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Women Creating Social Capital and Social Change

By
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This article is an excerpt from a study published by the Howard Samuels State Management and Policy Center, The Graduate School and The University Center of the City University of New York entitled, "Women Creating Social Capital and Social Change: A Study of Women-led Community Development Organizations."

As Community Development Organizations (CDOs) are the primary vehicle for development in low-income neighborhoods, scholars have begun to examine them in terms of the degree to which they increase citizen participation, increase civic capacity, as well as stabilize and revitalize neighborhoods through the creation of social capital.¹ According to Putnam, civic action requires the existence of social capital; he defines social capital as "norms, trust, and networks."² As Gittell and Vidal note, there has been a "virtual industry of interest and action created around the implication of Putnam's findings for the development of low-income communities."³

In an empirical examination of neighborhood stability, Temkin and Rohe argued that the creation and existence of social capital is a key factor in determining neighborhood stability. They found that neighborhoods with high levels of social capital thrive and develop, while those with low levels do not. In their words, "building social capital is an effective way to stem a neighborhood's decline."⁴ Furthermore, they argue, given recent policy changes, organizations in the best position to develop social capital will be neighborhood-based community development corporations. In some cases developing social capital will represent a new responsibility for CDCs, expanding their scope beyond housing development and social service provision.⁵

Our research finds that women-led groups define their community development efforts broadly and holistically, and emphasize participation and local democracy. To

the extent that women-led groups contribute differentially to the development of social capital by increasing community participation and trust, and by creating community networks and civic action, they represent a model for community development efforts.

Findings

The women-led groups included in our study tend to define program areas broadly, encourage participation, and value diversity on their boards and staffs. While women-led groups tend to exhibit the very qualities that have been identified as desirable in Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCI) initiatives, these efforts and characteristics have not been adequately valued or widely funded. A Boston Women's Fund and Women in Philanthropy report found that nationally Nonprofit Programs for Women and Girls (NPWGs) were not funded, and that in Boston, as in the rest of the country, funders favored "universal programs." However "universal programs" which did not consciously take into account women and girls often overlooked or excluded their needs. Furthermore, the examination of NPWGs in Boston, revealed that "NPWGs do not cluster around a set of narrowly defined 'gender issues.'" ⁶ Instead, these programs which are often designed and developed by women operate in a wide variety of areas including: housing, education, health, arts and culture, economic development, politics, and leadership training.

The defining operating characteristics of NPWGs was "program design rooted in asset models of human and community development; attention to constituents as whole people, not as discrete problem elements; inclusive decision making and participatory management; racial diversity; and a broad range of program foci."⁷ Our study of women-led organizations across the county found that this tended to be true nationally as well. The report argues that it is precisely the qualities that programs designed for and by women and girls exhibit which should make them desirable to funders, given funders own criteria. We would add that it is also these characteristics of women-led organizations that contribute to the development of social capital and of social change. These findings about Boston resonate with our own about women-led programs nationally and demonstrate the particular social capital building benefits of women-led programs.

Earlier research on the issue of gender in community development found that when women were in leadership positions and comprised the majority of the board,

development efforts were more comprehensive than male-led groups.⁸ This study confirms women's broad, inclusive definition of community development. Women-led CDOs in particular have taken on multiple roles in the community including housing and economic development, organizing, activism and advocacy, as well as human service delivery. The roles the organizations play and the programs which have been established reflect women's self-described "holistic" approach to community development.

The organizations which were included in this study vary greatly in terms of the types of programs they offer and the ways in which they structure their organizations and pursue their goals, however one consistent theme of the interviews was that most women leaders described their approach to community development as "holistic" and argued that it should be centered on changing people's lives. With a goal of creating change in their communities, women include special programs for women and children which respond to their special needs as an integral part of community development. Although women leaders felt that funders' evaluations of their programs are focused on quantifiable outputs, they often concentrate on less quantifiable areas such as leadership development and "community empowerment," as well as on housing and economic development.

Our interviews confirmed other gender specific research on women in organizations as leaders in that our interviewees describe themselves as open, consultative and supportive of staff. Most of them are committed to participation, process, and internal democracy. Furthermore, the majority of the women-led CDOs we studied emphasize community participation from the moment of program design, through implementation and evaluation. Open leadership, representation of the community in CDO governance, and community participation emerged as general attributes of women-led CDOs.

Women's personal histories were compelling accounts describing the increased self-worth they achieved from their activism and the skills they gained. They talked about their personal development in ways that connected to their communities. Their ability to see the community as an integral part of their own lives was exceptional. This deeper engagement based on women's unique experience and perceptions is one explanation for clear and identifiable differences in the goals and agendas of the women-led organizations. What these community women bring to their organizations is unique.

They are not entrepreneurs and they are not primarily in pursuit of personal advancement or new careers. Their priority is the community and they never see themselves as separate from the community.

We also found that women-led CDOs are creating social capital by developing and nurturing networks between women leaders, between themselves and their staffs and community residents, between their organizations and other community institutions, and between their CDOs and organizations and individuals outside their immediate community. Community residents who are participants in CDO activities or governance often benefit from these expanded networks. For instance, community residents may meet school and city government officials for the first time, or attend local or national meetings where they expand their social and political networks.

Choosing nine sites for our research allowed us to see differences between communities in the recruitment and support for women leaders in community development. We found that the political culture of the city or region can be important to creating a more receptive and respectful environment for women in community development. In cities where many agencies are headed by women, there are many women elected officials and a strong tradition of roles for women leaders in the city. This environment is clearly conducive to the recruitment of women into leadership positions in community development and the women in those jobs say there are fewer barriers to their assumption of leadership. Also, women leaders fare better where the community development movement has a longer history and a supportive political environment. In cities and regions where the local government is hostile to nonprofit development, women are more marginalized.

While the political culture of a city or region affects women's leadership in community development, there are barriers that most women we interviewed pointed to regardless of geographic location. Women face the same general barriers that all CDOs face in terms of the difficulty of securing funding, but they also spoke of having to overcome obstacles thrown up at them because of their gender and race. Most women report having overcome many of these obstacles through extra work and perseverance borne of their commitment to their community. Because women-led CDOs represent a model of democratic localism and social capital construction, their strategies and programs are worthy

of support and dissemination.

Faith-based CDOs

Another important theme which emerged from the interviews was the importance of faith-based CDOs. Many of the women we interviewed expressed that spirituality was an important factor in their community work, either as a personal motivator or as the foundation for the organizations which they lead. Across the country women spoke of the importance of the church in their communities and in their personal lives. A number of organizations were explicitly faith-based and had been founded by a church groups of churches, while others were more indirectly connected to a church, or were led and staffed by individuals whose personal faith had drawn them into community work. In some communities we visited, the church was often one of the few, and sometimes the only, institution to which community residents could turn to address housing, economic, and other development needs. In others, it was one of the only institutions which was able to help bridge the gap between community members of different races and ethnicities. In every community we visited, some of the most important community development groups are either based in church or drew on church members for leadership and support of their organizations.

Faith-based organizations were an important factor in both urban and rural communities and were particularly strong in communities of color. Many of the organizations in the African-American and a few in the Latino communities we visited had a strong religious base and their leaders openly expressed the importance of their faith to their work. Recent scholarship has begun to address the question of the importance of their faith in their work. Recent scholarship has begun to address the question of the importance of faith-based organizations in community development. Reese and Shields note that while the documentation of the role of the church in social service has been considerable, the examination of its role in housing and economic development remains "anecdotal."⁹ It has been noted that in many poor communities only the church remains as a vital and effective institution. In their examination of urban church-based development organizations, Reese and Shields contend that "in principle...urban religious institutions appear to be uniquely well-positioned to succeed at urban economic development."¹⁰ Our research found that both urban and rural faith-based CDOs are key contributors to community development.

Notes

¹ See Kenneth Temkin and William M. Rohe, "Social Capital and Neighborhood Stability: An Empirical Investigation," *Housing and Policy Debate* Vol. 9 No. 1, 61-88; Ross Gittell and Avis Vidal, *Community Organizing: Building Social Capital as a Development Strategy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998); Marilyn Gittell, "Participation, Social Capital and Community Change," (paper presented at The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives, Project on Race and Community Revitalization, 1998).

² Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

³ Ross Gittell and Avis Vidal, *Community Organizing: Building Social Capital as Development Strategy*, 14.

⁴ Temkin and Rohe, "Social Capital and Neighborhood Stability: An Empirical Investigation," 61-62.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶ Molly Mead, "World's Apart: Missed Opportunities to Help Women and Girls," (Medford, MA: Lincoln Filene Center, Tufts University, 1993), 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸ See Marilyn Gittell, Jill Gross and Kathe Newman, *Race and Gender in Neighborhood Development Organizations* (Howard Samuels State Management Policy Center, City University of New York, 1994); and Marilyn Gittell, Sally Covington and Jill Gross, *The Differences Gender Makes: Women in Neighborhood Development Organizations* (Howard Samuels State Management and Policy Center, CUNY, 1994).

⁹ Laura Reese and Gary Shields, "Faith-Based Development: Economic Development Activities of Urban Religious Institutions," (paper presented at the American Political Science Association Conference, Boston, MA, 1998).

¹⁰ Avis Vidal, "Reintegrating Disadvantaged Communities into the Fabric of Urban Life: The Role of Community Development," *Housing Policy Debate* Vol. 6, No. 1, 169-230.

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