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# Gender and the Silences of Social Capital: Lessons from Latin America

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## ABSTRACT

Social capital has entered development policy thinking and practice in Latin America where it converges with the premises of a new development agenda that emerged in the 1990s. Women are often central to the forms of social capital that development agencies are keen to mobilize in poverty relief programmes, but the terms of women's insertion into these programmes is rarely problematized. This article critically examines the gendered assumptions that govern efforts to build social capital, and explores some of the tensions that have arisen in post-transition Latin America between women's rights and social capital agendas.

## INTRODUCTION

Following its enthusiastic endorsement by the World Bank and other development agencies in recent years, social capital has found a ready application within Latin American policy arenas. It has framed development projects and inspired scholarly reflection both supportive and critical. If the World Bank has taken the lead in this area, United Nations agencies have followed in its wake. A major UN regional conference sponsored by ECLAC was held in Chile at the end of 2001 on the theme of 'Social Capital and Poverty Reduction in Latin America and the Caribbean'.<sup>1</sup> Its subtitle, 'Toward a New Paradigm', was as indicative of the hopes invested in the concept as of the interest it commands. In these respects social capital in Latin America is emulating its rapid progress elsewhere in the world.

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1. This conference was held in Santiago, Chile in September 2001. It was opened by former sociologist, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil, and co-sponsored by the University of Michigan. Among those who presented papers were Francis Fukuyama and Hernán de Soto.

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Yet as both its critics and its supporters acknowledge, social capital remains a contested concept<sup>2</sup> and, despite some methodological refinements, difficult to operationalize in research and policy settings.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, there are reasons to applaud the interest in social capital by development agencies. Insofar as it signifies a shift, albeit partial, from more orthodox development approaches which aim to ‘get the economy right’ (while ignoring their effects on the social fabric), it is widely seen as signalling a welcome, if belated engagement with the ‘social’ (Portes, 1998; Woolcock, 1998). Since social theorists have long been arguing against the false abstraction of economic from social processes and feminist economists have spent much time and effort in exposing the gendered character of the economy, we might expect the take-up of social capital in the field of development to converge productively with these efforts to place social processes more squarely in the policy domain.

In focusing on forms of social solidarity, social capital has some potential to enrich development debates. Studies of networks, community ties and kinship are important in refining policy approaches to poverty alleviation and these have been joined in more recent times by research on the use made of social capital by migrants and by ethnic entrepreneurs. Social capital approaches have brought to the attention of development agencies the quality of the local social fabric, the importance of forms of solidarity and co-operation, and they have also revealed the effects — positive and negative — of development projects on the communities they are intended to assist. If networks, associations, and local knowledge are recognized as valuable development resources that agencies must take account of when devising environmental, development or welfare projects, then surely this can only be viewed as positive. However, much depends on how social capital is understood and operationalized, and what relative value is attached to its importance in bringing about satisfactory outcomes.

My concern here is not to rehearse the origins or the strengths and weaknesses of social capital as a concept. There already exists an extensive

2. Suffice to compare some of these contrasting definitions: for Adler (nd) ‘Social capital is a resource for individual and collective actors located in the network of their more or less durable social relations’, while the ECLAC definition of social capital offered in its conference press release is ‘the set of norms, institutions and organizations that promote trust and co-operation among people, communities and the society as a whole’ ([www.eclac.cl](http://www.eclac.cl)). Contrast these with the Coleman school which utilizes a rational-actor, utility maximizing model, and with Fukuyama’s view that ‘social capital is nothing other than a means of reconceptualizing the role that values and norms play in economic life’ (speech given at ECLAC conference, see note 1).
3. The World Bank has sponsored the refinement of analytic instruments used in large scale studies; but see Foley and Edwards (1999) for a review and critique of forty-four empirical studies using social capital and Fine’s broader methodological critique in Fine (2001). For useful critical discussions of the concept ‘social capital’ from a variety of viewpoints see, among others, Adler (nd); Evans (1996); Fine (2001); Foley and Edwards (1999); Harriss and de Renzio (1997); Portes and Landolt (2000); Putzel (1997); Woolcock (1998, 1999).

scholarly literature on these issues which has, among other things, sought usefully to distinguish between concepts of social capital and the different theoretical paradigms that they imply.<sup>4</sup> This literature necessarily informs the discussion that follows, but in focusing upon policy settings, I highlight some particular problems in the way the concept is applied to development. However theoretically sophisticated the various scholarly treatments of social capital may be, in policy settings conceptual refinements can be lost in translation and banalized. Social capital has been described with some justification as a ‘deliberately fuzzy concept’, its imprecision allowing it to function as a ‘convenient peg for different agendas’ (Harriss and de Renzio, 1997: 921). Analytic concepts are always contested and bear different meanings; it is generally those with interpretative power who are able to give them content and who influence how they are applied ‘in the field’. The question of what these agendas might be is one which this article seeks to address.

In considering the integration of social capital into development agendas, I focus on some issues that have a particular salience from a gender perspective. Social capital approaches have been remarkably reticent about gender: one has only to check the World Bank’s dedicated website readings to verify this,<sup>5</sup> but it is also generally true of the scholarly literature to date. It is perhaps noteworthy in this respect that the advance of social capital in the World Bank seems to have proceeded independently of the work of its Gender Unit. The latter’s Policy Research Report *Engendering Development* (World Bank, 2001) does not discuss social capital, and there is not even an index entry on the subject. This is arguably not so much an oversight as a difference in approach. The Gender Unit report occupies a somewhat different analytic terrain in focusing on ‘rights, resources and voice’ (where resources are understood in largely economic terms)<sup>6</sup> as crucial issues for women. The degree to which tensions have emerged between feminist perspectives and those of social capital exponents is examined in the latter part of this article.

The following discussion considers some of the effects of this displacement of gender issues from efforts to place social capital in development policy. It focuses on three issues that tend to be sidelined and which have specific relevance from a gender perspective: the first is contextual, locating

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4. Notably charting its often forgotten origins in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, through to the worldwide prominence achieved by Robert Putnam’s books and articles. For histories and varying usages of the concept see, among others, Fine (2001); Portes (1998); Woolcock (1998).

5. The World Bank website dedicated to social capital was set up in 1998 at [www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital](http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital).

6. It is striking that the most prominent and enthusiastic proponents of social capital seem to be overwhelmingly male, when they are not specialists on the family. At the ECLAC conference in Chile it was reported to me by a senior participant that there was a ‘marked division between the enthusiastic men and the sceptical women participants’.

the broader significance of the shift in development policy which has brought social capital closer to the mainstream. The second is the issue of social inequality — in this case gendered inequality — in social capital approaches. The third is the question of the politics, including the gender politics, that are involved in operationalizing social capital approaches. These three issues will be reviewed with specific reference to the Latin American region.

### **LATIN AMERICA: CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POST-ADJUSTMENT POLICY AGENDA**

As is evident and increasingly acknowledged in the social capital literature, whether understood as a property of society ('civicness'), as a property of a community, or as a resource operationalized by individuals to maximize their ability to attain specific goals, social capital takes markedly different forms in different contexts. The social capital of bowling clubs and sewing groups in the United States is clearly not the social capital of the poor in Latin America, and its benign as well as its negative or destructive forms can only be adequately grasped in relation to specific political and social formations and development strategies, both local and global.

Latin America seems to many observers in the development field to have a comparatively resilient stock of social capital, or put differently, a fairly active civil society.<sup>7</sup> To the extent that this is true — if exaggerated at times — of some countries in the region, there are important historical and political reasons which account for it. Long before social capital and its policy derivative, 'participation',<sup>8</sup> became an integral part of development policies, the Catholic church and the left were engaging in forms of community development and activism through the Christian Base Communities. At the same time, a tradition of populist clientelism (as in Mexico, Argentina and Brazil) nurtured co-operative links with communities which converged with development initiatives to meet basic needs by sustaining local networks<sup>9</sup> and community mobilization. The decades of transition from authoritarian dictatorship which began in Brazil in the mid-1970s and culminated with the end of seventy decades of one-party rule in Mexico in 2000, promoted the development of a wide range of social movements and fostered an active associational life in many countries of the region. Women's movements were a notable feature of civil society activism, with

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7. All things are of course relative, and Latin America's civil society activism is scattered, largely urban, discontinuous and differs markedly among countries.

8. The development of participatory approaches owed much to the work of Chambers (1983) and Cernea (1991). For a critique of the way these approaches are applied in development practices see Cooke and Kothari (2001).

9. Networks are recurrent patterns of face to face interactions usually involving expectations of reciprocal assistance.

feminist and popular grassroots movements interacting with sometimes extensive political mobilization of women in parties, protest movements and over issues of collective consumption.<sup>10</sup>

What is today generally understood as ‘social capital’ (networks, forms of associational activity) and in development projects is operationalized as ‘participation’, is not a new area of interest or of policy in Latin America. What is new, is that these concerns have moved from the margins of development practice to occupy a more central place in international and regional policy arenas. The ‘new development agenda’, comprising policies that have evolved since the turn to political and economic liberalism from the 1980s, have combined elements of ‘bottom-up development’ — notably participation and decentralization — with an ongoing programme of economic restructuring which has resulted in growing social inequality and persistent levels of poverty. The ambivalent character of this ‘new agenda’, combining policy instruments that exist in apparent contradiction, lies at the heart of the debate over the uses made in development practice of social capital approaches.

In Latin America as elsewhere, the new development agenda originated in a series of policy shifts usually summed up as the ascendancy of neo-liberalism or ‘the Washington Consensus’. Since then it has gone through several phases. The structural adjustment and stabilization measures designed to contain the debt crisis of the 1980s were accompanied by the familiar package of privatization, export-led growth, deregulation of the economy and reduction of the sphere of state responsibilities. However, the global turn to democracy which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the communist system, together with the growing impact of the human rights movement in the 1990s, placed issues of rights and citizenship on the international agenda at a time when there was a major reassessment of the development policies of the previous decades. ‘Bottom-up development’ gained support, implying greater attention to demands from the grassroots, more sensitive policy instruments, and changes in the nature of state–society relations. Slimmed-down states were to be partially rehabilitated as actors in the development domain in line with the revised ‘post-Washington consensus’; their functions were, however, to be decentralized and ‘deconcentrated’ through the continuing privatization of some of their responsibilities, while civil society was to take a more active role in the delivery of social welfare and management of development. NGOs became important agents in this process; they not only assumed an expanded role in development work and in the delivery of welfare, but many also lobbied governments and worked with grassroots movements to advance citizen rights through legal reform and strategies designed to ‘empower’ the poor.

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10. For a discussion of the particularly rich experience of Brazil and the role of its women’s movements during the transition period, see Alvarez (1990).

Some of these developments represented changes for the better, ones that had resulted not only from particular conjunctural circumstances but also drew on the lessons of the past. Prominent among these lessons were the costly experiments in shock therapy visited on the countries of the South in the 1980s, and then on the former socialist states after 1989. These policies brought inflation under control through recessive stabilization measures; but they also exposed millions to poverty and unemployment in the absence of effective safety nets. Amidst growing criticism from a wide range of sources, including the various agencies of the United Nations, 'market fundamentalism' and shock treatment receded as policy priorities and development approaches were revised. The partial rehabilitation of the state converged with good governance reform agendas which sought to render institutions more efficient and accountable. Development practice was henceforth to be more consultative, more sensitive to the needs of the poor, the environment, ethnic minorities, women, and others who had been at the sharp end of it.<sup>11</sup> These shifts of emphasis represented not so much a 'new paradigm' as the fact that development agencies and governments were finally taking on board more than thirty years of criticism of their top down, 'growth first' policies.

For all the changes in emphasis and approach that occurred however, the full potential of these positive lessons was vitiated by the continuing influence of market fundamentalism in some of the most influential arenas of policy-making. The Washington Consensus might have lost some of its earlier self-confidence and remade itself in a new image, but many of its tenets continued to hold sway over the direction of international policy. Through the increasing resort to conditionalities from the 1980s, LDCs were persuaded to deregulate, privatize, and open up, while turning over more and more of their governmental responsibilities in the domains of development and welfare to private and voluntary agencies. Such moves were not uniformly rewarded with the hoped-for growth and inflows of foreign investment, however; for most LDCs growth rates remained low, while in some of the poorest states, they fell. The growing 'interdependency' promoted by globalization continued to be a selective process and major investment flows involved a relatively small number of (usually) historic partners, leaving much of the rest of the world short, or even starved, of cash.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, short term 'shareholder capitalism', most notoriously represented by hedge funds, moved in and out of countries in search of quick profits, and was never held to account for the financial crises it could occasion.

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11. For a positive account from a Latin American perspective of the shift from a 'monist, reductive and economistic' approach to development to this 'new approach', see the paper by Kliksberg (nd) — himself the Co-ordinator of the Interamerican Institute for Social Development.

12. In 1998, ten countries received 78 per cent of FDI (UNDP, 1999).

Since the 1980s, dubbed the 'lost decade' due to the political and social effects of the debt crisis, Latin America has been beset by periodic economic crises and low levels of growth. The percentage of those living in poverty in the ECLAC region declined from 41 per cent to 36 per cent between 1990 and 1997, but this is still above the figure for 1980 (35 per cent) and the absolute number of the poor remains stable at around 200 million (ECLAC, 1999). Women constitute the majority of the indigent and poorest in Latin America and outnumber men among the unemployed and the illiterate (female illiteracy is still significant among indigenous peoples).<sup>13</sup> They also occupy the lowest paid and least secure jobs, and suffer from high levels of personal violence and risk.<sup>14</sup> An extensive literature has theorized and documented the gendered cost of macro-economic policies, and has drawn attention to the ways in which women, through their role in the reproductive economy, acted as the 'shock absorbers' in the economic crisis (Elson, 1991). The effects of the creeping privatization of welfare on women have been shown to increase their caring responsibilities, while the costs of such services have led to many women and girls using them less. Yet for all the talk in regional governmental and UN summits of the need to make progress in promoting gender equity, economic and social policies have remained largely impervious to these criticisms.<sup>15</sup>

### **Rediscovering Society**

The deterioration of the social fabric and the rise in crime that accompanied the application of the new economic model, united left and right alike in a common platform to arrest the damage caused by the continuing process of restructuring. Regional development agencies called for social policies that could restore the fabric of society through activating greater participation, more 'community level' networks and ties of social solidarity. These were to serve as a counterweight to the supposed anomie caused by poverty, informalization and persistent levels of unemployment.<sup>16</sup>

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13. Despite a lack of gender sensitive data and some disagreements over the interpretation of empirical material in the analysis of female poverty, there is evidence to support the assertion that the proportion of women living in poverty is higher than that of men, and that female-headed households are generally (income) poorer than male-headed households. See ECLAC (2000); UNIFEM (2000).
  14. This is not to deny that men too, are subjected to violence, familial and public; in both cases they are also the main perpetrators.
  15. The situation, according to ECLAC (2000), would have been even worse had it not been for the efforts of women's movements in the region which did secure some measures that helped alleviate female poverty.
  16. In Latin America such concerns belatedly revived a lapsed interest in social policy, as I argue in Molyneux (2000b). See also Schild (2002) for gender perspectives on this question.

This concern for 'the social' and for participatory project management preceded the arrival of social capital approaches in Latin America. In the 1980s social analysis and development policies were governed by other theoretical concepts, two of which were particularly important in the region's policy arenas. The first was civil society (and, later, citizenship), which were particularly central to debates over the role of social movements and the prospects for democracy in post-authoritarian Latin America. The second, perhaps less prominent, was social cohesion and its cognate terms social integration and social inclusion, as applied in particular to the debates over poverty and social marginalization.

Social capital is arguably weaker, both as a conceptual construct and as a policy instrument, than either of these alternative conceptual clusters. Moreover, its appearance in the policy field might be seen as signalling a retreat from more problematic agendas for ruling elites and international development agencies — of citizenship and rights on the one hand, and of provision and policies to ensure greater social inclusion on the other. While citizenship and rights-based agendas raise questions about politics and entitlements, and debates about social integration and exclusion implicitly confront social policy issues,<sup>17</sup> social capital, where its focus is on micro-level phenomena, raises few such challenging questions.<sup>18</sup> In its most common usages it occupies a terrain upon which politics typically only enters through the back door, while social inequalities are rarely confronted either in theory or in policy. In this it follows in the footsteps of its sociological antecedent 'community', and aligns itself with its contemporary political filiate, communitarianism — both of which can exist in considerable tension with women's rights and entitlements, as we shall see.

If social capital's absorption into development agendas cannot be abstracted from the international policy shifts discussed earlier, I would argue further that in Latin America it acquires a particular salience as a post-transition concept, appearing as ideas of radical democracy, along with social movement activism and citizenship struggles, lost their momentum in the neo-liberal 1990s. These earlier struggles were often behind some of the most innovative and successful development initiatives in Latin America. Led by parties, trade unions, neighbourhood organizations and women's movements, among others, these forces challenged military dictatorships and engaged in struggles for democracy in political and social life. Detached from these political origins the projects that they founded are now often

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17. In considering the institutional basis of exclusion analysts tackle questions of education and public health and labour market regulation. In the words of Roberts (2001: 6): 'The issue has thus become that of the institutional arrangements of the modern state that keep substantial numbers of the population dependent and without adequate access to the opportunities of their society'.

18. The works of Woolcock and Portes, in addressing macro-level issues of social integration, are suggestive of a more promising strand within the social capital approach.

claimed simply as evidence of the benign workings of social capital. Yet it was political agency and the values that lay behind the creation of some of these projects that are the critical variables in comprehending the reasons for their success. To talk merely of 'social capital' barely does justice to this history and offers little by way of explanation.

### **From Social Movements to Social Capital**

In the conditions of structural reform that accompanied the region's redemocratization process, ideas of participation and 'bottom-up' development initially promoted by NGOs, social movements and civic associations, were steadily appropriated by international agencies and governments and re-fashioned as policy tools. They were now seen as a way of tackling a range of social and political problems by establishing a more widely-shared sense of social responsibility and a firmer basis for political legitimacy at a time when the role of the state was being redefined and its welfare commitments reduced. The World Bank expressed this aspect of the new development agenda succinctly in its 1997 Report where it called for 'greater efforts to take the burden off the state by involving citizens and communities in the delivery of core collective goods' (World Bank, 1997: 117).

Social capital is a concept that can be seen as converging with the premises of the new development agenda in at least five respects. First, it conforms to the emphasis on decentralization and subsidiarity as social capital is generally assumed to be a property of localities and communities. Second, the new agenda prioritizes working with independent associations and civil society organizations, now recast as social capital and participation. Third, the idea that communities are more efficient than states in the achievement of welfare or development goals is central to the current policy agenda. Fourth, the emphasis placed on the virtues of self-help and voluntary work as a way to develop greater self-reliance and autonomy from the state has highlighted the importance of social capital and participation. And last but not least, social capital is assumed to reduce the costs of development and enhance efficiency through the mobilization of resources that are freely given and considered to be sustainable because they are in the collective interest.<sup>19</sup> In the words of the President of the World Bank: 'Participation matters — not only as a means of improving development effectiveness, as we know from our recent studies — but as the key to long-term sustainability and leverage' (quoted in Francis, 2001: 72)

Social capital is generally seen to operate as a collective good, with beneficial outcomes, as a policy resource that must be operationalized and if possible strengthened by its association with development projects and goals. It is, in World Bank definitions, the 'glue' that 'holds societies

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19. I am grateful to Roberts (2001) for the formulation of the first and fifth of these points.

together'.<sup>20</sup> However, in the hands of practitioners, whether these be development agencies, governments or NGOs, the injunction to work with an appreciation of the benefits of social capital results in widely different interpretations. What social capital means to development agents, and how they think it should be strengthened, differs according to the political and institutional arrangements that prevail and the cultural context in which policies are applied. This is because the practical policy implications of social capital are by no means clear. We read of the need to strengthen it 'where it exists', to build on community associations, to restore indigenous institutions, and to develop participatory mechanisms. But who decides what particular forms of social capital need strengthening, which associations to support, which norms and principles of co-operation are to be upheld, and through the intervention of which external agencies?

These are very political questions in Latin America as they are elsewhere. Social capital has been generated by social movements (bottom-up, horizontal social capital) but hierarchical forms also exist, some more benign than others. Civil society is, in general, far from autonomous, permeated as it is by state and party patronage. While there is a positive role for states to play in development processes, and examples of dynamic synergy (Evans, 1996) between state and civil society abound, these are contingent outcomes. In Latin America governments regularly pour resources into their own clientelistic networks for the purposes of securing votes: the case of the participatory Solidarity programme PRONASOL in Mexico under the Salinas administration (1988–94) is a much cited example of this (Dominguez and McCann, 1998; Fox, 1997). The ignominious flight to Japan of former President Fujimori of Peru in late 2000 has been followed by disclosures that revealed layers of corruption and clientelism, a veritable 'colonization' of civil society by the state. In Argentina, government-supported poverty relief programmes involving tens of thousands of volunteers have been used by successive governments as ways to garner electoral support (Auyero, 2000; Feijóo, 2001). NGOs too, normally seen as having more freedom to determine who they work with (that is, to determine which social capital they wish to support, create or utilize), are coming under increasing control by governments who wish to restrict and channel their activities especially where these are seen to challenge government priorities as in the case of human rights and some women's projects.<sup>21</sup> Which agencies build or sustain social capital and with what purpose is therefore a central and not a secondary matter.

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20. See [www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital](http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital); also cited in Edwards (nd) website posting.

21. The Alemán government of Nicaragua (1994–2001) was a case in point. It sought to restrict funds that supported some feminist NGOs at the same time that it narrowed the range of NGOs it was prepared to work with. The administration also pursued a policy of open confrontation with feminist agendas in the international arena, seeking to challenge some of the formulations agreed upon at Beijing and encoded in the *Platform for Action*.

## **Gender and Social Capital**

These issues of international policy, regional context and politics, need to be borne in mind when thinking about gender issues in relation to social capital. If we turn to the literature on social capital and consider the practices associated with it in the domain of policy, we see that gender is both present and absent in troubling ways. On the one hand, as noted earlier, much of the literature all but ignores gender relations, and focuses in the main on men's networks. Not one of the postings on the World Bank website on social capital (at the time of writing) directly addressed — let alone critically engaged — gender issues. On the other hand, where gender relations are acknowledged, they are often encoded in normative assumptions about women which misrepresent their lived relations and lead to policies of questionable merit.

This is perhaps surprising in view of the fact that 'gender' has been recognized within development policy since at least the 1970s and has been the subject of extensive feminist advocacy and debate. Most development agencies have had to show that they take what they call 'gender issues' seriously, and standard project proposals and evaluations have for some time included requirements to consider the gender dimension and impact. Such commitments however, may give a false impression and exaggerate the degree to which gender is taken seriously. The World Bank, for example, has a gender policy unit responsible for mainstreaming gender issues and has committed resources to developing 'woman friendly' policies; but a recent evaluation of 100 World Bank projects shows the results to be disappointing in this regard and concludes that gender issues were in fact 'widely neglected' in their design and implementation (Frances, 2001: 86). Likewise, Latin American studies of NGOs in a variety of countries have shown that it was rare to find gender inputs into the administration of Social Funds (Gideon, 1998). There is no reason to suppose that the same gap between stated intentions and project implementation will not occur in the case of social capital enhancing projects.

A gender-aware approach to social capital has to begin not just by recognizing but also by problematizing the fact that women are very often central to the forms of social capital that development agencies and governments are keen to mobilize in their poverty-relief and community-development programmes. The evidence shows across a range of countries that women among low-income groups are frequently those with the strongest community and kin ties; many such women do network, they do engage in reciprocal supportive relations, they are often those who support church activities and participate in local forms of associational life. They are to be found too, at the heart of voluntary self-help schemes whether in health, education or neighbourhood food and housing programmes. In Argentina, the government-supported poverty assistance programme Plan Vida (Life Plan), in the Province of Buenos Aires, involved a million

beneficiaries and was administered by 22,500 unpaid residents, mostly women, in the target zone (Feijóo, 2001). As Schild has pointed out, social policies in Chile rely on 'a veritable army of volunteers, of underpaid and overworked and highly dedicated individuals... predominantly... women' (Schild, 2002, forthcoming). In such cases, women undoubtedly help to sustain the social fabric. Yet it is not always so, and comparatively little attention is paid to situations where social solidarity is weak — a point we will return to later. Moreover, where there is a recognition of women's contribution to the social fabric, it has helped to create a set of expectations about their role in development projects that have had some perverse effects.

In the first place there is the familiar assumption that women are naturally predisposed to serve their families or communities either because they are less motivated by a self serving individualism or, more materially, because of their social 'embeddedness' in family and neighbourhood ties due to their responsibility for the domain of social reproduction. The latter view carries some force in Latin America where, as in the example cited above, neighbourhood mobilization around basic needs provision frequently involves women. Gendered divisions of labour are strongly reinforced by cultural norms which, under the influence of Catholicism, signify motherhood as a powerful referent in the construction of identity. The naturalization of women's supposed 'disposition' for social capital maintenance thus receives a certain ideological sanction, but one which does not question the terms on which women are incorporated, or the power relations involved in situating women in this way. This can all too easily make the responsibility for community projects, family health, or environmental protection (women are 'closer to nature') come to be seen as the preserve of women.

A consequence of naturalizing the work that women do in these domains is that they are often targeted for voluntary (that is, unpaid) work. Self-help projects and voluntary sector work imply a considerable, often unacknowledged dependency upon women's unpaid or poorly paid labour. Such work, seen as a natural extension of their responsibilities for the family/community is consequently taken for granted and is assumed to be cost-free to the women and to the project. Indeed as Gideon notes, 'cost benefit analysis of projects fails to take into account the opportunity costs of women's time' (Gideon, 1998: 308). Evidence from studies of NGO programmes in Latin America illustrates this point. One UNICEF project in Guatemala mobilized women as volunteers in an urban development project where they were responsible for a range of tasks such as home visits and maintaining health records, involving an average of eight hours a week (Espinosa and Lopez Rivera, 1991, cited in Gideon, 1998). No support was given in the form of childcare and the volunteers soon found it necessary to withdraw from the scheme. This example is unfortunately typical of many, even though the underlying assumptions have been widely criticized by gender theorists and practitioners. Projects which assume that women are free and available for

unpaid work, and those which are designed to increase women's labour productivity or intensify their caring responsibilities, have been shown to fail time and again because they overload exhausted women without offering them adequate remuneration, any support in the form of childcare, or any training in skills that many need to obtain a paid job — still the most effective way of tackling poverty among women.<sup>22</sup> Maintaining social capital then, can come at a high, if unacknowledged, cost to women.

A second perverse effect of these assumptions concerns the way in which social capital can be treated as the panacea for poverty, as if this alone can substitute for resources and policies. This has clear gender implications. It has been argued by feminist analysts that the effects of the poverty into which millions fell in the 1980s would have been far more devastating had it not been for the efforts of women to secure survival strategies. Recast as evidence of the importance of social capital, we hear much about how poverty is alleviated by community and kin co-operation among the poor. No-one disputes that this can be and often is the case: indeed studies carried out across Latin America show how essential these social resources were to the survival of the poor, and how they were mobilized mainly by women — sometimes on a massive scale in a collective endeavour (see, for example, Chant, 1991, 1997; Gonzales de la Rocha, 1994). In Peru in the conditions of economic crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, tens of thousands of neighbourhood associations organized around basic survival strategies such as the glass of milk campaign and the popular canteens. Much of the work in these projects was carried out by women, and in the absence of other alternatives, they represented a collectivized responsibility for survival. These examples can be seen as evidence of the importance of social capital understood as a collective resource in poverty relief; but to view it in these terms alone avoids confronting the fact that this was a form of co-operation that developed in response to what might otherwise be seen as a crisis in social reproduction (Pearson, 1997). If we omit the background indicators on poverty, unemployment, malnutrition and child mortality, we get a too rosy picture of associational life in which social capital — in this case the unpaid labour of women — is mobilized as the safety net for irresponsible macro-economic policies and poor governance.

Social capital, as Putnam has emphasized, thrives best where material conditions permit the development of a rich associational life; trust thrives where civic norms prevail. Research in the United States has confirmed a tradition of sociological theory from Comte onwards that suggests that a decline in 'social capital' or social solidarity clearly correlates with the

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22. Kandiyoti (1988) draws attention to the reliance of participatory strategies for health delivery on mothers to administer and even finance initiatives that are directed at improving child health — oral rehydration and immunization among them. The onus is on women to extend their traditional responsibilities in the family to include provision of basic healthcare.

worsening position of the disadvantaged.<sup>23</sup> What then of the conditions that prevail in poorer developing countries? Are they necessarily any different? Moser (1996) has shown in a study of four low-income communities, that, as in the Peruvian example, poverty can generate social capital where kin ties are strengthened in times of shared adversity; but poverty also erodes the fabric of social life. As assets and employment possibilities decline, the poor cease to engage in exchange relations and avoid dependencies such as borrowing for fear that they cannot repay (Moser, 1998). In such circumstances, kin relations become strained as demands for support from vulnerable relatives grow. Broader community forms of solidarity and reciprocity weaken as households turn inwards and exhibit the traits associated with 'asocial familism'. Crime and gang warfare in poor neighbourhoods exacerbate these trends, adding fear and deepening mistrust of others.<sup>24</sup>

A number of points can be reiterated here. First, the building, sustaining and undermining of social capital are critically dependent upon wider policies that help to determine the resources available to people. Second, social capital is highly variable in its forms of existence, in its presence or absence, strength or weakness, negative or positive forms. Third, in conditions of poverty, 'coping strategies' might be a preferable and less value-laden description than social capital to denote the forms of co-operation that arise. Here we might want to distinguish between 'forced' co-operation and elective forms of solidarity — the former is arguably not social capital if it is not the outcome of a cumulative, sustainable and long-term process. In sum, social capital approaches might have the potential to render visible the importance of the reproductive or survival economy, but this activity should not be taken for granted and instrumentalized in ways that might be detrimental to the poor. Policies work best when, through redistributive and capacity-building measures, they strengthen the capabilities of agents to enter into voluntary and mutually beneficial association, sustainable over time, rather than simply being short term and parasitic on the ties of solidarity that may exist.

## **Inequality**

If hidden assumptions in social capital approaches are one problem, another is the lack of attention paid to gender inequalities in the new policy agendas. While increasingly recognized in the scholarly debate, equity issues are often marginalized in social capital development literature. Here the social relations in and through which social capital is reproduced are rarely analysed or

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23. For a recent empirical study of GSS data, see Wuthnow cited in Adler (nd).

24. See Auyero (2000) on the impact of crime, fed by the drugs trade, on a once active community in Buenos Aires.

taken into proper account. If social capital is diversely present in social formations, it accrues to, or is accessed by certain groups and not by others just as its benefits are also unevenly distributed. Portes has written of the way that immigrant communities are differently endowed with social capital, pointing out that those with dense networks tend to operate in self serving and hence exclusionary ways (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). If networks, by virtue of their modes of operation, function to exclude as much as to include, this is strikingly evident in the way that inclusion and exclusion are almost always gendered processes. It follows that there are considerable differences between men's and women's networks; as far as gender is concerned. Since power relations within societies are reflected in and reproduced by social networks, women can find themselves disadvantaged in at least two ways. First, they do not usually belong to the kinds of networks that bring economic advantage: in the case of business or political favours, valuable contacts typically operate through male in-groups<sup>25</sup> in masculine social spaces which exclude women. They also depend upon time and resources whose accessibility is also gender-related. Second, female networks generally command fewer economic resources and rely more frequently on time and non-monetized labour exchanges that can be accommodated within the domestic division of labour. Development policies designed to draw upon and to maximize the utility of social capital often fail to engage these issues and by so doing can unintentionally exacerbate existing social inequalities in their projects by favouring men's networks financially and organizationally, and by taking women's for granted. This usually means that women are seen as not requiring the same resources or support.

Micro-credit programmes, however, are an instance where women's networks are being fostered through economic agency. A central part of neo-liberal poverty-alleviation strategies, substantial numbers of women have been absorbed into these projects. This intake of women is often part of targeted poverty-relief programmes and is driven by four arguments: that women are heavily represented among the poorest and need assistance with income-generating projects; that they generally have greater difficulty in accessing credit; that they have (or can create and sustain) good networks and forms of co-operation which can ensure project efficiency; and that they have higher rates of loan repayment than men.

Yet, despite notable successes, many micro-credit projects for women fail. Among the reasons for the failure is the existence of gender relations that limit women's access to the funds they generate: in other words, men appropriate and control them (Goetz, 1996). The failure to tackle gender relations also means that in many cases women find themselves unable to

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25. Networks clearly display ethnic as well as gender bias in such areas as access to credit and trade reflecting social asymmetries of status and power.

access the resources they need to ensure that their enterprises succeed — one example is their exclusion from male controlled markets, another is the lack of help with childcare (Mayoux, 2001). More generally, if women represent a significant proportion of the poorest, micro-credit projects may be failing to reach them. A review of one of the most successful schemes in Bolivia concluded that while such schemes could deliver results for those close to the poverty line, they were ‘ineffective in comparison with labour market and infrastructural measures in reducing extreme poverty’ (Mosley, 2001: 101). Moreover, as far as social capital is concerned, it has been observed that many micro-finance projects, far from creating and sustaining social capital may instead serve to undermine social solidarity in failing to foster co-operative relations among members and creating a socially corrosive competitive individualism. Here the issue of whether social capital is understood as an individual or a collective resource bears on the interpretation of the consequences of these programmes. Where they aim to enhance individual social capital this can be at the expense of collective social capital or social solidarity. When this is combined with credit programmes that do not reach the very poor, and focus on including the better endowed in their schemes, the social capital that is drawn upon and created is not only individualized but may serve to deepen existing inequalities, while not offering adequate solutions to the poorest. This is not to deny that well conceived micro-credit programmes can form part of an effective poverty-relief strategy, but rather to point out that their weaknesses can be better understood and addressed through closer attention to gender relations.

### **Conservative Bias?**

A third problem from a gender equity perspective arises from the conservative bias associated with most social capital approaches. Practitioners are routinely urged to build on existing social capital and to revive past forms. Where this is interpreted as supporting ‘traditional’ networks and forms of administration and where project design is not guided by a commitment to prioritize equity concerns in policies, the result can be to deepen existing social divisions without necessarily increasing project efficiency.<sup>26</sup> From a gender equity perspective existing elites and organizations might

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26. There are particular problems associated with international agencies seeking to strengthen the social capital and institutional capacity of indigenous communities. This can result in indigenous communities becoming client groups of international agencies and having to invent or ‘revitalize’ traditional organizations. Where these function in ways which consolidate the power of sometimes quite undemocratic and inefficient elites which exclude religious minorities and women from participation while benefiting from the resources that are handed out to them as ‘representatives’ of their communities, such policies have come in for considerable criticism.

well be identified as an obstacle to women's participation and inhibit the creation of more efficient practices and more solidaristic community relations.

The conservative bias in the policy prescriptions designed in regard to social capital is most evident where they resonate with communitarian agendas. When applied to development projects, some of the same weaknesses that have been identified in communitarianism reappear. Social capital approaches have an implicit tendency to idealize communities which are treated as existing without structured power relations and conflict. The 'community' comes to acquire moral authority and through more or less meaningful participatory mechanisms, comes to be seen as the most efficient instrument for planning and implementing policies (Francis, 2001: 79). However, there is considerable scepticism in the critical development literature about these assumptions. Among the many problems noted is the partial way in which representation and participation work, resulting in silencing the voices of those without power and effectively undermining the claims that a legitimate consensus has indeed been achieved. More broadly, the underlying premises that communities are necessarily more effective and efficient than well-governed states is one that is far from supported by the evidence.<sup>27</sup> As noted, successful participatory projects in Latin America have frequently depended upon a creative synergy between state and civil society (Evans, 1996; Tandler, 1997).

The communitarian sympathies that underpin many social capital approaches are most evident in the treatment of the family. Material on the World Bank social capital website endorses the family as a prime locus of social capital, to be worked with and strengthened.<sup>28</sup> On the face of it few would disagree, but much depends on how this is interpreted and what is meant by 'the family'. In much of this literature the family is treated normatively as a unit in which little or no account is taken of the gendered divisions of labour and power within it. Seeing 'the family' as enhancing the life chances of children or maximizing the informal incomes of the poor is hardly helpful in identifying needs and resources if it assumes no gender differences or inequalities in the family unit. Feijóo (2001), writing about the social capital 'boom' in Latin America, notes that current usages seem to have forgotten earlier work on intra-household relations,<sup>29</sup> and calls for greater appreciation of the historical and regional diversity of family forms.

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27. The evidence from Latin America allows us to question claims that the level of state intervention is inversely proportional to the stock of social capital in society. Tandler's work on Ceará in Brazil (Tandler, 1997) shows that decentralized states and civic associations can co-operate effectively on social programmes under certain conditions.

28. This point was made by Mayoux (2001) and can be confirmed as still being valid at the time of writing (November 2001).

29. She cites, among other things, the 'gender blind' overview policy paper prepared for the ECLAC conference by Durston (2001).

In Latin America the family/household is characterized by often exaggerated forms of male privilege; moreover ‘the’ family is associated with multiple forms of kin and non-kin interdependency, and the nuclear family form accounts for at most 50 per cent of households in the region. With growing numbers of female-headed and extended households, with up to 40 per cent of married women (or more) in employment in most countries (more often than not in the informal sector or in poorly rewarded and insecure jobs), one wonders how ‘supporting the family’ will be translated into policy, and how it would square with the efforts of women’s organizations whose work departs from rather different assumptions.

Communitarians and many social capital theorists are united in lamenting the corrosive effects on social capital of women’s entry into paid work. Putnam sees the decline of family and kinship as a major factor in eroding social capital and cites ‘market based childcare’ as partly to blame — views echoed by Fukuyama in his recent work *The Great Disruption* (1999). This brings us back to the point made earlier with regard to the politics of policy implementation and alerts us to the different ways in which gender issues can be treated in social capital approaches. The conservative church in Latin America joins in the communitarian denunciation of women’s entry into wage labour, holding it responsible for a range of social ills. Women’s responsibilities to the family and community are held up against the ‘selfish individualism’ that drives them to seek self-fulfilment in work.<sup>30</sup> Yet the securing of income by women is the single most powerful factor in alleviating family poverty and children’s malnutrition. It is also crucial in enabling women to escape violence at the hands of husbands and other male kin. It seems that women’s *unpaid* work contributes to the stocks of social capital but their paid work does not. This makes it necessary not only to question some of the double standards applied within this debate but also to ask how and why social capital as normatively conceived privileges some forms of social capital over others.

Women’s movements and feminist NGOs in Latin America have been engaged in constructing other sources of social capital, building networks of trust and solidarity amongst women through employment, training and health programmes. It is usually only with great difficulty that such groups have been able to gain support for projects that target female-headed households amongst the poorest, in contexts where they are denounced as ‘encouraging the break-up of the family’.<sup>31</sup> In a region with some of the highest rates of violence against women in the world, it is hardly surprising that women’s movements have been active in supporting victims of such

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30. These tensions are explored more fully in ‘Gender and Citizenship in Latin America’ in Molyneux (2000a).

31. Author’s interviews with NGOs in Nicaragua and Chile, and with NGO representatives at the UN Latin American regional summit on women, 2000.

abuse and in training female heads of households for employment.<sup>32</sup> This conflict over the politics and forms of social capital that are seen as desirable expresses what may be a more fundamental tension between social capital approaches on the one hand and those that prioritize rights on the other. Many feminist NGOs have been engaged in rights advocacy work using the language of citizenship and developing programmes which empower women and allow them to develop some autonomy. It is not difficult to see how such strategies challenge the more conservative interpretations of social capital approaches. The 'detraditionalizing' of the family, and the reconfiguring of a new sexual contract premised on female autonomy (Giddens, 1990), require more creative responses from policy-makers than the simplistic call to 'support the family'.

## CONCLUSIONS

Social capital has its enthusiasts, its tacticians and its sceptics (Edwards nd). It has enjoyed considerable scholarly attention of late and seen some refinement in its conceptual apparatus. However, differences in theoretical and policy approaches to building social capital abound, not surprisingly given the lack of consensus on its definition and its inherent conceptual weakness. The operational value of the concept in the policy arena is as varied and contested as the assumptions on which it is based.

Three main points have been made about social capital and its absorption into current policy agendas in Latin America. First, that this is not an innocent appropriation and that in forming part of a broader policy agenda, we should be attentive to how it can support 'sticking plaster' approaches to development where it can serve to conceal structural issues, notably inequities in the distribution of power and assets, and the human and gendered costs of macro-economic policies. Social capital in the form of networks and associational activity can be an important resource in tackling poverty and social disintegration and in assisting in the effective delivery of social welfare. But it is no substitute for policies designed to achieve a more socially integrated society through redistributive measures and sound economic policies.<sup>33</sup>

Second, in the development of projects and policies designed to enhance social capital, a critical gender perspective is essential if social divisions and

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32. Research has shown that female-headed households are better at redistributing household resources than male-headed households and that they are also more networked and socially responsible. Children are not necessarily worse off in female-headed households and may even enjoy better conditions and care (Chant, 1997).

33. Schild (pers. comm.) suggests that social capital may turn out to be 'the discursive medium' of neo-liberal anti-poverty policies which propose to alleviate poverty without tackling equity issues.

existing power relations are not to be strengthened. Where policies recognize femininity as a sign of social capital, we need to ask not just what resources of social capital women command but — to paraphrase Martha Nussbaum — what do these resources allow women to do and to be (Nussbaum, 2002)? Whether poor women can deploy ‘their’ social capital to enhance their leverage over resources and policy depends crucially on whether they can develop their capabilities, political as much as economic, collective as much as individual. Women’s and feminist movements have been aiming to do just that through training programmes, through ‘empowerment’ strategies and by helping to enhance women’s collective and individual claims on citizenship. Social capital approaches need to consider the diverse ways in which feminist networks and associations throughout Latin America have sought to build new forms of social capital, in ways which are not at variance, but are in sympathy with, regional efforts to advance women’s human rights.

Third, social capital begs a number of questions as to the purposes it is designed to serve, who benefits and why. If one of the attractions of social capital to development practitioners is precisely its conceptual imprecision, its applications too often proceed in an apparent innocence of the politics and social relations of the social forces they choose to work with. Like so many of these terms, social capital will therefore be used and abused within the development field. From a gender perspective this ambivalent potential is all too evident. Negatively, it can be grist to the mill to those who, while arguing that women’s place is in a strengthened patriarchal family and that women’s employment is the cause of social ills, seek to instrumentalize their unpaid labour while failing to meet their needs. Positively, in the hands of more imaginative agencies, it could be brought into alignment with ongoing efforts aimed at building up citizens’ rights movements, and supporting co-operative and democratic forms of associational activity in ways that strengthen development initiatives and help confront the formidable negativity of what Portes has called the ‘downside of social capital’ — whether this be in the form of criminal gangs, corrupt public administrations, exclusionary elites or authoritarian communities.

These points suggest that the current take-up of social capital can only be understood within a broader analysis of the socio-economic and political relations in which it operates. In development policy, therefore, instead of idealizing social capital, taking it for granted, or ignoring its diverse forms and sites, a good place to start in producing a critical and more finely grained approach and more effective policies, would be to take gender relations and the problems they pose for social capital approaches more seriously.

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