

The importance of understanding the diversities of social capital: a case study of female heads of households in Sri Lanka

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In contemporary development policy and planning social capital is seen as important as economic capital for the advancement of the deprived populations, especially poor women as it is identified as a resource that is available to anyone. However, social capital is not a unitary concept and can manifest itself in diverse qualities and forms. The present paper is based on a study of female-headed households in three districts of Sri Lanka, namely Colombo, Kandy and Matara. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected; quantitative data were obtained through a sample survey of 534 female heads of households and qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews. The social capital of female heads of households were analyzed using a frame work by Briggs' (1998) that distinguishes between social support networks and social leverage networks. Results revealed that the social capital of women heads differed by type of contacts that they had as well as their residence location. The study further revealed that all female heads possessed social support networks. However, only 52 per cent have social leverage networks; this is especially so in the case of those belonging to low income groups with low education levels and engaging in manual labour. For example, only eight per cent of those with primary education or no-schooling had leverage networks outside their own community. In contrast 84 per cent among those with a degree or diploma had leverage networks outside their community. Similarly, while 82 per cent of the professionals had leverage contacts outside their community, only nine per cent of the manual labourers did so. The study stresses that ignoring the diversities of social capital and employing it as a singular term can hinder the usefulness of social capital, especially as a resource for the advancement of women.

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