management, reports similar results. Even where rules for community forestry groups (CFGs) are not restricting women's entry, especially gender norms and gender-differentiated access to resources become an effective barrier to women's participation. She highlights the implications on distributional equity, amongst others. Whereas, for example, cash benefits from CFGs are commonly accessed by the predominantly male group members who represent their households, they are seldom shared equitably within the family. On the other hand, since the main responsibility for firewood and fodder collection, animal care, cooking etc. falls on women, they also shoulder the burden of finding alternative resources when access to the forest is limited. Mayoux (2001) therefore warns that although households may be important sources of social capital, there is also a need to address the norms which regulate relations within them.

Babar (2006) also narrates the experience of the El Niño in a Peruvian fishing village. The warnings regarding the upcoming El Niño that is commonly associated with thunderstorms and flooding had only reached men, but not women who are in charge of household's budget management in the region. The exclusion from male networks of

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<sup>7</sup> See van Staveren (2002) for a useful overview.

information severely constrained households' ability to recover from the natural disaster as women did not allocate savings as financial buffers (Babar, 2006). Agarwal (2000) points out that such exclusion from male-centered information flows can prove particularly acute in regions of high male outmigration.

Silvey and Elmhirst (2003) describe kin-based networks amongst female labour migrants in Indonesia that prevent them from accessing potentially more powerful associations, such as trade unions, that would enable them to support their interests. Weaker female networks can also be a result of the fewer economic resources that women can typically mobilise. 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 transformation of the gender order in Bangladesh. This is undertaken through demands to install the cultural ideal of '*purdah*', that is, the segregation of sexes, which hampers women's access to paid employment and their (transnational) mobility. If existent, 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**

Gendered roles within social networks also reflect existing gender inequalities. Where women get involved in social networks, their expected contributions to the group are often higher than males', rationalised 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. Interestingly, these networks then serve to reproduce a shared moral framework justifying segregation by gender and caste. Akram-Lodhi (1996) reports similar results from the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) in Pakistan. Women are obliged to provide hospitality to



guests including the preparation of food by the local code of behaviour, *Pakhtunwali*, including the very time-consuming preparation of food. Men, in contrast, attend social meetings while rarely having to put labour on account of such activities. They are the representatives of family honour, though. Silvey and Elmhirst (2003) report young female return migrants 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 point out that this does not indicate that women themselves do not also 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 and in policies. An extensive literature has summarised the role of women as ‘shock absorbers’ for their families in economic crises, for example, triggered through structural adjustment programmes. They often compensated income losses due to other household members’ unemployment, the more costly provision of healthcare through intensified reproductive, subsistence and/or informal work (Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003; Moser, 1998; Elson, 1995; Benéria, 1995; Commonwealth Secretariat, 1989). The gender division of labour, assigning women the responsibility for family provision of resources such as water and fuel wood, makes women more sensitive to the risks involved in shifts from public to private provision of these resources and their degradation (Westermann, Ashby and Pretty, 2005). Moser (1998) emphasises that more time spent on subsistence tasks such as water hauling implies foregone income with negative effects on vulnerability. Benefits for their family and kinship networks were often paid for by greater individual sensitivity to health-related risks (Floro, 1995). Based on the essentialistic assumption that women are predisposed to serve their families or communities, development policies and programmes often target women for voluntary labour and by doing so can unintentionally exacerbate existing social inequalities (Molyneux, 2002). She therefore cautions not to omit the background indicators on poverty, unemployment, malnutrition and child

mortality in the analysis of associational life in which the unpaid labour of women is mobilised as the safety net for irresponsible macro-economic policies.

### **Social capital for coping**

The asymmetries in rights and obligations on the basis of gender, embedded in structures of intra-household domination outlined above translate into differences in the ability to cope with economic difficulties, that is, in resilience (Moser, 1998). However, social networks may contribute to a reduction in vulnerability both with regards to lower sensitivity to shocks and stresses and to 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 the former appear to contribute to women's vulnerability, the latter may play a crucial role in strengthening resilience.

As mentioned above, women often paid a heavy toll for their role as buffers against the negative outfall 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, amongst women, 'everyday forms of cooperation' are more common. She gives the example of 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. 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. On the other hand, 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 curtail women's ability to participate in community-based networks (Rankin, 2002; Kabeer, 1994), such as in large parts of South Asia and the Middle East. Pantoja (2000) cautions that the potential offered by a social network may not imply concrete opportunity to act collectively for the

improvement of well-being if, for example, based on their gender, the members are deprived from the access to and/or control over the necessary resources.

An important area of investigation of the role of women's social networks have been female groups involved in the provision of micro-finance. In the arena of development policies, they have taken a prominent place, assuming to contribute to poverty reduction and empowerment amongst women. Feminist analyses have provided a more varied picture. Group formation in the micro-finance programmes did appear to have strengthened women's ability to negotiate change, but mainly in areas where micro-finance had been explicitly promoted as a means of women's empowerment. Such social and political empowerment may reduce women's sensitivity to economic and other stressors. Where micro-finance programmes have merely used existing forms of social capital to reduce costs, benefits for women have been limited, amongst others, because their control over incomes is severely limited by hierarchical relations within households and kin groups (Mayoux, 2001).

Contrary to the dominant discourse on the positive significance of access to network resources, Hart (1991) notes that the exclusion of females from official politics may actually entail an emancipatory potential. While men in rural Malaysia were hired as individual agricultural workers, women workers organised 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-à-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, whereas women were largely excluded from these relations. Dannecker (2005) describes credit systems of women in Bangladesh that developed parallel to existing ones which excluded women. These associations played a crucial role in enabling female migration and safe investments of female returnees. Several authors have underlined that a pre-requisite for such empowering

collective action is consciousness and critique of dominant cultural ideologies (Rankin, 2002; Molyneux, 2002; Kabeer, 1994).

The emerging picture from this review is that feminist writings on social capital have rejected the mainstream stance that social capital 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 females and males. Paradoxically, women appear to invest in social capital without being able to capitalise on it. 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 (Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003; Rankin, 2002; van Staveren, 2002; Mayoux, 2001). Despite this magnified image of the underbelly of social capital, they also specify the empowering potential that social networks have to offer. The collective action of the disempowered would thus change their sensitivity and 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 (Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003; Molyneux, 2002), some throughout (Rankin, 2002; Risseuw, 1991). In the section that follows, we present salient features of Bourdieu's work that may be used for a more systematic investigation of the social capital-vulnerability nexus from a gender perspective.

### **3. OUTLINE OF BOURDIEU'S 'THEORY OF PRACTICE'**

#### **Social and other capitals**

Bourdieu uses the economic term 'capital' to show that relationships and exchanges within a society cannot only be reduced to economic rationales such as the exchange of goods, material self-interest and profit maximisation (Bourdieu, 1986). 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, 1986: 242; Mahar et al., 1990).

He distinguishes between economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital, but acknowledges that other forms of capital can be taken into account. They can be transformed into one another, not automatically but through transformation work in the form of time and energy (Bourdieu, 1986). Individuals acquire prestige and/or access to patronage through strategic action, in particular by forming groups and alliances, with the eventual goal of getting material benefits. In turn, money can be used to acquire respect and obedience from others (Berner, 2006). Though Bourdieu (1986) insists that the outcomes of possession of social or cultural capital are always reducible to economic capital, the processes that bring about these alternative forms are not (Portes, 1998). 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 legitimisation of other kinds of capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Schwingel, 1995: 92-3). He sees the accumulation of symbolic capital as, probably, the most valuable form of accumulation in a society in which, for example, the severity of the climate and the limited resources demand collective efforts (Bourdieu, 1977).

According to Bourdieu (1986: 248-249) 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, 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 institutionalised through multiple forms of interactions between members. An institutionalisation is needed to produce and reproduce useful and lasting relations, which provide access to resources. To put it in

Bourdieu's terms, a network of social relations is the product of individual and collective investment strategies, which intended or unintended sustain and create social relations, which promise sooner or later a benefit (Bourdieu 1986:249-252). For instance, relations in an extended family in mountainous Pakistan cultivated through joint festivities such as weddings may one day be the collective provider of a loan to fund a visa to Dubai and thus the entry ticket for the Emirate's labour market (fieldwork Siegmann, 2007).

More or less institutionalised forms of delegation of social capital exist in all groups, though (Bourdieu, 1986: 251). 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 the power which the group enables him or her to concentrate. One might think of the patriarch's unquestioned legitimacy to represent his family in a meeting to take decisions on behalf of his family but also to sanction lapsing family members. Bourdieu (2001: 45) specifies the role of women in the accumulation of social capital. Their reputation and, especially, their chastity constitutes a 'fetishised measure of masculine reputation' and thus a 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 not as benign and harmonious but as inherently conflictual and contradictory. Social capital is rather understood as an instrument of power and domination (Bourdieu, 1977; Harriss, 2006). In his 'theory of practice' he clarifies the modes of domination inherent in some forms of reciprocity and association. First, a theory of the economics of practice highlights the role not only of individual self-interest, but also of class interest in the logic of reciprocity. Among equals, gifting and acts of generosity provide an economic guarantee because they oblige a return. Among those of unequal status, however, gifting and other modes of reciprocity generate affective bonds that obfuscate the hierarchical nature of social relationships. Secondly, gestures of giving and kindness can in fact function as a form of domination, a 'symbolic violence' with the pernicious effect of binding the oppressed to their

oppressors through feelings of trust and obligation. Thirdly, to the extent that such forms of social bonding and associational life generate common values or a moral community; one may question how such values operate as forms of power within culture (Rankin, 2002). This reading of Bourdieu goes beyond a ‘downside of social capital’ that emphasises 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 and Waquant 1992: 98; Bourdieu, 1986: 243). This conceptualisation of social and other capitals as relative and socially constructed denotes a major difference to the notion of capital within the mainstream social capital and livelihoods literature. Bourdieu understands a field as a network of objective relations between social positions (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992: 97). The structure and order of a social field is composed of the availability of multiple forms of capitals, which agents possess. They condition the position of an actor in relation to other social actors within a social field (Mahar et al. 1990: 8). Social fields are, for example, education, science, economy, or politics.

The market for migrant labour can be considered as a social field. Being labour migrants, women and men experience that, depending on the context, their skills become valued on different scales. A former Russian teacher from a Kyrgyz village school might not be able to use her language proficiency for upward mobility in Moscow’s labour market (fieldwork Thieme, 2006). The depreciation of her cultural capital causes a loss of power, 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 (Mahar 1990, Dörfler et al. 2003,). Therefore, Bourdieu’s leading theoretical claim is that his work transcends the dualism between

explanations that attribute social change and social reproduction to certain overarching structures and theorizations that privilege individual subjective intention and experience (Painter, 2000; Dörfler et al., 2003; Bridge, 2004). The habitus, or a person's incorporated history, is a socially and culturally conditioned set of durable dispositions or propensities for social actions and thus a product of history. Habitus generates practice and limits people's possibilities at the same time, but it is only in the relation to certain structures that habitus produces given practices (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992: 135).

Bourdieu claims that through the habitus, large scale social inequalities are established through the subtle inculcation of power relations upon the dispositions of individuals (McNay, 1999: 99). Gender is one of the most powerful social hierarchies embodied 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 rather be the result of strategic behaviour of the disadvantaged, such as women and the young. It could be their only chance of neutralising 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 the Asian contexts suggests that women recognise male domination as ideology, but also comply in strategic ways that ensure their own and their children's security (Rankin, 2002, Agarwal, 1997; Hart, 1991).

Depending on the field, the very same habitus might thus generate different outcomes. 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, but it might also force or encourage a woman to negotiate her interests without any husband's mediation. Although Bourdieu's focus clearly is on the (re-)production of a certain social



order, he also acknowledges 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*, inasmuch 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). The conflicting experiences that are inscribed in women’s habitus may, as a consequence, explain their revolt against masculine domination in modern society (Krais, 2006).

#### **4. SOCIAL CAPITAL AND MASCULINE DOMINATION**

##### **From gender inequality to masculine domination**

Bourdieu’s social theory enables us to read the emerging puzzling picture of the nexus between social capital and vulnerability described in section 2 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 above, women provide a significant share of labour for the transformation of economic into social capital (Rankin, 2002; Akram-Lodhi, 1996) as well as the generation of economic capital. The latter is done through drawing either on female social networks, for instance, in the area of micro-finance (Mayoux, 2001) or disproportionate female investment in order to buffer the harmful effects of economic crises (Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003; Elson, 1995). 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). Such networks might even decide about their fates. The exclusively male *jirgas*, that is, a decision making assembly of male elders, in North-west Pakistan, for example, often take on a judicial role. Often, women are not even directly entitled to capitalise on the same

social networks, for example, in the form of information flows (Babar, 2006; Agarwal, 2000). Such indirect access to network resources as ‘associated members of the club’ is an expression of their subordination.

This asymmetry can be explained with recurrence to Bourdieu’s concept of social capital. In ‘Masculine domination’ (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 capitalisation of social networks described above can be explained with what Bourdieu (1986) terms the ‘paradox of delegation’: The patriarch may not be the one who has invested most but can nonetheless utilise the network’s capital for reproduction of his dominant role within. As the household’s main decision-maker, he is legitimised to utilise 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 amongst all actors in the respective social field. As a consequence, females’ contribution to the production and reproduction of the social network in the form of, for instance, her inputs in the form of time, labour and restrictions placed on her related to the family’s repute, may be considered merely instrumental.

Section 2 has confronted us with another seeming contradiction of social networks as supportive resources in some cases versus as obstacles for women’s empowerment in others. 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 on their resilience. On the other hand, women’s exclusion from specific types of social networks may actually create possibilities for empowerment (Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003; Hart, 1991).

As indicated above, 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 are aspects of a social field in which a struggle for power and domination takes place. They 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 characterised by internal inequality as concisely summarised 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 female migrants in Indonesia from occupational networks that might improve their bargaining power and, thus, working conditions might serve as an illustrative example for such domination *through* social capital (Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003).

Conversely, the empowering potential depends on the extent of domination prevalent in social networks. 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. Similar to her, Bourdieu (1992) underlines 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. Thieme and Mueller-Boeker (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 societies provide them with access to financial capital and reduce their husbands' domination. 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, thus, as the degree to which an individual or group of actors is affected by an external event, can be associated with the validation of capitals within a social field. Depending on the change of social field or aspects thereof, capitals become newly valued. Some might lose their significance and thus lead to a loss of power. Others might gain importance and thus might 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 qualification (fieldwork Thieme, 2007, 2006). Cultural capital was thus depreciated. Consequently, former physicians, lawyers and teachers from Kyrgyzstan are now involved in petty trade and street cleaning in Russia and Kazakhstan. A resource that was an effective buffer against unemployment previously had suddenly lost its relevance.

The same endowment with capitals that influences sensitivity in a given social field determines the ability to react to a problematic event or stress or adapt to a change of or in a social field. People might be able to react differently once damage is experienced. Again, this capacity is influenced or depends on the activated capitals one can build on in a given social field. Besides capitals, the accumulated history of an individual, the habitus, also has a role to play. Through the interplay between habitus and capitals in a given social field, opportunities for successful reaction to the negative experience might be limited or widened. In the context of post-socialist structural change in Central Asia mentioned above, women increasingly faced disadvantages in the labour market due to their lack of access to economically relevant social networks. The gender gap in education below tertiary level was virtually closed in socialist times (UNDP RBEC and CIS, 2005). Concurrently, traditional ascriptions of 'male breadwinners' and 'female homemakers' re-gained importance. As a result, female 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 coverage of expenses for health care, 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 result 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, such as 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 above, social capital means power and can become an instrument to produce and reproduce female subordination, such as in the case of male migrants' networks described by Dannecker (2005). For gender-specific vulnerability, this implies that the extent of domination within a particular social network defines the extent of vulnerability. For example, the reduction in male family labour available to a household paralleling migration from South Asia to, for example, the Gulf States is buffered by a re-shuffling of workload within the household or external hiring (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. It is often legitimised with the Islamic concept of *pardah*. As a largely unrewarded investment in the family's reputation, such restrictions may be seen as indicators of the prevalent extent of subordination. If comparatively liberal mobility norms are applied in the respective setting, this may mean more work for the remaining female household members or reduced mobility. For instance, Kaspar (2005) describes a significant increase in Nepali migrant wives' workload after their husbands have left for greener pastures abroad. It is likely that the increased burden affects their sensitivity to health risks negatively.

As a perverse consequence of males' mobility, in rural North-west 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). A habitus that does not question gendered (im-)mobility norms here endangers health and even life of female household members as a sacrifice for the symbolic capital of family honour. Simultaneously with the constraints on women's circulation, their ability to cope with health risks is thus severely curtailed. The micro-economics of family honour demand a high toll. Restrictions on female mobility are one aspect of the distressingly high maternal mortality ratio in South Asia as compared to other regions (WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA, 2004). Against this fatal background, Bourdieu's (2001: 43) interpretation of women as mere symbolic instruments of male 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 or may not go in hand with vulnerability of her respective family or clan, tribe etc. This is because gender norms in Asia often assign women a role of symbolic bearer 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 (fieldwork Thieme, 2006). She moves to her in-laws after marriage and, after a short period of time, her husband takes off for Moscow without informing the family and leaves his family to the mercy of her in-laws. They exploit her labour power without giving her the rights of a family member. She suffers silently in order to protect her biological family's honour. The symbolic capital she has helped accumulating is located at the level of her native family. This investment that was associated with considerable emotional and physical stress for her as an individual did not benefit her own social or economic position, though.

In Bourdieu's eyes, the notion of social capital equals power. He goes beyond a monolithic understanding of social capital, though. 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 the fore the exploitation of women's transformation labour for the production and reproduction of patriarchy—implying higher sensitivities for (e.g. health-related) risks and lack of means for coping with them.

This explains the puzzle of empowering exclusion described above. The bonding ties of the family are characterised by a greater degree of masculine domination as compared to extra-household networks. The habitus of female sacrifice for the family often prevailing in Asian societies – but not limited to them, thus, potentially increases women's individual vulnerability whereas 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 empowering potential as well the possibility of resistance against 'masculine domination'. This is due to the less hierarchical relationships they are characterised by. The degree of masculine domination as a characteristic of most social fields thus constructs females' vulnerability whereas egalitarian networks of the subordinated may open space for resistance and their improved well-being.

## **5. SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK**

This article contributes to a critical perspective on the social capital debate by linking it with the notion of vulnerability. Whereas the conceptualisation of social capital as a collective property of nations, regions or communities has received critical attention, much less has been said about the household as a social network of crucial relevance for a gendered understanding of vulnerability.

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. It goes beyond that by identifying 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 capitalise on the very relations. This way, social capital becomes an instrument of masculine domination and heightens women's vulnerabilities.

Based on his 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 social capital-vulnerability nexus has been highlighted.

Regarding the range of applicability of this main argument of the paper, 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. On the other hand, the points raised regarding the association between the degree of domination and vulnerabilities may cross-fertilise the analysis of other types of domination. Age, caste or positions in relations of production, for instance, are other stratifiers of society that intersect with masculine domination and also go hand in hand with hierarchies and subordination.



The findings are relevant not just as contributions to an emerging critical literature on social capital but also as criteria for policy formulation. 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, Ashby and Pretty (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? These determinants to be identified, for example, in the study of deviant cases that break with the norm would then help to design policies to strengthen women's resilience.

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