



ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF FEMALE HOME-MAKERS: A CASE STUDY OF THE WOMEN FARMERS' ORGANIZATION IN THE WESTERN PROVINCE, SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

In Sri Lanka, 34.5% of the females participate in the labour force. One of the projects launched by the Ministry of Agriculture in 2016, was the establishment of 'Sithamu' (Let's think) the women farmers' organizations to boost rural development with female participation in agriculture. The purpose of this paper is to explore the Economic and Social impacts of such organizations on the Female Home-Makers; based on Bourdieu's theory of capital (1986). It was conducted as a case study on a woman farmers' organization (WFO) in the Western Province selected through convenience sampling. The informants of the study were eight members of the organization. This study included a background information questionnaire, a semi-structured interview schedule, observational field notes and document analysis. The thematic analysis of data revealed that the WFO contributed to the development of their social inter-connections, relevant government officials, resource persons, local agricultural entrepreneurs and other agencies related to agriculture. This paves the way for the development of members' social capital through developing mutual trust, networks, sharing of information and collective decision making amongst them. The social capital has an impact on alleviating poverty through opportunities for self-employment and development of their entrepreneurial skills, their living standards, their capabilities...etc. Being members of the WFO gave them many opportunities to engage in both non-formal and informal learning. The sources of non-formal learning included instructional sessions, field visits, demonstrations and training sessions organized by the local Agrarian Service Centre. Field visits, meetings and informal interactions among the members provided them the informal learning. They helped members to develop social, cultural and economic capital in various ways. It is recommended to empower women farmers by providing them with more access to government-provided training, funding and social recognition as farmers and also to benefit them with these types of organizations and learning opportunities.

KEYWORDS: Women farmers' organizations, Female Home-makers, Social capital, Poverty Alleviation, Learning Opportunities

Introduction

Sri Lanka is a predominantly agricultural country with 77.4% of households still living in rural areas. Out of the total population in the country, 53.2% are women. However, only 34.5% of the female population participate in the labour force of the country (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020). They are considered as a valuable resource potential for the rural agricultural sector in Sri Lanka. The contribution of women in agriculture in the national economy is increasing and nearly 29.7% of employed women in Sri Lanka are engaged in the agricultural sector.

A significant proportion of the total population of Sri Lanka depends on agriculture for their livelihood (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020). Many family units cultivate vegetables and fruits for their own consumption. However, in order to meet our food needs, the government has to spend a considerable amount of foreign exchange annually on importing food items, and consumers have to pay high amounts of money on them. As a solution to this problem, at village level, 'Sithamu' (Let's Think) women farmers' organizations were established under the Agrarian Development Act No. 46 of 2000 "to boost rural development with female participation in agriculture" (Ministry of Agriculture, 2016, p.90). Under this project, it is expected to establish 25,000 women farmers' organizations. Through these organizations, it is expected to achieve national development aspirations by empowering families in all spheres such as economic, social, health and nutrition. The current study was conducted to investigate the impact of women farmers' organizations on their community.

Literature Review

According to Bourdieu (1986), capital is accumulated labour which, when appropriated on a private basis, enables people to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour. Capital is found in three fundamental forms: economic capital, immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; cultural capital, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and social capital, made up of social obligations, convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility. Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition to membership in a group which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. Therefore, the concept of capital can represent a valuable tool for development of community. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of women farmers' organizations in their own community using Bourdieu's concept on Capital (1986).

Social capital is the reciprocity within communities and between households based on trust deriving from social ties. Social capital is made up of both of networks of inscriptive and elective relationship between individuals, which may be vertical as in authority relationship, or horizontal as in voluntary organizations and of the trust and expectations which flow within those networks (Ellis,2000).It reflects the relationships of trust, reciprocity and exchange that facilitate co-operation, reduce transaction costs and may provide the basis for informal safety nets amongst the poor. Membership of groups and associations can extend people's access to and influence over other institutions. Likewise, trust is likely to develop amongst people who are connected through kinship relations or otherwise. Social capital is a product of these structures and processes, though this over simplifies the relationship. Structure and processes might themselves be the product of social capital; the relation goes two ways. Social capital, like other types of capital, can also be valued as good in itself. It can make a particularly important contribution to people's sense of wellbeing through identity, honor and belonging.

Harris,(2006) said that the strong social capital starts from neighborhood. Weakening of respect and less recognition of neighbor makes community life complex. Even informal interactions at local level affect people's relationships positively and help to improve life of the community (Harris, 2006). Thus, the social capital entails the development of networks and connectivity in women farmers' groups with different service providers and local development partners. It develops the ability to work together and expand their access to wider institutions. Steps of social capital formation bonding (within the groups, bridging (between the different groups in the community) and linking with other external service providers.

Studies on women farmers in various parts of the world highlight the need for their education in a variety of areas pertaining to increasing the productivity of crops, the production and use of fertilizer, weed and pest management, maintenance of equipment, managing finances, and dealing with gender power relations. These learning needs of women farmers are catered by a range of entities such as governmental agencies, community development organizations, experts in agriculture, farmers' societies, and people in their day-to-day social circle. It points to the fact that women farmers' learning takes place, to a considerable degree, in non-formal and informal contexts.

Yekinni, and Oguntade (2014) have studied about the training needs of women vegetable farmers in Nigeria based on data collected from 120 women farmers in Oyo State. The study revealed that the women's involvement in food crop production significantly influenced their need for training, especially in areas such as chemical weed control, selection and application of fertilizer, and production of compost manure. Findings of the study emphasize the need for community development organizations to design training programmes to meet these training needs.

Barbercheck et al. (2009) report on the findings of a needs assessment on the education of women farmers in Pennsylvania, the United States of America. Survey data obtained from 151 respondents revealed that the participants mainly depended on governmental agencies, non-profit organizations and Pennsylvania Women's Agricultural Network as sources of knowledge pertaining to farming. Some of the major problems faced by women farmers were; isolation from other farmers including women farmers, not being taken as seriously as their male farmers, and child care responsibilities. The respondents also mentioned that they have minimal skills in equipment maintenance, working with the local government and planning for retirement. Further they expressed their willingness to attend training sessions on topics such as pest management, building infrastructure, increasing the productivity of the crops, and managing finances. The main types of educational events they preferred to attend included seminars, workshops and on-farm demonstrations at local farms. Based on their findings, Barbercheck et al. (2009) recommend providing women farmers with opportunities for learning through events specifically designed for them with a focus on beginning farmers, recognizing that women farmers may face barriers such as discrimination by other farmers and agricultural service providers, and creating opportunities for women farmers to network with each other, training personnel and agricultural service providers, which would help “to create a personal and professional network that can be drawn upon as needed” (p. 11).

In her life history research study on women commercial farmers in Zimbabwe, Kaziboni (2018) she has found that the “women experienced non-formal and informal learning, with most of the latter being self-directed in nature” (p. iii). Their sources of knowledge included friends, neighbours, experts in agriculture and media. Further, it was revealed that women farmers complemented indigenous knowledge with modern farming methods. However, with the availability of knowledge and resources pertaining to modern farming methods, they tended to adopt those methods. Nevertheless, they still adopted indigenous farming methods when they were perceived to be less expensive, readily available and sustainable. Findings of this study also highlighted that males in the women farmers’ community resisted the discourse of women empowerment as landowners as it created “gender power tensions” (p.237). Drawing on the findings of the study, Kaziboni (2018) recommends the need for women farmers to have access to agricultural and business knowledge, and as well as training on management of gender power relations.

Numerous studies have investigated the role of rural agricultural extension programs in poverty alleviation. For example, Dube (2017) revealed that these programmes play critical roles in providing farmers awareness through the improved technology adoption which leads to improved business efficiency and sustained livelihoods. Zaid (2015) reported that the agricultural extension hastens the transmission and adoption processes of novel crop varieties and other innovations as well as enhancing farmers’ management

skills. It also advocates for the efficient utilization of present technologies by enhancing the technological expertise of farmers (Dube, 2017).

Therefore, the role of agricultural extension goes beyond just facilitating the transfer of technology and embedded training to helping groups of farmers with marketing approaches in their farming business. Besides, United State Agency for International Development (USAID) (2002) stated that extension helps tackle such rural community concerns as observing food safety and farming production, preservation of resources, nourishment, household health and education, youth improvement as well as joining hand with far-reaching service benefactors and other sectors. Christoplos et al. (2012) noted that for extension programmes to be effective in responding to the demands of their clients, in the long run, the service providers ought to be accountable to the beneficiaries of the services or products. Agricultural extension plays a significant role in community development. Its role in testing and disseminating research-based agricultural knowledge and technology to rural people results in improvements in the agricultural sector (Suvedi, 2011). According to Suvedi (2011), extension has facilitated the dissemination of information about new crop varieties, species of fish and livestock, and associated production and management practices leading to the improved socio-economic status of the rural communities. Despite these important roles played by rural extension programmes, Philip (2014) reported that unless related to the production agenda of the farmers with the goal of poverty reduction in rural areas, extension service methods and their transfer mechanisms will have a little impact. This is because farmers need information regarding the best technological application for agricultural productivity as well as post-harvest information that includes handling, storage, processing, and marketing (Glendenning et al., 2010). Furthermore, they need suitable and scientifically proven information concerning certain challenges like processing and market opportunities, livestock, and crop pest/disease management to overcome these challenges working against good farming techniques as well as proper information on the influence of a changing climate (Yusuf et al., 2013). Bringing it together, these studies suggest that the effectiveness of extension service delivery largely depends on whether the needs of the beneficiaries, the farmers in this case are met. Therefore, identifying farmers' needs becomes a crucial step in the success of rural extension programmes in alleviating poverty.

Methodology

Research Design

This study was conducted as a part of a large study on the structure and functions of a women farmers' organization which comes under the purview of the Ministry of Agriculture, Sri Lanka. It followed the case study design, which allowed the researcher to gain in-depth understanding of the case being studied (Baca, and Lopez, 2017, p.13), i.e.

a women farmers' organization in the Western Province selected through convenience sampling.

Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is to address the key research objective of exploring the Economic and Social Impact of Female Home-Makers through a women farmers' organization from the perspective of the membership, in the context of Women Farmers' Organizations established under the Ministry of Agriculture in Sri Lanka. As such, this study will focus on the following research questions;

- In what ways does the membership in the women farmers' organization contribute in the development of social capital of the participants?
- How does the development of social capital through membership in the organization alleviate their poverty?
- What are the learning opportunities made available to the members of women farmers' organizations in the Sri Lankan context?

Data Generation and Analysis

Eight members of the selected Women Farmers' Organization were recruited as participants of the study. All the participants of the study were married home-makers of over 30 years of age. The informants' profile is presented in summary in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of the Informants

Informant's name (Pseudonym)	Age Range (in years)	Highest Level of Education	Types of crops cultivated	No. of children/dependents	Average family income per month (in Sri Lankan Rupees)
Padmini	Over 51	Junior secondary school	spices, fruits, vegetables	02	35,000.00
Indumathi	Over 51		Aquatic flowers, betel, vegetables	04	35,000.00
Rasangi	31-35	Senior secondary school	betel, vegetables	03	45,000.00
Chathurika	41-45		spices, vegetables	01	35,000.00
Lasanthi	46-50		ornamental plants	03	35,000.00
Sreema	Over 51		betel, vegetables	03	15,000.00
Irangani	Over 51		betel, vegetables	03	25,000.00
Manoshika	46-50	Bachelor's degree	betel, organic vegetables	03	35,000.00

Source: Survey data

Data were generated through multiple means: a 14-item background information questionnaire was used to collect demographic data of each participant; a semi-structured interview schedule and observation on the participants' agricultural work. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The constitution of the women farmers' organization was used as a secondary source of data. When recording and presenting data, each participant was identified by a pseudonym, and other information that would lead to identification of participants were also anonymized or omitted.

The eight interview transcripts were analysed using both theory driven and data driven codes. The initial findings were triangulated by analysing the field observational notes and the secondary data.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of data showed the impact of the participants' membership in the Women Farmers' Organization their own community.

Development of Social Capital

Findings of the study show that membership in the organization resulted in fostering their social networks. It promoted camaraderie among members and their families. All the members participated in the special occasions that took place in one another's families and made their contribution to those activities. For instance, when someone in a member's family died, others visited them and helped with chores such as cooking and serving food to the guests. Another example is visiting and helping members when they fall sick. It is evident that the membership in the Women Farmers' Organization helped to improve their social networks: "We all get together. We have that feeling of companionship. We get to know one another although we stay in different places in the village, right?" (Rasangi, in her early thirties).

On the other hand, the social networks to which the members belonged had the potential to benefit the Organization as well:

"Actually, as for myself, as I have connections with those who are in politics, I intervene getting fertilizer and other things to the Women Farmers' Organization." (Manoshika, in her late forties).

Information sharing is the continuous flow of communication between partners, and contributes to better planning and supervision. It is evident that being members of the Women Farmers' Organization provided the participants with social capital for knowledge sharing thereby leading to the development of their economic capital. Their membership had given them the opportunity to work closely with the Agrarian Services Center and its staff as well as other public and private sector institutions and officials involved in agriculture. The participants were also introduced to a range of resource persons such as doctors, dieticians and expert farmers. These resource persons conducted

special awareness sessions and training on a variety of topics such as food security and nutrition, how to get a good yield from plants and how to propagate plants.

At the monthly meetings of the Organization, different matters related to cultivating and harvesting were discussed. These meetings also provided a space for the members to share their experiences with regard to farming and food preparation. This helped them further and personalize the learning that occurred as a result of the training and awareness sessions conducted by the local Agrarian Services Centre. In addition, members also shared their own plants and seeds with one another.

“At the monthly meetings, [...] we share our experiences with one another. That is more important than just speaking from mere knowledge.” (Lasanthi, in her late forties).

Normally when a Women Farmers’ Organization is registered, the number of members should be limited to twenty. However, the organization selected for this study had twenty-five members. Although the members received plants, seeds and other benefits from the government to be distributed among twenty members only, the members of this organization treated all members equally and had their own strategies for sharing the benefits among the entire crowd. For instance, if the members got one hundred fruit saplings to be distributed among twenty members with five different types of plants for one member, they distributed four plants per person. In doing this, each person was asked to take plants that they did not already have in their home garden. This shows that, within the organization, they employed their own strategies to maintain equal access to resources in spite of the excess number of beneficiaries, which according to the participants, enhanced their sense of togetherness.

The role of social capital in small-scale agriculture has been generally documented and the social capital can be found in networks and mutual trust among farmers, creating fruitful social connections and information sharing between farmers (Osabuohien, 2020). Community collective action is also part of social capital and has a solid impact on the development of growing social welfare (Puspita et. al., 2020).

Impact of Poverty Alleviation

Social capital may support in alleviating poverty through three main channels: 1) At micro level, informal social networks of families and neighbours create abundant ground to build mutual trust, to create fruitful social connections and information sharing among farmers. 2) Social capital may improve the poor people’s capabilities, specifically in underdeveloped areas where marketplace establishments fail and the role of the state is limited. Social connections lead to the availability of informal credit networks or the entree to formal credit. In fact, the social capital may be measured as a key to the success of small initiatives. 3) Social capital may help the poor to advance their life settings through collective action, permitting people to carry out encouragement and politicization

activities that would not be possible without it. At macro level, social capital may play an unintended role in alleviating poverty by earnings of its optimistic impact on financial development.

Involvement in social activities may reduce the risk of being poor through two main channels: 1) associations facilitate the creation of networks (which in turn may serve for mutual assistance purposes); 2) remittances among network members often help to cope with temporary lack of money. Research also provides evidence that non-governmental voluntary organizations may contribute in improving the living standards of the poor by improving the provision of key public essentials and public services and/or helping the poor in claiming their right to access them (Adams & Chowdury, 2003).

From the poor people's point of view, social capital is the more reasonable form of capital. Since social contact is time exhaustive, the poor may take to rely more on social capital than the better off. Social capital may thus be measured as a means for the development of the living standards of the poor through an improvement of their capabilities, nurturing their access to information, education, formal and informal credit and technology, and improving common pool resource management (Fox & Gershman, 2000). For female farmers, social capital is a key benefit as it permits both a discount in transaction costs and the opportunity to share knowledge about technology and market circumstances, with the aim of refining productivity. Moreover, social networks play a serious role in female farmer's access to credit, since formal and informal credit schemes generally work better when borrowers are connected to the sources of funds by social bonds (Chloupkova & Bjornskov, 2002). Different categories of credit plannings available to the poor rely on social ties and connections as part of the strategy and implementation of their transfer and implementation mechanisms. By getting these loans, they can purchase their requirements for agricultural work. This leads to their economic development.

“When we have a savings account, we can apply for loans. We can get loans at an interest rate as low as 2% from the local agrarian service center, and we can apply for loans at any moment from Rs. 10,000.00 to 500,000.00.” (Chathurika, in her early forties).

A substantial body of literature shows the ability of social ties to effect the sharing of information and technology to agricultural entrepreneurs in rural villages. The basic impression is that there are spill-overs in the dispersion of more compound agricultural technologies. Isham and Kahkonen (2002) as well as Parthasarathy and Chopde (2000) afford extraordinary examples of the part of social capital in development of knowledge and new technologies. Isham and Kahkonen (2002) demonstrate that in Tanzania the probability of implementation of new agricultural technologies grows in the presence of ethnic relationships and dispersion of advice-giving norms. Parthasarathy and Chopde (2000, p. 1) express that the social capital is defined as ‘an increased ability and

willingness to co-operate and work together for achieving common goals, and sustaining and developing norms and networks for collective action.’ Thus the members of the women farmers’ organization barter their excess harvest among one another. This helps to strengthen their family economy:

“We have an excess of harvest which is more than our home requirement. Then when we get together for the monthly meetings, we bring the excess here and sell it to the others” (Padmini, over 51 years old).

The third factthrough which social capital can alleviate poverty is given by the ability of common values, social norms and the relationship to associations and other kinds of social networks to nurture a productive ground for collective action. This conduit enables the poor to collaborate for mutual advantage, to carry out support activities, and to contribute in the common pool resource management and delivery of public service. In Putnam’s words (1995, p. 67),

‘Networks of civic engagement foster study norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved’. The role of the social capital and collective action in the development of the living standard of the poor becomes clearer if we ponder the extensively documented ability of social networks to foster an effective access to public services (Douglass et. al., 2002).

It is apparent that social capital has an impact on members’ economic capital by means of raising their living standard, creating opportunities for self-employment, providing access to credit facilities and development of their entrepreneurial skills. It is recommended that more opportunities be made available for home markers from low-income families to benefit from these types of organizations.

Learning Opportunities

Majority of the learning opportunities reported by the informants were non-formal. They consisted of instructional sessions, field visits, demonstrations and training sessions organized by the local Agrarian Service Centre. For instance, members attended instructional sessions on topics such as unhealthy eating habits, harmful properties in commercially produced food and how to prepare healthy food for infants; such sessions were conducted by resource persons such as pediatricians and dieticians. Demonstrations on ploughing land, selecting suitable seeds for cultivation, and production of food items such as jam, yoghurt and vegan sausages were conducted by resource persons from the local Agrarian Service Centre. Members who expressed their interest in cultivating particular crops were directed to attend relevant training sessions conducted by other Agrarian Service Centres. For instance, Manoshika attended a one-day training workshop

on producing export quality vegetables which was conducted by another Agrarian Service Centre. Workshops conducted by the local Agrarian Services Centre focused on topics of more general interest such as production of compost, cultivation of pepper and grafting of plants. Manoshika mentioned that, during the monthly meetings of their organization, the members collectively requested the representative from the local Agrarian Service Centre to organize workshops on subjects of their interest. This shows that the membership of the women farmers' organization had a sense of agency and were oriented towards self-direction of the learning opportunities made available to them through the organization. Visits to farms, agricultural research centres, and horticultural crop research and development institutes organized by the local Agrarian Service Centre also provided the membership with opportunities to attend workshops on topics such as crop cultivation according to the size of the farming land and how to care for particular plants. These findings indicate that the non-formal learning opportunities available to the women farmers' organization addressed the training needs of women farmers highlighted by Yekinni, and Ogunlade (2014), Barbercheck et al. (2009), and Kaziboni (2018).

Further, members of the women farmers' organization were provided with opportunities for informal learning. For instance, the members organized trips to national level agricultural exhibitions with members of other women farmers' organizations from neighbouring villages. This shows that the members of the organization themselves sought opportunities to engage in informal learning, which, in turn, resonates with Kaziboni (2018) stating, "Women experienced non-formal and informal learning, with most of the latter being self-directed in nature" (p. iii). In addition, the monthly meetings of the women farmers' organization provided the members with opportunities for informal learning. For example, the representative from the local Agrarian Service Centre, Bandula, took these meetings as an opportunity to share his ideas as to how home makers can productively contribute in the family economy. He illustrated his ideas by quoting examples from the successful stories of other home makers from similar socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, incidental learning occurred in the form of members sharing knowledge and experiences related to crop cultivation, production of organic fertilizers at home and solving issues pertaining to their cultivations. Chaturika stated that she valued what she learnt through the experience of her fellow members rather than what she learnt by listening to an instructor. Sreema also stated that the example set by Manoshika motivated her to develop her home garden. Likewise, informants of this study mentioned how they learnt effective strategies to save money and practiced problem solving skills (e.g. - sharing limited resources among the membership who exceeded the number of beneficiaries of the Sithamu project) through their participation in the activities of the organization).

As such, informants of the current study provided evidence for the availability of various types of opportunities for them to engage in learning in both non-formal and

informal contexts as members of the women farmers' organization. In her study on women commercial farmers in Zimbabwe, Kaziboni (2018) notes that non-formal learning (provided through workshops, demonstrations and mass media) and informal learning play an important role in the participants' practice as farmers. Conversely, it is apparent that the learning opportunities available to the informants of the current study support them in performing their role as home-makers rather than as commercial farmers. This, however, is in line with the objectives of establishing Sithamu women farmers' or organizations in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Agriculture, 2017).

Qualitative data generated through multiple means indicate that the non-formal and informal learning opportunities available to the membership of the women farmers' organization have impacted the accumulation of their economic, social and cultural capital.

It is apparent that learning opportunities made available to the members of the women farmers' organization have contributed in the development of their economic capital. For example, learning how to cultivate and care for crops such as fruit trees, spices and vegetables in the home garden has resulted in minimization of expenditure on family food consumption (Ministry of Agriculture, 2017). Indumathi mentioned how the members practiced habit of saving five rupees per day which they retained through home garden produce that helped to cut down household expenses; they then used this money to pay their monthly membership fee and deposited the rest in a personal bank account. Manoshika mentioned that this practice enabled the members to "avoid asking their husbands for the monthly membership fee" implying that although the amount of money saved was minimal, it brought a sense of satisfaction in their capability to influence their family economy.

The learning opportunities available to the members of the organization also strengthened their social capital. This seems to have taken place at two levels that is within the membership of the organization and outside the organization. Sharing their experiential knowledge related to topics of interest such as crop cultivation, tackling of issues in crop cultivation, and production of manure seems to have fostered a sense of solidarity among the members of the organization. Manoshika mentioned that if they had any excess of seeds for crop cultivation, they would share them with the other members. Moreover, being members of the women farmers' organization seems to have provided them with the opportunity to network with homemakers with similar interests, and to share with one another their experiences of bringing up children and maintaining the family economy. Moreover, this sense of solidarity seems to have permeated to their life outside the organization in such a manner that they would support one another in times of need such as in the event of the passing away of a member's dependent, when a member needed support to organize religious events at home (e.g. – dhamma preaching events, pirth chanting and alms giving ceremonies), or when a member fell sick or gave birth to

a child. In case of such events, they would provide the member concerned, with support in terms of money or labour as appropriate. This shows that the members' mutual engagement in learning opportunities has given them access to a repertoire of "actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21).

At a more macro level, the learning opportunities made available to the members of the organization paved the way for them to network with farmers, agricultural instructors and governmental institutions related to agrarian development thus helping them to increase their social capital. These opportunities for "farmer networking [...] facilitated by formal agricultural knowledge institutions" enabled them to engage in "knowledge exchange, jointlearning" (Šūmane et al., 2017, p. 1) and the generation of solutions to the challenges they encountered as home-based farmers.

In addition, the learning opportunities made available to the membership of the organization motivated them to seek cultural capital in the form of training (development of human capital), development of "habits, dispositions, and ways of interacting with others, similar to what is referred to as 'soft skills'" (Woodward, 2014, p. 25) and work towards achievement of formal certifications as farmers. It is evident that the opportunities for training provided to the members helped them to develop their skills as home makers. For example, the members received training on production of food items such as yoghurt, as well as cultivation and maintenance of crops in the home garden. Sreema, Indumathi and Padmini particularly mentioned that this helped them to produce healthy food for home consumption and save money that would otherwise be spent on buying some of the vegetables, fruits and spices needed for home consumption. This, in return, it improved their competence as home makers as well.

The learning opportunities also helped them to develop their soft skills pertaining to problem solving, teamwork, leadership, networking, communication and organizing events. For example, some of the training sessions conducted by the local Agrarian Service Centre were organized by a member of the women farmers' organization on a rotational basis. This provided each member with the opportunity to develop organizational skills by preparing a conducive environment to conduct the training session at her private residence by way of making the space (e.g.- in the home garden or kitchen) and the necessary utensils ready, as well as arranging refreshments for the participants of the training session. The informal and non-formal learning opportunities available to the members also motivated some of them to work towards achievement of formal certifications as farmers such as Good Agricultural Practices certification.

Conclusions/Recommendations

Social capital is an asset for a community, which helps in providing collective answers to personal needs. The social capital gained through the memberships in Women Farmers' Organizations has the potential to increase members' access to economic resources, to make maximum possible use of available economic resources, and to improve individuals' capabilities to use them efficiently. In this sense, social capital supports women to fight with poverty and increase their living standards. And non-formal and informal learning opportunities available to the memberships of the women farmers' organization have had an empowering effect on them by paving ways for them to accumulate economic, social and cultural capital.

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