

# Women's Empowerment Through the Lens of Pierre Bourdieu: Capital, Habitus and Field

Abhimanyu Singh Thakur<sup>1</sup>, Chandra Kala<sup>2</sup> and Parmeet Kaur<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author, Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development (CRRID), Chandigarh

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development (CRRID), Chandigarh

<sup>3</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development (CRRID), Chandigarh

## Abstract

This paper explores empowerment through the theoretical lens of Pierre Bourdieu's key concepts of capital, habitus and field. By using existing literature, it examines how access to different forms of capital addressed by the Bourdieu such as social, economic, cultural and symbolic affects women agency in the field of education, family and governance and generally in society. Women empowerment is an important subject matter in sociology and in development studies as it shows ongoing efforts to achieve equality in genders and social justice. By applying Bourdieu key concepts, the paper highlights holistic framework to understand women empowerment as a process that is shaped by intersecting capitals and structural inequalities. Furthermore, it also looks deep into the sociological concept of gender transformation how women navigate, resist and reconfigure dominant power relations. Overall, by linking Bourdieu's theoretical framework to study empowerment, this paper also contributes to a sociological understanding of gender transformation.

**Key Words:** women, empowerment, capital, habitus.

## Introduction

Women's empowerment has emerged as a central theme in sociological discourse, particularly in the context of gender inequality, development, and social transformation. Traditionally, empowerment has been understood through metrics such as access to education, income generation, and political participation. While these indicators are important, they often fail to capture the deeper social, cultural, and symbolic dynamics that shape women's lives and their capacity to exercise agency. To move beyond surface-level understandings of empowerment, it is necessary to adopt a theoretical framework that involves both structure and agency in everyday life. Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory, especially his concepts of capital, habitus, and field, provides a nuanced lens through which women's empowerment can be critically examined. His framework highlights how power is embedded in social structures, reproduced through routine practices, and accessed through various forms of capital beyond the purely

Published: 30 January 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i1.30804>

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economic. Empowerment, from a Bordieuan perspective, is not only about acquiring resources but about transforming one's social position within structured fields of power, and reconfiguring internalised dispositions that have been shaped by longstanding gender norms. This paper explores how Bourdieu's theory can increase our understanding of women's empowerment by analyzing existing secondary literature from various sociological studies. This paper majorly focuses on research questions mentioned below:

- How do different forms of capital such as economic, cultural, social and symbolic interact to influence women's empowerment?
- How is women's habitus shaped and potentially transformed through empowerment processes?
- In what ways do women navigate or contest dominant power structures within different fields such as the family, education or politics?

By solely engaging with secondary sources, this study offers a conceptual synthesis of women's empowerment as a relational and dynamic process, mediated by one's position in social hierarchies and access to transformative opportunities. In doing so, it challenges reductionist views of empowerment and advocates for a more layered, sociologically grounded understanding of gendered power and agency.

### **Theoretical Framework: Bourdieu's Concepts and Women's Empowerment**

Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework offers a powerful sociological lens for understanding how power operates within society, not just through overt institutions but also through subtle, everyday practices. His concepts of capital, habitus, and field allow us to analyse how social inequality is produced and reproduced, and how individuals navigate, resist, or transform these structures. Applied to the study of women's empowerment, Bourdieu's framework highlights the ways in which empowerment is embedded in both material conditions and symbolic relations.

#### **1. Capital: Beyond the Economic**

Bourdieu (1986) proposed that social life is structured by access to various forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Bourdieu argued that capital is a kind of accumulated human labour which is used to produce some kind of profits (Svendsen & Svendsen, 2003). Within this framework, women are often considered to have less economic control than men. It is clear that they are lower in the education level, earnings and in terms of assets. Therefore, economic development is considered to be the crucial aspect for the empowerment of women, which is why many empowerment initiatives focus on increasing women's economic capital. Bourdieu's framework reveals that without corresponding gains in cultural and social capital, empowerment may remain limited. Cultural capital, like education and symbolic capital such as social legitimacy, play crucial roles in translating material resources into agency. Unlike cultural capital. Coleman (1988) explains social capital by its function. He mentions that social capital is productive and it is more precise to certain activities.

## **2. Habitus: Internalized Dispositions**

Habitus refers to the internalized dispositions shaped by one's upbringing and social experiences. Gendered habitus may cause women to internalize roles of subordination. Empowerment requires a shift in habitus, which can occur gradually through repeated participation in empowering spaces such as education, employment, or leadership roles.

## **3. Field: Structured Spaces of Power**

Fields are structured spaces, such as education, politics, and family, where power and capital are negotiated. Each field has its own rules and hierarchies. Empowerment, which is a multifaceted process that enables women to fully realise their identity and access power in all the aspects of their life therefore, it depends on a woman's position within these fields and the type of capital she brings or gains. Women's ability to transform their position in these fields reflects their empowerment. For transformation of personal and social development, education is one of the major tools for empowerment. Education provides women knowledge, skill and development so that they can pursue what they really want in their life.

## **Literature Review: Women's Empowerment Through the Lens of Bourdieu**

A growing body of sociological literature has explored women's empowerment using various theoretical and empirical approaches. When viewed through Bourdieu's lens, empowerment emerges as a multi-dimensional process shaped by access to different forms of capital, internalized social dispositions (habitus), and position within structured social spaces (fields). This section reviews relevant secondary literature that engages with these three key dimensions.

### **1. Capital and Women's Empowerment**

Empowerment, according to Kabeer (1999), is a process consolidated by agency, resources and achievement. Agency refers to the ability to make your own choices while there are obstacles such as social norms. Further, he explained resources are tools that provide women with economic means and social networks so that they can improve their social life and have access to greater opportunities and achievement is the outcome of the resources for instance, the increase in the self-confidence of the women, more inclusion in the process of decision making within the household and outside the household. Studies such as Kabeer (1999) and Swain & Wallentin (2009) argue that while economic gains can increase a woman's bargaining power, they do not automatically lead to broader empowerment unless accompanied by other forms of capital. Cultural capital—including education and confidence, plays a transformative role (Desai & Thakkar, 2001). Narayan (2005) and Mayoux (2001) emphasize that empowerment also depends on building social capital through networks and collective action. A group having extensive trustworthiness within the members will be able to accomplish more tasks as compared to the groups that have less or no trust (Coleman, 1988). For instance, India has one of the richest settings for women-led development to empower women through microfinancing, by providing them access to credit and encouraging entrepreneurship and increasing their financial knowledge. While SHG helps to enhance the economic empowerment of the women, it also helps women to build a network, enhance social support, improvements in confidence,

develop leadership qualities and be more included in the community. This initiative of microfinancing enhances the quality of life of the women and their families. This further led to the empowerment of women as a transformative change (Chandel and Gupta, 2025).

## **2. Conversion**

Bourdieu (1986) while explaining various types of capital as mentioned earlier also discussed the process of conversion, focusing that all the forms of capital are interconnected. However, he explained that the process of conversion takes time and it happened with effort and strategy. He also mentioned that economic capital is the base for all the other types of capital and for the conversion into the other types of capital such as social and cultural, demands continuous time and effort to develop. He further added that the concept of wastage is not applicable in the general sciences, what may appear as wasted can be viewed as economic such as the labour-time or effort that has been involved is actually a strategic investment that will later transform one capital to another.

## **3. Habitus and the Internalization of Power**

Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides insight into how gender norms are internalized. For instance, in a process of socialization, in a society women and men are expected to behave in a particular way. Socialization is inherited and learned in a certain way that no one is questioning. The difference between the masculinity and femininity is created from the beginning of life (Eagle, 1988)<sup>1</sup>. McNay (1999) added that increasing feminization in social world can leads to transformation in the idea of women habitus and it will raise awarenesses and a break from traditions<sup>2</sup>. Thus, empowerment can be seen as a process of rearranging the habitus, by challenging the internalized beliefs that sustain gender inequality.

Skeggs (1997) demonstrates how women's self-perceptions are shaped by class and gender expectations. Similarly, in South Asian contexts, Mahmud (2003) and Jeffery & Jeffery (1997) show that despite economic progress, many women continue to view themselves as subordinate while participating in collective spaces due to ingrained patriarchal values. However, habitus can be reshaped over time (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010).

## **4. Field and the Contextual Nature of Empowerment**

Fields such as education, politics, and the family each have unique rules and hierarchies that shape empowerment outcomes. Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of 'patriarchal bargains' shows how women adapt to male-dominated structures. Atkinson (2014) explains how to interpret family life through the lens of Bourdieu's theory, how it contributes to the construction and deconstruction of broader social structure. Desai & Thakkar (2001) find that political representation through quotas depends on symbolic and cultural capital. Jeffery & Jeffery (1997) argue that educational access must be culturally endorsed to be effective.

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<sup>1</sup> Eagle, G. (1988). Learning to become a "natural woman": The process of socialisation. *Agenda*, 2(2), 67-80.

<sup>2</sup> McNay, L. (1999). Gender, habitus and the field: Pierre Bourdieu and the limits of reflexivity. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 16(1), 95-117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327699016001007>.

## **Analysis and Discussion: Interpreting Empowerment through Bourdieu's Framework**

This analysis reveals that women's empowerment is not merely about acquiring resources but involves transforming social positions, internal dispositions, and negotiating existing power structures. Bourdieu's idea of capital conversion explains why material resources alone may not lead to empowerment. Kabeer (1999) and Mahmud (2003) illustrate that unless women also gain social and cultural capital, their agency remains constrained.

Transformation of habitus is equally essential. Skeggs (1997) and Cornwall & Edwards (2010) show that empowerment is a gradual process involving the reconstruction of internal self-perceptions. Entry into new fields may be empowering, but only when women acquire the forms of capital recognized within those fields. Ultimately, empowerment must be understood as relational and contextual. It depends on how capital is valued, how habitus evolves, and how women navigate the social logic of specific fields. These factors collectively shape women's capacity to act, influence, and lead.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored women's empowerment through Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical lens emphasizing capital, habitus, and field. The secondary literature reviewed shows that empowerment is not simply about access to resources but about negotiating power, transforming internalised norms, and shifting positions within structured social spaces. Bourdieu's concept provides a more layered understanding of empowerment as an ongoing and contested process. Future research can apply this framework empirically across cultural and institutional contexts to further examine how women use various forms of capital, reshape habitus, and navigate different field. Such research can inform more holistic empowerment strategies that go beyond economic indicators and address deeper structural and symbolic inequalities.

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