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# Gender equity and social capital in smallholder farmer groups in central Mozambique

*Elisabeth Gotschi, Jemimah Njuki, and Robert Delve*

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*This case study from Búzi district, Mozambique investigated whether gender equality, in terms of male and female participation in groups, leads to gender equity in sharing of benefits from the social capital created through the group. Exploring the complex connection between gender, groups, and social capital, we found that gender equity is not necessarily achieved by guaranteeing men and women equal rights through established by-laws, or dealing with groups as a collective entity. While there were no significant differences in the investment patterns of men and women in terms of participation in group activities and contribution of communal work, access to leadership positions and benefits from social capital were unequally distributed. Compared with men, women further found it difficult to transform social relations into improved access to information, access to markets, or help in case of need.*

KEY WORDS: Gender and diversity; Civil society; Labour and livelihoods; Sub-Saharan Africa

## Introduction

The benefits of collective action in agricultural activities and farmer groups (for example, bargaining, improved access to technology, and reduction of transaction costs) have been well recognised in the literature (see, for example, Pretty and Ward 2001; Westermann *et al.* 2005). However, while gender has become increasingly important in the development debate, gender relations within groups have not been adequately addressed. Inter-relationships between gender, collective action, and social capital are just beginning to be explored (Adkins 2005; Agarwal 2000; Molyneux 2002: 177; Westermann *et al.* 2005).

### *The debate about social capital*

Social capital is one asset that individuals produce through interacting with each other, creating relationships of trust and common understanding. Unlike physical capital, social capital is a 'social' resource, in the sense that it is only accessible to actors through interaction with others (Grootaert *et al.* 2004). High levels of social capital facilitate the development of

shared norms within social groups and networks (Grootaert *et al.* 2004; Uphoff and Wijayaratra 2000), and can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating co-ordinated actions (Putnam 1993: 167). Owing to its comprehensive character, scholars agree 'that social capital is not a single entity, but is rather multi-dimensional in nature' (Grootaert *et al.* 2004: 3). Different types of social capital have been distinguished: for example, structural and cognitive social capital. Structural social capital refers to social networks, roles, rules, and interaction patterns that are relatively objective and visible; it includes institutionalised forms such as group membership, as well as informal networks and loose contacts. The norms, trust, attitudes, and beliefs which are based on subjective, mental processes that are shared within a group or in society constitute cognitive social capital (Uphoff and Wijayaratra 2000: 1876).<sup>1</sup>

Male and female social networks differ from each other as a result of different gender roles and cultural norms, such as responsibilities within the household, extra-household activities, and division of labour (Agarwal 2000; Westermann *et al.* 2005). These 'different kinds of and qualities of social capital' (Westermann *et al.* 2005: 1785) for men and women are rarely discussed in the literature. While most of the social-capital literature assumes the family as a primary source of social capital (see, for example, Bourdieu 1987), it has been criticised by Adkins (2005), who suggests that the implicit assumption of a family model based on a heterosexual couple resting upon the traditional division of labour and domestic femininity reinforces female subordination and ignores the complexity of the realities of many women all over the world.

In the analysis of gender and social capital, it remains unclear how male and female members differ in terms of investing in groups, especially their willingness to contribute money and labour, participation in group meetings, length of membership of groups, or helping other people. The differences in benefits from group membership experienced by men and women, especially in terms of increasing personal networks, creating supportive social networks, access to information and services, or gaining access to reputable leadership positions, are not documented. Emphasis by NGOs that are trying to achieve gender equity has been to encourage men and women to participate in groups and to achieve gender parity in the numbers of men and women in the groups. In most groups, established by-laws do not distinguish between male and female leaders, rather (in theory) the constitution guarantees equal rights. This article analyses the gendered differences in investments in groups and benefits from social capital, and asks whether women can increase their benefits by entering leadership positions. We also look at the role of women's participation in increasing social capital within groups.

### *Forms of social capital in Mozambique*

Compared with other countries in Southern Africa, social networks in Mozambique are unique as a result of various factors. Due to low population density, settlement patterns are scattered and farmers often live long distances from each other. Consequently, people predominantly organise their social life around their kin. The extended family provides social protection, as government services (health services, child care, and pensions) are rarely in place (Ministério do Plano e Finanças 1998). In addition, social ties within the communities were largely destroyed during the armed civil war (1984–1992), which displaced about 50 per cent of the population.

Perhaps surprisingly, systems of informal co-operation and structure of rural society have survived the dramatic changes. The main types of informal co-operation between households include *xitique* (saving and credit), *ajuda mutua* (mutual assistance in daily work), and *buscato* or *ganho-ganho* (exchange of labour for money, food, or traditional drinks) (Marsh

2003). Formal co-operation is comparatively rare, with only 2 per cent of the three million smallholdings being officially organised in groups (Mole 2003: 140). However, with the increased NGO and government activities after the war, growing numbers of non-registered groups are emerging all over the country.

## Methodology

The study was carried out in Búzi district of Sofala province in Mozambique. It utilised a variety of tools. A group inventory was carried out of 73 farmer groups, and detailed information on membership was elicited for 20 of the groups with a total membership of 491 farmers. Focus-group discussions were carried out with the 20 groups, and structured interviews were conducted with 160 farmers. The sample of 160 farmers was obtained through a two-stage quota sampling which selected the 20 groups based on quota for geographic location, gender composition, age of group, and other factors, and then eight respondents per group were selected by quota for gender and leadership. The survey instrument was developed from a review of existing measurement tools, adapted to the regional context and research interest (Grootaert *et al.* 2004) to explore insights into the complex inter-relationships among groups, gender, and social capital.

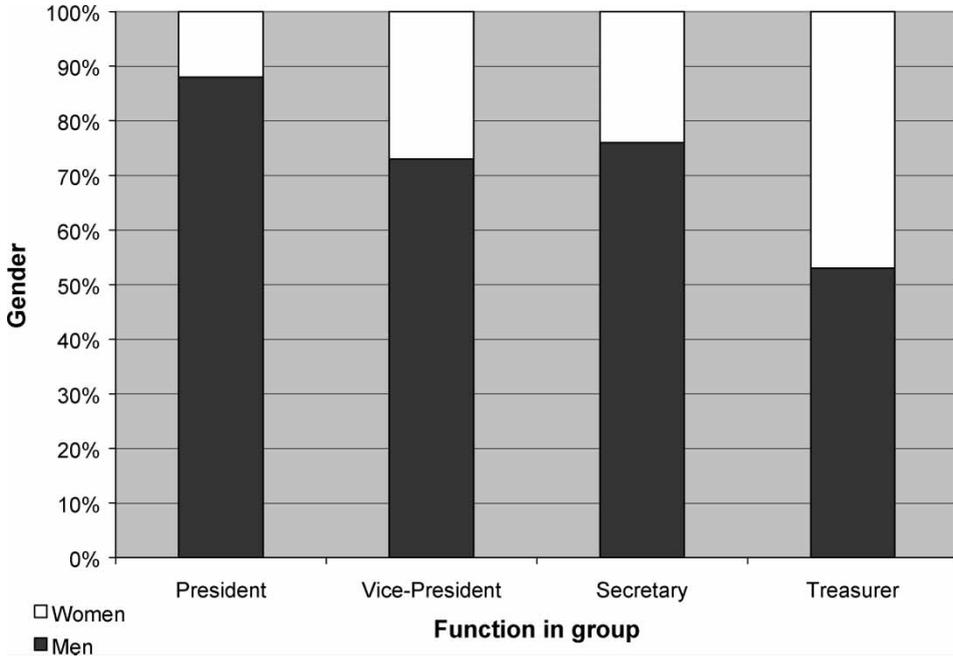
## Results and discussion

### *Equal numbers, equal chances?*

Overall, the farmer groups studied in Búzi district were characterised by ethnic homogeneity (96 per cent of respondents belonged to the ethnic group, Ndau) and a gender balance (53 per cent women) in membership figures. However, farmer groups were quite heterogeneous in their socio-economic profile, and most indicators were significantly different between men and women: women were younger (37.8 years vs 46.1 years), had a higher level of illiteracy (31 per cent vs 80 per cent) and had been school-educated for a shorter period of time (1.8 years vs 3.6 years) than men. Women in permanent relations<sup>2</sup> were less likely to become group members, compared with single, divorced, or widowed women. Upon marriage, the construction of female identity includes the woman's subordination, restricted mobility, and dependency on the male household head. Women's relatively low access to financial and human capital can restrict their active participation in groups.

It was reported that typically the husband would become a member, pay the monthly membership fee that most groups impose on their members, and represent the household. In female-headed households, a woman's autonomy increases; but, while such women have the advantage of being members in their own names, female-headed households face greater risks of being poor (UNDP 2001: 46). In contrast, groups perpetuate gender relations and social imbalances that are prevalent in society: women report not being able to talk freely or disagree in front of men; some participate in groups against the will of their husbands, or participate in group meetings outside their village. In focus-group discussions, women indicated that husbands do not like the fact of not knowing where the women are, and therefore women find it hard to leave the household for longer than a couple of hours; their time is also constrained by their multiple tasks and responsibilities (such as household tasks, child care, and farming).

Besides restricting women's personal engagement in the group, traditional gender roles affect women's access to leadership positions (Figure 1). Women are less likely to be president and hence hardly have a chance to represent the group, participate in meetings or seminars, or take final decisions. This is also true for the positions of vice-president and the secretary.



**Figure 1:** Leadership position disaggregated by gender for 20 farmer groups (n = 491) in Búzi district, Mozambique

Only the position of the treasurer is more often held by women, who are said to be more trustworthy and less likely to abuse (‘eat’) money; but even here there is only approximate parity between the sexes (Figure 1). By-laws do not formally define criteria for group leaders; however, it was repeatedly reported that informal criteria were considered for a position; for example, having a social reputation (‘being a good person’), trustworthiness (‘not eat the money’), ability to read, write, and be able to represent the group. Group members who already occupy positions in the community (such as traditional leaders) are more frequently elected into these positions, prove their ability to deal with authorities, and further improve their social status according to the principle ‘them as has, gets’ (Putnam 1993: 169).

### Gender equity and social capital

We did not find significant differences between men and women regarding their willingness to invest time and money in the achievement of common goals (altruist orientation), participation in group meetings, or contribution to community work (Table 1). Men reported higher trust in other people and a higher degree of helping other people than women, contradicting the common assumption that women in general display more solidarity behaviour (Cornwall 2003; Westermann *et al.* 2005). A comparison between male group members and female leaders found that these gendered differences are partly overcome when women enter leadership positions, although traditional gender roles still limit women’s ability to make friends and create relations.

Female members of mixed groups had significantly higher trust in other people, compared with members of female-only groups. Despite equal investments of men and women into

**Table 1:** Gendered differences in contributing to farmer groups and social capital

Variable	Female (1) vs. male (2)	Female leaders (1) vs. male non-leaders (2)	Women groups (1) vs. women in mixed groups (2)
Altruist orientation†	0.089	-0.021	0.145
Contribution to community work‡	-0.095	0.051	-0.034
Helping other people‡	0.188**	0.076	0.112
Number of friends‡	0.446***	0.392***	0.014
Participation in meetings‡	-0.034	-0.145	-0.033
Trust in other people†	0.401**	0.110	0.352*

Note: A positive value indicates that (2) is better off than (1); and a negative value indicates that (1) is better off than (2) in each comparison.

Significance levels: \*\*\*P < 0.01; \*\*P < 0.05; \*P < 0.1.

†Gamma; ‡Pearson’s R.

groups, men were more successful in benefiting from social capital, measured in terms such as having people who help or provide credit in case of need, number of contacts, and likelihood to access institutions (for example, markets, government, service providers), or information about (for example) technologies and markets. Men were also less likely to report suffering from problems, compared with women. Women in leadership positions could improve their social-capital benefits, attaining to the level of male non-leaders, but it remained more likely that male members, rather than female leaders, would obtain credit (Table 2).

Women in mixed groups were more likely to benefit from social capital (such as access to institutions, sources of help) and report fewer problems, compared with women in female-only groups. Although we suggested above that mixed groups perpetuate female subordination

**Table 2:** Gendered differences in benefits from structural social capital

Variable	Female (1) vs. male (2)	Female leaders (1) vs. male non-leaders (2)	Women in women groups vs. (1) women in mixed groups (2)
Number of people who give credit†	0.321***	0.341**	0.101
Number of people who help in need†	0.278***	0.221	0.202*
Index§ Source-help-in-need‡	0.162	0.107	0.482***
Index§ Number of contacts‡	0.370***	0.258	0.299*
Index§ Access institutions‡	0.233**	-0.079	0.441**
Index§ Sources of information‡	0.235**	0.232	0.265*
Index§ Number of problems‡	-0.235**	-0.297	-0.365**

Note: A positive value indicates that (2) is better off than (1); and a negative value indicates that (1) is better off than (2) in each comparison.

Significance levels: \*\*\*P < 0.01; \*\*P < 0.05; \*P < 0.1.

†Pearson’s R; ‡Gamma; §Indices are Σ of battery of dichotomous question.

and restrict their participation in leadership positions, the creation of women-only groups addressed only part of the 'gender problem'. Gendered differences are also reflected in distinct social networks of men and women within power relations; such differences determine access to, for example, traders or political institutions. Women in mixed groups found it easier to tap some of the male resources, enter the 'masculine social spaces' (Molyneux 2002: 181), and establish contacts, gain access to information, and obtain help in case of need. In order to achieve gender equity, the challenge ahead is to transform power relations between men and women.

## Conclusion

While women in Búzi district form more than 50 per cent of group members, attend group meetings, and invest money, labour, and time in group activities at an equal level to the men, group membership cannot be examined without taking into account the multiple roles of men and women in their households and communities.

Despite formally defined equality in by-laws and gender equity in membership figures, groups in Búzi district perpetuate patriarchal power structures prevalent in society. Women face restricted chances of being elected as group leaders. Traditional subordination under men further restricts their ability to put their issues on the group agenda for discussion, or to capture benefits such as increasing their networks, and accessing information and help in case of need (Cornwall 2003: 1330). Increasing women's participation in groups and leadership positions is a key step in involving women. It does not, however, address power issues and the ability of women to take decisions or put their issues on the group's agenda. Efforts to increase the number of female leaders need to account for women's relatively more complex responsibilities. In addition, having women in committees and leadership positions in groups, although necessary, is not sufficient for opening up space for women (Cornwall 2003). Similarly, it has been demonstrated that the creation of women-only groups avoids addressing the 'gender problem'; by creating a 'gender-free space', the groups fail to fulfil their potential to transform power relations between men and women.

Mixed groups formally provide equal chances for men and women; however, there is a need to challenge traditional gender roles (Kusakabe *et al.* 2001). Gender-sensitive group approaches require that NGOs rethink their strategies and consider the complex relations between men and women, and their respective commitments to the household and community. This not only requires empowerment of female members of farmer groups, but starts from training their own development and extension agents to be aware of gendered differences within groups and to have the capability to deal in a more critical way with collective entities (such as households, communities, and groups). An increased number of members could be used to broaden the scope of group objectives and establish sub-committees for different tasks, allowing a greater number of members to gain experience and skills.

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## Notes

1. Social capital has been conceptualised differently by various scholars (for example, distinction of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, or strong ties vs weak ties).
2. The category 'permanent relation' comprises officially registered monogamous or polygamous marriages and 'informal', traditional weddings where *lobolo* (bride price) has been paid, but no official documents received.

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