

Sociological Analysis of the Effect of Social Capacity Building on the Social Participation of Female Heads of Household Supported by the Tehran Province Welfare Organization Using a Mixed-Methods Approach

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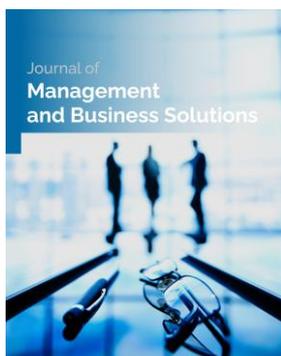
ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the effect of social capacity building on the social participation of female heads of household supported by the Tehran Province Welfare Organization. This research was conducted using a mixed-methods approach in two phases: qualitative and quantitative. In the qualitative phase, grounded theory methodology was employed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 experts until theoretical saturation was achieved. Key concepts and categories were extracted, and an initial conceptual model was developed. In the quantitative phase, the study followed a descriptive–correlational design. Data were collected from 448 female heads of household selected through cluster random sampling using a researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of 65 items. The instrument demonstrated acceptable content validity (CVR = 0.89) and reliability (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.74 to 0.91). Data were analyzed using multiple linear regression and path analysis techniques. The results indicated that social capacity building explained 38.1% of the variance in social participation. Enhancing social capacity building can lead to significant growth and improvement in the social participation of female heads of household supported by the Tehran Province Welfare Organization.

Keywords: Social capacity building; Social participation; Female heads of household; Empowerment; Tehran Province Welfare Organization.

Introduction

Social participation has long been recognized as one of the fundamental pillars of social development, social cohesion, and sustainable governance. Modern societies increasingly rely on citizen engagement in social, economic, cultural, and political processes as a mechanism for achieving inclusive growth, democratic stability, and collective well-being. In the Iranian context, social participation is not merely a civic activity but a strategic resource for social management, urban governance, and community resilience (1-3). Extensive research demonstrates that societies characterized by higher levels of social participation exhibit stronger institutional legitimacy, greater public trust, more effective policy implementation, and improved social welfare outcomes (4, 5). Consequently,



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strengthening the conditions that foster participation has become a central concern of social policy and development planning.

Within this framework, the concept of social capacity building has emerged as a comprehensive approach for enhancing the abilities of individuals, communities, and institutions to engage productively in social life. Social capacity building refers to the process of developing skills, knowledge, social networks, organizational structures, and institutional mechanisms that enable communities to identify problems, mobilize resources, and implement collective action (6, 7). Unlike traditional top-down development models, capacity building emphasizes endogenous growth, empowerment, and the strengthening of social systems from within. Research in organizational and community studies confirms that capacity building enhances institutional performance, social innovation, and long-term development sustainability (8).

One of the most vulnerable yet socially significant populations in contemporary societies is female heads of household. These women occupy a complex social position shaped by economic responsibility, caregiving obligations, social vulnerability, and exposure to structural inequalities. In Iran, the population of female-headed households has increased steadily due to factors such as divorce, widowhood, migration, addiction, and economic instability, making their social integration and empowerment an urgent policy priority (9, 10). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that female heads of household face higher risks of poverty, social exclusion, psychological distress, and limited access to economic and social opportunities (11, 12). These challenges significantly restrict their capacity for social participation, thereby reinforcing cycles of marginalization and vulnerability.

From a sociological and gender-development perspective, women's participation in social life is both a human right and a critical driver of social progress. Theories of gender and development emphasize that women's engagement in public and community life enhances household welfare, strengthens social capital, and promotes more equitable and resilient societies (13, 14). However, women's participation is deeply conditioned by cultural norms, institutional arrangements, and policy frameworks that either enable or constrain their agency (15, 16). For female heads of household, these constraints are magnified by caregiving responsibilities, economic precarity, and social stigma, creating multidimensional barriers to participation (17, 18).

Social capacity building offers a theoretically robust and empirically supported framework for addressing these challenges. At the individual level, capacity building enhances psychological resources such as self-efficacy, resilience, hope, and social competence, which are essential for sustained engagement in social activities (19, 20). At the community level, it strengthens social support systems, trust, cooperation, and collective problem-solving, thereby expanding opportunities for participation (4, 21). At the institutional level, capacity building improves governance structures, policy responsiveness, and service delivery, facilitating broader inclusion and engagement (5, 8).

A growing body of international research further underscores the centrality of social participation for individual and collective well-being. Studies demonstrate that participation reduces social isolation, improves mental and physical health, enhances life satisfaction, and fosters community resilience across the lifespan (22, 23). For marginalized populations, participation functions as a pathway to empowerment, social recognition, and access to institutional resources (6, 7). In the context of female-headed households, social participation facilitates economic integration, social support acquisition, and identity reconstruction, which are critical for overcoming structural disadvantage (9, 10).

Despite the acknowledged importance of participation and capacity building, empirical evidence from Iran reveals persistent structural, cultural, and policy barriers. These include inadequate legal protections, fragmented welfare services, weak community institutions, limited access to employment and training, and deeply rooted gender norms that restrict women's public engagement (16, 17, 24). Such constraints disproportionately affect female heads of household, whose survival strategies often remain confined to informal economies and private networks with limited transformative potential (11, 18). Consequently, interventions that fail to address social capacity holistically risk producing short-term relief without sustainable empowerment.

The integration of social participation into urban management and community development strategies further highlights the strategic importance of this domain. Research on urban governance in Iran demonstrates that citizen participation enhances service effectiveness, accountability, and social trust while reducing governance costs and conflict (2, 5). These benefits extend to vulnerable groups when participation mechanisms are inclusive and supported by institutional capacity building. However, many existing programs targeting female heads of household remain narrowly focused on financial assistance, neglecting the broader social capacities required for sustained participation and empowerment (10, 17).

Moreover, psychological and social dimensions of capacity building are inseparable from material conditions. Studies reveal that female heads of household exhibit higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal, which significantly undermine their participation potential (11, 20). Interventions that enhance resilience, mindfulness, social support, and psychological capital have demonstrated measurable improvements in well-being and social engagement among this population (12, 19). Thus, capacity building must be understood as an integrated psychosocial, economic, and institutional process.

From a policy perspective, the alignment of capacity-building strategies with national development goals and social security frameworks is essential. Legal analyses indicate that existing family support and population policies in Iran possess latent capacities for enhancing social security and empowerment but require systematic evaluation and implementation to achieve their intended outcomes (24). Without coordinated institutional capacity, policy reforms alone cannot generate meaningful improvements in participation or well-being.

Despite the expanding literature, significant gaps remain. Many studies focus either on social participation or on empowerment without systematically examining how social capacity building operates as a mediating mechanism that transforms resources into sustained participation among female heads of household. Furthermore, empirical research employing integrated qualitative–quantitative designs remains limited, constraining the development of comprehensive theoretical models grounded in lived experience and robust statistical validation (8, 10). Addressing these gaps is essential for designing evidence-based interventions and policies capable of fostering inclusive social development.

Given these theoretical, empirical, and policy considerations, a systematic investigation of the effect of social capacity building on the social participation of female heads of household is both timely and necessary. Such an inquiry offers the potential to advance sociological theory, inform social policy, and contribute to the design of sustainable empowerment programs that enhance the social integration and well-being of one of the most vulnerable segments of society (3, 4, 6).

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to investigate the effect of social capacity building on the social participation of female heads of household supported by the Welfare Organization of Tehran Province.

Methods and Materials

The present study employed a mixed-methods (integrative) research design. Given the exploratory nature of the subject and the absence of sufficient prior studies in this field, the use of a mixed approach was deemed necessary in order to derive the research concepts through expert knowledge and professional insights and, based on those findings, to formulate the conceptual model and research hypotheses; consequently, a quantitative phase was also conducted to strengthen the overall research process. In essence, after examining the research objectives, the study proceeded toward testing the outcomes in the quantitative phase. The qualitative component of the research followed a grounded theory approach. The qualitative phase began with in-depth interviews with economic and social experts, and through open, axial, and selective coding procedures, the relevant categories and concepts were identified. With respect to the purpose, the quantitative phase of the research was applied in nature. In the qualitative phase, the statistical population consisted of all economic and social experts familiar with women's issues, particularly female heads of household, across the country, who were selected using purposive and convenience sampling (20 participants until theoretical saturation). In the quantitative phase, the statistical population included all female heads of household aged 25 to 49 years in Tehran Province. According to official statistics reported by the Welfare Organization, this population comprised approximately 3,300 individuals. Based on Cochran's formula, a sample size of 384 participants was determined, and questionnaires were distributed to them using systematic random sampling (based on the list of female heads of household supported by the Tehran Province Welfare Organization). However, due to the elimination of incomplete questionnaires, 500 questionnaires were distributed, of which 448 valid questionnaires were ultimately collected.

The questionnaire used in the present study was a researcher-developed instrument constructed on the basis of the conducted interviews and their corresponding coding process. The questionnaire consisted of 65 items.

Table 1. Concepts, Indicators, and Items

Variable	Indicator	Number of Items
Social Capacity Building	Informal Support Networks	7
	Formal Social Institutions	7
	Social Capital	7
Participation	Social Participation	10

The content validity of the questionnaire was assessed using the content validity method. To ensure adequate content validity, the developed instrument was provided to 10 experts who were asked to evaluate the appropriateness of each item. Following their evaluations, the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) was calculated using the formula:

$$CVR = (ne - N/2) / (N/2),$$

where N represents the total number of evaluators and ne denotes the number of evaluators who judged the item to be essential. The obtained values were then compared with the minimum acceptable value of 0.62 for 10 evaluators, and all values equal to or exceeding this threshold were considered acceptable. As a result, 7 items that were evaluated as inappropriate were removed from the instrument. The overall mean CVR of the questionnaire was calculated as 0.89.

The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

Table 2. Validity and Reliability of the Questionnaire

Variable	Indicator	CVR	Cronbach's Alpha
Social Capacity Building	Informal Support Networks	0.80	0.85
	Formal Social Institutions	0.70	0.78
	Social Capital	0.90	0.82
Participation	Social Participation	0.72	0.79

As shown in Table 2, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all indicators exceeded the threshold value of 0.70; therefore, the reliability of the research questionnaires is confirmed.

Findings and Results

By reviewing related studies and conducting in-depth interviews with economic and social experts, in this phase the influential factors were first identified and specified, and then classified and coded through open, axial, and selective coding. This process led to the operational definition of social capacity building and the social participation of female heads of household. Based on these results, the theoretical model of the study was developed and the research hypotheses were formulated. Given that the measurement scale in this phase of the study was interval and ordinal (transformed into quasi-interval), descriptive statistics such as mean, median, mode, frequency, and percentage were first used to describe the sample. Subsequently, the research hypotheses were tested. Considering that the assumptions of parametric testing—including normal distribution (achieved through random sampling), homogeneity of variances, and continuity of the measurement scale—were satisfied for the relational hypotheses, Pearson's correlation coefficient was employed for bivariate hypotheses, and linear regression was used for multivariate hypotheses.

In the qualitative phase, the findings derived from the analysis were organized around the central research objective, and by linking the codes (open coding) and indicators (axial coding), the main categories were identified. In this stage, through selective coding, the final concepts were determined.

Table 3. Extraction of Research Concepts

Code	Category	Indicator	Concept	Frequency
1	Specialized NGOs	Organizational Structures	Institutional Structures	4
2	Local Councils			
3	Peer Mentoring	Participatory Strategies	Empowerment Strategies	94
4	Mutual Aid Groups			
5	Kinship Networks			
6	Local Associations			
7	Urban Agriculture	Economic Strategies		
8	Women's Cooperatives			
9	Modern Handicrafts			
10	Incentive Policies	Policy Strategies		
11	Gender-Based Service Segregation			
12	Successful Role Models	Modeling Strategies		
13	Interest-Free Loan Funds	Financial Strategies		
14	Unsecured Microloans			
15	Referral Systems	Technological Strategies		
16	Hybrid Models			
17	Operational Research	Scientific-Practical Foundations	Scientific-Practical Basis	3
18	Monitoring Systems			
19	Home-Based Work	Time Constraints	Barriers	17
20	Elderly Care			
21	Childcare			
22	Initial Capital	Financial Barriers		

23	Regional Deprivation	Structural Challenges	Macro-Level Challenges	32
24	Urban–Rural Disparities			
25	Labor Law Limitations			
26	Gender Policies	Cultural Challenges		
27	Administrative Bureaucracy			
28	Religious Constraints			
29	Ethnic Conflicts			
30	Gender Stereotypes			
31	Stigma of Divorce	Psychological Challenges		
32	Low Self-Esteem			
33	Depression			
34	Anxiety	Technological Empowerment	Empowerment Domains	37
35	Basic Digital Literacy			
36	Online Marketing			
37	Management Software			
38	Virtual Training	Financial Empowerment		
39	Online Stores			
40	Personal Accounting			
41	Negotiation Skills	Individual Empowerment		

In the quantitative phase, correlation analysis and regression were employed to test the research hypotheses. To assess the effect of social capacity building on social participation, regression analysis and correlation coefficients were applied.

Table 4. Summary of the Model of the Effect of Social Capacity Building on Social Participation

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Standard Error
1	.618a	.381	.377	5.519

a. Predictors: (Constant), Social Capital, Formal Institutions, Informal Networks

The multiple correlation coefficient ($R = 0.618$) indicates a relatively strong relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The coefficient of determination (0.381) suggests that approximately 38.1% of the variance in social participation is explained by the three dimensions of social capacity building (informal networks, formal institutions, and social capital). The standard error of the estimate (5.519) represents the overall error of the model.

Table 5. Analysis of Variance for the Effect of Social Capacity Building on Social Participation

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance
1	Regression	8341.601	3	2780.534	91.272
	Residual	13526.094	444	30.464	
	Total	21867.694	447		

The F-value of 91.272 with a significance level of 0.000 indicates that the regression model is statistically significant overall. In other words, the combined set of independent variables has substantial predictive power for explaining changes in the dependent variable (social participation).

Table 6. Regression Coefficients for the Effect of Social Capacity Building on Social Participation

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Significance
(Constant)	9.318	1.035		9.003	.000
Informal Networks	.121	.058	.097	2.072	.039
Formal Institutions	.515	.053	.436	9.759	.000
Social Capital	.236	.055	.197	4.269	.000

Formal institutions ($\beta = 0.436$) exhibit the strongest standardized coefficient and thus represent the most influential factor in enhancing social participation. From a sociological perspective, this underscores the importance of modern and formal institutional structures such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local councils, and cooperatives. These institutions, by establishing legal frameworks, providing concrete opportunities, and creating safe environments for collective activity, constitute the primary foundation for the social participation of female heads of household. In societies where female heads of household are often marginalized, such institutions play a facilitative and legitimizing role.

Social capital ($\beta = 0.197$) has a positive and statistically significant effect of moderate magnitude. This dimension—comprising trust, norms of reciprocity, and participation—serves a foundational and culture-building function. From a sociological standpoint, social capital acts as the connective cement between networks and institutions. In contexts characterized by distrust or individualism, strengthening social capital can enhance a sense of belonging and collective responsibility while reducing the costs of cooperation. Its moderate coefficient suggests that social capital alone is insufficient for substantial social mobility, but its impact is amplified when combined with strong institutions.

Informal networks ($\beta = 0.097$), despite being statistically significant ($p = 0.039$), demonstrate the weakest effect. This finding is sociologically significant. In Iranian culture, which places strong emphasis on kinship and friendship ties, informal networks would be expected to play a more prominent role. The relatively weak effect may indicate the additional pressures experienced by female heads of household; kinship networks can themselves be sources of constraint, control, or irregular support, and their supportive capacity may be lower than expected. Moreover, due to their specific circumstances—such as divorce, widowhood, and heavy responsibilities—these women may have partially distanced themselves from traditional networks, or such networks may lack sufficient capacity to effectively empower them.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to examine the effect of social capacity building on the social participation of female heads of household supported by the Welfare Organization of Tehran Province. The empirical findings demonstrated that social capacity building explains 38.1% of the variance in social participation, with formal institutions exerting the strongest influence, followed by social capital, and finally informal networks. This pattern offers important theoretical and practical insights into the mechanisms through which vulnerable women can be effectively integrated into social life.

The dominant effect of formal institutions on social participation is consistent with structural theories of participation which emphasize the central role of organized social systems in enabling collective engagement. Institutions such as NGOs, local councils, cooperatives, and welfare agencies create legal legitimacy, provide access to resources, and establish safe and structured arenas for participation. Similar conclusions have been reported in urban management and development studies showing that institutional participation mechanisms significantly improve civic engagement and governance outcomes (2, 5). Furthermore, Rajabzadeh et al. argue that capacity building within institutional frameworks transforms abstract social goals into actionable participation pathways by aligning resources, governance, and human capabilities (8). The present findings reinforce this perspective by demonstrating that for female heads of household—who often lack social power and legal leverage—formal institutions function as the primary gateway to sustained participation.

The second most influential factor, social capital, exhibited a positive and statistically significant effect of moderate magnitude. This finding accords with Putnam's social capital theory, which conceptualizes trust, norms of reciprocity, and social networks as essential foundations for cooperative behavior and civic engagement (4). Empirical research in Iran has similarly demonstrated that higher levels of social trust and perceived social support increase women's engagement in social activities and enhance their collective efficacy (15, 21). The moderate strength of this relationship suggests that while social capital facilitates participation, it cannot operate in isolation. Rather, its effectiveness depends on institutional contexts that transform interpersonal trust into organized collective action, a conclusion that aligns with Moradi et al.'s analysis of participation and sustainable development in Iran (3).

The weakest yet still significant predictor, informal networks, presents one of the most theoretically intriguing outcomes of the study. In Iranian society, family and kinship networks traditionally serve as the primary support system for women. However, the limited effect observed here suggests that for female heads of household, these networks may be insufficient or even constraining. Qualitative evidence indicates that such women frequently experience social stigma, surveillance, and conditional support within traditional networks, which restricts their autonomy and public engagement (11, 18). This finding challenges cultural assumptions regarding the protective role of informal networks and supports Shahbazi et al.'s argument that structural and cultural barriers significantly limit women's social participation in Iran (16). Thus, capacity-building strategies must move beyond reliance on informal support and invest in institutional and social capital development.

The overall explanatory power of the model underscores the centrality of social capacity building as a multidimensional construct. Consistent with international frameworks, capacity building enhances participation by strengthening individual competencies, community cohesion, and institutional effectiveness (6, 7). The present results extend this framework to the lived realities of Iranian female heads of household, confirming that empowerment cannot be reduced to financial assistance alone. Instead, participation emerges from the dynamic interaction between personal resilience, social trust, and institutional accessibility.

Psychological and social dimensions of capacity building further illuminate the mechanisms underlying participation. Prior research demonstrates that resilience, self-compassion, hope, and psychological capital significantly predict social engagement among female heads of household (12, 19, 20). These internal resources enhance women's perceived agency and reduce withdrawal behaviors, enabling them to overcome social exclusion and engage more actively in community life. The present findings implicitly support these conclusions by demonstrating that social capacity building—encompassing both psychological and structural components—substantially improves participation outcomes.

At the policy level, the results highlight persistent shortcomings in existing empowerment programs. Many current interventions for female heads of household focus narrowly on income support without addressing broader capacity deficits such as legal literacy, institutional access, social trust, and psychological well-being (10, 17). This fragmented approach undermines long-term empowerment and perpetuates dependency. The present study offers empirical support for more integrated models that align institutional reform, community development, and individual empowerment, consistent with contemporary development theory (13, 14).

The findings also resonate with global evidence demonstrating the health and social benefits of participation. Wang et al. show that social participation significantly reduces loneliness and improves overall well-being, particularly among vulnerable populations (22). Similarly, Bwambale Bhangyi emphasizes that ethical and participatory social work practices strengthen both individual capacity and community cohesion (23). These

international insights reinforce the generalizability of the present findings while highlighting the universal relevance of capacity-building strategies.

Importantly, the study contributes to Iranian sociological scholarship by empirically linking social capacity building with social participation in a population that has been underrepresented in quantitative research. Previous Iranian studies have examined participation broadly (1, 25) or focused on women's participation in political and social domains (15), yet few have offered an integrated, empirically validated model centered on female heads of household. The present research thus advances both theory and practice by providing a coherent explanatory framework grounded in empirical evidence.

In sum, the results demonstrate that formal institutions constitute the primary engine of social participation, social capital functions as a critical enabling infrastructure, and informal networks offer limited but meaningful support. Effective empowerment policies must therefore prioritize institutional development, foster social trust, and complement—not replace—informal support systems. Only through such integrated capacity-building strategies can sustainable social participation among female heads of household be achieved.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference and limits the ability to examine long-term changes in participation over time. The sample was confined to Tehran Province, which may reduce generalizability to rural areas or other provinces with different socio-cultural conditions. Self-report measures may also introduce response bias. Finally, although the model explains a substantial portion of variance, other relevant factors—such as political context, labor market dynamics, and macroeconomic conditions—were beyond the scope of the present investigation.

Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to examine how social capacity building influences participation trajectories over time. Comparative studies across different provinces and socio-cultural settings would enhance generalizability. Qualitative investigations focusing on the lived experiences of female heads of household within institutional contexts could further enrich understanding of participation mechanisms. Additionally, future models should integrate economic, political, and legal variables to provide a more comprehensive explanatory framework.

Policymakers and practitioners should redesign empowerment programs to emphasize institutional access, social trust development, and psychological resilience alongside economic support. Welfare organizations should strengthen partnerships with NGOs, cooperatives, and local councils to create sustainable participation platforms. Community-based training programs focusing on leadership, negotiation, digital literacy, and self-efficacy should be expanded. Finally, social policies must shift from short-term assistance models toward long-term capacity-building strategies that foster autonomy, dignity, and active citizenship among female heads of household.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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