

**Getting on or getting by?**  
**Women, social capital and political participation**

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## **Introduction**

This article considers the utility of the concept of social capital in explaining differences in patterns of political participation among women and men, with particular reference to local politics and governance in Britain. It investigates whether women have access to the same *quantity* of social capital as men, whether their social capital is of the same *type*, and whether they *use* their social capital in the same way as men. Taking forward the ‘capital’ analogy, the article looks at how rich women are, and the extent to which they invest their capital in political activity. As well as providing new insights into women’s political behaviour, the analysis illuminates key issues for the broader social capital debate - regarding the distribution of social capital within communities, and the nature of the link between networks of sociability and patterns of political engagement.

### **Social capital and women’s political engagement: the conundrum**

Analyses of social capital are based upon the claim that patterns of formal and informal sociability build up relations of trust and reciprocity. The resultant ‘social capital’ enhances individuals’ capacity to join together in collective action to resolve common problems (or ensure that governments address such problems) – it ‘capitalises’ political engagement. High levels of social capital are associated with high-performing democratic institutions. Although not the originator of the concept of social capital (see Coleman 1990 and Bourdieu 1986), Robert Putnam has been its chief publicist in political science. This article takes as its starting point the definition offered by Putnam (1995, p 67): “‘social capital’ refers to features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’.

From his 20-year comparative study of the Italian regions, Putnam (1993) comes up with the startling claim that the best predictor of good government is the ‘civic-ness’ of a local community (his measures include levels of social trust, associational membership and newspaper reading). Putnam’s thesis has had a major impact upon political theory (the role of ‘civil society’ in a democratic polity), political economy (the link between ‘civic

communities' and economic success), and the comparative and historical analysis of nations' democratic performance (the role of associational activity and social trust). A version of the social capital thesis also lies at the heart of the 'third way' politics professed by many European and American political leaders (see Giddens 1998). Ben Fine (2000, p 19) has commented recently on the 'gargantuan analytical appetite of social capital'.

What aspects of women's political participation in Britain might social capital help to explain? On *political participation*, we know that levels of electoral turnout are roughly equal for women and men, and that both sexes participate about equally in non-electoral activities, although there are differences in the types of activities in which they 'specialise' (Jarvis *et al* 2000, Johnston and Jowell 2000, Chivite-Matthews and Teal 2000, Norris 1999). On *representation*, we know that there are major differences between the proportion of female and male representatives, which are more marked for 'higher' and more formal institutions of governance (Norris 2000). We also know that women representatives tend to have less authority than their male counterparts, but often work harder (IDEA 2001, Yule 2000). On *attitudes to politics*, we know that women are less interested in, less knowledgeable about, and less satisfied with the operation of politics and government (Hinds and Jarvis 2000, Cabinet Office 1999). (We also know that women may evaluate their own attitudes and behaviour in different ways from men – a point taken up later in the article.)

In terms of trends, the same sources provide evidence of both a closing and a widening of the gender gap. For participation, the gap seems to be closing – in fact, reported voting is now slightly higher for women than men. For representation, the gap is becoming smaller but still remains highly significant. For attitudes towards politics, the gap is widening – attitudes towards politics are becoming more negative for both women and men, but the trend is more pronounced for women. (For all these observations, variables including age, ethnicity, household structure and socioeconomic status interact with gender in important ways - some of which are discussed later.)

With its 'gargantuan analytical appetite', how might social capital help to explain women's patterns of political engagement? Perhaps women simply have less social capital than men - explaining their under-representation in politics? Perhaps women's social capital is in some

way different from men's – explaining their concentration in less formal arenas of politics? Perhaps women have access to social capital but don't invest it in politics – explaining their lower levels of political interest and knowledge? To assess the relevance of social capital models, we start by exploring their potential affinity with gender studies in politics.

### **Social capital and gender studies: a potential affinity?**

The social capital concept appears to have clear epistemological and empirical relevance for those interested in gender differences in politics. Epistemologically, the attraction of the social capital concept lies first and foremost in the explanatory value it places upon social relationships. As the name suggests, the social capital debate promotes a 'socialised' account of political phenomena - in contrast to the 'undersocialised' explanations offered by both rational choice theory and behaviourism. Empirically, the concept seems attractive for the attention it directs towards the intersection between community life and politics, and towards informal as well as formal domains of political activity (see Lowndes 2000 and Randall 2002)

Despite the potential affinity, there has in fact been little interest in gender within the social capital debate, and a simultaneous reluctance among those concerned with women and politics to engage with social capital models. Putnam's path-breaking Italian study, *Making Democracy Work* (1993), made no mention of gender dynamics. Subsequent work tended to concentrate on comparative studies of the relationship between social capital and government performance, using national level and non disaggregated survey data (see, for instance, the pioneering collection edited by van Deth *et al* 1999). The link between social capital and the local community has often appeared to be in danger of getting lost. At the same time, early studies paid little attention to the distribution of social capital within populations.

As is so often the case in political science (and academic debate more generally), a lack of interest in gender dynamics has tended to produce male-bias rather than gender-neutrality. In operationalising concepts within the social capital debate, attention has focused disproportionately upon male-dominated activities. Of the local associations considered by

Putnam (1993, p 92) in his Italian study, 73% were sports clubs whilst only 1% were concerned with health and social services. In his study of social capital in Britain, Peter Hall (1999, pp 427-428) considers in detail trends in pub attendance, whilst relegating to a footnote increases in time spent on childcare (Lowndes 2000, p 534). Despite its promise to link informal community-based activity with broader political phenomena, the social capital debate has often replicated the classic ‘public/private’ split, whereby it is assumed that women’s activity is ‘outside the political world of citizenship and largely irrelevant to it’ (James 1992, p 48).

In short, a ‘disciplining discourse’ has grown up around the social capital concept that renders women’s citizenship ‘invisible’ (Blaxter and Hughes, cited in Field *et al* 2000, p 262). Scholars with an interest in gender relations have tended to find the social capital concept wanting. Ben Fine (2001, p 30) observes that social capital has provided a handy ‘dumping ground’ for political scientists of a broadly rational choice persuasion. The concept allows such scholars to acknowledge the importance of ‘social factors’ without accepting that all political behaviour is shaped by (unequal) social relationships. In criticising dominant approaches to social capital, Grenier and Wright (2001, p 22) argue that ‘the distribution of participation is not a niggling concern – it is the main story’. Ginn and Arber (2002) point to the danger of a ‘malestream bias in which women’s concerns and perspectives are neglected’.

In criticising the neglect of gender within the social capital debate, our objective is not simply to ‘add women and stir’ (Sapiro 1998, p 67). In fact, a consideration of gender dynamics serves to remind us just how hazy the micro-logic of the social capital argument remains. When we move beyond national level statistical associations, it becomes clear how little is known about *how* and under *what conditions* social capital enhances democracy. Men and women may be involved in different, gender-specific ‘circuits’ of social capital that ‘capitalise’ political engagement in different ways (or not at all).

This article seeks to identify differences in women’s and men’s relationship to social capital, drawing out implications for both the wider social capital debate and for our understanding of women’s political engagement. The analysis is organised around three key questions:

- Do women have as much social capital as men?

- Is women's social capital the same as men's?
- Do women use their social capital in the same way as men?

### **Do women have as much social capital as men?**

Interestingly, Robert Putnam has highlighted gender issues to a greater extent in his recent work that seeks to map and explain changes in the level of social capital in the USA (Putnam 1995, 2000). Peter Hall (1999) has also looked at gender differences with regard to trends in associational membership in Britain since the 1950s. Putnam and Hall come up with two strikingly different scenarios.

Hall (1999, p 437) claims that 'social capital has been sustained in Britain largely by virtue of the increasing participation of women in the community'. Hall's data show that women's membership of associations more than doubled between 1959 and 1990 (increasing by 127%), while men's membership grew by just 7% during the same period. Taking a shorter and more recent time period, Hall finds that men's associational membership began to decline after 1973 (down 23% by 1990), while women's membership rose by 23%. By 1990 the levels of women's and men's associational membership were almost identical (p 423). Hall argues that women's increased associational involvement is related, most significantly, to increased access to higher education, but also to participation in the labour force and to the generally changing social situation of women (p 437).

Putnam, on the other hand, considers the contention that the progressive movement of women into paid work may account for *declining* social capital in the US. He shows that women belong to fewer associations than men – although he acknowledges that they spend more time on these groups, and on informal social connections. Levels of joining are in decline for both men and women; but, while the absolute levels of decline are similar, the relative decline is greater for women. Controlling for education, Putnam finds that memberships among men have declined at a rate of 10 – 15 %, compared with 20 – 25 % a decade for women. He argues that this evidence, in association with time budget data, suggest that 'the decline in organisational involvement in recent years is concentrated among women' (Putnam 1995, p 670).

What are we to make of these contradictory scenarios? Unsurprisingly, closer examination of the evidence reveals that women are neither the saviours nor the wreckers of social capital. In his 1995 article, Putnam observes that working women are actually members of *more* associations than non-working women, and are spending more time than previously on such activities (while non-working women are spending less). He suggests that ‘the sort of women who, in an earlier era, were most involved with their communities have been disproportionately likely to enter the workforce, thus simultaneously lowering the average level of civic engagement among the remaining homemakers and raising the average among women in the workplace’ (Putnam 1995, pp 670-1). In his more recent study, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam backs off further from the ‘wreckers’ thesis, pointing out that: ‘Whether working full-time, part-time, or not at all outside the home, and whether by choice or necessity, women invest more time in associational life than the average man... I explicitly disclaim the view that working women are “to blame” for our civic disengagement’ (Putnam 2000, pp 200-1). Although women have ‘lost’ their social capital at a faster rate than men, they still play the major role in sustaining US social capital. We are still left with the mystery of why women’s associational involvement appears to be subject to dramatic increases on one side of the Atlantic and dramatic decreases on the other. There does appear to be evidence in both cases, however, of a closing gender gap with respect to social capital.

Hall and Putnam are interested in gender only in so far as changing gender roles help to explain aggregate trends in the overall level of ‘national’ social capital. If social capital is ‘going down’ or ‘going up’, what is the respective ‘contribution’ of men and women to this trend? They are not concerned, however, with documenting absolute differences in the level of social capital possessed by women and men - nor with differences in the nature of that social capital or the uses to which it is put. Interestingly, it is the take-up by policy-makers of the social capital concept (on both sides of the Atlantic) that has prompted a new interest in the distribution of social capital within communities. Putnam’s interest in the ‘micro-politics’ of social capital has grown alongside his increasing involvement in policy debates concerning the decline of social capital in the US (Putnam 2000, Leigh and Putnam 2002). In Britain, New Labour policies on urban regeneration, health promotion and community relations all aim to build and mobilise social capital, particularly within deprived

and ‘excluded’ communities (see, for instance, Blair 2002, Thompson 2002, Ginn and Arber 2002, Home Office 2001). The research activity associated with this policy agenda is producing new gender-disaggregated data sets, which go beyond crude measures of associational activity and explore all aspects of social capital.

In 2000/01 a special module of the British General Household Survey (GHS) investigated five different aspects of social capital, based upon a sample of 7,857 respondents. The survey reveals few differences between the responses of men and women across a comprehensive range of social capital indicators; in fact, women are often slightly ‘ahead’ of men (although the differences are small). As the survey report concludes: ‘with the exception of age, the socio-demographic factors most likely to be closely associated with the indicators of social capital were the household or area based factors rather than individual ones’ (Coulthard *et al* 2002, p 111). (In addition to gender, individual factors included ethnicity and socioeconomic status; household and area factors included region, tenure, marital status, dependent children.) The GHS findings, therefore, tie in with Putnam and Hall’s observation of a closing gender gap in relation to social capital. Table 1 sets out a selection of survey findings to illustrate the similarity between levels of social capital for women and men.

*Table 1 about here*

The lack of any significant gender gap is reinforced by the initial findings of the British Home Office Citizenship Survey, conducted in 2001 (see Prime *et al*, 2002). Women and men were within three percentage points of one another in responding to questions about broad categories of social capital related activity: ‘social participation’ (which includes watching and playing sports, and participating in hobbies, religious activities and community groups); informal volunteering (including looking after property or pets, babysitting and childcare, collecting pensions and shopping); and formal volunteering (including fundraising, organising and running events, and committee work). (Unfortunately, gender disaggregated data are not yet available for the sub-categories of activity.)



The findings on levels of social capital remain surprising, however, given what we know about differences in women's political participation, and about the enduring nature of gender roles in the family, workplace and community. If women and men possess similar levels of social capital, how can the concept help us explain manifest differences in political behaviour and attitudes? Perhaps the answer lies in differences in the nature, rather than the level, of women and men's social capital – it is to this issue that we now turn.

### **Is women's social capital the same as men's?**

Three points are of particular importance here. First, we know from our discussion of the GHS that there exist a range of measures for social capital. Referring to aggregate 'levels' of social capital, or picking upon a single measure (typically associational membership), may give a misleading picture regarding gender differences. Second, quantifiable measures of social capital (like those we have dealt with so far) may obscure important gender differences in the type or quality of the social capital involved. Third, the choice of social capital measures may reflect a gender bias, selecting in or out activities dominated by women and men respectively. Related to this point, there is also evidence that women and men identify and report upon their social capital related activities in different ways. Evidence on levels of social capital may be relatively unhelpful, then, if it smooths out gender differences in the type or quality of social capital, or if it reflects a gender bias in the activities it 'counts'. We look now at these points in more detail.

Although the GHS shows no close statistical association between gender and social capital across the board, there are interesting (if small) gender effects. Given the paucity of data in the literature regarding gender differences, it is worth reporting these in some detail.

Looking at the full range of the GHS findings (not just the figures in Table 1), the following gender effects can be identified (all references are from Coulthard *et al* 2002):

- **Trust and reciprocity.** While there are no major gender differences, women are slightly more likely than men to know and trust their neighbours. When other demographic factors are accounted for (via logistic regression), women have a slightly higher score than men on the GHS summary indicators for neighbourliness and reciprocity.

Interestingly, the presence of dependent children in a household is related to high reciprocity scores (p 29).

- **Social networks.** Women are more likely than men to speak on the 'phone frequently (particularly to relatives) and to see relatives, but men are more likely to report having a large number of close friends living nearby (p 50). Interestingly, part-time workers are more likely than full-time workers to see and speak to friends and relatives, and to have more close friends living nearby (p 51).
- **Social support.** Women are more likely than men to seek help from their partner or relatives in relation to seeking a lift or borrowing money (men are more likely to turn to friends). However, in the event of illness, women are more likely than men to turn to friends, while men are more likely than women to turn to their partners. These data suggest a gender effect at work – with both women and men turning to female helpers! According to the summary indicator for social support, men are slightly more likely to have low social support than women (p 71). Again, part-time workers are richer in social capital than full-time workers, being more likely to have multiple sources of informal help (p 72). (This finding supports Robert Putnam's [2000, p 407] contention that part-time workers have 'the best of both worlds': they are exposed to broader social networks but also have sufficient time to pursue social capital related activities outside the workplace.)
- **Civic engagement.** There is very little difference between women and men in relation to associational involvement, although women are slightly more likely to say they could influence decisions in their area (p 7). Age differences are interesting: women in their thirties are more likely than men to be actively involved in an organisation, probably reflecting closer local involvement when children are small. Confirming this, the findings show that civic engagement is more likely where there are dependent children in a household, all other factors being equal (p 8).

- **Views of the local area.** There are no differences between women and men's length of residence in their local area or their overall perceptions of local facilities or problems. Women have more experience than men of facilities for young children and education services, but less experience of police services. There is a major difference regarding women and men's feeling of safety when walking alone at nighttime (p 91).

So, while gender differences in the survey responses are undoubtedly small, the GHS findings do reveal a tendency for men and women to have different *social capital profiles*. Women are slightly more likely than men to know and trust their neighbours, have more contact with friends and relatives, and have access to informal sources of social support. Women's social capital appears to be more strongly embedded in neighbourhood-specific networks of informal sociability. (This is not to say that women are not as active as men in other social capital forming activities, like involvement in formal associations - but our task here is to highlight gender *differences* rather than similarities.)

It would be tempting to suggest that women may be richer in what Putnam and others have called 'bonding social capital': ties with relatives and intimate friends whose sociological niche is like one's own. (Bonding social capital is contrasted with 'bridging social capital' that links one with diverse acquaintances who move in different social circles – as may be the case with sports clubs, church activities or charitable organisations.) However, the evidence presented above is inconclusive as to the diversity or otherwise of women's social contacts vis-à-vis those of men. Even if we assume that women's contacts are mostly with other women, we should beware of assuming that 'women' are a homogenous group. Women meeting in an ante-natal group, for instance, may vary significantly in relation to class or ethnicity. If they stay in touch after the birth of their babies, they may exchange information and contacts regarding future employment, childcare or health issues that cut across the assumptions and experience of any one social group. Outward-looking, 'bridging' social capital may be produced within women's networks as well as men's. The neighbourhood focus of women's social capital profile would, of course, suggest a shared 'sociological' niche, but the GHS evidence also points to the importance for men of contacts with friends living nearby. Putnam (2000, p 24) seems wise to caution against putting too much store on

the distinction between ‘bridgingness’ and ‘bondingness’, given the practical difficulties involved in categorising social capital activities in this way.

The level of detail provided by the GHS represents an immense improvement upon the crude proxies for social capital that have been used in the past – generally counts of associational memberships or reported levels of social trust. A more sophisticated measure of social capital is achieved through the blending of the five different aspects and, by analysing them separately, it is possible to identify how social capital profiles differ for different groups of respondents. Such survey data still cannot tell us, however, about the nature and quality of the social interactions and activities involved. When someone ‘phones a friend, they may be arranging an evening out, or they may be negotiating shared childcare arrangements. When someone ‘does a favour’ for a neighbour, they may be posting a letter, or helping them to find a job or a college course. When someone says that they are involved with a local organisation, they may be a name on a membership list, or a member of a management committee, or an active volunteer.

Other studies can give us some clues about what is actually involved in the social interactions and activities that get counted alongside one another in social capital surveys. There is evidence that women and men tend to ‘specialise’ in different social and community based activities (see Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Research on volunteering in Britain shows that men and women focus their efforts in different arenas: more than twice as many men than women undertake activity related to sports and recreation (29% compared with 13%), while women are more active in the fields of health, education and social services. As for the specific roles undertaken, men are more likely to occupy committee posts, while women dominate in visiting and befriending activities (Gaskin and Smith 1995, Chapter 3). Gender-specific patterns of activity are also evident in relation to informal sociability. Time-budget studies show both women and men are spending more time on leisure activities outside the home (an increase of about 20 minutes a day between 1961 and 1995). However, in 1995 men still had 50 minutes more leisure time a day than women. On average women spend nearly four times longer than men on domestic work and childcare (about 5 hours a day), while men spend three times longer than women on socialising (Gershuny and Fisher, cited in Grenier and Wright 2001). The focus of informal sociability

varies too, with women spending a third of the time spent by men in sports' clubs, and only half as much time at social clubs. Men, however, spend a third of the time devoted by women to visiting friends (see Hall 1999, Table 2, p 426). (These are differences across sample populations and are not, of course, intended to suggest that *all* women have a preference for social welfare over sports, or visiting over clubs.)

Differences in the type of activities undertaken by women and men (and the time they spend on them) may well have a bearing upon whether, and in what ways, women and men's social capital can be mobilised for political purposes. The situation is, however, further complicated by the fact that social capital studies in political science have tended to focus upon male dominated activities. They have 'selected in' men's social capital-related activities, while often neglecting entire spheres of relevant activity where women's efforts are concentrated. As we observed earlier, 73% of the Italian local associations considered by Robert Putnam in his seminal study of social capital were sports' clubs whilst only 1% were concerned with health and social services. We also noted that care-related social networks tend to be disregarded.

Exploring the case of childcare further, we know that school-runs, childcare swaps and babysitting circles all involve relationships of reciprocity and mutuality. Childcare networks clearly fit with common definitions of social-capital forming activities: 'regular contact with others, beyond the sphere of the family or the market... the kind of face-to-face relations of relative equality associated with participation in common endeavours' (Hall 1999, p 418). And yet, because they involve children and relationships of care, such networks are presumed to be within the sphere of the family – as belonging to the domestic arena rather than wider civil society. To paraphrase Jean Cohen (1999, p 238), they are seen as 'in' rather than 'of' civil society. Interestingly, this is a perception shared by many women themselves. Research shows that female activists often do not identify themselves as 'active in the community' because they regard their activities (such as after-school clubs or tenants' groups) as an extension of their domestic and caring roles (see, for instance, Lowndes 1997 and Balsom 2000).

Putnam's great contribution in *Making Democracy Work* was to signal the importance for a healthy democracy of community activity that is not overtly (or at all) political. He disrupted conventional discourses about citizenship by showing the importance of sports' clubs and choral societies to the creation of a 'civic community', but stopped short at crossing the public/private divide and venturing into 'women's territory' (Lowndes 2000, p 537). In his more recent work on the USA, Putnam (2000) does expand his understanding of social capital to include more 'domestic' activities – including visiting friends and entertaining at home (see Chapter 6), and even exchanging and sharing childcare (see Chapter 17). However, as Putnam has spread his social capital net wider, he has sought to catch an ever larger range of fish. While *Making Democracy Work* concerned itself with the link between civic activity and democratic performance, *Bowling Alone* links social capital to a broad range of social and economic phenomenon. In the case of childcare, for instance, Putnam seeks to demonstrate a relationship between carers' networks and children's welfare and educational achievement. He argues that the best predictor of which children avoid behavioural and emotional problems is 'the degree to which they and their mothers were enmeshed in a supportive social network' (Putnam 2000, p 299). Such findings are fascinating, but they take us no nearer understanding the *political* implications of men and women's distinct relationships with social capital. In expanding its 'gargantuan analytical appetite', social capital is in danger of losing its bite as a predictor of political behaviour and outcomes.

We have argued in this section that women and men tend to have different social capital profiles, with women's social capital more embedded in neighbourhood-specific networks of informal sociability. Gender is important, then, not just for explaining how levels of social capital rise or fall across a population over time, but also for understanding how the different aspects of social capital are distributed within populations. Concerns about 'types' of social capital are not just nit-picking, nor are they an attempt to rank some activities as 'better' than others. Such concerns are important because they provoke difficult questions: can all types of social capital be 'converted' into political engagement, and under what conditions? It seems from our discussion so far that women have access to as much social capital as men, but that this social capital tends to be of a different type. Perhaps women are also less likely than men to invest their social capital politically? The most important issue may not be what

women have, but what they do with it. The next step in our analysis is to look at differences in the way in which women and men use their stocks of social capital.

## **Do women use their social capital in the same way as men?**

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that social interactions dominated by women tend to produce 'really useful' social capital, especially when compared with some other settings that have attracted commentators' attention. Trust and mutuality *may* be associated with pub attendance (along with fighting and petty crime), but there is surely a far weaker link to social capital than the regular, shared and reciprocal responsibilities that characterise childcare networks (for instance). Recent sociological research argues that women are, in general, more strongly connected to neighbourhood networks than men, whilst mothers of young children enjoy particularly robust patterns of social exchange (see Morris 1995, Bell and Ribbins 1994). Research on the social networks of unemployed people shows that women fare better than men in terms of access to social support and even financial help (Russell 1999). Among employed women, relations of interdependency within local networks are an important resource for 'the effective coordination of home, work and family life' (Jarvis 1999, p 237). As Helen Russell (1999, p 219) argues: 'the very building blocks of social networks are gendered... Women's continued responsibility for caring and domestic work tends to restrict the range of social activity they are involved in, but it does provide an opportunity to build up supportive social networks in the community'.

Women's neighbourhood support networks are not a thing of the past – some rosy glow left over from the Young and Wilmott community studies of 1950s (see Young and Wilmott 1957). The utility of such networks, particularly in relation to childcare, is reinforced in the context of continuing increases in women's labour force participation (particularly striking for mothers of children under 5 years) and the very low levels in Britain of public and private childcare provision (in 1998 over a half of all working mothers relied on informal care) (Cabinet Office 1998). There is also new evidence linking women's social networks to their state of health. Analysing data from the 2000/01 General Household Survey (GHS), Ginn and Arber (2002) note that network activity was relatively unimportant to men's health. In contrast, they observe that, for women, 'frequency of phone contact and having a relatively large number of friends living nearby were linked to better health'. In addition, trust of neighbours was more positively associated with health from women than men, reflecting 'women's greater embeddedness in the neighbourhood' (Ginn and Arber 2002).



Women's health, then, is more closely linked than men's to social relationships with friends and neighbours. It seems that women may be investing their social capital in 'getting by' rather than 'getting on' (to adapt Briggs' distinction, cited in Putnam 2000, p 23). As women draw on their hard-earned social capital as a resource in the day-to-day management of their own and their family's lives, there may be little left to spend on politics. Women's social capital may be more likely than men's to remain within the community sphere, rather than spilling over into the political domain.

At the same time, there exists a rich literature on the links between women's community activity and political engagement. In Britain, the classic example of the striking miners' wives in the mid-1980s shows how women were politicised through community involvement (Loach 1985). Similar processes have been documented in areas like housing, health, childcare, crime prevention and neighbourhood regeneration (see Lister 1997, Williams 1993 and Dominelli 1990). Such studies serve to illuminate the links between what Putnam (1993) calls the 'internal' and 'external' benefits of group activity: that is, the gains for individuals of their personal development and political competence, and for the wider community in terms of collective services or campaigns. Research into women's community involvement demonstrates the importance of pre-existing relationships of trust and mutuality among friends and neighbours. Shared concerns serve to mobilise self-help and campaigning activity, which in turn catalyses more formal political activity as activists' competence grows. To take a few examples, Martha Acklesberg (1983) analysed the 'politics of friends and families' in the context of the organised women's movement; more recently, Marian Barnes (1997) has explored the role of friendship among women organising as disabled people and as users of mental health services.

At one level, then, studies of women's political activity seem to offer a paradigmatic case of Putnam's social capital magic in operation (taking us back to the 'potential affinity' discussed at the start of the article). However, we also know that women remain under-represented in formal politics and have lower levels of political interest and knowledge than men. It seems that social capital may get women into politics, but it may also hold them back. We know that women are most active in what could be called the 'lower' or more informal reaches of

politics. The more formal the political process becomes, the less likely women are to be active. It seems that women often cross the boundary between community activity and political action in pursuit of particular issues or causes. Having got there, however, they are less likely than men to 'progress' up the political ladder or to move into more formal political arenas. We consider three examples of these processes in action in the field of local politics: in relation to housing and urban regeneration, education, and elected local government.

Studies of tenant participation confirm the dominance of women as founders and members of tenants' groups, but record different motivations for involvement between women and men. Research has found that women were more likely to get involved as a result of specific campaigns (such as faster repairs services or improved play areas for children), whereas men were attracted by more abstract considerations of 'making a contribution' and 'playing their part' (Balsom 2000). Female tenants were more likely to see participation as a means to an end, whereas male tenants tended to see participation as an end in itself. Hood and Woods (1994) have documented the tendency for women to be involved in establishing tenants' groups, their involvement then giving way to male leaders. Among the tenants in Balsom's study, men favoured more formal methods of organising than women. Male tenant activists were also more likely than women to take on roles as school governors or local authority councillors; women's 'empowerment' was more likely to take the form of personal development. Rather than using their skills and experience to 'get on' in politics (taking on more formal and influential roles), women activists tend to draw upon their increased confidence, independence and contacts to pursue education or employment opportunities (or just feel better about themselves) (Lowndes 1997, Balsom 2000). Rose Gilroy (1996, p 253) identifies two, gendered, routes to empowerment within the broader urban regeneration context: 'while many men were taking the route to jobs, many women (and some men) were taking another individualised route... to self esteem'.

The different 'styles of power' evident in women and men's community activity (Gilroy 1996) go some way to explaining why women's involvement falls off as activity becomes more formalised and overtly political. Mike Geddes' (1997) study of urban regeneration partnerships found that, typically, only 3 or 4 seats on partnership bodies were held by women (who were usually there as community representatives). A survey by the London

Regeneration Network confirmed that only 35% of partnership board members were women in 1997 (although this figure is, as we shall see, higher than for council membership) (see Brownhill and Darke 1998, p 15.). In addition, research shows that female representatives often found it hard to play a full role in boardroom debates and decision-making, due to both a lack of confidence and an unfamiliarity with formal procedures. Moreover, women were frequently excluded from 'behind the scenes' networks dominated by male councillors and business representatives (Skelcher *et al* 1996, Lowndes *et al* 1997). Geddes (1997, p 110) concludes that: 'while it is increasingly realised that women play a crucial role in maintaining some sense of community in deprived neighbourhoods, this experience is often not available at the heart of partnership processes'. In my own research, one activist summed the situation up thus: 'women's networks are organic... often invisible.. and, if recognised, they are seen as threatening or trivialised' (Skelcher *et al* 1996, p 32).

In the education field, women are generally more active than men in attending meetings of traditional parent teacher associations (PTAs) and informal parents' forums (concerned with curriculum issues or other policy matters). Jane Martin's research established that men were becoming more involved in their children's education, but were colonising the 'male public sphere' of school life, while the 'female orientation' of much of home-school liaison remains unchanged (Martin 1999, p 60). Her survey of 15 schools in disadvantaged areas found that where men were involved, they were more likely than women to take up formal roles as school governors and PTA committee members, while women dominated within traditional forms of parental activity (attending parents' consultation activities and pupils' plays or concerts) (p 56). There is also evidence that men are more likely to be involved with their children's schools at secondary rather than primary level, 'as the stakes get higher' (Vincent and Martin 2000, p 461). Across the country, women make up 54% of school governors, but only 36% of chairs of governing bodies, and just 25% of chairs at secondary level (Scanlon *et al* 1999, p 9).

Evidence suggests that there may be important class-based distinctions within women's involvement in school-based parents' groups. Vincent and Martin (2000, p 471) found that more educated women, working in professional jobs, used attendance at school meetings as a 'strategy' that allowed 'them to display their support for the school and their interest in

their children's education... in a way that avoids being assigned to an ancillary role or being given gendered domestic tasks, such as washing paint bottles or preparing food'. Less educated women, working part-time and in non-professional jobs, were more likely to be involved in such 'support' roles or in a fundraising capacity. Both sets of women, however, characterised their respective activities as part of being a 'good mother' (Vincent and Martin 2000, p 476). As discussed earlier, caring responsibilities may mobilise women as community activists but potential connections with wider political participation may go unrecognised and unacted upon.

Moving further up the ladder of 'formality', there is further evidence of our contention that social capital may get women into politics, but may also hold them back. The 2001 national census of local authority councillors (England and Wales) found that 72% of councillors were men and 28% were women. There was no increase in the proportion of women councillors since the last survey in 1997 (IDEA 2001). Among newly elected councillors, men and women had similar levels of 'external' community involvement, in both formal roles like school governors and in wider voluntary activity (IDEA 2000a). However, it is clear from the 2000 'exit' survey that, among councillors who were standing down, women were more likely than their male counterparts to have responsibilities in the community (IDEA 2000b).

As noted earlier, the GHS showed the presence of dependent children in a household to be a good predictor of high levels of social capital (particularly in relation to neighbourliness and civic engagement). However, the 2001 census found that only 28% of all councillors had caring responsibilities – a decrease from 34% in 1997 (IDEA 2001). Caring responsibilities seem to be particularly incompatible with council membership for women. Among newly elected councillors, 40% of men had dependents in contrast with 32% of women (IDEA 2000a). The GHS also found that organisational membership increased for women in their 30s, when they were most likely to be caring for children. Looking at the age profile of councillors, we find that a higher proportion of male councillors fell into the age bracket 25-44, whereas female councillors were more likely to be aged 45-59 (when caring responsibilities for children are likely to be less) (IDEA 2001). These findings suggest again a gendered relationship between social capital and political engagement.

So we know that women are less likely than men to become elected councillors and, if they do, they are likely to be older than men and to be free of caring responsibilities. A recent exit surveys showed that female councillors were more likely to stand down voluntarily (as opposed to being voted out), and were more likely to cite family responsibilities and time constraints as reasons for leaving office (men were more likely to mention business or work reasons) (IDEA 1999). Women councillors were also more likely than men to stand down after four years or less (IDEA 2000b). This evidence suggests that community involvement is less compatible with council membership for women than men. In the formal arena of local democracy, social capital seems a less good predictor of political involvement for women than men. We know that men and women have similar levels of social capital, but it appears that women are not ‘spending’ their social capital in the formal political arena.

One explanation, then, is that women’s ‘social capital profile’ is more suited to ‘getting by’ rather than ‘getting on’ – that is, to catalysing informal activity in the immediate community, and to providing a resource for their own and their families’ health and well-being. A second explanation is that women’s social capital is actually being ‘spent’ by men in the political realm. The argument here is a familiar one in political, business and artistic spheres: as the saying goes, ‘behind every great man, there is a great woman’. Women’s care- and neighbourhood-based networks may, at the same time, present a burden for *female politicians* and a resource for *male politicians*. The gendered nature of social capital deals out a double whammy: while men are helped, women are hindered. Women’s social capital provides many male politicians with practical support (freeing them from domestic and neighbourhood responsibilities) and also with political support, in the sense of community-based information, knowledge and contacts. This is clearly of particular importance in local politics. In my own experience, male parent governors make productive use of their female partners’ informal ‘school gate’ knowledge when debating and taking decisions in meetings. At the same time, those partners are providing practical support to male governors through babysitting at home – or using their social networks to arrange such care!

Fiona Mackay (1998) has used Joan Tronto’s notion of ‘privileged irresponsibility’ to explore the advantages enjoyed by male councillors who had others to undertake caring work for

them. She found that women councillors, in contrast, were struggling to combine family responsibilities with meetings that lasted all day and frequently late into the evening. Mackay (1999, p 262) notes ironically that 'every politician needs a wife'. These insights are not in themselves novel. What is important for our purposes is that they throw light upon the gendered relationship between social capital and political engagement. Not only does the relationship tend to be *different* for men and women, it also tends to be *unequal*. Not only do women tend to spend their social capital in different arenas from men, but - to put it crudely - women may earn social capital that is subsequently spent by men. Many men, in politics and elsewhere, enjoy the benefits of 'gendered social capital' (Fine 2001, p 123). As Catherine Campbell (2000, p 196) has noted: 'our understanding of the role played by social capital in perpetuating unequal power relations is still in its infancy'.

For those women who do become local councillors, there is evidence to suggest that women work harder but have less responsibility than their male counterparts. The 2001 census showed that, although they were a minority of councillors overall, women were more likely to sit on between 6 and 10 committees, while male councillors were more likely to belong to three or less. At the same time, male councillors were more likely than women to occupy executive posts, or to act as committee chairs (IDEA 2001). (The pattern with regard to committee chairs is evident even in relation to newly elected councillors, so cannot be accounted for by longer service or greater experience on the council {IDEA 2000a}.) Before the recent changes in political management arrangements (the gender impact of which is not yet clear), women also tended to be under-represented on finance and 'policy and resources' committees (Yule 2000, p 36; IDEA 1999). As Jean Yule (2000, p 33) has argued, there is a 'tendency for the numbers of women and their potential for influence to decline inversely in relation to the most powerful positions'.

Many women do, of course, play an active role in formal politics. For many successful women politicians, professional or party contacts are far greater importance to their career than community networks (mirroring most men's experience). There is an emerging argument, however, that care and community based networks can prove to be a resource, and not just a burden, for women politicians. Feminist theorists, like Carole Gilligan (1982) and Joan Tronto (1993), have explored the distinctiveness of women's moral reasoning,

introducing the concept of an 'ethic of care'. The argument is that men are more closely associated with an 'ethic of justice' (stressing abstract rights and formal rules), while women relate to an 'ethic of care' that prioritises responsibilities and inter-personal relationships. The ethic of care need not relegate women to the domestic sphere, but may also 'be used to challenge and transform values and practices within the public and political sphere' (Mackay 1998, p 261). Mackay (1998, p 265) cites the views of women councillors who argued that they made good politicians precisely *because* they had 'other lives outside the council' (in contrast to many men), and were able to contribute values, skills and contacts gleaned at 'the coal face of life and the community'. Even avoiding the potential essentialism of the justice/care dichotomy, there is surely an untapped potential for women to convert their social capital into a distinctive form of local politics – one that builds on trust and social networks, and 'judges with care' (Sevenhuijsen 1998, p 148).

As I have argued elsewhere, the formation and mobilisation of social capital is best understood in the context of a *two-way* relationship between civil society and government (Lowndes and Wilson 2001, p 631). Challenging Putnam's 'bottom up' approach, Ken Newton (1999, p 17) has argued that social capital 'may also be strongly affected by the policy of governments and by the structure of government itself – a top-down process'. The relationship between gender, social capital and political engagement is profoundly affected by the policies and structures of the state. In their comparative analysis of 14 countries, Claibourn and Sapiro (2002, p 3) observe the importance of institutional differences that 'shape the gender basis of citizenship'. While it is hard to alter the deep-seated social and economic structures that shape women's lives, there is scope to re-design political institutions in such a way as to enable (rather than frustrate) the conversion of women's social capital into political involvement. Indeed, it is the relative accessibility of local government that accounts at least in part for women's relative 'success' in this domain vis-à-vis other arenas of formal politics (Briggs 2000, Mackay 1998). Despite the massive increase after the 1997 Labour landslide, women still make up only 18% of MPs at Westminster (in comparison with 28% of local councillors) (Norris 2000).

The increase in the representation of women beyond local government – at Westminster and, even more strikingly, in the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales - provides

further evidence of the potential role of institutional design. As Pippa Norris (2000) argues, the changes are due primarily to ‘strategies of positive discrimination within the Labour party parliamentary recruitment process’, and a process of constitutional reform that has ‘altered the structure of opportunities for women... without the barrier of established incumbents’. Appointments to public bodies have also proved to be an institutional device for increasing women’s political representation (see Skelcher 1998, Sperling 1998). There is clearly far more that could be done, at all levels of politics, to make institutions more conducive to women’s participation: from ‘small’ matters like the timing and conduct of meetings, to ‘big’ issues like the selection of representatives and leaders. As Elinor Ostrom (1986, p 7) has argued, institutional rules do not ‘produce behaviour’ but they do affect the ‘structure of a situation’ in which actions are chosen.

## **Conclusion**

To date, there has been very little consideration of the relationship between social capital and gender differences in politics, despite a potential affinity of concerns. This article has sought to establish whether social capital can help explain differences in women’s and men’s patterns of political engagement. The answer is a cautious ‘yes’, but only if we move towards a more sophisticated understanding of the link between social capital (in all its different guises) and political involvement. Using new survey data, backed up by insights from qualitative research, we have shown that women have as much social capital as men, but that it tends to be of a slightly different type, and is less likely to be invested in formal political activity. Women’s ‘social capital profile’ is more strongly embedded in neighbourhood-specific networks of informal sociability. Women are more likely than men to draw upon social capital as a resource for ‘getting by’ – for balancing the competing demands of home and work and for protecting their own and their families’ health and well-being.

For women who do cross the boundary between informal community action and formal politics, social capital may get them on - but also hold them back. Care and community based responsibilities are clearly a factor in explaining why women drop out of formal politics, or do not progress at the same rate as men. Women’s social capital may also be ‘spent’ by male politicians, which boosts men’s political prospects at the same time as



holding women back. For women, social capital comes with strings attached! There is evidence, however, that ‘women’s social capital’ can support a different type of local politics: one that is rooted in trust and mutuality and builds on informal community connections. We have argued that there is scope for re-designing political institutions in such a way as to maximise women’s opportunity to ‘convert’ their social capital into political involvement.

In fact, our analysis supports an emerging argument within the broader social capital debate: there is no straightforward causal relationship between social capital and political involvement. Social capital does, or fails to do, its work in particular contexts (Lowndes *et al* 2002). Whether social capital is mobilised as a political resource depends on a variety of factors other than the level and intensity of social capital itself. Our work on gender and social capital serves to illuminate a future research agenda, which is of considerable importance to political scientists and policy-makers alike. A better understanding is required of the circumstances under which social capital becomes an actual, rather than a potential, resource for democracy. Three points are of particular importance. First, we need to identify the factors that trigger or suppress the mobilisation of social capital. Second, we need to establish how these work in relation to different groups within society. Third, we need to explore the ways in which such factors can be influenced by policy-makers (and citizens themselves) in the service of good and equitable governance.

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**Table 1 – Indicators of social capital for women and men**

<b>Answered 'yes'</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
	%	%
<i>Reciprocity and trust</i>		
Speak to neighbours on a daily basis?	28	26
Know most/many people in the neighbourhood?	48	43
Trust most/many people in the neighbourhood?	59	56
Done a favour for a neighbour in last 6 months?	74	74
Received a favour from a neighbour in last 6 months?	73	71
<i>Social networks</i>		
Speak to relatives daily on the 'phone?	35	19
See relatives daily?	17	12
Speak to friends daily on the 'phone?	22	19
See friends daily?	20	21
<i>Social support (informal sources)</i>		
Could get a lift if needed? (from relative, friend, neighbour)	94	93
Could get help if ill in bed?	97	96
Could borrow £100 if in financial difficulty?	14	17
<i>Civic engagement</i>		
Well informed about local affairs?	60	59
Feel you can influence decisions that affect your area?	27	24
Involved in a local organisation, with responsibilities?	14	12
Involved in a local organisation, without responsibilities?	8	7
Taken action to solve a local problem?	27	27
<i>Views of local area</i>		
Enjoys living in this area?		
Low satisfaction with local facilities?	34	33
Perception of high local problems?	36	32
Feel very/fairly safe walking alone in day?	90	95
Feel very/fairly safe walking alone at night?	37	74
Victim of crime in the past 12 months?	14	17

Source:

Social Capital Module, General Household Survey 2000/01

Adapted from tables in Coulthard *et al* 2002

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