



# Briefing Paper

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## Women's Status and Social Capital Across the States

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*"Community connectedness is not just about warm fuzzy tales of civic triumph. In measurable and well-documented ways, social capital makes an enormous difference in our lives. . . . [S]ocial capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy" (Putnam, 2000).*

In 2000, Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* called attention to a compelling problem: a decline in levels of social capital, or community connectedness, across the United States. On a variety of indicators of political and civic involvement, including voter participation, involvement as members and leaders in civic groups, religious involvement, philanthropy, and even informal activities such as dinner parties and picnics, Americans have fewer connections with their neighbors than they did in the 1950s and 1960s.

The decline in social capital has serious ramifications for American society. *Bowling Alone* found that social capital is closely associated with a variety of important indicators of community health, including better child welfare and school performance, decreased crime and aggressiveness, better health status, and even lower levels of tax evasion.

Obviously, women benefit from many of these resources as members of their communities. But are levels of social capital of special concern to improving women's status in particular? Might women benefit in special ways from the positive conditions associated with social capital? Should the debate over how to increase social capital be of concern to women and women's organizations?

To help answer these questions, this Briefing Paper analyzes the relationships between social capital and indicators of women's status. Using data on social capital from *Bowling Alone* and data collected by IWPR for its *Status of Women in the States* project, the paper assesses trends across the states on both dimensions. Overall, the findings suggest that there is a strong relationship between levels of social capital and women's status. This, in turn, suggests that women and women's organizations should be engaged in this important national debate.

### Who's Bowling Alone, and Who Isn't: The Comprehensive Index of Social Capital

Social capital "refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 19). It has public and private dimensions: it can encompass relationships with friends, personal networks, and individual contacts, as well as involvement in more formally organized and public groups and activities. It has public and private benefits as well. Strong social networks can help an individual advance her career through her ability to exploit her system of contacts. By building trust and encouraging neighbors to look out for one another, social capital can also lower crime in her neighborhood.

Because social capital is a complex and involved concept, measuring it can be complicated, especially given the lack of consistent, direct measures available in existing data. The analysis in *Bowling Alone*, therefore, relies on a multifaceted approach using a variety of different kinds and sources of data: from voter turnout to club membership to participation in picnics.

A portion of the data used in *Bowling Alone* was combined into a Comprehensive Index of Social Capital, using 14 measures of public and private social capital across five areas: community organizational life, engagement in public affairs, community volunteerism, informal sociability, and social trust (see Table 1). The resulting index was then used to compare the states for levels of connectedness. All the states but Alaska and Hawaii were evaluated for their levels of social capital (see Table 2).<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1**  
**Components of the *Bowling Alone* Social Capital Index**

<b>Measures of Community Organizational Life</b>	
	Served on committee of local organization in last year (percent)
	Served as officer of some club or organization in last year (percent)
	Civic and social organizations per 1,000 population
	Mean number of club meetings attended in last year
	Mean number of group memberships
<b>Measures of Engagement in Public Affairs</b>	
	Turnout in presidential elections, 1988 and 1992
	Attended public meeting on town or school affairs in last year (percent)
<b>Measures of Community Volunteerism</b>	
	Number of nonprofit (501[c]3) organizations per 1,000 population
	Mean number of times worked on community project in last year
	Mean number of times did volunteer work in last year
<b>Measures of Informal Sociability</b>	
	Agree that "I spend a lot of time visiting friends"
	Mean number of times entertained at home in last year
<b>Measures of Social Trust</b>	
	Agree that "Most people can be trusted"
	Agree that "Most people are honest"
Source: Putnam, 2000.	

As Table 2 indicates, levels of social capital vary significantly by state and by region. In general, states in the northern part of the Midwest (including North and South Dakota, Minnesota, and Montana) have the highest levels of social capital. In contrast, the states of the Southeast generally have the lowest.

**Trends in Women’s Status: *The Status of Women in the States***

Like social capital, women’s status is a complex concept, encompassing many areas of women’s lives: economics, politics, health, education, and many other dimensions. Also like social capital, measuring women’s status can be difficult based on the limitations of existing data. Over the past eight years, however, IWPR has amassed a collection of available indicators for measuring women’s status in its *Status of Women in the States* reports. *The Status of Women in the States* uses 30 indicators to create composite indices of women’s status in five areas: political participation, employment and earnings, economic autonomy, reproductive rights, and health and well-being (see Table 3; this list of indicators is based on the most recently published results from this project, released in 2000).<sup>2</sup>

As a supplement to the five indices from *The Status of Women in the States*, the analysis in this Briefing Paper also combines states’ scores on each index to create an overall index of women’s status.<sup>3</sup> States’ scores on the new index are presented in Table 4. Like levels of social capital, levels of women’s status vary by state and by region. In general, women’s status is strongest in the states of the Northeast (including Maryland, Connecticut, and Vermont) and the West (including Washington and Hawaii). It is weakest in several Southeastern states, including Mississippi, West Virginia, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Tennessee (because the District of Columbia has no elected representation in Congress, it could not be ranked for women’s political participation or for women’s overall status).

**Table 2**  
**States Ranked for Scores on the *Bowling Alone* Social Capital**

Rank	State	Score
1	North Dakota	1.76
2	South Dakota	1.70
3	Minnesota	1.36
4	Vermont	1.32
5	Montana	1.27
6	Nebraska	1.17
7	Iowa	1.02
8	Wyoming	0.72
9	Washington	0.69
10	New Hampshire	0.68
11	Utah	0.61
12	Wisconsin	0.61
13	Oregon	0.57
14	Maine	0.54
15	Kansas	0.40
16	Colorado	0.38
17	Idaho	0.22
18	Connecticut	0.19
19	Massachusetts	0.15
20	Missouri	0.06
21	Arizona	0.02
22	Michigan	0.00
23	Delaware	-0.04
24	Indiana	-0.09
25	Rhode Island	-0.12
26	Oklahoma	-0.14
27	DC	-0.19
28	Ohio	-0.19
29	Pennsylvania	-0.19
30	California	-0.21
31	Illinois	-0.23
32	Maryland	-0.26
33	Virginia	-0.29
34	New Mexico	-0.34
35	New York	-0.43
36	New Jersey	-0.45
37	Arkansas	-0.50
38	Florida	-0.50
39	Texas	-0.54
40	Kentucky	-0.78
41	North Carolina	-0.80
42	West Virginia	-0.84
43	South Carolina	-0.88
44	Tennessee	-0.97
45	Louisiana	-0.98
46	Alabama	-1.09
47	Georgia	-1.12
48	Mississippi	-1.15
49	Nevada	-1.39
50	Alaska	--
51	Hawaii	--

Source: Analysis by Robert Putnam for *Bowling Alone*.

**Table 3**  
**Composite Indices and Indicators from *The Status of Women in the States*, 2000 edition**

**Composite Political Participation Index**

- Women's voter registration rates, 1992 and 1996
- Women's voter turnout rates, 1992 and 1996
- Women's representation in elected office, 2000 (composite index based on power of each position)
- Women's institutional resources, 2000 (commission for women, women's legislative caucus)

**Composite Employment and Earnings Index**

- Women's median annual earnings, 1996-98
- Wage ratio: women's to men's median annual earnings, 1996-98
- Women's labor force participation rate, 1998
- Percentage of women in professional and managerial positions, 1998

**Composite Economic Autonomy Index**

- Women's health insurance coverage rate, 1997
- Women's educational attainment (proportion with college education), 1990
- Proportion of businesses owned by women, 1992
- Proportion of women living above poverty, 1996-98

**Composite Reproductive Rights Index**

- Does state have parental consent or notification for minor seeking abortion?
- Does state mandate a waiting period before abortions?
- Is there public funding for abortions for women who qualify?
- Proportion of women in counties with abortion providers
- Does state mandate comprehensive contraceptive coverage by insurance companies?
- Does state mandate infertility treatment coverage by insurance companies?
- Is the state government pro-choice?
- Is second-parent adoption legal for gays and lesbians?
- Is sex education mandated for public school students?

**Composite Health and Well-Being Index**

- Women's mortality rates from heart disease, 1995
- Women's mortality rates from breast cancer, 1991-95
- Women's mortality rates from lung cancer, 1991-95
- Women's incidence rates of diabetes, 1998
- Women's incidence rates of AIDS, 1998-99
- Women's incidence rates of chlamydia, 1997
- Women's mortality rates from suicide, 1995-97
- Women's self-reported mental health, 1998
- Women's self-reported activities limitations due to health, 1998

Source: Caiazza, 2000.

**Women Do Better in States with High Social Capital: The Relationships between Women's Status and Social Capital**

To examine the relationships between women's status and social capital, we tested the degree of association between states' scores on each composite index of women's status and their levels of social capital. Table 5 presents the results of this initial analysis.

In general, women's status is better in states with relatively high levels of social capital. As Table 5 shows, states' scores on four of the six composites (women's political

participation, economic autonomy, health and well-being, and their overall status) are associated with levels of social capital at a statistically significant level. In contrast, women's employment and earnings and reproductive rights are not significantly related to levels of social capital.

Of course, the existence of better women's status and high levels of social capital could just be a co-occurrence, and the results in Table 5 are not enough to establish a clear causal relationship between them. For example, some other factor, such as income levels, poverty levels, or religiosity (among others), might affect both levels of social capital

**Table 4**  
States Ranked for Scores on the Status of Women Index

Rank	State	Score
1	Maryland	2.07
2	Connecticut	1.93
3	Vermont	1.68
4	Washington	1.66
5	Hawaii	1.45
6	Massachusetts	1.36
7	Colorado	1.34
8	Minnesota	1.33
9	California	1.18
10	Alaska	1.06
11	New Hampshire	0.99
12	Maine	0.73
13	New Jersey	0.67
14	Kansas	0.42
15	Illinois	0.36
16	Delaware	0.30
17	Oregon	0.29
18	Iowa	0.17
19	Arizona	0.15
20	Wisconsin	0.14
21	Virginia	0.11
22	New York	0.06
23	Utah	0.05
24	Rhode Island	0.00
25	Missouri	0.00
26	Nevada	-0.04
27	New Mexico	-0.07
28	Montana	-0.13
29	Nebraska	-0.16
30	Georgia	-0.27
31	Wyoming	-0.29
32	North Dakota	-0.33
33	Idaho	-0.40
34	Texas	-0.46
35	North Carolina	-0.47
36	South Dakota	-0.48
37	Michigan	-0.56
38	Ohio	-0.61
39	Indiana	-0.66
40	Pennsylvania	-0.88
41	Florida	-0.92
42	Oklahoma	-1.01
43	South Carolina	-1.16
44	Louisiana	-1.17
45	Alabama	-1.27
46	Tennessee	-1.35
47	Kentucky	-1.58
48	Arkansas	-1.60
49	West Virginia	-1.82
50	Mississippi	-1.85
51	DC*	--

\*The District of Columbia could not be ranked because it does not have a score or ranking for women's political participation, as it has no governor, state legislature, or senators.

Source: Authors' analysis, based on data from *The Status of Women in the States*.

**Table 5**  
Relationships between Social Capital and Composite Indices of Women's Status

	Correlation Coefficient
Composite Political Participation Index	.531***
Composite Employment and Earnings Index	.160
Composite Economic Autonomy Index	.399***
Composite Reproductive Rights Index	-.710
Composite Health and Well-Being Index	.735***
Composite Index of Women's Overall Status	.475***
***significant at p<.01	
Source: Authors' analysis, based on data from IWPR's 2000 report on <i>The Status of Women in the States</i> and Robert Putnam's <i>Bowling Alone</i> .	

and women's status. If so, the relationship between the two factors could be simply a result of the same social, economic, or political factors without any effect on one another.

To further explore the relationship between social capital and women's status, eight additional variables were added to the mix: 1) the proportion of each state's population that is white; 2) state poverty rates; 3) state scores on a Gini index of income inequality; 4) personal income per capita; 5) average levels of education in each state; 6) whether a state was a member of the Confederacy; 7) an index of religiosity (which measures levels of church membership, attendance, and density); and 8) the percent of the population living in urban areas. Any of these factors might affect both levels of social capital and women's status and, therefore, were added as controls for the relationship between the two.

Table 6 presents the results of this statistical analysis of the relationships between each of the six composite indices of women's status, on the one hand, and a combination of the eight new variables and the comprehensive index of social capital, on the other. Factors that did not have a significant relationship with a particular index of women's status were dropped from each model.<sup>4</sup>

As Table 6 indicates, social capital did not figure significantly in two models: those for women's employment and earnings and reproductive rights. In each case, other variables were more strongly and significantly related to social capital. In the case of employment and earnings, higher poverty rates but more economic equality, higher per capita income, and higher levels of education were most closely associated with better status for women. In the case of reproductive rights, per capita income and religiosity were most closely related to the composite index. Where per capita income is high, reproductive rights are stronger; where religiosity is high, they are weaker.

In contrast, social capital was significantly related to women's political participation. In fact, it was the most important variable in this model: where levels of social capital are high, women have higher levels of political participation and representation. In this model, social capital was followed by religiosity (which was negatively related to women's political

participation, indicating that high levels of religious involvement are associated with low levels of women's political participation) and urbanization in importance.<sup>5</sup>

Social capital is also the most important variable significantly related to women's health and well-being. It is followed by poverty rates, which are negatively related to health—high poverty is associated with worse health status. Perhaps surprisingly, however, higher per capita income and a larger white population are also associated with lower levels of women's health. Nonetheless, none of these variables is as strongly related to good health among women as high levels of social capital are.

Social capital has the fourth strongest relationship to women's increased economic autonomy, behind higher per capita income, a smaller white population, and higher education levels.<sup>6</sup> The final significantly related variable is economic inequality: the more equality, the more economic autonomy women have.

Finally, social capital is the second most important factor in the model of **women's overall status**. It is outweighed by per capita income and followed by educational attainment and urbanization (which, perhaps surprisingly, has a negative association with women's status).

Overall, these findings suggest that although social capital is not related to every aspect of women's status, and although other factors are also closely associated with women's status—sometimes even more strongly than social capital is—they do not replace or explain the relationship

between social capital and women's status. In a consistent way, higher levels of social capital are associated with women's better status.

Figure 1 provides a much simpler version of the same message: Women do better in states with high social capital.<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion: The Close Connection between Women's Status and Social Capital

Like many other indicators of well-being in the United States, the status of women is directly related to levels of social capital. As a result, it may also be directly (and negatively) affected by the decline in social capital traced in *Bowling Alone*. Alternatively, efforts to improve women's status may improve levels of social capital.

It is still possible, of course, that yet another factor (for example, political culture or public policy differences) explains both women's equality and social capital. Future research can explore this possibility.

In addition, even if social capital directly affects women's status—or vice versa—we don't yet know how and why. For example, by improving connections among members of a community, social capital may make everyone—men and women—better informed about, or more sympathetic to, the issues raised by women's inequality. This, in turn, could improve policy efforts to advance women's status. Improved connections could also increase women's

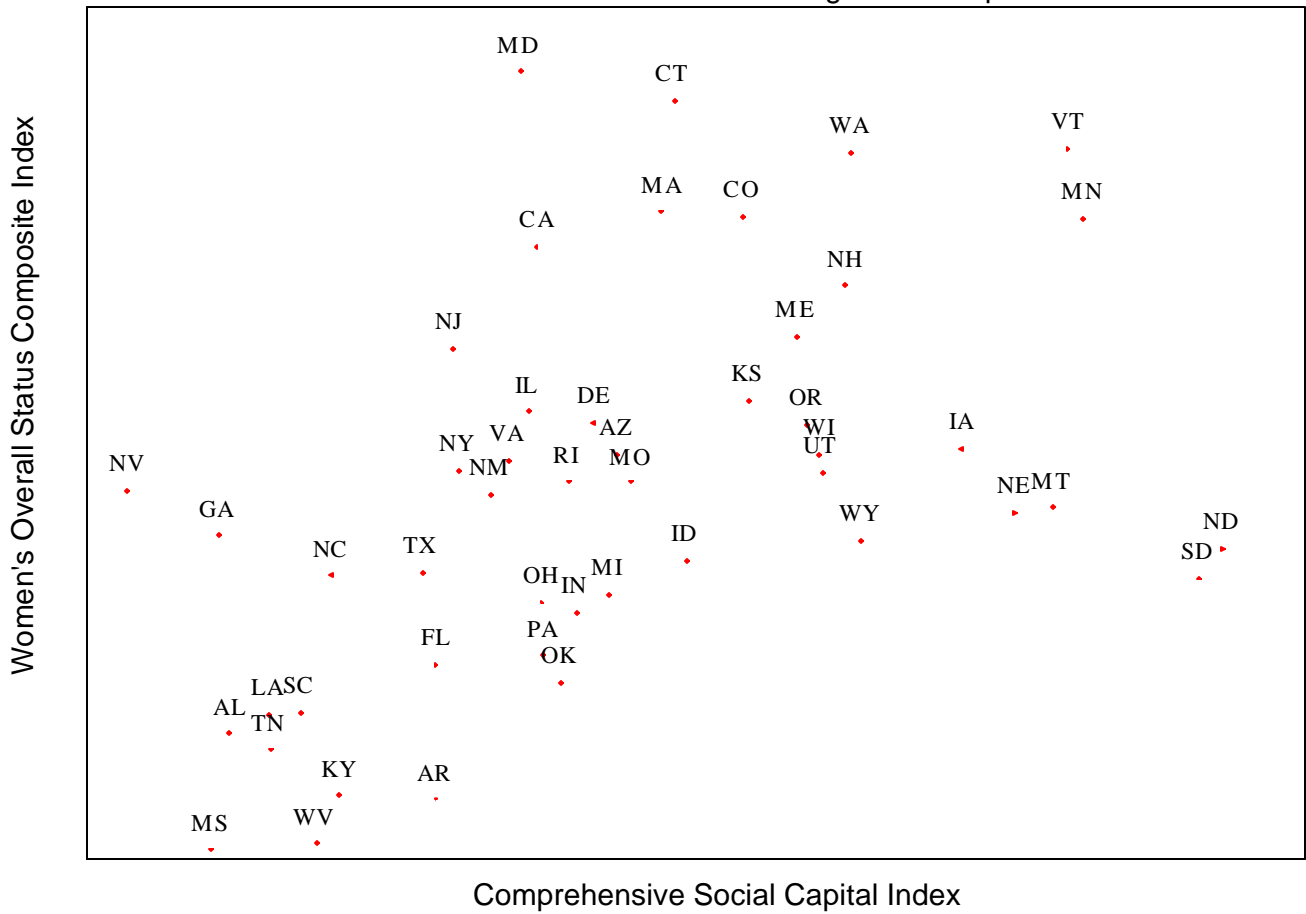
Table 6  
Results of Regression Analysis

	Standardized Beta Coefficients					
	Political Participation	Employment and Earnings	Economic Autonomy	Reproductive Rights	Health and Well-Being	Women's Overall Status
Social Capital Index	.576***		.286***		.641***	.311***
Proportion of Population That Is White, 1990			-.328***		-.257*	
Poverty Rate, 1987-92		.571***			-.490***	
Gini Index of Income Inequality, 1990		.276**	.157*			
Personal Income per Capita, 1990		.871***	.458***	.445***	-.325**	.464***
Mean Years of Education, 1989		.356***	.298***			.257*
Was State Member of Confederacy?						
Index of Religiosity (church membership, attendance, density)	-.412***			-.358***		-.202**
Percent of Population Living in Urban Areas	.199*					

\*\*\*significant at p<.01  
\*\*significant at p<.05  
\*significant at p<.1

Source: Authors' analysis, based on data from IWPR's 2000 report on *The Status of Women in the States* and Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*.

Figure 1  
 Women do better in states with high social capital



awareness of and access to resources available to improve their status. Alternatively, women's improved status may make them feel more empowered and effective as active community members. On the other hand, their increased access to education and earnings might allow them to devote more of their time to civic activities. Exploring these relationships could have important implications for how to improve women's status and levels of social capital.

In other words, there is ample room for further investigation of the relationships presented here. The findings in this Briefing Paper illustrate an intriguing regularity that should be better understood.

No matter what, the relationship between women's status and social capital suggests that women and women's organizations have a stake in the debate over declining social

capital in the United States. Women fare better where civic engagement is greater, and they fare worse where people are isolated and disconnected from their communities. Engaging more women in civic and political participation may be a crucial tool for advancing their status more generally—and improving women's status may be important to improving the overall civic health of the country.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> This index was created using the factor score from a principal components analysis of the 14 variables involved. Alaska and Hawaii had too few cases in the data sets used to measure levels of social capital.

<sup>2</sup> For states' scores and ranks on each index, see IWPR's 2000 report on *The Status of Women in the States*. IWPR has ranked the states for women's status since 1996 and updates the data and rankings every two years. New data and rankings will be released in November of 2002.

<sup>3</sup> This index was created using the factor score from a principal components analysis of the five indices involved in the overall index. This technique differs from that used to pick the top and bottom states overall in the *Status of Women in the States* project. As a result, the top and bottom states differ from the results published in that project.

<sup>4</sup> The results in Table 6 are based on a series of regressions between each of the six composite indices of women's status (as dependent variables in each of six models) and the eight new variables along with the comprehensive index of social capital (as the nine independent variables). Independent variables that did not have a significant relationship with the given dependent variable were dropped to fine tune a model for each composite index of women's status. The final models are outlined in Table 6, which presents standardized Beta coefficients (rather than unstandardized b coefficients) because they can be compared across independent variable to evaluate the relative importance of their relationship with the dependent variable.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, in some ways the political participation and social capital indices measure similar phenomena— involvement in political and civic processes—and both include measures of voter turnout. At the same time, the most important factor in the women's political participation index is women's representation in elected office; it is weighted four times as strongly as women's voter turnout. And voter turnout is one of just 14 factors in the social capital index. In other words, the overlap of this variable alone cannot fully explain the strong link between the two.

<sup>6</sup> The links between per capita income and education, on the one hand, and economic autonomy, on the other, are not particularly surprising: women's economic autonomy includes measures of their poverty and educational attainment.

<sup>7</sup> Figure 1 does not include the controls accounted for in Table 6 but simply plots levels of social capital against women's overall status.

## Sources:

Caiazza, Amy, ed. 2000. *The Status of Women in the States*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.

Putnam, Robert. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

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*This Briefing Paper was prepared by Amy Caiazza, Ph.D., Study Director at the Institute for Women's Policy Research, and Robert Putnam, Ph.D., Professor of Government at Harvard University and Director of the Saguro Seminar, an effort to understand and improve levels of social capital in the United States. Dr. Putnam performed the original statistical analysis presented. The Briefing Paper was prepared with financial support from the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Institute.*

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