



Investigating the Relationship between Social Capital and Political Participation of Iranian Women

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ABSTRACT

Political participation as one of the various types of participation is considered as an indicator of social and political development in a country. Political participation of women as a substantial portion of the population of developing countries is particularly important for political stability and vitality of the society. The purpose of this article is to compare the relationship between social capital and political participation of Iranian women. Survey method was employed here for collecting and analyzing data. Research population included all women (with literacy level no less than primary education) of the city of Isfahan in September and October 2011. The sample included 288 people who were selected by cluster-sampling. For data collection, questionnaires were used whose validity was evaluated using formal method, and their reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α) and data were analyzed using SPSS16 and AMOS18 in Windows. Results revealed that meaningful correlations exist between aspects of social capital and the degree and manner of the political participation of the participants.

KEY WORDS: social capital, political participation, social networks, social trust.

INTRODUCTION

Political participation is an instance of people deciding for their own future. With the rising spread of democracy in the world, different aspects of people's involvement in political arenas of their respective countries have become the focus of attention [1]. The tendency of the individual to involve in different levels of activity in the social system is considered an important aspect of political behavior [2]. Political participation is generally a complex phenomenon with various aspects which represents a relationship between civic society and political society [3]. Political participation is defined as participation in political procedures which lead to the election of political leaders and determine or affect public policies [4]. In other words, political participation is the voluntary social activity of the individuals in a society in which people feel they have a say directly or indirectly in making public policies or electing leaders of their country [5]. Therefore, political participation is firstly a social act; secondly, it is voluntarily performed; and thirdly, it is closely related to the social standing of the individuals.

However, women who constitute a substantial part of the population of every country and play a significant role in wide-ranging development have always suffered from unfair distribution of opportunities and resources, particularly in third world countries [6]. Historical background of women's political movement and ideas associated with it should be traced back to the French revolution and after. During the French revolution, women started establishing revolutionary clubs. The first reactions to the unfair conditions and political involvement of women in Iran go back to late 19th century. The patriarchal culture of the traditional, Iranian society which always cast a humiliating eye at women never gave them the chance to partake in political activities [7]. When sensitive positions are entrusted only to men, patriarchy presents itself which in return provokes a kind of "gender gap". Overlooking social and cultural factors affecting women's political participation is equal to ignoring the political behavior of one half of a country's population which challenges that country's possibility of attaining democracy [8].

Social, cultural and political changes triggered by globalization along with people's serious inclination toward the institutionalization of democracy in all countries have challenged the patriarchal attitude toward women's political participation [9]. In the present times, a country's failure to accomplish its democratic goals is considered as a grave defect. By speaking of the full establishment of democracy, we do not mean that provisions are made for men to involve in political arena, but the necessity of involving women in the hierarchies of political participation is also crucial for a country to attain perfect political development. Minimum participation of women in political affairs leads to a defective democracy in society [10]. In this crusade toward democracy, Iran is not an exception among other countries. After the Islamic revolution, extensive involvement of women in different social spheres became possible. Increased political participation of women has transformed the position of the political

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system regarding gender gap. Paying more attention to the social factors that foster a wider political participation of women is thus a necessity.

Participation denotes using personal resources to join in a collective action [11]. Participation is a collective, conscious and voluntary act which encompasses a vast range of activities, from citizens' involvement in public affairs and different levels of official and political decision-making and casting votes to aiding in satisfying social needs of the society to people's involvement in the functioning of organizations whose existence depend on it [12]. In addition to this belief, in Putnam's view, participation is the engagement of people in religious and non-religious organizations, associations and movements of every ilk that influence social life [13]. In this regard, a definition dealing with political participation stresses the role of participation in the hierarchy of power. As Huntington puts it, political participation is the activity of individual citizens to affect their government's decision-making procedures [14]. Anthony Giddens [15] in his discussion of political participation refers to participatory democracy as a system in which decisions are made collectively by people whose lives are affected by those decisions. Peterson (Peterson 2001) instead defines political participation as efforts whose aim is to influence the society.

In the viewpoint of Kevin Olson [16], the purpose of participation whose most fundamental underlying idea is recognizing the principle of the equality of people is understanding, cooperation and collaboration between individuals in order to improve the quantity and quality of people's lives in every social, economic and political aspect. Participation is process through which people change and make this change happen in them. Croft and Beresford [17] consider changes such as emergence of new social movements, contemplating and rethinking about human needs, reemergence of the idea of citizenship and postmodern as causes for a new emphasis on the idea of participation it appears that much attention is paid to political participation in the contemporary world.

In the last recent years, numerous theoretical and qualitative studies have been performed on political participation and democracy which at least go back to Tocqueville's [18] study of democracy in America. Indeed, it seems that the major portion of experimental studies on political participation go back to Sydney Verba and his colleagues [19]. Gray and his colleagues, unlike rational choice theories, argue that there are considerable differences between various kinds of participations, especially among different races and social classes. They found out that resources produced by social activities of citizens, including organizational skills and ties are beneficial to political participation [4]

Verba et al [19] have also stressed that participation in voluntary social associations are influential in political participation. Their argument is that participation in nonpolitical voluntary associations facilitates political participation in three ways. Firstly, participation in voluntary social associations creates opportunities for people to develop their political skills. Secondly, participation in nonpolitical voluntary associations increases political awareness in citizens. Thirdly, according to Verbal et al, nonpolitical voluntary associations play an important role in political mobilization of individuals

Several studies have supported Verba's findings in regard with the relationship between voluntary associations and political participation. For instance, Smith (1999), using structural equations model, showed that extensive relationship and ties with others, intimate familial relationships, religious involvement, and participation in extracurricular activities predict political participation of the youth. Also, Ayala [20] argues that participation in voluntary groups has a positive effect on political participation. Fung [21] and Ulzurum [22] in reviewing literature on voluntary associations argue that these associations facilitate political participation in six ways: 1. improving the inherent values of associations; 2. developing civic virtues and teaching political skills; 3. deliberating government policies; 4. equal access to services for all people; 5. making provisions for people to discuss; and 6. providing people with appropriate opportunities to participate in government affairs. Findings by Alexander et al (2010) also demonstrate that although the extent of social ties are positively related to political participation, it is rather more the number of fields an individual belongs to that actually determines the degree of an individual's political and civic partnership.

It appears, then, that nonpolitical voluntary associations enhance political participation through development of political discussions among citizens and drawing people to political activities. Numerous studies in this regard confirm that social networks also play an important role in political participation of the citizens. For example, Verba and his colleagues show that when inclination toward political activities happens through social networks, member of networks are more prone to be attracted to political activities [23]. Other studies also confirm that friendship networks increase the possibility of participation of people in political activities [24].

Levin [25] argues that social networks, whether weak or strong, have direct impact on elections, party affiliations and people's views regarding important political issues. Passy and Guigni [26] believe citizens' attraction to networks is the best predictor of political participation. Schmitt-Beck and Macenrodt [27] studied the effect of unofficial social networks and independent mass media on voters. Their results illustrate how both of these

two forms influence on voters in elections. But what appears to be very significant in their study is that they found the impact of social networks on participants to be stronger than mass media.

In this research, social capital is defined as resources produced by social ties and interactions. Of course, if social ties are improved, social trust among citizens will also increase [28]. As Putnam puts it, not only does social trust directly affect political participation, but it also indirectly influences political activities of the citizens by improving social norms and civic partnerships. According to Putnam [13], people with higher social trust are more likely to support charity institutions, partake in politics and social organizations, fulfill their obligations and tolerate opposing views.

Inglehart[29] contends that emergence of some norms and attitudes among citizens promises political participation and democracy. In his opinion, one of the most important of these attitudes is interpersonal trust between citizens. He highlights the relation between trust and participation. He maintains that mutual trust between individuals is an influential factor in political participation because behaviors are made predictable through trust and as a result, the scope of action and decision making expands. Almond and Verba [30] in their discussion of civic culture considered social trust as a cultural instrument of democracy and found out that interpersonal trust is a prerequisite for establishing secondary relationships and is necessary for effective political participation in every extended democracy. Feeling of trust is also indispensable for the enforcement of democratic laws.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research method employed in this study is survey method. Research population included all women (with literacy level no less than primary education) of the city of Isfahan in September and October 2011. Sample included 288 people who were selected by cluster-sampling. Every area was considered as a cluster and every street in the areas was considered as a cluster. Mean and standard deviation of the participants were determined respectively, 33.16 and 11.34. Mean and standard deviation of income were 215807.74 and 345267.12 (287.722 and 179.840 USD), respectively. Instruments included two types of questionnaires:

Researcher-based Political Participation Questionnaire: In order to evaluate political participation, a questionnaire based on Likert scale was used. This questionnaire consisting of 22 questions was designed by the researcher using Likert scale. The questionnaire was made using Ting [31] political participation model which was originally designed for evaluation of political participation in Taiwan. For determining the validity of research instrument, questions were first designed by several professors of political sciences and 22 questions were chosen after discussions and analyses which were experimented on a 40-people group (20 males and 20 females) after necessary revisions to make sure they were appropriate. Reliability coefficients of this scale based on Cronbach's alpha (α) were 0.75 per cent. Reviewing test validity in similar cases and calculating internal consistency coefficient demonstrate that the reliability and validity of the questionnaire is high. The questionnaire was divided into five levels, including participation in elections, campaign activity, contact with politicians, engagement in protesting activities, and membership in political groups. This scale is an instrument for assessment of the extent of political participation in individuals. Scoring each question is based on a continuum from 1 (Absolutely agree) to 5 (Absolutely Disagree).

Social Capital Questionnaire: The questionnaire included questions concerning aspects of social trust, voluntary associations and social networks. These aspects were extracted from the existing theories concerning social capital; questions were, then, designed for the indices. In order to obtain the validity of the research instrument, questions were first designed by 5 professors of political and social sciences (at least, assistant professorship) and 36 questions were chosen after discussions and analyses which were experimented on a 40-people group (20 males and 20 females) after necessary revisions to make sure they were appropriate. Reliability coefficients of this scale based on Cronbach's alpha (α) for social aspects (4 questions), voluntary associations (14 questions) and social networks (11 questions) were, respectively 0.75, 0.68 and 0.71 with the overall reliability coefficient of the questionnaire (36 questions) 0.77. In the preliminary study, results showed that there was no need to eliminate any of the statements. This instrumental scale is used for evaluating the amount of social capital in individuals and every questionnaire is scored based on a continuum of 1 (Absolutely agree) to 5 (Absolutely disagree).

Data Collection: Questionnaires were distributed by direct call at houses. Participants' phones were received to follow up with their progress afterwards and they were given assurance about confidentiality. Participants were called to be given information on how to fill out the questionnaire, to make sure that women themselves answered the questionnaires, and to decide on the time to collect questionnaires. Data were collected in 48 days. During this time no religious or public ceremonies were held and it was not concomitant with any elections or particular social activities.

RESULTS

First, descriptive data are presented and then, the model will be fitted .

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of research variables

variables	M	SD	variables	M	SD
Voting	4.03	1.66	Network	13.67	2.04
Campaign activity	18.67	3.37	Trust	29.76	3.67
Contact	17.06	3.09	Voluntary	34.09	4.26
Protest	3.01	.68	Total	25.87	2.25
Group membership	2.16	.73			
Total social participation	44.93	9.68			

Table 1 shows mean and standard deviation of participants' scores in political participation and social capital aspects.

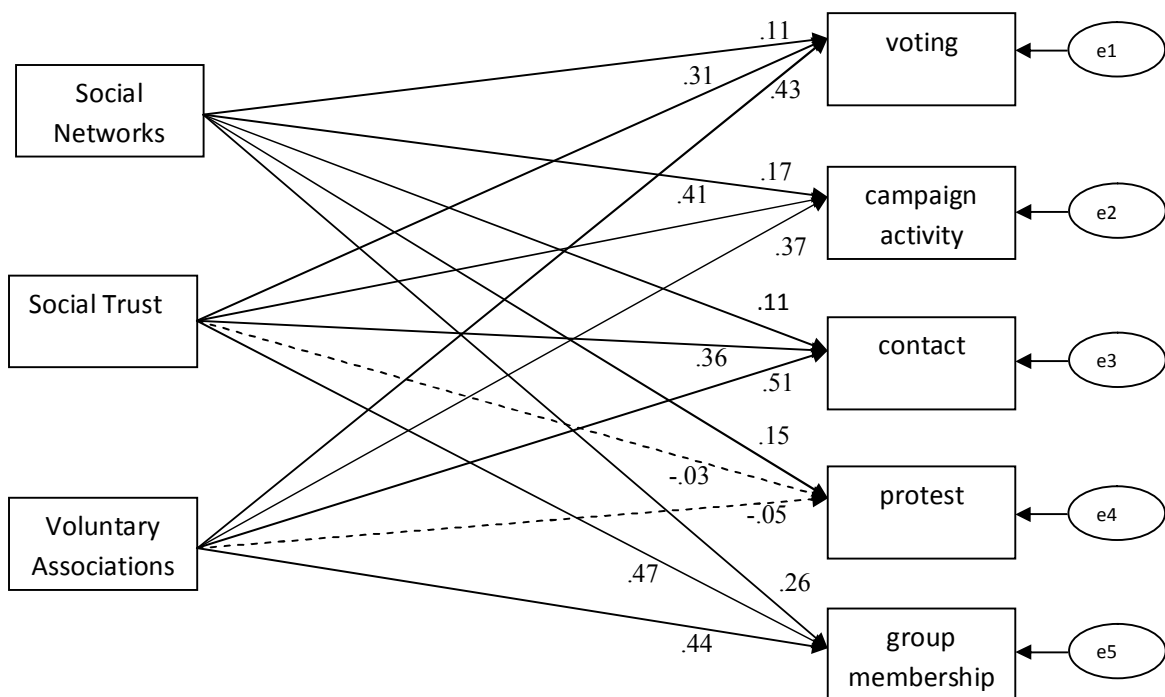


Figure 1. The standard regression coefficients of social capital on political participation

Figure 1 illustrates the path model for the explanation of political participation based on social capital. As it can be seen from the illustration, regression weight of trust and voluntarism on participation in protests is not significant which is indicated with dashes.

Table 2. Path model fit indices

RMSEA	CFI	TLI	GFI	AGFI	χ^2	df	χ^2/df
.049	.95	.91	.94	.92	33.24	12	2.77

Table 2 presents Path model fit indices. As it can be observed, adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) and comparative fit index (CFI) are higher than 0.90 and root mean square error of approximation index is below 0.05 which all together show that the model is convincingly compatible with the data and acceptable.

Table 3. The standard and nonstandard regression coefficients

Dependent variables	Parameters	Predictive variables		
		Social Networks	Trust	Voluntary
Voting	Standard coefficients	.11	.31	.43
	Nonstandard coefficients	.17	.58	.46
	Critical rate	9.47**	29.13**	36.08**
Campaign activity	Standard coefficients	.17	.41	.37
	Nonstandard coefficients	.38	.39	.61
	Critical rate	16.01**	33.71**	34.96**
Contact	Standard coefficients	.11	.36	.51
	Nonstandard coefficients	.23	.29	.71
	Critical rate	6.39**	31.22**	39.41**
Protest	Standard coefficients	.15	-.03	-.05
	Nonstandard coefficients	.37	-.21	-.19
	Critical rate	9.81**	-1.02	-1.13
Group membership	Standard coefficients	.26	.47	.44
	Nonstandard coefficients	.49	.34	.63
	Critical rate	22.09**	40.37**	37.10**

** p< .01 * p< .05

Table 3 shows standard and nonstandard path model regression coefficients for the explanation of political participation based on social capital. As you can see, *voluntary associations* has the highest standard regression weight on *contact* and *voting*. Social trust reveals the highest regression weight for explanation of campaign activity and group membership. *Social networks* has the highest standard regression weight on *protest*. The effect of *voluntary associations* and *social trust* on *protest* is negative but significant (p.0.5). Other regression weights are positive and significant (p<0.01).

DISCUSSION

The subject of the political participation of women calls for taking its relevant factors into consideration. The fundamental question of this research was whether there is any relationship between social capital of women and their political participation. In attempting to answer this question, with respect to the theories of Putnam [13], Levin [25], Schmitt & Mackenrodt [27] and Inglehart [29], it was assumed that there also exist significant differences among women in benefitting from general capital and as a result in statuses and habitués and this fact presents itself in their political participation.

Results from data analysis demonstrated that there is a significant relationship between social capital and political participation of women. Even though no significant relationship was observed between the effect of the two variables of *social trust* and *voluntary associations* on political participation in form of protest, results showed that *voluntary associations* is most correlated to *contact* and *voting* variables. These results agree with findings of Fung [21], Putnam [13], Ayala [20] and Verba et al [19]. Voluntary organizations as a new field for participation are increasingly growing in developing countries. By encouraging people to participate, these organizations seek a more influential presence in society and effectiveness in the process of development and growth. Nevertheless, it appears that the general awareness and information of people about how parties and voluntary organizations operate is at a very low level as a high percentage of people had no information and awareness about how parties operate and the majority of them did not know about membership in voluntary organizations.

The variable of *social trust* shows the most significant relationship for explanation of *voluntary activity* and *group membership* variables. These results conform with those of Putnam [13] and Schmitt & Mackenrodt [27]. It implicates that in Iranian society, higher social trust among women increases their participation in group activities and campaign activities. In fact, we may claim that trust acts as a bridge between women’s awareness and participation. In other words, participation is the outcome of awareness and trust and we cannot claim about realization of social capital unless social capital is transformed from a conceptual, potential state (awareness and trust) into an active social capital and evince itself in the form of participatory behaviors. According to social capital-related theories, when individuals transcend their personal world and immerse themselves in a larger community, they establish more relationships with other individuals; these relationships are strengthened when there is trust between their establishers. This trust causes a closer relationship between individuals. Moreover, establishment of relationships and trust depends on norms created between individuals. These norms enable people to predict interpersonal behavior. In order to establish more relationships with others, individuals have to be in participatory groups and have mutual interaction with people. Thus, this necessitates their participation in social arenas.

Social network variable has shown to have the highest regression weight on *protest*. These results are in line with those of Passy & Guigni [26]. Social capital offers invaluable resources and social networks for the facilitation of political participation. When social capital is easily accessible regardless of the type of community, hierarchies of political participation (education, employment, civic skills, etc) may be broken. Social networks are able to organize protest activities and inform people about the flow of events. The often unofficial nature of the social capital of women allows them to politicize nonpolitical environments and thus keep such activities secret without having to conform themselves to masculine standards. Social networks make women's participation in political affairs and social movements against the government more possible than traditional circles did.

What is worthy of noting in the findings of this research is that a negative correlation was observed between aspects of social trust and the variable of *voluntary associations* and political participation in the form of protest; however, respondent women have actually had participated in political protests. This negative correlation could be due to a distrust in social associations, inflexible political structure of Iranian society, social obligations and/or other factors. Accordingly, we may maintain that even though respondents had actual political participation, not achieving their expected results from political participation has a negative effect on their attitude. In addition, people with more social capital who have had higher expectations of political participation have lost their trust in political participation because their expectations were not realized.

In developing countries where women esteem participation necessary, but believe that current conditions are not propitious for the realization of this participation, we can hope that by modifying infrastructures and resolving economic issues, political participation and consequently, the level of social capital may increase in society, which in return will lead to improved efficiency, outsourcing, decentralization, resolution of structural inconsistencies and increasing of responsiveness.

Overall, it appears that by pruning the patriarchal structure ruling over the society and eliminating former social exclusions women had to endure in their social relationships, the possibility of women's partnership in social activities to have increased. Suffrage, presence of female representatives in the parliament, growth of women-specific nongovernmental organizations and more involvement in environments such as universities, gives women the chance to communicate with more people and enjoy their support. It should be added that social exclusions exerted on women and violations of their rights through patriarchic structures, in addition to formation of feministic thoughts and movements, caused their attempts for acquiring more rights and their protests against gender discrimination to be entangled with politics. One of the fields of participation for women in society is politics which has turned into a criterion for judging democratic governance. Increased participation of women in society results in thriving and facilitated development of the country, improves the national solidarity of women, prevents a sort of alienation and separation of women from the society so that the individual feels a sense of belonging to the society and will contribute to the advancement of the society. Thus, developmental indicators are improved and national sources are mobilized in this direction.

Conclusion

Results revealed that the relationship between social capital and all aspects of political participation is significant. The above findings reveal that social capital of women which is suggestive of existing resources in their associated social groups and the extensiveness of the network of social relationships influences their tendency to engage in political activities. Results of this study indicate that the more social capital individuals possess in this structure, in the sense that this social capital consists of an invaluable collection of interpersonal trust between individuals, existence of kinship networks and social interactions and voluntary organizations, the more active people will be in electoral campaigns, political contacts, and group memberships. Therefore, participation and social capital have mutual relation and the increase of either causes the spread of the other throughout the society.

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