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Cummings, S.J.R.

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# Chapter 9

## A dynamic framework for strengthening women's social capital: strategies for community development in rural Bangladesh

### Abstract

Social capital contributes to the alleviation of poverty but evidence on how to strengthen it remains scarce. This article describes strategies to strengthen social capital developed by a non-governmental organization (NGO) and women as part of a development programme in rural Bangladesh between 2006 and 2012. The NGO and the women involved leveraged bonding (familial), bridging (peers) and linking (vertical links to powerholders) social capital in efforts to improve women's livelihoods, simultaneously changing household- and community-level gender relations. Against a background of local norms and ethics, the NGO and the women employed strategies that created opportunities for women to meet and exchange, and develop their social skills, know-how, self-worth and capacity to act. Drawing on these strategies, the article presents a dynamic framework for strengthening social capital for community development, providing theoretical insights into the mechanisms for doing so.

## 9.1 Introduction

Bangladesh is one of the world's poorest countries, ranked 142 of 187 countries in terms of human development (UNDP, 2015). Women bear a disproportionate burden of poverty, demonstrated by high levels of gender inequality (UNDP, 2015). Women have fewer resources, and little or no access to networks, banks, and other private and public institutions. They are subject to constraints on their mobility and participation in public life because of the social norm of female seclusion, *purdah* (Mair and Marti, 2009) which limits women's ability to leave their home alone or to work. Against this background, it is very difficult for rural women to escape poverty.

Social capital, 'the aggregate of the actual and potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network' (Bourdieu, 1986: 248) is recognized as having the capacity to alleviate poverty through development interventions which include micro-credit, agricultural production and marketing, environmental protection and knowledge networking (Seferiadis et al., 2015). In Bangladesh, for example, social capital has been found to facilitate organization of waste collection by slum residents (Pargal, Gillian and Huq, 2002), to strengthen women's assets in terms of the diffusion of agricultural technologies (Quisumbing and Kumar, 2011), and to play a role in improving livelihoods and food security (Ali, 2005). Social capital can, however, make women more vulnerable and expose them to greater gender-based discrimination (Thieme and Siegmann, 2010; Molyneux, 2002) and restrict individual freedom in contexts of *purdah* (Andrist, 2008). Some micro-credit interventions have been shown to make women more vulnerable by building on negative aspects of social capital (Rozario, 2002) while efforts to strengthen women's social capital in the Farmer Field School project in Bangladesh were not sustainable due to lack of male support (Islam et al., 2004). Although social capital is associated with many positive effects, especially in terms of poverty alleviation, evidence on how social capital can be strengthened by development interventions remains scarce (Seferiadis et al., 2015; Grootaert, 2001).

This article is concerned with the strategies that community development projects can use to strengthen social capital as a means to alleviate poverty. It is based on a development programme in the rural Jessore District in Bangladesh, undertaken between 2006 and 2012 by the local non-governmental organisation (NGO), PRIDE. The research question this article addresses is: What types of social capital have been used and which strategies have been developed to strengthen women's social capital for poverty alleviation in rural Bangladesh? Following a literature review, the paper presents the programme's methodology and learning phases. The strategies developed by the NGO and by women are presented in the section on results. Drawing on these strategies, the article develops a dynamic framework for strengthening social capital for community development, providing theoretical insights into the mechanisms that achieve this. The framework can also support NGOs in their efforts to strengthen women's social capital for poverty alleviation.

## 9.2 Social capital and community development

Scholars locate social capital at different levels. For example, Lin (1999) locates it at the individual level and Putnam (1993) at the community level. As reviewed by Halpern (2005),

social capital is located at three levels: *micro*, at the individual level; *meso*, at the community level; and *macro*, at the societal level. Moreover, social capital can promote development through different functional sub-types. As Granovetter argued, ties are of different strengths depending on the ‘(probably) linear combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie’ (1973: 1361). Varying uses are associated with these strengths: for example, weak ties can be an asset in seeking employment (Granovetter, 1973). Intra-community ties are most useful for poor entrepreneurs at the start-up phase, while extra-community ties become most valuable when enterprises grow (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). The three functional sub-types of social capital comprise bonding, bridging and linking. At the micro level, bonding refers to the familial networks, bridging to the networks with peers, and linking to the vertical networks with powerholders (Halpern, 2005).

Some researchers have conceptualized mechanisms of social capital production in development projects. According to Uphoff (1999), structural and cognitive phenomena are the ‘mechanisms by which social capital is built up and accumulated, stored, modified, expressed, and perpetuated’ (Uphoff, 1999: 219), hence they are ‘specific things that can be identified and invested in’ (Uphoff, 1999: 220). Structural social capital enables mutually beneficial collective actions through roles and rules, and social relationships; while cognitive social capital consists of norms, values, attitudes and beliefs which predispose people towards collective action and cooperation (Uphoff, 1999). Cilliers and Wepener (2007), building on Ammerman (1999), identified four mechanisms that strengthen social capital in South Africa, related to church attendance rather than to development interventions. In a literature review based on these mechanisms and a further review of the literature on social capital for poverty alleviation, Seferiadis and colleagues (2015) identify four categories of social capital which appear to strengthen social capital for poverty alleviation, namely the material level of structural opportunities, a sense of belonging, civic literacy, and the ethos of mutuality. This paper focuses on strategies to strengthen social capital developed by a development programme, rather than mechanisms which strengthen social capital. However, we hypothesize that the mechanisms are being leveraged by the strategies, and will briefly reflect on this in the discussion.

### 9.3 The development programme and its methodology

The development programme aimed to reduce rural poverty in Jessore District. It was implemented by the local NGO, PRIDE, which employed an action–research methodology: the Interactive Learning and Action approach (Bunders, 1990). Each year involved one learning cycle: monitoring and evaluation (M&E) resulted in adaptations in the following year. The programme went through a number of phases: reconnaissance, experimentation, implementation and scaling up (for further details see, for example, Maas, 2013; Maas et al., 2014; 2014a; 2014b; 2014c).

#### 9.3.1 Learning phases

In the **reconnaissance phase** (2004–2006), the local context was analysed, the research team was established, and perspectives, needs, interests and knowledge of different stakeholders

were analysed and integrated through focus group discussions (FGDs) and visualization techniques in villages.

In the **experimentation phase** (2006–2008), two women were identified in different villages who were already relatively successful compared to other people in their village: they were already engaged in some income-generating activities (IGAs), were well-known to others, and had been in contact with other NGOs in the past. These women were invited to experiment with new IGAs, such as home-based gardening and poultry-rearing, in order to achieve a higher income for themselves and others in the community. They were also paid a small salary for their activities in the programme. These women were called intermediaries and the people they involved in their network activities were known as their beneficiaries.

In 2007, four additional female intermediaries were included in the programme. Based on the lessons learnt, PRIDE trained these women in the knowledge and skills required to conduct IGAs and to disseminate them to their network of beneficiaries. In 2008, 15 more women were included in the programme. They experimented with new IGAs, such as handicrafts and sewing.

In the course of 2008–2009, all intermediaries were able to generate revenue from their activities. This led to the launch of the **implementation phase** (2008–2009). In 2009, 32 additional women were selected and trained as intermediaries, without being paid. Payment to the original intermediaries from the experimentation phase was also stopped but none of the women dropped out, suggesting that the programme was beneficial to them. Drawing on previous learning cycles, the **scaling-up phase** was started in 2010. From this phase onwards, the programme explicitly took a social entrepreneurship approach and focused only on the role of the intermediaries who had become ‘social entrepreneurs’, as can be seen in Table 9.1.

### 9.3.2 Methodology

During the annual learning cycles, various M&E tools were used. During the reconnaissance phase, we used in-depth interviews and FGDs to understand obstacles and opportunities for development. During the experimentation stage, PRIDE staff and the intermediaries believed that social capital was an essential resource for development of the poor. In order to investigate the mechanisms underlying the strengthening of social capital during the implementation stage, we adopted the photo-voice methodology (Wang et al., 1996). Cameras were distributed to intermediaries and beneficiaries, who were asked to portray ‘what has changed in your life since the NGO came to your village?’ Women were then invited to consider the photographs in FGDs. We also carried out in-depth interviews and questionnaire surveys. An evaluation was undertaken during the scaling-up stage.

The study also involved observations by the first author of the intermediaries and the beneficiaries, including visits to their garden or participation in handicraft or cooking activities. We also drew on data from the NGO’s internal documents and observations of its working practices, including participation in training sessions for intermediaries and in mapping activities. In total, this article draws on 111 in-depth interviews, 30 FGDs and 98

questionnaires; participants included NGO staff, intermediaries and their beneficiaries, but also community members (see Table 9.1).

**Table 9.1 An overview of data-collection during programme phases**

Respondents	PRIDE	Intermediaries			Beneficiaries			Community members
		Experimental phase	Implementation phase	Scaling-up phase	Experimental phase	Implementation phase	Scaling-up phase	
<b>Data collection period: Experimentation phase</b>								
In-depth interviews	1	1			8			23
FGDs	7	1			1			2
<b>Data collection period: Implementation phase</b>								
In-depth interviews	1	4	7		2	14		2
Photovoice FGD		2	2		2	2		
Photovoice participants		5	7		6	5		
Questionnaires		25	38		2	6		1
Participatory mapping								5
Training observation	2		2					
<b>Data collection period: Scaling-up phase</b>								
Questionnaires				26				
Monthly reports				24				
In-depth interviews	11			20				17
FGDs				4				18

## 9.4 Strengthening different types of social capital

This section first considers the processes of strengthening social capital within the programme before going on to the next section to describe strategies for strengthening social capital.

The programme strengthened participants' social capital at the level of the functional sub-types identified earlier, namely bonding, bridging and linking capital, at different stages of the programme.

#### 9.4.1 Bonding social capital

Family bonds appeared to be essential during the experimentation stage: women who lacked their family's support (especially of their husband and in-laws) would be forbidden to work, while women who were successful in engaging in IGAs reported this was possible thanks to the support of their family. Different strategies were experimented with, one of the most important being to deal effectively with *purdah*: only intermediaries needed to leave their home to take part and all IGAs were home-based.

During the implementation stage, both intermediaries and beneficiaries reported that their husband and in-laws had started to have 'faith' in them. Some also described a change in their domestic bargaining power, which is of considerable significance in a context where strong power imbalances are common within the household, as can be seen from this beneficiary's story from the photo-voice methodology:

In this photograph, you can see me, my husband and my daughter (...) On this photograph, we are together taking the decision about sending our daughter to school to class six and on how we are going to pay for this. Before I was dependent on my husband, and now he takes suggestions from me. As I am a beneficiary (of the programme) and earning money, we now take decisions together. (beneficiary)

Hence, strategies to strengthen bonding social capital appeared to be successful and were applied in the next phase. In this scaling-up phase, intermediaries reported that their families were initially strongly discouraging but, with the intermediaries' success, including their capacity to earn money, they became more favourably disposed, with some husbands even helping them in their activities.

#### 9.4.2 Bridging social capital

From observations during the experimentation stage, PRIDE assessed that bridging social capital is valuable to poor people because it gives them 'power as group': women help each other to strengthen their capacities but also mediate access to resources. Hence, different strategies were trialled. The importance of strengthening the participants' bridging capital was evident in the photographs taken during a photo-voice activity carried out during the implementation stage in 2010. Nearly half of the 346 photographs taken by intermediaries and beneficiaries display other people (for example, other women or family members), while more than 20% show the participant with another person, often someone she is helping.

In the discussions following the photo-voice activities, all intermediaries reported having interacted with beneficiaries they did not know before. Half of the beneficiaries of the first two phases also reported such changes in the extent of their networks. Social exchanges increased during the programme: women helping each other and also exchanging materials, giving seeds or vegetables to each other, and earning gradually through these exchanges. Both intermediaries and their beneficiaries not only indicated that they have extended their bridging social capital by knowing other women but also explained that their relationships with other women were 'better' and more 'intimate/close.'

### 9.4.3 Linking social capital

During the experimental stage, it became evident that women need to develop links with local powerholders who could, on the one hand, impede women's development and, on the other, provide access to resources. Religious leaders can forbid women to work outside the home; rich men can provide access to land; and NGOs can provide access to knowledge; while elected officials of the village council (*Shalish*) can mediate with other actors.

During the learning cycles, different strategies to strengthen linking social capital were piloted. With the assistance of PRIDE, intermediaries were able to use linking social capital with powerholders to mediate access to resources for their beneficiaries, such as land or access to health care. The intermediaries also negotiated with teachers and elected local government officials to help their beneficiaries. During the scaling-up phase, it became clear that linking social capital was the most difficult to accumulate.

## 9.5 Strategies to strengthen social capital

During the programme, a number of strategies have been identified through which PRIDE and the women themselves strengthened social capital. These are considered below in terms of strategies consistent with norms and ethics, strategies which create opportunities, strategies that develop women's social skills and know-how, and strategies which develop women's self-worth and capacity to act.

### 9.5.1 Strategies consistent with norms and ethics

#### 9.5.1.1 Working in harmony with norms and customs

PRIDE staff were aware of local customs, such as *purdah*, which prevent women from going outside the home. In recognition of this, from the start of the experimentation stage, the IGAs could be undertaken at home. In the implementation stage, an intermediary explained during a FGD how she organized her activities with her beneficiaries in order to comply with local norms:

We plan meetings at times when it doesn't get in our husband's way. (beneficiary)

As this quote shows, women sought to avoid conflict with local norms. Rather than confronting dominant norms and customs, in particular *purdah*, PRIDE encouraged women to engage in home-based IGAs that were acceptable to their family and local powerholders, representing bonding and linking social capital respectively. In this way, the programme strengthened shared norms and hence avoided severing women from their social capital. From the implementation stage onwards, however, some degree of empowerment was observed. In the scaling-up stage, it had become more socially acceptable for women to seek change.

#### 9.5.1.2 Selecting change agents with more freedom of movement

During the implementation stage, PRIDE observed that husbands and in-laws could forbid women from leaving the house and taking part in the programme, and that these restrictions were more likely to apply to young or recently married women. PRIDE gradually learned that women over 25 years of age and widows had more freedom of movement than younger

women who might be hassled by men if they moved around the village or had young children. In response, PRIDE developed criteria for selecting intermediaries, change agents needing to leave their home.

#### **9.5.1.3 Developing trust**

PRIDE established relationships of trust with powerholders and developed its capacity to transfer its acquired linking social capital to intermediaries. PRIDE facilitated intermediaries' contacts in their respective villages with elected local government officials, such as the chair and members of the Union Council and teachers, but also with entrepreneurs and other NGOs. PRIDE leveraged its village-level social capital, making it accessible to the intermediaries. For example, PRIDE invited powerholders to come to training sessions and also initially accompanied the intermediaries to talk to them. In interviews during the scaling-up phase, powerholders said that they started to trust PRIDE because of regular staff visits and because of the way in which they were directly involved.

#### **9.5.1.4 Engaging with resistance**

Although working in harmony with norms and customs, it was also necessary for the NGO to deal with resistance or potential opposition. During the experimentation and implementation phases, PRIDE developed strategies to establish connections with the powerholders, investing time in regular visits and also actively involving them. PRIDE's staff engaged with the local elite before starting a village programme, explaining it, and preventing elite capture of resources. They also actively engaged them in the participatory mapping. From the start, PRIDE learnt to involve women's families. PRIDE staff contacted the families of proposed intermediaries to secure their support, and also negotiated with husbands and in-laws to gain their cooperation *before* asking women whether they wanted to participate. For the beneficiaries, intermediaries tried to mediate the families' cooperation, and some even mediated within the private sphere of domestic problems.

#### **9.5.1.5 Ethos of mutuality**

During the experimentation phase, intermediaries received a small allowance so they could help their respective beneficiaries. From the implementation phase onwards, intermediaries were no longer paid because the IGAs had become profitable but they continued to 'help' and 'share' with other women. When the women described their social exchanges, they explained them as being based on altruism. Women's accounts show that they strive to enable others to improve, as they themselves have done. Hence not only do intermediaries help and share with their beneficiaries, but also beneficiaries also help and share with others, saying that they value providing good advice to others: 'I feel happy that I am giving suggestions' and 'I do this for their improvement, and they have reported to me that they have improved'. As 'everyone is happy to help' and making gifts explained as part of the culture, this norm of altruism or mutuality was not created by the programme but was already present and drawn upon during the learning cycles, as the programme provided the opportunity for the exchange of gifts and gradually developed into an approach that stimulated social entrepreneurship. As mentioned in the theoretical section, Cilliers and Wepener (2007) identified this mechanism as the ethos of mutuality.

## 9.5.2 Strategies that create opportunities

### 9.5.2.1 Opportunities to meet other women

PRIDE brought intermediaries and beneficiaries together to receive training in IGAs. For the first time, this gave women opportunities to meet other women. This served a triple purpose: women could learn about IGAs, exchange knowledge about their challenges and possible solutions, and extend their social networks among their peers. In particular, this gave women the opportunity to accumulate bridging social capital. Cilliers and Wepener (2007) also identified this as the material level of structural opportunity to meet.

### 9.5.2.2 Opportunities to make social exchanges

At the start of the experimentation phase, the intermediaries received seeds from PRIDE to start vegetable and seed production. They distributed seeds to their beneficiaries and, after the harvest, returned seeds to PRIDE. All intermediaries were involved in these exchanges and even beneficiaries started distributing seeds. These exchanges occurred along different reciprocity patterns. A primary type of exchange represented classical market exchange and/or barter between the beneficiaries and the intermediaries. Gradually, however, intermediaries, beneficiaries and neighbours started exchanging seeds and vegetables, calling them 'gifts', saying explicitly that these are 'different from a "contract" as they are from the heart'. As one beneficiary put it: 'giving gifts increases the relations between neighbours'. Gifts initiate relationships, leading to further dissemination of skills and goods, such as the inaugural gift of seeds from intermediaries to beneficiaries. The programme created structural opportunities to exchange gifts, and thus stimulated bridging social capital.

A second pattern of exchanges encompassed an expectation of return (women say there is 'duty' and a 'responsibility' to make gifts or help others) while there was a denial that this expectation existed. This clearly corresponds to Bourdieu's (1986) description of exchanges that build social capital. This pattern was prevalent between the beneficiaries and intermediaries but also between the neighbours and beneficiaries. Exchanges with flexibility on the timeframe of exchange and with whom reciprocity is enacted take place in 'balanced reciprocity' (Sahlén, 1972). In the scaling-up stage, the approach became explicitly a social entrepreneurship approach, strengthening patterns of exchanges that included gifts and barter but also financial exchanges.

## 9.5.3 Developing social skills and know-how

### 9.5.3.1 Pre-existing social and networking skills

During the implementation phase, PRIDE developed a set of criteria to identify women who could become successful intermediaries. The criteria evolved to include 'having the ability to make friends' and 'good networking skills', both capacities that would facilitate the development of social capital, and 'without communalism' so as to not foster closed religion-based networks. Based on these criteria, PRIDE started searching for women with the capacity to develop a social network, even if they did not yet have one. In this way, PRIDE developed criteria to identify women with capacities to build fruitful social capital.

### **9.5.3.2 Know-how of social interaction**

During the implementation phase, PRIDE trained intermediaries in how to invite people, form groups and hold group meetings. In addition, PRIDE facilitated the first group meetings and initially accompanied the intermediaries during their daily activities: meeting their beneficiaries and conducting the IGAs. PRIDE then gradually reduced its direct involvement and helped the intermediaries to become independent, supporting them until they had the skills and the social capital necessary for their activities. Cilliers and Wepener (2007) identified this process as civic literacy.

### **9.5.3.3 Know-who of social interaction**

In addition to developing know-how on how to facilitate social interaction, participants also learned with whom to engage, for example with rich men in order to hire land. In many cases, beneficiaries would seek the intervention of the intermediary, while in turn PRIDE supported intermediaries. This is a particularly important mechanism for strengthening linking capital. Know-who also played an important role in engaging with resistance, although this specific strategy relates more to the participants' knowledge than to PRIDE's strategy.

### **9.5.3.4 Know-how of motivational leadership**

PRIDE also supported intermediaries in developing motivational leadership skills in which they would enable other women to become change agents. This is strongly linked to the next category of self-worth and capacity to act.

## **9.5.4 Developing women's self-worth and capacity to act**

### **9.5.4.1 Capital of recognition**

In the experimentation phase, different strategies were experimented with to develop the poor. During the implementation phase, intermediaries said that they appreciated being 'known to many', 'valued' and 'loved', and having 'more strength'. Beneficiaries also appreciated being better valued and known. As one beneficiary noted, 'I am more valued because what I say is right'. Such recognition was not limited to other women of similar socio-economic status but also to the village powerholders. Women's social status was enhanced by the recognition of their contribution to the community. This higher social status facilitated further impact as this quote from an intermediary shows:

We are more known so people give importance to what we are saying so other women are also able to develop themselves. (intermediary)

As a result of their enhanced status, the women are able to participate more effectively in the improvement of others because there is a demand for their knowledge: 'women come and ask' and people 'listen' to their advice. Hence the programme strengthened women's place within the community. During the scaling-up phase, this symbolic capital was strengthened and it also, in turn, strengthened entrepreneurs' social capital.

### **9.5.4.2 Becoming a change agent**

From the first learning cycle, intermediaries were stimulated to lead change in their village. As intermediaries reported, they started helping and sharing only after they had gained the

confidence to do so. From 2008, this confidence was developed during training sessions with other intermediaries. The intermediaries also had to acquire the capacity to motivate other women. Beneficiaries report that before the programme, women were ‘not so interested’ or ‘not so curious’ about profit but that their attitudes have now changed. The intermediaries and beneficiaries often used the word ‘inspire’ to describe this first step of dissemination. There is a transformation in the women’s attitudes: more positive, with more strength and more energy, they work more. Women claimed that what occurs is a shift from ‘having the will’ to ‘knowing the way’, as exemplified by this beneficiary’s account:

I had the will in my mind before but I didn’t know the way. Now I have many ways.  
(beneficiary)

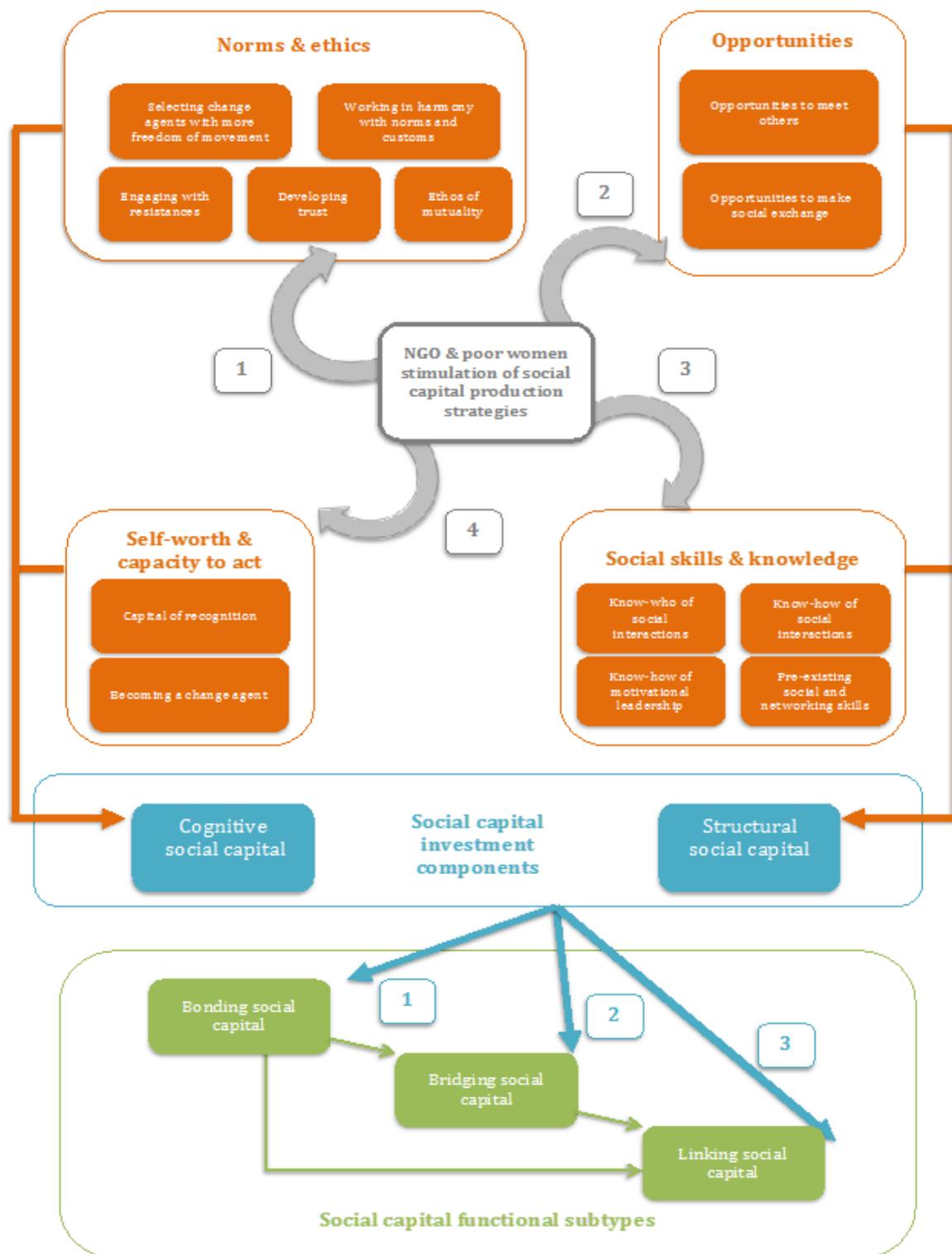
During the implementation stage, women explained that the inaugural gift of seeds is necessary for starting, for inspiring them both for its material and its symbolic value in stimulating women to engage on a path of development.

In conclusion, we have identified 13 strategies that PRIDE and women employed to strengthen social capital, divided into four categories. In the discussion, we use these strategies to develop a dynamic framework for strengthening women’s social capital within communities with the social norm of *pardah*. Below, we discuss how this new dynamic framework compares with insights from the literature on social capital and how it relates to the empowerment of women.

## 9.6 Discussion

### 9.6.1 The dynamic framework

In Figure 9.1, we illustrate how the programme developed strategies to strengthen women’s social capital. Some of these strategies were developed by PRIDE, others were developed by the women themselves, such as working in harmony with norms and customs and becoming a change agent. The four categories are closely related to mechanisms of social capital production previously identified by Cilliers and Wepener (2007) and by Seferiadis et al. (2015), but we have also identified a number of new strategies. First, PRIDE leveraged norms and ethics, working within current norms, selecting women who already had more freedom of movement because of age and lack of family relationships through widowhood, navigating resistance to change, and reinforcing the value of altruism, already valued in local society. As shown in a knowledge network in India (Gupta et al., 2003), it fostered an ‘ethical capital’. Second, corresponding to Seferiadis et al.’s (2015) material level of structural opportunities, our study shows how PRIDE provided opportunities for women to meet other women, although in the particular context this did not require a building but rather opportunities to gather outdoors, reminiscent of other studies of poverty (see, for example, Larance, 1998; Elder et al., 2012).



**Figure 9.1 Strategies for strengthening social capital in community development.**

The programme gave women the opportunity to make ‘social exchanges’ (Wels, 2000), including gift exchanges, barter and financial exchanges. In our opinion, creating opportunities for women to meet and exchange is a pre-condition for strengthening social capital and improved livelihoods for women living in *purdah*. Third, we have demonstrated that developing know-how but also know-who of social interaction are important mechanisms for strengthening social capital, building on the identification of pre-existing social and networking

skills. A study of a Ugandan farmers' association similarly shows how developing the know-how of social interaction was performed by 'learning by doing' (Kaganzi et al., 2009). Fourth, improved self-worth and increasing the capital of recognition led to a situation in which women themselves became change agents, able to develop themselves and their communities. This then becomes a virtuous cycle in which these new capacities are then increasingly valued from the norm of altruism, taking us back to the first category in the framework.

### 9.6.2 Reflections on types of social capital

In the literature, there is evidence that bonding (familial), bridging (peers) and linking (vertical links to powerholders) social capital are of different utility along development paths from the perspective of social entrepreneurship because bridging capital becomes redundant with success and may be discarded in favour of more profitable linking capital (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). In our study, we found that women first had to strengthen their bonding capital – because they needed their family's permission to leave the home and engage in IGAs – before they were able to develop their bridging capital with women peers. This bridging capital was the main powerhouse of the programme, based on women helping and sharing with each other. Linking capital was frequently more problematic: intermediaries often needed help in their negotiations with the village powerholders, part of PRIDE's strategy in engaging with resistance. There is evidence, however, that as women gradually became change agents, they also began to receive more recognition and respect from powerholders. This indicates, as can be seen in Figure 9.1, that bonding capital first needs to be developed, then bridging capital and that the latter then has spill-over effects on linking capital, and that all three types need external intervention in situations of *pardab*. Linking capital, however, may require continuing interventions, even when the establishment of strengthened social capital in bonding and bridging domains has been achieved.

### 9.6.3 Empowerment of women

As this paper has emphasised, PRIDE worked within local norms in its efforts to improve the livelihoods and capacities of poor women. The programme was not designed to empower women but rather to improve their livelihoods. To improve women's livelihoods and capacities, PRIDE and the women themselves needed to bring about changes in gender relations within their families and communities, simultaneously building women's feelings of self-worth and their capacities to act.

While some studies of social capital in Bangladesh have shown that strengthened social ties are not always associated with benefits (see, for example, Islam and Morgan, 2012), our study shows that, in some circumstances, Bangladeshi poor women value the strengthening of their social capital. A study of another Bangladeshi NGO, Saptagram, similarly showed that participants valued the organization because it enhanced their relationships (Kabeer and Hug, 2010). The women in our study give clear motives for sharing gifts and development: producing social capital is a rational strategy, as conceptualized by Granovetter (1985), and social networks are constructed through strategies because they generate benefits, as conceptualized by Bourdieu (1986).

In this study, social capital provides women with access to other forms of capital: strengthened human capital through access to knowledge and improved skills; material capital through resources, such as seeds; and symbolic capital through enhanced status. The women particularly emphasize the latter: they not only gain satisfaction from participating in the effective improvement of others, they also gain recognition. This is consistent with Bourdieu (1986), who emphasizes the conversion of social capital into symbolic capital, namely the capital of recognition.

Enhancing responsibility to help could be detrimental for women, reflecting an internalization of their subordinate status (Kabeer, 1999). Indeed, social capital can reinforce gender subordination as we noted in the introduction. PRIDE did not confront dominant norms and sought involvement from husbands, in-laws and powerholders. As social capital is, in part, built on shared norms, working in harmony with dominant customs ensured that women did not lose social capital. In addition, this strategy enabled PRIDE to secure allies for its programme while negotiating with actors who could restrict women's ability to participate and gain access to resources. This approach was coupled with an awareness of needing to mitigate potential downsides: PRIDE was concerned to pre-empt the elite capture of resources and to avoid reinforcing powers and norms deleterious to women. PRIDE worked towards enabling women to navigate resistance and to engage in IGAs, thereby contributing to a gradual changing of norms. Enhancing women's development and their bargaining power, the programme to some extent 'empowers' women. For example, some women reported being less dependent on their husband or enhanced decision-making within their household. As Fine (2001) pointed out, social capital cannot be analysed separately from issues of power. Our study shows how one NGO developed a deliberate strategy of addressing the issues of power in order to facilitate women's development.

## 9.7 Conclusions

The study highlights how NGOs can develop strategies to improve women's status within their communities, while stimulating know-how of social interaction and the know-how of development agency and social entrepreneurship. At the same time, it has provided new theoretical insights into the nature of social capital and how it relates to women's empowerment. These practical and theoretical insights may be particularly relevant to communities where women are subject to *pardah*. Further research is needed to see if this framework can be used to leverage social capital in other communities that are characterised by unequal gender relations but not necessarily by *pardah*.

The study proposes a model of poverty alleviation through value creation, enhancing the mutuality of development. This represents a potential model of sustainable, endogenous development, built on women's increasing understanding of how they can become change agents.